"A Consort of the Spirits" or How to Cultivate Indigo, Conjured by Herself

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ABSTRACT This foreword is a personal essay in which I reflect on the other ways of knowing and the African spiritual cosmologies that were first introduced to me through Ntozake Shange's novel *Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo* (1982). I walk readers through the quarter-century love affair I have had with black women writers and Shange, in particular. I share memories of my only meeting with the author and discuss the profound impact her novel has had on both my professional and spiritual journeys. The article engages in black narrative practices of multivocality, culture bearing, vernacular language, and conjuring moments. The testimony herein involves a powerful Ifá priestess who moonlights as an English professor, a creole-speaking ancestral spirit, and the deep cultural legacy of indigo (and Indigo). It is a story told in celebration and honor of Ntozake Shange's creative, conjuring genius.

KEYWORDS Indigo, conjure feminism, black women writers, Ntozake Shange, spirit work

"The Ancestors knew all about indigo and Indigo, herself."
—Ntozake Shange

I don't even know where to begin. How do I find the words to speak this truth? I have been trying to write this story since the passing of Ntozake Shange in 2018, and on *three* separate occasions I had to not-so-graciously bow out of submitting to other special issues and edited collections that

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focused on the impact of her literary and creative legacy. The universe keeps bringing the opportunity before me, however, so I will make my best attempt here. In the true artistry of "my people, my people," this narrative is nonlinear, multivocal, and deeply engages other ways of knowing. That is, some of you may have to suspend disbelief; for others, if you *know*, then you know. Dig it?

My earliest memories of girlhood are laced with the essence of black women writers; I have long been impacted by the camaraderie and sense of community their words have created. I can recall distinctly avid consumption by the women folk in my family of black women's stories. Reading Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Gloria Naylor, and Toni Morrison was an experience these women shared. I recollect being in fourth or fifth grade when I discerned a weighty difference in my mother's behavior that I attributed to these books: Terry McMillan's *Mama* and *Waiting to Exhale* produced deep-throated cackles and illegible speech-laughter during the monthly long-distance calls with the aunties, while Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* elicited hush-mouthed conversations with other sister-friends. Stephen King's and Judith Krantz's hardback library-bound editions did no such thing. My prepubescent mind deduced that it must be the black femininity of it all. I observed this reading culture my entire life. The books would circulate among my grandmother, great aunt, and my mother and her sisters before being accessible to my eldest girl cousin, and then me when my eighth-grade status deemed me old enough to finally engage. When the copy had made its rounds among them, my cousin and I would relish the placement of the book back upon the bookshelf during our summer visits to Grandma. This meant our turn had come. I could not *wait* to feel and understand and express my own hush-mouthed responses. It was my black girl rite of passage. What I didn't know was the fullness that my relationship to black women writers would take, and one black woman in particular—Ntozake Shange.

The first time I ever heard about the cash crop indigo, I was sitting in an audience of college faculty, staff, and students listening raptly to Ntozake Shange answer a question about the inspiration for the title of her 1982 novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo*. A newly declared English major and seedling of a scholar, I was awestruck at being in the presence of a black woman writer whose work had so deeply stirred my soul. I had read the novel that quarter in Professor Georgene Bess's course "Expressions of

African Spirituality in Literature." As an *iyawo*, a newly initiated bride of the orisha, Professor Bess had also introduced me to African-centered spiritualities present in her own life and in Shange's text. Only now, almost a quarter-century later, can I even begin to articulate how profoundly that experience shaped the road ahead of me. Shange's simple response that she named each sister after a natural growing thing associated with enslavement and, specifically, that "indigo was a cash crop during slavery" reverberated in my spirit. I intuitively understood that there was a sacredness about the plant, the process by which "the slaves who are ourselves" created the dye, and the spiritual significance of Shange's precocious character (Shange 27). I still have the photograph from that night. Georgene flanked one side of Shange and I on the other; the author's face balled-up like a fist while I skinned and grinned all wide-eyed with wonder. Shange had recently taken a fall while painting her home, her assistant explained, and was nursing a broken rib or two. I, in my uncontainable excitement, snuggled up close to her for the photo op, bumping into her fractured ribs just as the aperture snapped. My *only* photo with the beloved Ntozake Shange is, well, quite the embarrassment. She looked like she wanted to slap me for the careless child I had been as I apologized profusely. The photo lives in infamy. I have never shared it with anyone. I am gonna tell this story nonetheless.

I had started to dabble in Ifá under Georgene's tutelage, and Shange's novel was both an entry point and the sustenance for my intellectual awakening around what black women were doing with writing and spirit work. I decided I would make a career of studying black magic that women conjured in the *biomythographies* of black women writers like Elizabeth Nunez, Tina McElroy Ansa, Toni Cade Bambara, and, of course, Shange.[1] I started to read every novel and poem and story where black girls and women were imbued with Spirit and employed *conjure feminism* as freedom practice.[2] Through Shange's fiction (and Georgene's mentorship), I had found my niche, my research topic, my career path. It was a domino effect. I fell in love with Shange's Indigo and vowed that if Spirit ever sent a girl child through this body, she would be called after the junior Geechee Captain herself.

As above, so below. Spirit had gifted me the seed of Shange's work in 1998, but it would take twenty years before I was ready to cultivate indigo for myself. But there was plenty of confirmation along the way. I entered

graduate school and dug deeper into African American folklore, African spiritual cosmologies, and African cultural retentions. I became more comfortable in my spirit work practices and my eyes focused in on my own ancestral connections to the creolized space of New Orleans, Louisiana. Stories of the women birthing babies and divining through dreams had floated around the family for a while, but I was only now paying close attention. I had acquired new language and a literal second sight to read what had previously been illegible. Did I have conjuring midwife women in my lineage!?!? Had my spiritual gifts been passed down through my mama's people? The more I recovered my cultural (and literal) ancestors' knowledge, the stronger Spirit began to take a hold of me. I was faithful to the academic path, throwing myself into my research and reading lists without realizing it was a means to an end. And Shange's novel was my anchor; a primary text in my thesis, my dissertation, and eventually my first monograph. I have taught her work at least once every academic year since before I was freshly minted. While preparing for my comprehensive exams, I even purchased a UK First Edition of *Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo* (in incredible condition with the original dust jacket, I might add!) to bequeath to the child I hoped to have and name in honor of everything the novel had given me. Shange and moon-mouthed women had led me to a crossroads wherein the professional and personal aspects of my life collided to create a sacred, spiritual interstices wherein the potency of black women's intellectual traditions of spirit work and spirit writing was empowering me to make deeper and wider impacts in both the visible and invisible worlds. I was too close to see it then, but Spirit has a way of making things known.

Amid dissertating, I miscarried a pregnancy I was not even aware I had conceived. There was less than twenty-four hours between the confirmation of the pregnancy and the "spontaneous abortion," as it was so described in my discharge paperwork. It was the most traumatic loss I had endured up to that point in my young life, but not the last. At the height of my grief, I turned my face away from Spirit in shame of fumbling such a precious gift and they sent an emissary: Ma Marie. She appeared to me in a lucid dream, beckoning me to call on her when I was spiritually bereft and she walked me through the ritual (warning—do *not* try this at home; I am not responsible for how my dead folk respond to summoning a being that doesn't belong to you): "*Draw three* [concentric] *circles on the*

ground with cascarilla, stand in the middle, smallest circle and call my name." Now, I had been deep in my spirit practice for years but had never actually experienced a visitation of spirit; but I had written about this very phenomenon between Sassafrass and the spirits of Mamie Smith and Billie Holiday, who tried to teach her how to sing her blues. I knew *exactly* what this was; Ma Marie was there to help me heal and it was my wounded spirit that had summoned her. I had become "a cunjah" and didn't even know it (Shange 109). I was too scary to perform the ritual and call on her consciously, so I would not meet Ma Marie properly until the grief of my father's transition took hold of me eight years later—wounded spirit beckoning to her again. Even so, I *still* ain't ready to find out if the summoning conjure works. I'll take her at her word. We are still building our relationship and these days I keep a ready place for us to talk and break bread in my home. These things take time. But what I know for sure is that Ma Marie is an ancestral spirit, my *egun*. We share lineage and blood. She hails from "*one of those islands*" (she hasn't told me which one yet), has a French inflection in her speech, and in her time on earth, she was a child of an ocean spirit—Yemaya or, perhaps Olokún. She wore/wears a plain shift dyed the color indigo.

In the years between our meetings, Ma Marie made sure I was reminded of her and the importance of indigo to my life and lineage. A sister-friend who visited Ossabaw Island, Georgia, in 2008 brought me a sprig of an indigo flower pressed between the pages of a book. I had made it known to anyone who would listen that Shange's novel had put a spell on me and I was obsessed with indigo/Indigo, though I could not articulate it beyond *Sassafrass, Cypress, & Indigo* being my favorite novel. It was the first time I had ever seen the plant and it was gifted to me just after giving birth to my son. When I got my spiritual life together and accepted that I would do "the work" with a proper madrina and ilé, or spiritual house, Ma Marie was the first to appear and speak on my behalf. I learned of her relationship to the islands and the color she wore and the healing work she did for her community. Then came the premiere of episode six of *Sacred Journeys with Bruce Feiler*, "Osun-Osogbo" (2014).

In my spiritual work, it had been revealed and confirmed that I am an *omo-Osun*—a child of the orisha Osun/Ochún. I was delighted to learn that a path toward initiation in the Lucumí tradition had been opened and that she claimed me. I *thought* I was watching the documentary to

learn more about the journey I would be undertaking. I had to pick my face up off the floor when a segment revealed that indigo dyers in Osogbo, Nigeria, were blessed by Osun/Ochún, as indigo is a favorite and sacred plant of hers. It made absolute sense, then, that I would be drawn to the color and dying tradition of my Yoruba ancestors (confirmed by DNA ancestry testing and, of course, my Spirits). It was like indigo was summoning me, slowly but surely. In 2017 I myself traveled to Ossabaw, known for being a flourishing indigo plantation during the time of enslavement. As I toured the space and watched the reenactment of how enslaved folk produced the colorful dye, I conspired to enact a ritual of my own. It was an act of reclaiming I became committed to over the years of visiting sites of enslavement. In any space wherein enslaved folk dwelled, gathered, or worked, I make it my business to reclaim an artifact (usually from nature—a piece of wood from a cabin, dirt, or rocks) from my cultural ancestors' lives to place on my altar. Let's just say, I do it "for the culture." In addition to an item that will remain unnamed, I reclaimed several pods of seeds from the teeming rows of indigo bushes surrounding the wrap-around porch of the big house. I had just purchased a home in Charleston, South Carolina, and declared in my Scarlett O'Hara voice, "I will grow wild indigo in my yard!"

The seedlings responded to the dark, loamy earth, sprouting within weeks of being sown. I nurtured a lone shoot of indigo well into that fall season. It bloomed a single purple-ish flower, and two seedpods eventually hung heavy from the green appendage before one week of over watering and unseasonably cold weather erased my claim to green-thumbing. The plant browned and disappeared into the earth. No sooner than I discovered the plant had perished, however, I learned that *another* type of seed had been sown. I was expecting a child. Now, I cannot claim this was a *total* surprise. This child had been prayed for and prophesied. During two separate spiritual ceremonies between 2014 and 2017, the spirit of my father and Yeye Osun, herself, came forth to tell me of the little girl who was coming (ironically, Georgene was the conduit for both those experiences). So when I discovered the pregnancy, I knew it was a gift and I also knew it would be a daughter with "a moon falling from her mouth, roses between her legs, and tiaras of Spanish moss, this [child would be] a consort of the spirits" (Shange 3). What I hadn't expected in the twenty years since first reading Shange's novel is that I would be living in

Charleston. I was very weary of South Carolina—I knew and had *felt* the spiritual potency in the air and my naïve, scary ass had long been averse to subjecting myself to the unsettled energy of this space. I had neither considered putting down roots in Charleston, a space so thick with spirit that it chokes; nor had I expected to embrace a partner who was literally "filled up with the Geechees long gone, and the sea" (Shange 3). His family *been* tied to the land and legacy of Charleston further back than our memories even know to forget. The Gullah Geechee roots don't go any deeper.

Shange taught me that "the Ancestors knew all about indigo and Indigo, herself," but I could not comprehend the impact of that singular line on my whole, entire, spirit-filled life when I was nineteen years old (Shange 40). This baby *already* had a name and I can no longer even say it was truly of my choosing. All throughout the pregnancy, multiple spirits of dark-skinned women kept appearing to me with beautiful indigo cloth in my dreams and, finally, made a request that I wrap the daughter who was coming in indigo cloth post-delivery. I was about five months along when I began preparing to oblige them. I searched high and low for indigo stained cloth produced right here in the low country. I cannot even begin to tell you how unsuccessful that endeavor was! I attained the personal number of indigo master artist Arianne King Comer, but that connection was premature. She never returned my calls. I would come to know her and her work more intimately *after* giving birth. Can't say I didn't try, though! To my narrow mind, having indigo produced outside of the region was blasphemous. Like, what kind of *trash* is that? Wrap *my child* in indigo from outside the land our ancestors worked? The "slaves [who] was ourselves" had other plans, they put me on game (Shange 26). I eventually acquired traditional Adire cloth direct from Nigeria. They meant for this indigo child to be wrapped in clothed dyed in the custom of her ancestors. How short sighted of me to have pressed for anything else.

My daughter, Indigo Amelia-Marie, came home covered in blessings, spirit, and Adire. She was born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2018—just days shy of my father's birth date. And the moon was full, y'all. Shange's storytelling was literally coming alive through the "trail of stars that [had fallen from] between my legs" during labor and delivery (Shange 22). And this story is still unfolding. The spring after Indigo was born, a tendril burst from the spot where I had originally planted the indigo seed pods. I have indigo growing in my yard again. For every birthday since her

birth, Indigo has been gifted a hand-made doll in the spirit of her namesake. Her first one, a gift and blessing of spiritual protection from my madrina is clothed in a dress stitched from the same Adire that wrapped her body at birth. And even before she could speak, Indigo would coo at my daddy's picture on the wall. Smiling and fixing her eyes on him as if she knows him—a familiar face from the past. "The South in her," for sure (Shange 3).

When I first learned about the power of a woman with a moon in her mouth, I could not have envisioned the significance Ntozake Shange's brilliant story of three sisters from Charleston, South Carolina, would have on my life. To be clear, I started college as a psychology major intent on working with children on the autism spectrum. Reading was for leisure. *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* has been the grounding force that changed my career path and lead me to do the spiritual work that I did not even know I was being called to do. It is more than a black woman's story; it is an incantation and spiritual evocation. Shange's novel has led to the conscious coupling of my professional and spiritual lives—a separation I have tried, in vain, to maintain. Spirit gets what Spirit wants. And so here I am, writing about my spiritual journey in an academic journal.

I learned to cultivate indigo/Indigo from the masters. Black women storytellers have always been our cultural bearers—pre- and post-literacy—and through their words, fictive characters, and incantations, I have learned to embrace other ways of knowing through the visionary narratives put forth and the remembered practices within. Without Georgene Bess and Ntozake Shange, I am not certain I would have found the breadcrumbs that started with Shange's novel and that are still so vigorously guiding my journey. I came to her work decades after it had originally been in print and while this homily is focused on one novel, my testimony here is to make a bigger point about the impact of her work. Ntozake Shange has been shaking the spiritual trees and telling tales of black folk, women most especially, for a considerable time now. Her work is truth-baring; it will strip you naked and force you to look upon yourself anew with wonder. It will confront the Blue Sundays in your bloodline and the magic between your legs. I can't say whether the world truly gave Shange her flowers while she was among the living, but I have come forth to give my best offering, my best thing. In every space that my daughter inhabits, people will know Ntozake Shange's name. And if they are smart,

they will seek out her work for themselves and willingly allow her spell to be cast. Light for her spirit. May her legacy live forever in those she has touched in words, recipes, choreopoem and otherwise.

Kameelah L. Martin is Professor of African American Studies and English at the College of Charleston. Her teaching and research interests sit at the crossroads of literatures of the African Diaspora, folklore studies, and black feminism. She is the author of *Conjuring Moments in African American Literature* (2012) and *Envisioning Black Feminist Voodoo Aesthetics* (2016). She has published widely on African American literature and popular culture, including an edited collection of essays on Beyoncé's 2016 visual album, *Lemonade*. She has served as a guest editor for special issues of *South Atlantic Review* and *Hypatia* on black transnationalism and conjure feminism, respectively.

NOTES

1. Biomythography is a term coined by Audre Lorde to describe the use of dreams, history, biography, and myth-making to develop narrative. For further explanation, see Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work*, Continuum Press, 1983, 115.

2. Conjure feminism refers to a theoretical framework I am developing, with scholars Kinitra Brooks and LaKisha Simmons, that articulates another branch of Black womens' intellectual traditions based in spirit work and folklore traditions. See special issue of *Hypatia* 36, no. 3, Winter 2021.

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