

# REPARATIVE JUSTICE, RACIAL RESTORATION, & EDUCATION SERIES

## (Re) membering Me

By Cecelia Joyce Price

In May 2019, I visited Ghana, West Africa with a group of Black women in higher education from across the United States. Few of us had met before, but over those two weeks, we bonded as sisters and as women who discovered new ways to value, embrace, and celebrate our identities. For me, I was first in awe of beautiful blackness everywhere, and I marveled at what it must feel like to be the majority, the default, the norm since before one's birth. I noted the sense of community among the Ghanaian people, the creativity that was evident in the villages, and the beauty of the women. Most importantly, I recognized, what Cynthia Dillard (2012) wrote about: the (re)membering of my own identity and the (re)membering of me. I returned to the states more proud, more confident, and stronger. I am an artist - with words, and mostly, with images. The best way I knew to express how this experience has continued to shape my life as a woman of color in education was with a bit of poetry, a palate, and paint. The art that I continue to birth as a result of this journey speaks directly to all that made a lasting impression upon me.



In my first painting, a 4x6 foot piece I called "Identity," I honored the creativity of the Ghanaian people which, because I am a descendent of slaves stolen from African shores, flows through me. I did so by painting my own image in the dress made of the fabric that "Auntie Bea," a Ghanaian Village merchant, designed using a method called "Batik." "Auntie Lucy," another Ghanaian entrepreneur sewed my dress together without a pattern. Both Ghanaian women helped me (re)member my identity as a creative. In my painting, my hand reaches for, and my eyes peer upon, the African shores from which my ancestors

were stolen. I am sitting on a red cloth, as this is a concept piece rather than a realistic rendering. The cloth represents the blood of my ancestors strewn across the Middle Passage, for without their blood sacrifices, I would not be. The African shores and the blood are sacred reminders which help me (re)member my gratitude and my strength. My right-hand covers, and my body leans, toward North American lands, for this is the only home I have known. And my identity, while rooted in the majesty of the Motherland, is planted firmly there, where all that I do with these hands takes place. That positioning between here and there helps me (re)member the depth of my being, the character I maintain which is born of both places, and the deep respect I have for all of the factors and pieces that make me, me.

The second, third, and fourth paintings in the series that I have named "Community + Identity = Literacy" are titled as follows: "We Writin' It ALL!" (three boys writing, 18x24 inches). "Your Words on my Heart" (little boy looking up at his teacher, 18x24 inches), and "Lovin' Literacy" (three little girls reading, 20x24 inches). These paintings follow the "Identity" piece because I wanted to illustrate how a strong sense of myself impacts



my interactions with others. Thus, the backgrounds of these paintings are splashed with the colors of my dress and represent how my (re)membering, the reassembling of my understanding of who I am, and the emboldened confidence that continues to rise within me as a descendent of African people has a long-lasting, positive impact on the students in my classroom.

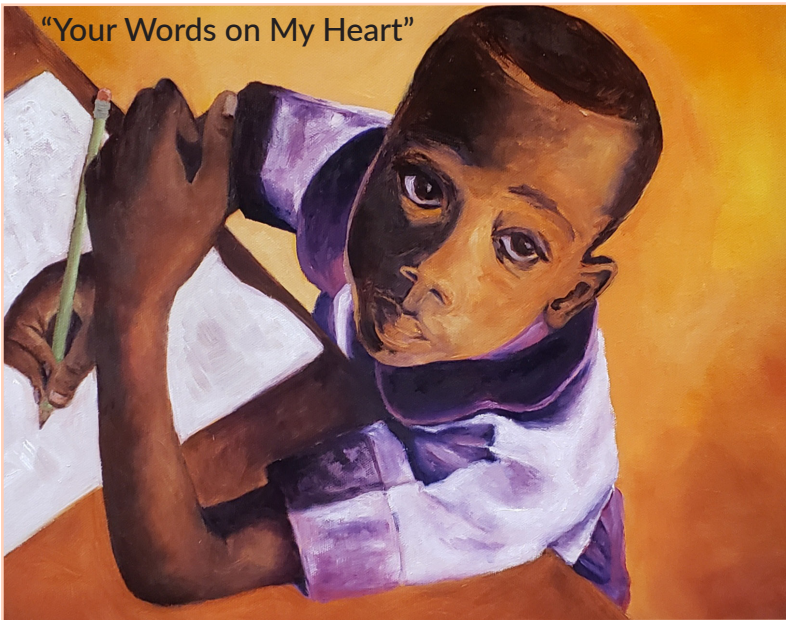
"We Writin' It ALL!"



"Lovin' Literacy"



"Your Words on My Heart"



A fifth painting in the series, a 3x4 foot work, is another representation of what I felt while in Ghana: a strong sense of community among beautiful Ghanaian women. While on the trip, I took hundreds of photos of sites, but mostly of people. Upon my return home, I studied each image and selected an array of women and children who represented the many walks of life that I saw in the villages. I called this one "Ghanaian Village Women."

"Ghanaian Village Women"





I included the young, the seasoned, the babies, the teens, the grandmothers, mothers, workers, entrepreneurs, creatives, the beautiful. I selected a fabric store as the featured trading post and surrounded it with other shops. I finished the piece by including the lovely Ghanaian shore with its peaceful sandy beaches in the background. Currently, I am working on a sixth piece, 3x4 feet, that will feature Ghanaian village men. Peaceful community, the central theme in these pieces, helps me (re)member my sense of responsibility to my friends, my family, my neighbors, my students, my colleagues, the people in and around my world.

At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned that upon arriving in Ghana, the first notable awakening for me was the blackness everywhere. At first, it was hard to express what I meant or felt. But when I did, the outpouring did not come in paint. It came in verse. And so, I wrote "Ebony" along with an intro called "Why 'Ebony?'" to set its stage:

### **Why "Ebony?"**

When I went to Ghana, I could not, in the beginning, articulate why watching interactions among the Ghanaian people intrigued me so. I saw Ghanaian people in the villages taking care of one another, being responsible to and for each other. I saw people in both the villages and in the city walking here and there with confidence, looking others directly in the eyes. I sensed no anger, no threat, no fear. I saw very few police, I heard very few sirens, and where police were present, I saw easy interactions between them and the citizens. I saw peace.

At some point, I determined that I must be witnessing the interactions of a people who, from the beginning of their lives, and from the beginning of their parents' lives, and from the beginning of their grandparents' lives, had always been the majority – the default – the norm. Thus, they had always been in control, and they had always governed themselves. They had not been broken.

I have experienced being part of the majority in limited spaces: at church, in my 3rd grade school, and in one neighborhood where I used to live. I have no concept of what it feels like to be the norm from birth. My parents don't know that feeling, and neither did their parents or their grandparents. My friends and I are descendants of a people who may have dominated their neighborhoods, the churches, and local stores. But the specter of a more powerful, and sometimes menacing people constantly loomed over their land, their homes, their jobs, their neighborhoods, and sometimes, over all of these.

I can only imagine that as a member of the majority, and having been such since birth, that one would not spend much time thinking about such things. What would there be to talk about? But I, as well as most black people, have always existed as a minority, learning as early as second grade that my appearance can incite ill-will and that in certain settings, I was expected to curb my speech, my topics of conversation, and at one point, even my appearance to accommodate the tastes and temperaments of the majority.

And so, in Ghana, I wondered for the first time in my life: what would it have been like to exist from the beginning only among black people? What would it have been like for this existence to remain for my entire life? For my parents' entire lives? For the lives of my grandparents, my great-grand parents, and my ancestors who were taken to America? What would that have meant for my family members, for my friends, and for students today? What if black was the default? The norm? Who would I have been? Who would my loved ones have been? Such questions and my experiences as a minority in the United States inspired the poem entitled "Ebony."

## Ebony

Her skin is like midnight.  
Plump are her lips.  
Thick are her thighs. She's got swing in her hips.  
"I'll edit her down," the white photographer quips.  
She was more. She is more.  
But what more might she be if in print of all kinds, she could say, "I see me."  
If her conceptions of beauty began in Ebony?

"Walk with me," husband says, "so they'll treat me kindly."  
I stop, meet his eyes, and feel his sincerity.  
We enter, we inquire, but the white man speaks to me.  
Husband was more. He is more.  
But who more might he be if he traded in markets of familiarity?  
If the community faces were in Ebony?

The plans she designed outwits rival quests.  
With no fear, she speaks and stuns all the guests.  
But the clients dismiss as though she is less.  
She was more. She is more.  
But how more might she be in a network of thinkers who look like family?  
If her career had begun in accomplished Ebony?

Black as default is a proud stride, a straight back, A direct look in the eye.  
No concept of inner lack.  
It's moving here and there with assurance and ease,  
it is owning the spaces and holding the keys.  
It is no limitations according to skin tone,  
Or the sound of our speech, or the body we own.

Not that success can only be found if Blackness alone in this world did abound.  
But lost between somewhere and our home of ago are assumptions of our worth  
and the value we know  
To be rightfully ours as God intended.

But taken and broken, our worth was upended.  
Ghanaian-like confidence and strength since suspended.

"Black as default" might ring offensive to some  
Who say it disrupts the idea that "We're one."  
But offense, I believe, is most easily embraced  
By those who see in most others their face.  
To flip the script, I respectfully suggest  
Might put that "We're one" message to a real test...

His chubby brown hand shoots up. Without pause,  
He shouts his response out loud because  
He knows the answer and he just wants to please.

But inside his little heart drops to its knees  
As he finds once again his placement outside.  
Now brewing, inner rage sets in to reside.  
And not yet mature, he has no words to tell  
Of how school has for him, become first-grade hell.

What more could he be?  
Who more should he be?  
How more would he be?  
If his learning world reflected his identity  
And normalized,  
And dignified  
His Ebony?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Cecelia Joyce Price earned her doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction at University of North Texas, Denton. She is a full-time faculty member in the School of Education at Dallas College where she teaches, facilitates professional development experiences, and co-sponsors a chapter of the Texas Association of Future Educators.

