A Radical Reconstruction of Resistance Strategies: Black Girls and Black Women Reclaiming Our Power Using Transdisciplinary Applied Social Justice©, Ma'at, and Rites of Passage

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Abstract Heeding the call for Black Women's Studies to move from theory to praxis, the Transdisciplinary Applied Social Justice model provides a theoretical and methodological approach for social justice change, with an emphasis on praxis. In this article, the model is used to examine the lived reality and effects of intersectional race, class, and gender oppression on African American girls and women. Their high unemployment rates, incarceration rates, disenfranchisement rates, and health care disparity rates demonstrate that a very real "Black female crisis" exists. This article encourages a radical reconstruction of resistance strategies by African American girls and women. It suggests that they can reclaim their power by embracing ancient African thought, traditions, and practices, as symbolized by Ma'at and rites of passage programs.

Keywords Ma'at · Rites of passage · African American women · African American girls · Transdisciplinary applied social justice

As an African American critical race feminist and scholar activist, I look at issues of race, gender, and the law with a focus on justice and transformation. I examine systems and structures, people and policies, and ideas and ideologies through a transdisciplinary lens. The issues affecting African American girls and women are social problems that require creative, innovative, and transdisciplinary approaches. Transdisciplinarity "is the use of multiple theories, methods, approaches, frameworks, and disciplines to understand, strategize, and implement transformative initiatives in society" (Pratt-Clarke 2010: 19). Transdisciplinarity is the foundation for the Transdisciplinary Applied Social Justice (TASJ) Model.

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The TASJ model is a tool that facilitates a critical examination of the lived experiences of African American girls and women, with a focus on praxis. I used TASJ to examine educational experiences of African American girls in the Detroit Male Academy debate. I illustrated the ways in which African American girls were marginalized and excluded from an educational opportunity based on their intersecting race, class, and gender status. In this article, the TASJ model is used to analyze the multidimensional social challenges and disparities that African American women and girls are experiencing based on their intersecting race, class, and gender status. The scope, breadth, and complexity of the disparities involving the health care system, the criminal justice system, the economic system, the religious system, and the political system reflect a need for a radical reconstruction of resistance strategies. This article suggests that rites of passage programs, grounded in the African principle of Ma'at, have the potential to serve as a strategy for empowering African American girls and women and transforming their lives.

The Theoretical Foundation: Transdisciplinary Applied Social Justice

TASJ is "the application of concepts, theories, and methodologies from multiple academic disciplines to social problems with the goal of addressing injustice in society and improving the experiences of marginalized individuals and groups" (Pratt-Clarke 2010: 27). A transdisciplinary approach integrates multiple disciplines and areas of study, including sociology, psychology, history, political science, law, communication studies, critical race theory, African American feminism, African American studies, critical race feminism, and race, class, and gender studies. TASJ focuses on theory, method, and praxis. The objective of TASJ is to directly and indirectly improve individual lives through theoretically informed strategic initiatives that focus on empowerment, transformation, and social justice activism.

The TASJ model illustrates that "understanding how our lives are governed not primarily by individuals but more powerfully by institutions, conceptual schemes, and their 'texts'... is crucial for designing effective projects of social transformation" (Harding and Norberg 2005: 2011). Harding and Norberg (2005: 2011) note the importance in feminist research of "'studying up'—studying the power, their institutions, policies, and practices." Effective activism involving race, class, and gender often requires a restructuring of power relationships involving social institutions. TASJ recognizes the importance of understanding the impact of systems of power (Pratt-Clarke 2010). Collins (2009: 292) claims that power can be seen as "something that groups possess" but also as an "intangible entity that circulates within a particular matrix of domination and to which individuals stand in varying relationships." Thus, TASJ incorporates Collins' Black feminist constructs of power domains: structural, disciplinary, interpersonal, and hegemonic. The domains form the theoretical foundation and provide a platform for analyzing the ways in which power and power dynamics operate in society and influence social outcomes. Understanding the operation of each of these domains is critical to social justice activism, as activism will often target and impact one or more of these domains.

The structural domain involves interlocking social structures and systems, such as the economic system, the education system, the legal system, the health care system,

the religious system, and the family. This domain organizes and structures power (Collins 2009). The disciplinary domain includes written and unwritten laws, policies, practices, and procedures. This domain manages, controls, and structures relationships between individuals (Collins 2009). The interpersonal domain involves micro-level relationships between individuals. It includes those in leadership roles, those who are intermediaries, those who are gatekeepers, and those who are participants and recipients of everyday acts of oppression. In this domain, intersecting identities of race, gender, class, religion, language, and nationality become critical factors in influencing access to power; experiences of oppression; and opportunities for advancement (Collins 2009). These identities often influence the narrative that is told and the history that is documented.

The final domain is the hegemonic domain. This is the domain of systems of thought, ideologies, values, and beliefs (Collins 2009). Religious and political systems of thought are foundations upon which societies are created, sustained, and legitimized. Ideas about the role, value, and place of women of color exist within this domain. Racism, sexism, classism, and democracy are examples of systems of thought in the hegemonic domain. Similarly, the "White supremacist capitalist patriarchy" referred to by bell hooks (1994) is another example of a powerful matrix of domination in the hegemonic domain that impacts women of color by shaping their life experiences and life outcomes.

The four domains are interactive and dynamic. The life experiences and narratives of individuals in the interpersonal domain occur within the structural domain of social institutions and social structures. The structural domain is influenced by the ideologies and values of the hegemonic domain. The beliefs of the hegemonic domain inform the laws, policies, and practices of the disciplinary domain. TASJ encourages the examination of the impact of interlocking domains on the experiences of African American girls and women.

TASJ enables us to recognize that there are systems of thought, including racism, sexism, and patriarchy, at work in the hegemonic domain that influence written policies, procedures, and laws in the disciplinary domain. There are also many unwritten and unspoken practices that affect the experiences of African American women and one of the critical challenges is learning, unearthing, uncovering, and challenging what is unwritten and unspoken, yet acted upon. The disciplinary domain provides the foundation for the structural domain and the systems in which we exist and have our experiences, including the education system, the legal system, the political system, and the criminal justice system. African American women's experiences in these social structures and institutions involve interactions with other individuals and groups in the interpersonal domain. Within the interpersonal domain, intersecting identities, including race, gender, and class become salient. As a result, these identities often influence and determine levels of respect, power, prominence, and authority.

Thus, the lived experiences and narratives of African American girls and women must be privileged and placed at the center of any analysis so that instances of injustice and oppression can be unearthed, unsilenced, made visible, acknowledged, and recognized. This centering approach is consistent with the key tenets of Afrocentricity. Afrocentricity encourages the active agency and voice of African people in addressing social issues (Asante 1990). Once the experiences have been given voice,

have been documented, analyzed, legitimated, and validated, transformative action can be undertaken. Discourse analysis, then, plays a critical role in the TASJ model as a methodological approach, it complements the theoretical component.

It is through the narratives, life stories, and the discourse of individuals and groups that we can begin to understand how institutions, ideologies, and policies create and perpetuate injustice. As such, social justice scholar-activists should, through discourse analysis, deconstruct discourse to determine effective and transformational interventions in individual lives (Pratt-Clarke 2010). Discourse analysis is a key methodological tool of TASJ because it enables the scholar activist to deconstruct narratives and explore the role of power in the experiences of individuals. Discourse analysis facilitates an understanding of the role of intersecting identities in the lived experiences of individuals. It highlights the power of voice and the story. Policy discourse analysis, in particular, enables a critical analysis of the role of policy and its impact on the experiences of marginalized groups. It allows for an assessment of concepts, ideologies, and dominant themes, including power domains. Discourse analysis facilitates problem diagnosis which is a key step to praxis, problem-solving, and activism.

Once problems are identified and strategically defined, once causes are logically attributed and politically informed, then practical solutions can be created that address both the problem and the cause. The TASJ model facilitates this process. It focuses on identifying opportunities for praxis and social justice activism that have a theoretical and methodological foundation. TASJ, then, is a conceptual tool and lens through which issues affecting African American girls and women can be examined and analyzed. In the next section, TASJ is used to illustrate the magnitude of societal and structural challenges facing African American girls and women.

The Theoretical Analysis: The Black Female Crisis

A critical examination of social systems in the structural domain reveals that African American girls and women are struggling with experiences in the healthcare system, the prison system, the political system, the employment system, and the religious system and that their experiences in one system often affect their experiences in other areas. We will begin by looking at the experiences of African American women in the healthcare system.

Health Care System

In the area of health, African American women are considered a health disparity population. Under the Minority Health and Health Disparities Research and Education Act (2000: 2498), a population is considered a health disparities population "if there is a significant disparity in the overall rate of disease incidence, prevalence, morbidity, mortality or survival rates in the population as compared with the health status of the general population." There are several disparities between African American girls and women compared with the general population. There is a higher mortality rate for African American infants compared with White infants; the maternal mortality rate is higher among African American women; African American

women have higher mortality rates than White women from breast cancer; pregnant African American women are less likely to receive appropriate medical advice; and African American women receive less appropriate care for cardiovascular disease than White males (Healthy People 2010: 73–74). Life expectancy at age 26 is shorter and rates of heart disease and diabetes are higher among African American women (Healthy People 2010: 73–74). In addition, the estimated lifetime risk of becoming infected with HIV is significantly higher for African American women when compared with White males and females. The risk is one in 30 for African American females, compared with one in 104 for White males and one in 588 for White females (Avert.org). African American women are also facing issues related to obesity at higher rates. According to current statistics, 77 % of African American women are overweight and nearly 49 % are obese. In comparison, 63 % of African American men are overweight and 28 % are obese (Cowart et al. 2010).

These data reveal that the physical health of African American women is at a critical juncture. The reality is that many African American women are unhealthy, are burdened by illness and weight, and are dying prematurely. TASJ enables us to recognize that many factors influence this disparity. Predominantly White practitioners (doctors, nurses, and health care administrators) in the interpersonal domain are largely responsible for administering and implementing health care policies and practices of the disciplinary domain which results in the unequal access to quality care and disparate treatment often due to the prevalence of racism and sexism in the hegemonic domain. This pattern is consistent in other social systems, including the criminal justice system.

Criminal Justice System

While there has been extensive discussion of the overrepresentation of African American males in prison, there has been very limited attention directed to the experiences and representation of African American women in prison. The incarceration disparity for African American men has been widely publicized. The incarceration rate in 2009 for White men was 708/100,000; for Hispanic men, it was 1,822/100,000; and for African American men, it was 4,749/100,000 (United States Bureau of Justice Statistics 2010: 2). What has not been widely recognized and what has been buried, hidden, and silenced is the significant increase in the incarceration rates for women.

The Sentencing Project (2008: 2) notes that over one million women are under correctional supervision and that "the number and proportion of women in the system has been increasing at nearly double the rate for men over the past two decades." Similarly, the National Women's Law Center October 2010 report on incarcerated women noted that it was unusual, 25 years ago, to see women and mothers in the criminal justice system. When mandatory drug sentencing was introduced in the mid-1980s, there was a 400 % increase in the number of women in prison. Currently, there is a greater percentage of females incarcerated for drug offenses than males. As evidence of the growing incarceration of women, five women's prisons were built nationally from 1930 to 1950; during the 1980s and 1990s, dozens more prisons were built, with most of them being maximum-security women's prisons (Hutchinson 2006).

The increased female incarceration can largely be attributed to the increased incarceration of minority women. Braithwaite et al. (2005: 1679) noted that African American and Hispanic women constitute the fastest-growing prison population. In 2009, one in every 300 African American females was incarcerated compared to one in every 704 Hispanic females and about one in every 1,099 White females (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2010: 2). The rate of growth for African American women has been so rapid that Hutchinson (2006) in a column titled, "Why More Women—and Especially Black Women—are Behind Bars" asserted that African American women have almost single-handedly expanded the women's prison-industrial complex. As early as 1998, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (Amnesty International 2001) recognized that there was an 828 % increase in the incarceration rate of African American women over a 5-year period. Amnesty International (2001) noted "an African American woman is eight times more likely than a European American woman is to be imprisoned; and African American women make up nearly half of the nation's female prison population, with most serving sentences for nonviolent drug or property related offenses."

The injustice of the criminal justice system extends to the experiences of African American girls and young women in the juvenile justice system. At the March 2011 symposium titled "African American Girls and Young Women and the Juvenile Justice System: A Call to Action," hosted by the Thelton E. Henderson Center for Social Justice at the University of California, Berkeley's School of Law, Jones and Chesney-Lind (Palta 2011; Berkeley Law 2011) presented data indicating that African American girls and young women are the fastest growing population of incarcerated young people in the country. The symposium was an effort to raise awareness to address the silence about the experiences of African American girls and women (85 % of whom are mothers) in the criminal justice system (Palta 2011). Applying a TASJ framework demonstrates that the operation of the prison system is influenced by policies, procedures, and laws in the disciplinary domain, and their execution in the interpersonal domain by a largely White and male police force and legal system. The role and effect of ideologies of racism and sexism in the hegemonic domain on the experiences of African American women and girls in the criminal justice system must also be acknowledged.

A TASJ analysis reveals that there is a relationship between the health care system and the prison system. This relationship was acknowledged by Braithwaite et al. (2005: 1679) in an article about the health of minority women in prison—a population that is largely invisible and often ignored. The article notes that "incarcerated women are largely African American; thus, many of them bear the quadruple burden of their race/ethnicity, class, gender, and status as a criminal offender. That being Black, being female, being poor, and being a criminal offender confers serious health risks is clear." The consequence of the convergence of these identities is that incarcerated women's health is worse than women in the general population and worse than that of incarcerated men (Braithwaite et al. 2005: 1679). An additional challenge for women arises from the predominantly male prison staff, as 70 % of federal prison guards are male (Braithwaite et al. 2005; Amnesty International 2001). Many inmates are assaulted during routine medical exams (Amnesty International 2001).

Political Participation

Not only is there an interconnection between the health care system and the prison system, there is also a connection with the political system through disenfranchisement laws. These laws have resulted in a disparity related to the loss of the right to vote. Many states have laws restricting the right to vote for individuals who have been convicted of a felony. For some states, it is a complete ban. For others, it is a complicated and difficult journey for them to have their right to the franchise restored. This is another area where African American women have remained largely invisible. The Sentencing Project (2008) recognized that the while the effects of the disenfranchisement policy "among African American males has been widely documented—in some states one in four Black males is denied the right to vote due to a felony conviction—less is known about the impact on women, particularly women of color." The "Felony Disenfranchisement Rates for Women" report (2008) recognized the correlation between the increasing incarceration rates for African American women and their rates of disenfranchisement. The report (2008: 1) noted "an estimated 279,800 African American women—one in 50—cannot vote, an increase of nearly 14 % since 2000. This rate of disenfranchisement is nearly four times the rate for non-African American women." In light of the rapid increase in the number of incarcerated women, the Sentencing Project Report (2008) concludes that disenfranchisement will continue to have a significant impact on women's political participation.

The experiences of African American women in the legal system, the prison industrial complex, and the political system illustrate the power of interlocking structural domains in the TASJ model. The laws implemented in the disciplinary domain related to felony disenfranchisement are created at the state level by legislatures that are dominated by White males. The state legislatures also have a vested interest in supporting the prison industrial complex which has a substantial connection to the economic system. Since prisons are major industries for states, cities, counties, and towns, the increasing incarceration rate of women, and of African American women in particular, supports the prison industrial complex which creates jobs and wealth for a largely White and often male political constituency (King et al. 2003).

Economic Participation

While the incarceration of African American women supports the economic engine for some, their own the employment and economic participation opportunities remain limited. As of January 2010, the unemployment rate for African Americans was anticipated to reach a 25-year high, at almost 20 % (Haynes 2009). The unemployment rate for young African American women was 26.5 % in 2009 compared with 15.4 % for all 16-to-24-year-old women (Haynes 2009). In addition to employment challenges, African American women also continue to struggle with salary equity based on their race and gender status (Women of Color Policy Network 2011; Hegewisch et al. 2011). The Institute for Women's Policy Research (Hegewisch et al. 2011) noted that "African American women on average only earned 69.6 % for every dollar earned by a White male per week." The National Women's Law Center (2010) noted that African American women earned only 60 % of the median annual

earnings of White men. While women as a whole earn 77 cents for every dollar earned by men, Black women earn 61 cents and Hispanic women earn 52 cents for every dollar paid to a White man (Women of Color Policy Network 2011).

Unfortunately, education does not seem to mitigate the wage gap as the gender gap is largest at the highest levels of education for comparable work (Lips 2011; Women of Color Policy Network 2011). Research indicates that from the time that college-educated women enter the workforce, they earn less than men and the disparity continues through retirement (Women of Color Policy Network 2011). Women earn 80 % as much as men in their first year out of college and less than 70 % of men's earnings after 10 years in the workforce after controlling for factors such as occupation and parenthood (Women of Color Policy Network 2011). Consistent with the TASJ model, these data evidence the power of interlocking social structures such as the economic system and the education system to perpetuate injustice and the marginalization of African American women.

Black Church Participation

Most ironically, however, the marginalization of African American women is not limited to predominantly White institutions. It also exists within African American institutions. The most visible of these institutions is the Black church. Many Black women's experiences in the Black church, particularly the Black Baptist church, are ones of marginalization and exclusion. This is reflected in the roles they are allowed to play, in the areas they are given access to in the church, with the money they are allowed to control, and with the images they are allowed to worship, including the frequently displayed "White Jesus."

Bruce (2008) accurately portrays the experiences of many African American women in the Black church, particularly the Black Baptist church. It is a lived experience and social structure in which women are submissive, subordinate, and subservient to men and men are dominant, powerful, and authoritarian. It is an experience in which there are clearly defined roles and boundaries that are imperme-able and inflexible. It is a world that is increasingly disempowering and non-affirming for African American women. Bruce (2008: 2) documents the extensive and comprehensive role of Black women in the church in contrast to Black men. The traditional role of women involves teaching Sunday School, serving church meals, reading announcements, serving as nurses at funerals, being ushers, and singing in the choir. Women play an instrumental and critical role in the financial well-being of the church through tithing, bake sales, and by hosting and contributing to other fund-raising events. Women essentially sustain and maintain the church. In contrast, men though fewer in number than women in the church have more powerful and presti-gious roles. They received the offering; often served as the Minister of Music, and, "constituted the ministerial staff and sat in high-backed chairs on the pulpit, in long robes, with Bibles in their laps; or they were deacons or members of the board of trustees, and sat in the congregation in rows reserved for those groups."

Bruce (2008: 2) acknowledges that she found the church nurturing as a youth, but as an anthropologist focused on women's issues, she found the church to be a patriarchal "structure of dominance and oppression in need of fundamental change." Her conclusion about the patriarchal structure of the Black church and the need for

change is echoed by Pastor James Henry Harris. Harris (1990) notes that the inequality and sexism towards African American women must be addressed by the Black church and by Black theology. The need is particularly critical given that Black women outnumber men by more than two to one, yet have very little authority or responsibility. Given the prominence, power, and respect accorded ministers in the Black community, it is unfortunate that Black women are excluded from these roles in many churches. The exclusion is even more pronounced in that though Black women are assuming more leadership roles in society, there appears to be an impenetrable wall to leadership opportunities within the Black church. This marginalization evidences the interracial tension between African American men and women on issues of intersecting identities of race and gender and the role of African American women in the struggle for equity and liberation. The historical reality of Black male sexism has on-going implications for the ability of African American men and women to work in partnership to jointly advance and support issues of gender equity.

The Theoretical Application: Reconstruction, Transformation, and Praxis

When taken collectively, the experiences of African American girls and women in the health care system, the economic system, the legal system, the political system, and the religious system reflect a very real Black female crisis. Our struggle to navigate a society where we have been largely invisible and marginalized based on our race, gender, and class status has resulted in a reality where the experiences of many women of color are "existentially catastrophic, psychologically depressing, socially alienating, and spiritually devastatingly dichotomous" (Grant 1995: 14). As such, African American girls' and women's experiences evidence a world view and ideology of "imperialist White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (Burke 2004) and Black male sexism. TASJ seeks to radically reconstruct existing ideologies and social systems to transform the lives of African American women.

An important first step of reconstruction and transformation in the TASJ model is analyzing and deconstructing social structures to understand how they promote marginalization and exclusionary processes. After a comprehensive analysis of the problem, the second step is to develop a strategy for challenging and changing those structures. The final step is implementation and praxis. Freire defines praxis in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire 1986: 36) as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it." Since the objective of social justice should be transformation, it is critical that reflection and analysis lead to action.

Radical reconstruction is an appropriate metaphor for reclaiming power, because the historical Radical Reconstruction was about reclaiming humanity, dignity, and personal power. The Radical Reconstruction was a period in the USA from 1865 to 1877 involving an attempt to reconstruct the South and social relations between African Americans and Whites. In 1865, the Freedmen's Bureau was established in the War Department to undertake the relief effort and the unprecedented social reconstruction for four million newly freed, illiterate former slaves. It issued food and clothing, helped locate family members, helped legalize marriages, and worked with African American soldiers and sailors and their heirs to secure back pay, bounty payments, and pensions. Hospitals and schools were built; medical aid and education

were provided; special courts were created; employment assistance was given; and some freedmen were able to settle on abandoned or confiscated lands. All these actions were specifically geared and targeted towards improving the condition and quality of life of previously enslaved people. It was a comprehensive initiative involving restructuring all aspects of society: economic relations, legal and political rights, family status, employment opportunities, health care, and education (National Archives and Records Administration 1901; Dubois 1901).

Despite the comprehensive gains for the newly freed slaves as part of the Radical Reconstruction, these gains were short-lived. After the Compromise of 1877 when federal troops were withdrawn, a series of acceptable discriminatory and racist practices were sanctioned by federal and state governments which have continued through today in various forms. Race relations were restructured through Black Codes and Jim Crow laws, de jure and de facto segregation were legitimized, and lynching was legalized. More recently, the War on Drugs was initiated; lengthy crack cocaine sentences were implemented; and disenfranchisement laws were passed. The result was that a White, patriarchal, hegemonic society was reinstituted in America through the operation of the disciplinary domain, the structural domain, and the interpersonal domain. The consequence is that many African Americans, including African American women, have essentially been re-enslaved through incarceration, unemployment, poor education, and disenfranchisement. Therefore, in order for the condition of African American women to change, there is a need for another radical reconstruction.

TASJ encourages a vision of reconstruction that is informed by our understanding of the operation of power domains. A comprehensive reconstruction should address systems of thought and ideology, social structures; interpersonal relationships; and laws, policies, and procedures. For example, it should address the operation of racism and sexism in government institutions, like the prisons and in the legislatures. It should seek to address disenfranchisement laws; and it should seek to transform interpersonal relationships that are influenced and affected by intersecting identities. Since large-scale transformation is difficult, most social justice efforts often begin on a smaller scale. A small-scale effort for African American girls and women could involve a more deliberate and intentional incorporation of African-centered concepts into our lived reality.

Ma'at and Rites of Passage

The current reality of African American girls and women of disharmony, inequality, and disorder justifies the need for a restoration of order, balance, and harmony. The restoration can begin with us. In the Afrocentric tradition, we must be active agents; we must begin to assume responsibility for changing our condition and creatively assess and explore opportunities for self-empowerment. In particular, it can involve resurrecting, restoring, reclaiming, and reacquainting ourselves with Ma'at—an ancient Egyptian concept, construct, and goddess of harmony and order, balance and justice, and truth and righteousness from 3500 BC.

Implementing and reintroducing Ma'at in a more meaningful way into the psyche and consciousness of African American women requires that a mechanism, format, and process be established. Rites of passage programs are one such vehicle. Rites of

passage programs incorporating concepts from Ma'at provide the potential for transforming the lived experiences of African American women and girls.

Rites of passage have been defined as "those structures, rituals and ceremonies by which age class members or individuals in a group successfully come to know who they are and what they are about, the purpose and meaning for their existence as they proceed from one clearly defined state of existence to the next state or passage in their lives" (Graham 1999: 114). In general, rites of passage programs focus on transitions in life and the mastery of emotional, spiritual, and physical tests and tasks. They often involve the active engagement and involvement of family and friends (Afrocentric.Info; Alford 2003; Alford et al. 2001; Harvey and Rauch 1997). Rites of passage programs can be traced back to Kemet as part of the African initiation rites that were used to provide a clear definition of roles, responsibilities, and expectations in the transition from youth to adult and promote a healthy self-image and self-esteem (Olade 2011; Alford 2003). "In the African tradition, the youth must ask for the rite (right) or permission of passage (passing on) to a higher level of human social and educational development" (Platt 2001). Most African-centered programs have an emphasis on African tradition or influences, including the history and culture of Africans in the diaspora. Many incorporate African-centered principles and values, including the concepts of interconnectedness; spirituality; collective and individual identity; the comprehensive nature of family; and the oneness of mind, body, and spirit (Graham 1999).

Rites of passage programs for African American girls often incorporate African cultural components, as well as traditional elements. Some common elements include community acknowledgement and support for changing from a girl to a woman; becoming a part of a larger family of women; acknowledging ancestors and sharing stories; celebrating African American culture; discussing values, purpose, and responsibility; setting goals, and creating dream journals. In addition, sexuality is also discussed. Many rites also include African dance and movement to drums, African history, and ceremonial wrap in African dress (Platt 2001).

An important African-centered principle, particularly for African American girls and women that should be an integral part of rites of passage programs, is Ma'at. Martin (2008: 952) has defined Ma'at as "a comprehensive construct that existed throughout ancient Egyptian civilization. In its cosmological sense, Ma'at is the principle of order that informs the creation of the universe. In its religious sense, Ma'at is a goddess or neter representing order or balance. Last, in its philosophical sense, Ma'at is a moral and ethical principle that all Egyptians were expected to embody in their daily actions toward family, community, nation, environment, and god." Ma'at is also defined as the "goddess of the unalterable laws of heaven" (Martin 2008: 957). This definition recognizes her sacred role as a goddess; it acknowledges the matriarchal tradition, beliefs, and practices of African culture; and it focuses on the permanence of Ma'at and its pervasiveness in the cosmos. Ma'at is depicted in many ways but often as a woman with a feather on top of her head or just a feather (Martin 2008: 959).

It is the comprehensive nature of Ma'at that encourages us to intentionally envision possibilities for systematically integrating it into the consciousness of our present-day society. Martin (2008: 955) argues that Ma'at "allows the synergy of cosmological, philosophical, artistic, and social ideas, much like how they exist in

classical African communities, to be interpreted in a systematic manner." Conceptualizing Ma'at as the foundation for a radical reconstruction enables us to replace the dominant hegemonic domain of the White patriarchal hegemony with an alternate approach to society reflecting the primacy of the values exemplified by Ma'at and symbolized by a goddess: harmony, order, love, and balance. Since ideology is often the foundation for social systems, the use of an alternative ideology provides the potential to transform the social system.

The Candace Rites of Passage Program, developed by Miriam Ma'at-ka-re Monges (1999), is an example of a successful rites of passage program for women and girls that incorporates Ma'at. The primary goal of the Candace Rites of Passage is the "'Shebanization of the soul' that is, to use culture to provide tools so that women constantly seek wisdom, like thirsty women seek water (Monges 1999; 827)." It is based in Afrocentric principles, and focuses on the integration of spirit and body and eliminating duality. The foundation principles include Ma'at (truth, justice, reciprocity, balance, order, and harmony), the Nguzo Saba or the Seven Principles (Karenga 2008), and lessons from Africana women role models from Africa and the African Diaspora. The Seven Principles include unity (umoja), self-determination (kujichagulia), collective work and responsibility (ujima), cooperative economics (ujama), purpose (nia), creativity (kuumba), and faith (imani).

Named for Candace African queens, the participants are defined as future queens and are taught tools for the journey. The tools include using affirmation and meditations, creating a portfolio of pictures, maintaining a pictorial and written diary of a "sojournal of unfolding," using a gratitude journal, designating and using a sacred place in the home, learning spiritual principles, engaging in a weekly sacred bath as symbolic immersion in the Nile, developing an appreciation for the power of water, and retelling "her stories" of African female leaders. The goal is empowerment: connecting with the past to acquire power for the future. The final outcome is a naming ceremony (Monges 1999). Her program has been held in high schools with African American girls with the ultimate goal of enabling participants to manifest their internal power. This goal, again, reflects the importance of personal power as energy that can be used to restore balance and promote equity, equality, and justice.

Another example of a rites of passage program is the Sojourner Truth Adolescent Rites Society in New York City. An African American mother selected the program for her 14-year-old daughter as she was moving into womanhood to encourage her daughter to make a choice for education over adolescent pregnancy and to learn spirituality and African history. She wanted values to be ingrained in her daughter. The program was a 10-month program that included classes on spirituality, sexuality, cooking, and quilting. The daughter noted that she "got a lot out of the group, especially the self-love and self-esteem class, where we talked about our body temple, and how we feel about ourselves" (Olade 2011). These benefits of self-affirmation reflect an important element of rites of passage programs.

Consistent with the focus on self-development, another program involved initiates signing an oath of commitment to themselves and their community. The oath reads: "With sincere humbleness, gratitude, and love; I take this oath of loyalty, dedication, discipline, sacrifice, and achievement; To do all that I can, in the way that I can; To develop myself and my people; I accept my role given by my ancestors; I promise not only to help my people, but to teach them to help themselves; I recognize my family

as the smallest example of our nation; and my parents as the authority of our house; I pledge to keep this oath of commitment for as long as the sun shines and the water flows. Ashay Ashay Ashay" (Platt 2001). This oath incorporates key values of African-centered traditions: self, family, nation, and land. Similarly, a rites of passage program that I developed involved collective participation by the participants; it combined music, hymns, and songs; and it integrated Christian and African traditions. The ceremony was a three hour event which included African drumming, ringing of bells, purification of air, washing of hands, invocation, libation, prayer, lighting of candles, readings of scripture and other spiritual texts, a washing of feet ceremony, a symbolic shedding of skin ceremony, and a putting on of a robe of a new identity.

The ability to integrate both Christian and African traditions, scriptures, and rituals during a rites of passage program demonstrates the potential role of the Black church in rites of passage programs. A critical space and location for reclamation of power by African American girls and women is in the Black church. Rites of passage programs grounded in Ma'at and housed within Christian churches have the potential to restructure the consciousness of African Americans and to empower African American women.

An Afrocentric approach to spirituality, including an incorporation of Ma'at, can be transformative on many levels for the Black church. On one level, it presents a unique opportunity for the church to reassess its theology and its role in Black liberation. Harris (1990) challenges the prominent display of pictures and murals of a White Jesus in many Black churches. Replacing the White Jesus with a picture of Ma'at could represent a radical reclamation of power for African American women and African American girls.

In addition, just as the Black church housed the Freedom Schools of the Civil Rights movement, the Black church could house the freedom schools of today. These "schools" within churches could enable many churches—which are empty and stagnant during the week—to rise like the ancient phoenix to new life. They could become places of sanctuary instead of places of silence. They can become places that promote African traditions and values, and complement Christian and Western traditions. The Black church could become a place of new excitement, rather than places of tradition and familiarity. It could be a place for new conversations and dialogues in the community. It could facilitate creative problem-solving for issues in the inner-city neighborhoods. It could potentially transform individuals and the community. Most importantly, it could lead to a more meaningful incorporation of women into shared leadership in the church, create a space for the discussion of sexism, and also promote gender equality. A reinvigorated Black church could increase the presence of African American men who could see the relevance and connection between an Afrocentric worldview and their lives. Rites of passage programs, located within Black churches, provide an opportunity for the Black church to reestablish its significance and to be re-empowered.

If incorporated into rites of passage programs held in Black churches, Ma'at can serve not only as a transformative ideology, it can also transform social institutions and interpersonal relationships. It can help empower African American women, as active agents in our own transformation, to confront social problems and to engage in activism from both a theoretical and practical perspective. In a creative approach to criminal justice issues, rather than incarceration being viewed as a rite of passage, Maruna (2011) suggests that rites of passage could be used as part of the reintegration of inmates into

society upon completion of their sentence. The rites could address recidivism and the difficulty that former inmates experience in reintegrating into society. In addition, if the criminal record is wiped clean as part of the rites, former inmates would be able to reintegrate into society without the stigma of incarceration in employment opportunities. This has the possibility to also decrease the disenfranchisement rates.

Similarly, just as Harvey and Rauch (1997) propose a rites of passage program for Black males to address health issues, a similar program could address health issues for Black women and girls. Prevention and positive intervention and culturally relevant education can impact physical and emotional health. Thus an African-centered, gender-sensitive rites of passage program, could also be used to address health disparities. In fact, there are a few Black churches that have begun to address health issues with intervention strategies involving mental health, breast cancer prevention, and AIDS (Markens et al. 2002; Blank et al. 2002; Hatcher et al. 2008).

Conclusions

TASJ, then, creates the potential for Ma'at to be a relevant and powerful construct and an alternative and transformative ideology that can radically restructure the power domains and power relationships to transform the experiences of African American girls. Rites of passage programs that incorporate Ma'at are one example of the type of praxis that the TASJ model promotes. The TASJ model encourages a recognition of creativity in complexity, an acknowledgement of the power of integrating African and American ideas and values, and a commitment to praxis. Closely examining and acknowledging the current challenges that exist for African American girls and women in the economic, health, legal, and spiritual realms requires us to engage in a radical reconstruction of our thoughts and ideas to find creative solutions. TASJ is a radical reconstruction of thoughts and ideas. It requires thinking across disciplinary boundaries and silos, and it encourages a critical look at reality, while at the same time visioning a different future. It centers and validates individuals—their stories, narratives, and experiences as the foundation for change. It is flexible and able to incorporate different ideologies and schools of thought.

Like Ma'at, as African American girls and women, we must use our eyes to see, our ears to listen, our minds to think, and our power to change society. As African American girls and women, as Black feminists, as critical race feminists, and as advocates, we must undertake a radical reconstruction of ourselves, our relationships, our practices, our worship experiences, and our roles. We must restructure them with a foundation that can be familiar and comfortable, affirming and validating, visible, and present. We must then teach the lessons that we learn to others so that they know their rites and rights. With that knowledge and power, we can help our community pass on, pass along, and pass through into greatness and into a fullness of potential and power.

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