



*Essay*

## Bring it to the Altar: Reproductive Justice and Altar Work in Africana Women's History

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*Abstract*

This article focuses on the establishment of the Reproductive Justice Community Altar, a communal space for students, faculty, staff, and community members to meditate, grieve, and celebrate how reproductive autonomy has impacted their lives, at the University of Louisville. It examines how Africana reproductive justice foremothers guided the course and highlights Africana women's unique contributions to the reproductive justice movement. Furthermore, it argues that a return to Africana ritual practices is a viable pedagogical tool for teaching reproductive justice in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Pan-African Studies classrooms.

*Keywords*

reproductive justice, pedagogy, Africana spiritual traditions

## Introduction

On June 24, 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, removing the constitutional right to abortion. The removal of constitutional protections for abortions caused tremendous anxiety, but as reproductive justice advocates have highlighted for decades, numerous factors have complicated reproductive autonomy for multiply marginalized folks living in the United States since the nation's inception. As a professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Pan African Studies at the University of Louisville, who teaches courses in Africana women's history and reproductive justice, this article documents the historical motivations for and experience of creating a community altar space for students, faculty, staff, and community members to interact with the past while looking to the future through ritual.

This article presents a historical approach to understanding how the intersections of African American women's identities have made them vulnerable to white supremacist violence with special attention to the realm of reproductive autonomy. It showcases Africana women's unique and varied methods of resistance to these various forms of violence. Finally, it highlights communal ritual practices at the Reproductive Justice Community Altar (RJCA), a transformative healing space where students, faculty, staff, and community members could celebrate, grieve, and meditate on how reproductive autonomy has impacted their lives, as well as the experiences of their ancestors and communities. The RJCA was grounded in the transgressive practice of sojourning, a method through which altar coworkers envisioned individual and collective reproductive futures. The Altar was created as a portal through which they could access the past and conjure the future with ancestral guidance, knowledge of past struggles, and methods of resistance.

Invoking the tradition of sankofa, or looking back to go forward, this article returns to Africana women's experiences in the distant past to better understand how Africana women living in the United State have experienced reproductive violence.<sup>1</sup> Further, it points to strategic methods of resistance Africana women employed to maintain bodily autonomy and humanity. This article enlivens the current conversation around reproductive justice and foregrounds Africana women's experiences as a tool to understand the invasive reach of white supremacy. It offers altar work as a pedagogical tool for teaching reproductive justice (RJ) in Women's,

Gender and Sexuality Studies and Africana Studies classrooms. In doing so, it centers resistance and healing as sojourning methodologies of reclamation as well as individual and collective future-making.

## Reproductive Justice as Concept and Practice

In 1994, twelve Africana activist women coined the term reproductive justice. While working in the reproductive health and rights movement, they found that it did not meet the needs of their communities.<sup>2</sup> They felt that a myopic focus on access to abortion obscured many of the issues facing non-white birthing people, especially those who were multiply marginalized. Co-founder and scholar activist, Loretta Ross shared, “While abortion is one primary health issue, we knew that abortion advocacy alone inadequately addressed the intersectional oppressions of white supremacy, misogyny, and neoliberalism.”<sup>3</sup> In its earliest iteration, reproductive justice was centered around three tenets: (1) the right to have children; (2) the right not to have children; (3) the right to parent those children in safe and healthy environments. Over time, the concept of reproductive justice has evolved to include the protection of gender identity and pursuit of sexual autonomy and pleasure.<sup>4</sup>

Using an intersectional lens, reproductive justice addresses the variety of obstacles that impact reproductive decision making and demands that legislation and support services do as well. Reproductive justice brings together the reproductive rights and human rights frameworks to demonstrate how reproductive violence is a direct infringement on human rights.<sup>5</sup> Reproductive justice activists Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger noted, “Reproductive justice connects the dots between many social issues that seem unrelated to reproductive rights and to traditional view of reproductive politics.”<sup>6</sup> Even though reproductive justice was developed by African American women, the concept is not limited to use exclusively by African American women. It is a theoretical and organizing framework meant to empower and enliven all people to pursue and protect reproductive autonomy.

One of the most prominent reproductive justice organizations is SisterSong, which was founded just 3 years after the framework was initially developed. SisterSong is a southern based, national membership organization that organizes and raises awareness around reproductive justice issues. Since 1997, it has served as the flagship reproductive justice organization. It was originally formed by sixteen organizations

representing Native American, African American, Latino and Asian American and Pacific Islander communities.<sup>7</sup> Similar to the women who coined the term, the activists who founded SisterSong recognized that the traditional reproductive rights movement did not address the needs of their communities. Accordingly, they realized that to adequately respond to these needs, leadership would need to come from within their communities, not outside of them. SisterSong continues to organize in the pursuit of reproductive autonomy for all and remains grounded in experiences of women of color.

## Teaching Reproductive Justice in the Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies and Africana Studies Classrooms

The project that guided this article is the Reproductive Justice Community Altar (RJCA); it served as a community component to “African American Women and the History of Reproductive Justice,” a graduate/undergraduate course taught at the University of Louisville. In the past, the course has been cross-listed in the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGST) Department, Pan-African Studies (PAS) Department, and UofL Law School. It was designed to give students a historical understanding of African American women's complex relationship to reproductive autonomy in the United States from the mid nineteenth century through the Black Power era. The course opened with readings on the purpose and objectives of reproductive justice both as a theoretical and organizing framework. The course then moved to discussions of the historical past, starting with Africana women's experiences during enslavement within the United States. Over the course of the semester, students engaged with readings that covered the theft of Africana women's bodies during enslavement, Africana midwifery, birthwork and herbalist practices, the abuse of Africana women's bodies in service of medical discovery and Africana women's experiences with pregnancy while incarcerated. This article highlights multiple stories across time and space to demonstrate their linkages and to highlight the connections between Africana women's experiences during enslavement and the not-so-distant past.

In curating this course, the instructor considered how students could engage with these ideas, concepts, and histories in unique and meaningful ways, not simply to help them learn the information, but also to help them *feel* through these often-

difficult topics through an embodied practice of sojourning. Viewing the altar space as a portal to access both past and future, the course called on participants to make meaning of their individual and collective visions of the future. It asked them to return to self and bring that full version of themselves into our communal space.<sup>8</sup> This ritualized altar practice invited participants to move forward, declaring their power and reclaiming their reproductive autonomy through the individual and collective practice of conjure. Through accessing the past, it became possible for students to understand more clearly the present and sculpt wondrous futures together.

### **Africana Reproductive Justice Foremothers**

Collective African American reproductive justice ancestors and elders guided the course and illustrated the depth and breadth of the impact of white supremacist violence in the lived experience of African American women across time and space. Lucy, Betsy, Anarcha, Margaret Garner, Josephine Scott, and Assata Shakur were central historical figures in the course and played important roles in our collective ancestor veneration practice, which included honoring these collective ancestors and heeding the knowledge of their stories. Similarly, the unnamed Black mothers, other-mothers, caregivers, herbalists, birth workers and rootworkers were included for their underrecognized role in preserving ancestral traditions and protecting of Black birthgivers and communities. This section of the article explores these stories to explain how they fit as Africana reproductive justice foremothers and to highlight the various ways Africana women have responded to reproductive violence.

Enslavement provided the conditions for various types of abuse and violence against Africana women as their value to enslavers was determined by both their physical and reproductive labor.<sup>9</sup> These conditions incentivized the systematic sexual assault of enslaved Africana women both by white enslavers and through forced breeding with enslaved Africana men. Further, they endured as their children were abused, assaulted, kidnapped, and sold as chattel. Dorothy Roberts described how Africana children were used as “hostages” to control Africana mothers as seen in the case of Harriet Jacobs, an enslaved Africana mother who struggled with the conflicting emotions of escaping enslavement while her children remained enslaved.

Another such Africana mother was Margaret Garner, who was enslaved on a plantation in Boone County, Kentucky. Garner’s story is the basis for Toni Morrison’s

prolific *Beloved*, a vivid novel that reimagines Garner's life. After many years of abuse, Garner and her family, including her husband and four small children, escaped and fled to Ohio in January 1856.<sup>10</sup> After crossing the frozen Ohio River and reaching Garner's cousin Elijah Kite in Cincinnati, they were cornered by "slave catchers." Rather than allowing her children to be returned to enslavement, Garner slit the throat of her infant daughter. Her choice to commit infanticide was an extreme act of resistance seldom employed by enslaved women but was one that struck directly at the heart of the system of enslavement by denying white enslavers access to African children.<sup>11</sup> Of Garner's decision to kill her daughter, Morrison wrote in *Beloved*, "I took my babies and put them where they'd be safe."<sup>12</sup> Morrison suggests that her main character Sethe, whose story is based on Garner's, perceives death as safer than a life enveloped in white supremacy. Garner's act was also an assertion of her and her children's humanity and a demand that that humanity be recognized. Garner comes into the reproductive justice orbit due to her unflinching desire to protect her children and keep them from experiencing enslavement.

Enslaved women's healthcare was a complex matter often fraught by numerous factors. Their physical health, especially their ability to reproduce, directly impacted their worth to white enslavers and some enslaved women used this dynamic to their advantage by feigning illness, playing the lady, and slowing up work.<sup>13</sup> These strategic acts of resistance were a declaration of their humanity and afforded them some degree of rest, and possibly joy. Enslaved Black women performed much of the necessary daily health work on southern plantations.<sup>14</sup> Even this labor was highly scrutinized as white enslavers had a firm distrust of Black healers. They felt that if Black healers, herbalists, and doctresses could use their knowledge to heal, they could also use it to harm.<sup>15</sup>

Herbalism and communion with nature represented another way for enslaved African people to serve their communities. While herbalists were not exclusively women, many were, and performed this work alongside other domestic labor. Through a practical and spiritual relationship with the land, enslaved African herbalists became a "pragmatic resource for survival" and worked to heal mental, physical, and spiritual afflictions.<sup>16</sup> This multi-layered form of resistance directly challenged white enslaver's beliefs that African people were uninformed and lacked knowledge about their bodies, and it troubled the paternalistic nature of enslavement itself. By placing themselves in positions of authority, enslaved healers and herbalists

rejected the intrusions of white control from white enslavers and helped enslaved individuals retain some degree of body sovereignty.

Within the realm of reproductive care, enslaved Africana birth workers, regularly performed the necessary labor of delivering babies and caring for birthing people in multiple ways. Africana midwives mixed the secular and spiritual to provide support for various reproductive concerns, including enhancing fertility, preventing pregnancy, safe delivery, and lactation.<sup>17</sup> Making the choice to prevent or terminate pregnancy challenged white authority and should be considered a rich example of body sovereignty. They also provided a safe space for Africana birthing people outside of the racist white male medical gaze. As some enslaved Africana women chose not to reveal their pregnancies to white enslavers, Africana birth workers kept their client's confidences and supported them in secrecy. Scholar Marie Jenkins Schwartz noted, "Out of concern that they might be subjected to painful and dangerous procedures, abortions, or degrading treatment, some slaves hid miscarriages, pregnancies, even the onset of labor from owners, despite life-threatening complications."<sup>18</sup> This intentional concealment was itself an act of resistance, a practice termed the culture of dissemblance by historian Darlene Clark Hine. Hine defines the culture of dissemblance as the attitudes and behaviors of Africana women that created the appearance of openness but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors.<sup>19</sup> Enslaved Africana women directly challenged white male authority by denying white enslavers access to the intimate parts of their lives.

African American women were also abused through the experimental use of their bodies in pursuit of medical discovery. Africana women have been denied recognition for their contributions to these discoveries, and their pain and (involuntary) sacrifices have gone largely unacknowledged within the historical narrative, a narrative that frames white male medical professionals as altruistic, benevolent actors and fails to consider how they took advantage of the most vulnerable in their care. Between 1845 and 1849, three enslaved women named Lucy, Betsy and Anarcha underwent numerous experimental procedures to repair vesico-vaginal fistulas or vaginal tears. Dr. James Marion Sims performed these procedures, which would eventually gain him a great deal of notoriety. He became known as one of the earliest American gynecologists due to his success in performing surgical procedures as well as the development of numerous gynecological tools and methods, like the "Sims position" and "Sims speculum."<sup>20</sup> Sims was familiar with Anarcha's case because

he had attended her previous lengthy childbirth, but he “leased” Lucy and Betsy in an effort to have more experimental material.<sup>21</sup>

Sims’ decision to perform repeated experimental operations on enslaved Africana women without anesthetic cannot be removed from the social context in which they lived, nor the professional acclaim Sims gained as a result of their victimization. Through Sims’ experimental procedures and medical discoveries, he became known as the father of modern gynecology. In contrast, historian Deidre Cooper Owens has dubbed Lucy, Betsy and Anarcha the “mothers of modern gynecology” to emphasize their contribution, not only the numerous painful procedures they endured, but also their labor as skilled nurses and attendants within Sims’ backyard sick house. Similarly, scholar Laura Briggs argued that these discoveries would not have been possible without them.<sup>22</sup> Only recently has there been serious consideration of the dynamics surrounding Sims’ experiments, including the power dynamic between himself and the enslaved Africana women. Lucy, Betsy and Anarcha hold an important place in our historical reproductive justice continuum because they were some of the earliest documented Africana women to experience medical exploitation and abuse at the hands of American medical men. Their experiences illuminate some of these early intrusions into the sacred reproductive space.

Like Lucy, Betsy and Anarcha, Josephine Scott encountered white medical professionals at time when she was quite vulnerable and in need of care. In the 1870’s and 1880’s, Scott was living in Philadelphia when she died during her third pregnancy.<sup>23</sup> The physicians who attended her second and third pregnancies, Drs. John Parry and W.H. Parrish, used her case to promote wider use of cesarean section. After her death, Parrish donated her pelvis and the attached bones to the natural history collection at the American Obstetrical Society.<sup>24</sup> Records indicate the Society donated the collection to the Mütter Museum Committee of the College of Physicians of Philadelphia in 1886 and recent attempts to recover Scott’s remains have been unsuccessful.<sup>25</sup>

In the not-so-distant past, elder Assata Shakur provided a forceful demonstration of what Africana liberation looked like in practice. Her story brought together important themes of gender and childbirth for political prisoners. Shakur is perhaps one of the most widely known Africana revolutionary nationalist activists of the twentieth century. Her autobiography *Assata: An Autobiography* demonstrates her



indominable spirit, constant pursuit of liberation and strategic methods of resistance. Within the context of reproductive justice, one of her most daring acts was choosing to have a child while incarcerated. She refused to succumb to the physical and psychological pressures the state inflicted on her. Shakur wrote:

“I am about life,” i said to myself. “I’m gonna live as hard as i can and as full as i can until i die. And i’m not letting these parasites, these oppressors, these greedy racist swine make me kill my children in mind, before they are even born. I’m going to live and i’m going to love Kamau, and, if a child comes from that union, i’m going to rejoice. Because our children are our futures and i believe in the future and in the strength and rightness of our struggle.” I was ready for whatever happened next. I relaxed and let nature take its course.<sup>26</sup>

Through this act Shakur reclaimed her body autonomy and exercised her right to have a child. After making this choice, Shakur fought a tremendous battle to protect her and her child’s health. When Shakur initially believed she was pregnant and visited the prison doctor, she was dismissed. During later visits she was coldly treated with disregard and told, “...my advice is to have an abortion. It will be better for you and for everyone else.”<sup>27</sup> Despite inadequate healthcare and blatant pressure to terminate her pregnancy, Shakur did not falter and was successful in securing a private obstetrician/gynecologist who could monitor her pregnancy. Shakur’s fierce self-advocacy in the face of such opposition embodies reproductive justice at its core. Her refusal to allow others to control her body and fervent optimism for the future is an important aspect of her Africana liberation narrative deserving of more attention.

Each of the Africana reproductive justice foremothers highlight important lessons both in how white supremacy invades the lives and psyches of Africana people, but more importantly, how they respond, resist, and overcome these obstacles. Altar work is one of the mediums through which we can access, honor, and implement the important life lessons of these foremothers. The RJCA helps participants see themselves as a part of this continuum of resistance.

## Altar Work in the Africana Tradition

Within various African and African diasporic traditions, the use and maintenance of altars is a common spiritual practice used in the process of sojourning or returning to the self and reclaiming one's inherent power through ritual and ancestor veneration.<sup>28</sup> The instructor developed this project in connection with multiple African and African diasporic practices, including the Dagara tradition from Burkina Faso, West Africa and the Ifa spiritual tradition of the Yoruba people from Nigeria, West Africa, but especially the Hoodoo tradition.<sup>29</sup> Anthropologist Katrina Hazzard-Donald defines Hoodoo as the “indigenous, herbal, healing and supernatural-controlling spiritual folk tradition of the African American in the United States” and the “embodied historical memory linking them [African Americans] back through time to previous generations and ultimately to their African past.”<sup>30</sup> In many cases, Hoodoo and conjure are used interchangeably. Scholar Stephanie Y. Mitchem defines Hoodoo or conjure as “a set of practices and beliefs that draw on nature and its perceived energies in order to shape preferred conditions.”<sup>31</sup> While all altar co-workers were not necessarily invested in these practices as African and African diasporic traditions, the RJCA was rooted in how Africana people across time and space have tapped into spirit and used sacred altar space to shift their reality.

Altar work can include meditation, prayer, dance, manifestation, and communication with various spiritual energies, and for ancestor veneration, or to honor their ancestors.<sup>32</sup> In *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose through Nature, Ritual, and Community*, Malidoma Patrice Somé wrote, “A shrine is where one goes to enter into communication with the Other World. It is the place of beauty and mystery, and also the place of memory because shrines have the power to remind us that in human life we are always at the threshold of another world.”<sup>33</sup> Altar work is therefore a starting point for connection with self through another plane and is a direct through point to communication with individual and collective ancestors. The importance of these relationships cannot be overstated and help to guide altar workers through various life obstacles.

Offerings, water, and fire are common features of altars throughout the African diaspora and on the continent. The practice of leaving offerings can be understood through the Yoruba belief of reciprocity of ‘ase’ or the inherent force of all creation.<sup>34</sup> In exchange for help, clarity, or protection, one may leave a sacrifice or offering at an

altar. Baba Ifa Karade added that offerings are given “to give thanks for the granting of a need or desire; as a promise or sacred vow...to provide strength, stability, and courage to achieve in the visible world, as well as the invisible world.”<sup>35</sup> Depending on the individual’s intention, offerings can include food, drink, herbs, flowers, pictures, poetry as well as other written items. They may also include an ancestor’s favorite item, a piece of their clothing or jewelry. Clean water is used to symbolize the “doorway to the Other World,” a portal that empowers altar co-workers to tap into and envision other planes.<sup>36</sup> As a tool of healing, water “seeks to cleanse, reconcile, and balance that which is in agitation, emotional disorder, and self-danger. When water succeeds, it restores or enhances life.”<sup>37</sup> Fire is an elemental energy that calls ancestors to the sacred space, it is like a “connecting rod, an open channel” that connects that which is present, has passed and will be.<sup>38</sup> Somé wrote, “Fire is...the spirit part of us that knows what has always been.” In that context it acts as conduit, through our current reality back to our ancestral selves.

## Building Our Altar

The Women’s Center at the University of Louisville hosted the RJCA in the designated lactation room. In the space, altar co-workers found fresh flowers, vases, and stationary supplies to use in their offerings. The Altar resembled many of the altars found in the homes or communal spaces of Africana spiritual practitioners, some of whom use an eclectic approach to spiritual practice bringing together traditions from Africa and across the diaspora. The altar space started with a table covered with clean white fabric, a bowl of water and flameless candles.<sup>39</sup> To the left of the altar were large pillows for participants to use in their meditation, prayer, chant, or other spiritual practice. A free book exchange was on the opposite side of the room and participants were invited to share books related to reproductive justice. The instructor asked participants to consider the following questions when making offerings:

- How has reproductive autonomy impacted your life and the lives of those around you? What feelings does that bring up for you?

- How/do the historical figures discussed in the course speak to you? Do you see connections between their experiences and the contemporary moment?
- What lessons have you learned about bodily autonomy from our readings and discussions? Who in your community could benefit from these lessons?
- Who shaped your earliest ideas/feelings/emotions around bodily autonomy and reproductive justice? Are there ancestors, elders or others who have influenced how you understand reproductive justice and body sovereignty?
- How do you envision your individual reproductive future? What about our collective reproductive future? What does body sovereignty look/feel/smell/taste like to you?
- What types of objects/ideas/practices have you used to safeguard your reproductive autonomy?
- How have you helped others secure reproductive autonomy already? How can you help others secure reproductive autonomy moving forward?

As a part of the course, students were asked to make two offerings and commit to two altar maintenance shifts. The instructor allowed students to make meaning of their offerings in any way they saw fit. For example, while some students were drawn to natural offerings, like flowers, others found more meaning in offering their poetry and artwork at the altar. Students were also asked to take up the communal responsibility of making sure that the altar space was clean and orderly by committing to altar maintenance shifts. During their shift, students were asked to switch out flameless candles, add water to vases, ensure the bookshelf and meditation space were organized and alert the instructor if there was a need for any additional supplies. This aspect of the altar practice inspired students to conceptualize the altar as their own living project, not simply an assignment for the class but as a sacred space to protect and keep alive through regular tending.

Over the course of the semester, participants both made use of the provided supplies and brought their own creative offerings. The offering (Figure 1) was written

to “Celia, Margaret Garner and all other Africana Enslaved Women Who Resisted However and Whenever they Could.” It highlights both the ways enslaved Africana women resisted through violence, but also those who resisted in other ways that asserted Africana women’s right to humanity, life, and joy. In 1855, Celia, an enslaved Black woman, was convicted of killing her enslaver after he repeatedly sexually assaulted her. Similarly, Garner’s story as described above reflects one of the ways enslaved Black women were willing to use violence to protect themselves and their families. Another participant created a reproductive justice collage that includes symbols and terms that represented reproductive autonomy and freedom.

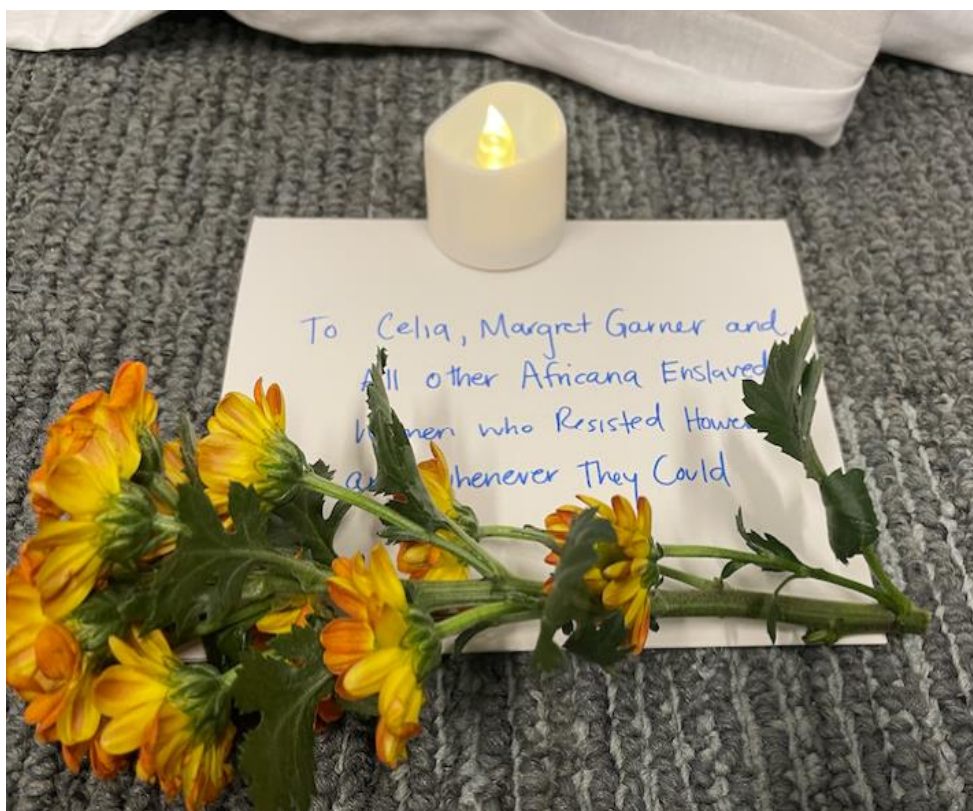


Figure 1: RJCA offering, including flowers, flameless candle, and handwritten note, 2022. Courtesy of the author.

By the end of the semester, representatives from various reproductive justice community organizations and offices on campus as well as community members and students had made offerings (Figure 2). From conversations with various altar co-workers, the instructor was made aware that some wrote letters to those they had lost, including parents and children. Others left offerings of flowers to their younger selves

who were survivors of violence, and some left notes of encouragement to future selves as symbols of hope and empowerment.

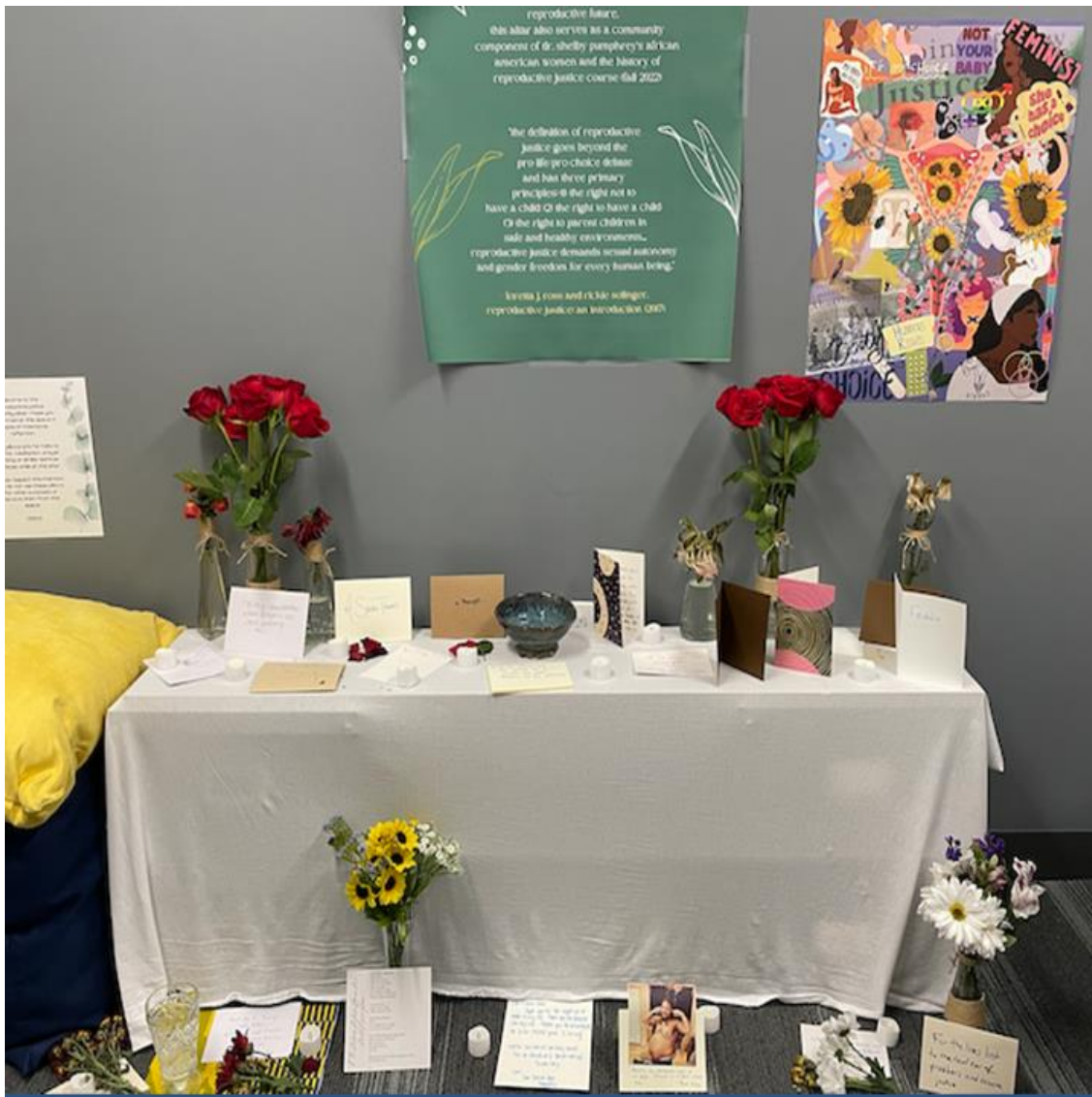


Figure 2: Reproductive Justice Community Altar, 2022.  
Courtesy of the author.

## Conclusion

There is growing awareness of how white supremacy and all its byproducts, like racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism, continue to restrict our lives and visions for the future. Despite this growing collective consciousness, birthing people continue to bring

forth new life with hope and optimism. They and their (chosen or biological) families continue to build support systems around them and their children to protect and care for them in the face of white supremacy. While certainly not the only example, Africana women and Africana communities represent a harrowing example of overcoming, remaining resilient and seeking joy. The RJCA demonstrated just one access point into that continuum of resistance, a continuous overflowing of tools, information, and ideas we enact daily to liberate ourselves and our communities.

As a portal to the past and future, the RJCA served as a reclamation space, where participants could come to clearly see their present and begin conjuring a future. By understanding the tethers that tie the collective past to our individual and collective present and futures, white supremacy's intrusive reach is more visible. Further, focus on these stories from the distant past reveals how birthing people and their communities supported one another through multi-layered forms of resistance, making these tools more accessible to altar co-workers.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies* (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 2010), 65. Sankofa is a Twi word from the Akan cultural group of Ghana, West Africa. The concept calls for one to look to the past to make a better present and future. The term holds particular importance within Africana/Black Studies. Many scholars in the discipline *do* Sankofa work, as the discipline requires that we use knowledge from the past to better understand the Africana experience over time and space. Author uses Africana and Black interchangeably. Africana refers to people of African descent. Author uses African American to describe the unique experiences of Africana people living in the United States.

<sup>2</sup>Loretta Ross, “Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism,” *Souls* 19, no. 3 (2017): 290.

<sup>3</sup>Ross, “Reproductive Justice,” 290.

<sup>4</sup>Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 9.

<sup>5</sup>Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice*, 10.

<sup>6</sup>Ross and Solinger, *Reproductive Justice*, 169.

<sup>7</sup>Jael Silliman, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross, and Elena R. Gutiérrez, *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 50.

<sup>8</sup>Students were not required to share their experiences, nor their offerings, but the instructor found it important that they had the opportunity and safe space to do so.

<sup>9</sup>Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1997), 24.

<sup>10</sup>Nikki M. Taylor, *Driven Towards Madness: The Fugitive Slave Margaret Garner and Tragedy on the Ohio* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016), 7.

<sup>11</sup>Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 48-49.

<sup>12</sup>Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Vintage Books, 1987), 193.

<sup>13</sup>Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 123, 177 - 179. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 46.

<sup>14</sup>Fett, *Working Cures*, 112.



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<sup>15</sup> Fett, *Working Cures*, 143.

<sup>16</sup> Fett, *Working Cures*, 76.

<sup>17</sup> Marie Jenkins Schwartz, *Birthing A Slave: Motherhood and Medicine in the Antebellum South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 103.

<sup>18</sup> Schwartz, *Birthing A Slave*, 139.

<sup>19</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," in *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Reconstruction of American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 37.

<sup>20</sup> Deirdre Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage: Race, Gender, and the Origins of American Gynecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 39.

<sup>21</sup> Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage*, 36.

<sup>22</sup> Laura Briggs, "The Race of Hysteria: 'Overcivilization' and the 'Savage' Woman in Late Nineteenth-Century Obstetrics and Gynecology," *American Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (June 2000): 262.

<sup>23</sup> Briggs, "The Race of Hysteria," 264.

<sup>24</sup> Briggs, "The Race of Hysteria," 265.

<sup>25</sup> Layla A. Jones, "When the Water Breaks," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 12, 2022, <https://www.inquirer.com/news/inq2/more-perfect-union-maternal-morbidity-philadelphia-medicine-history-racism-20220712.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1987), 93.

<sup>27</sup> Shakur, *Assata*, 126.

<sup>28</sup> In various traditions, like the Dagara, an altar may be referred to as a shrine.

<sup>29</sup> Author recognizes Hoodoo as a continuation of African spiritual traditions, carried to North America through the Maafa (Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade), continued by Africana people during enslavement and recognized through contemporary practice. For more information about the distinct characteristics of Old Traditional Black Belt Hoodoo, see Katrina Hazzard-Donald's *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System* (2013).

<sup>30</sup> Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 4.

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<sup>31</sup> Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *African American Folk Healing* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 15.

<sup>32</sup> Spiritual energies refer to nature as well as any deified entities of a specific tradition.

<sup>33</sup> Malidoma Patrice Somé, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose through Nature, Ritual, and Community* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1998), 134.

<sup>34</sup> Baba Ifa Karade, *The Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts* (Newburyport: Weiser Books, 1994), 29, 93.

<sup>35</sup> Karade, *The Handbook of Yoruba Religious Concepts*, 98.

<sup>36</sup> Somé, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*, 167.

<sup>37</sup> Somé, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*, 172.

<sup>38</sup> Somé, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*, 170.

<sup>39</sup> Due to restrictions related to where the RJCA was housed, we were unable to use live candles.

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