

Detail from Figure 14: Island Girl

READING ROOTS

Who are you without a home? Do you believe that memories are enough to give you comfort? Thoughts alone are enough to bring back what you left behind? Dreams are enough to teach you the art of speech? . . . Who are you in this world of riddles?—Tunu: The Gift¹

THE FIRST GIFT I CAN REMEMBER was a large, thick picture book of Mother Goose nursery rhymes given to me by my aunt—a goodbye memento presented to me and my sisters as we left for our new home on another continent. I was four years old, mesmerized by the colorful images and words, which I understood as codes that could unlock the stories. No matter how many times I turned the pages and stared, or how fervently I wished, the code could not be broken. In our new place, my father would return home from work, sit cross-legged in “his” chair, unfold the newspaper, and become engrossed in reading the news of the day. Some evenings, if I turned around to face the opposite end of the room, I would observe my mother move the chairs away from the dining room table, spread several yards of cloth over it, unfold a paper booklet that contained words and drawings, pin the accompanying tissue paper that also had words and drawings onto the cloth, and cut out shapes. Later, she would sew the pieces together to create matching dresses for my two sisters and me, or shorts sets for my baby brother. Other days, my father unboxed a canvas printed with small shapes and numbers onto the table, along with small pots of oil paint, and filled in the shapes with color according to a guide that came in the box. My parents’ actions cemented my belief that words printed on paper held the key to information not available to those who, like me, could not decipher them.

by Alisa Banks

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alisa Banks is a visual artist based in Dallas, Texas, who investigates connections to contemporary culture, her Creole heritage, and the African diaspora through the lenses of home, terrain, and the body, using Southern Louisiana as a point of entry. Her sculptural artist books, mixed media work, and textile collages often incorporate fibers and found materials and reference traditional craft forms. Alisa’s work has been exhibited internationally, and is housed in private and public collections, including the Smithsonian Institution, the US Library of Congress, and the British Library. www.alisabanks.com.

A culture is preserved by marking paper. Those images and words represent beliefs, triumphs, sorrows, and rules of governance. This is how a people sees itself and how it wants others to see it. Paper, heavy with the marks of history, is assembled and sewn into books. The earliest books contain words originally spoken and speak of actions previously performed. The physical book is a vessel of information—a place to preserve a story, an idea, a belief. However, printed words were not the only forms of reading I witnessed at four years old (though they too contained clues to understanding). Many years later, I would recognize other actions as “reading.” One can read the stars, such as in astronomy and astrology—skills developed by peoples on every continent and relied upon for navigation, weather prediction, crop planting, and spiritual observances. Faces and body postures can be read, skills that aid in diplomacy and help maintain safety and assess well-being. There are written, visual, spoken, and performed signs. Modes of dress can be coded. Numbers may be signifiers. A hairstyle can denote social or political affiliation.

I have a term for the process of engagement with a book through the exploration of memory, culture, and archive: “root reading.” I aim to reconcile a practice (bookmaking) with a system of communication (writing) that was denied to my ancestors, who were enslaved and then forcibly relocated to this continent. In the midst of upheaval, it was they who carried the fragments of former homelands, sowed and sewed them, used them to communicate in new ways that also maintained connections to their root.

In this context, “root” refers specifically to the culture of one’s ancestors, one’s origin or base. One can be physically severed from root, or the culture of one’s ancestors, but remnants of origin remain. “Root” also has other associations: the part of a plant that provides structure and nourishment, or the base of a strand of hair whose shape determines curl pattern. In these and many other instances, root has the same meaning: connector, nurturer, origin. Plants, cloth, and hair are carriers of culture by the way in which they are selected, used, and/or maintained.

Language systems, societal structures, village and family histories: the method by which they evolved and were maintained, including the practice of and the structure of dissemination, was dismantled during the period of enslavement. A young enslaved person may have only partially remembered an oral history traditionally delivered by an elder. Context and detail were often incomplete. The gaps were filled in by partial understanding and through mixing that resulted after contact with new cultures. How else does one communicate without the familiarity of family, home, and language, and what might this look like in the creation of a new culture? Information can be shared in a myriad of ways.

Books are meant to be studied, admired, and enjoyed. They are recognized as root, but in the beginning, there was the word. A people separated from their root and forbidden to document or maintain cultural practices will build a new culture, a culture that continues to evolve when other forms of expression—music, dress, food, language, stitching—acquire increased significance as alternate forms of reading. These forms of expression, or cultural cues, are created and maintained in secret, though at times are hidden in plain sight. We rely on printed descriptions to carry history—descriptions of music, dress, and ritual that attempt to provide context, to read and to be read into. To a person unfamiliar

with them, a certain series of marks, for example, might appear random or accidental. But for the initiated, there is an understanding of a sign or symbol often overlooked by others. A cosmogram, or drawing of a series of circles and crosses carved on a ceramic pot or into the wooden floor of a church, may appear as random doodling, but to the initiated it symbolizes universal order, origin, and destiny.^{2,3} Symbols sewn onto cloth may denote social status or give direction. Newspaper pages that appear to have been applied to walls helter-skelter are in fact placed purposefully to distract spirits. A field song or clothes drying on a line can be coded and used to give direction or tell a story. Smoke, a particular shade of blue, a familiar taste in a new homeland: each speaks of history. Each can be read.

Voice, action, repetition. This is how our ancestors remembered stories, relayed information, and shared beliefs. The historical practice of formally creating and deciphering shapes written or carved was limited to the upper strata of societies and was largely not available or outright forbidden to the majority of men and almost all women. The stories considered important, those considered worthy of speaking for a civilization, were those of the wealthiest citizens. The stories of the common folk, of women and other people living outside the mainstream, were not considered significant enough to preserve. For many, if not most, families who can trace their histories back to the earliest centuries of European colonization of North America, common literacy was only achieved fairly recently, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.^{4,5}

To clarify, the definition of literacy I am referring to is the ability to read, comprehend, and write in the official language of the land where one lives. This standard definition of literacy is problematic. What if one cannot read, write, and/or comprehend the “official” language or that spoken by the majority where they live, but can do so in another language? What if one can read symbols that are obscure or rare in the rest of the world, but commonly understood within one’s culture? What of the centuries prior to European colonization, when indigenous peoples developed and practiced “other” ways of reading long before Western contact? And in cultures where women are the keepers of the stories, how are those stories documented if women are denied the ability to learn to read and write?

A book is a container, or vessel, for information. Over the millennia, the material of the vessel has varied: stone, clay, leaf, cloth, paper. I incorporate unconventional materials, those other than paper, to create books that engage the senses in order to forge connections between the reader and myself, between me and my history, and between the reader and the message. In addition to cultural practices, evidence of root may be physical, such as hair or skin. I use hair, for example, as a medium to speak to culture and connections. Messages are understood by those able to “read” the clues, even outside of specific personal experience. Black hair culture is multifaceted and dynamic. Through the years, hairstyles have been created and/or adopted to show political or social affiliation by movements and societies.⁶ Some societies in precolonial Africa adopted hairstyle codes to denote marital status or social class. The afro hairstyle was adopted in the mid-twentieth-century US and beyond as a challenge to both oppression and Eurocentric beauty norms. I believe that featuring hair fibers in books invites the viewer to get “up close” to the subject and also plays on the attraction of hair as a creative and textural material.



Figure 1: Afro Centric



Figure 2: Edges

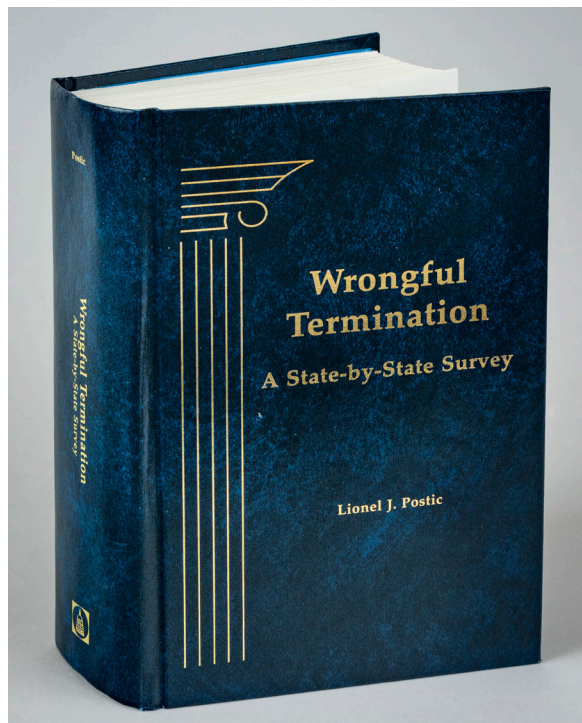
A book containing hair can be celebratory, as in *Afro Centric* (fig. 1), a circular Coptic book structure where hair is incorporated within and sewn across pages of handmade paper. The Coptic book structure, ancient and African, was sewn into a circle. The circular form is symbolic of the time required to care for Black hair and the distance in time from ancestors who employed many of the same hair-care techniques still in use: wrapping, coiling, braiding. Hairstyling is sartorial, and the shape of the book is reminiscent of a hat.

Hair can be used to enhance an elegiac message or help bring into focus the legal and personal magnitude of rejection. The *Edges* series (fig. 2) makes a political statement by recognizing contributions of marginalized communities. Each of the altered, Spanish-language books features hair attached onto and into the page in patterns based on braided hairstyles of African ancestry. The series was created in response to intolerance to immigration occurring at the southern borders of the US expressed on the national, state, and local level, and is a symbol of solidarity among marginalized cultures. *Edges* is an acknowledgement of not only the creativity, activity, and life that occur on and outside the margins of mainstream culture, but also of the effect marginalized communities have on mainstream culture.

Wrongful Termination (figs. 3 and 4) is an altered law book that addresses race-based discriminatory practices and subsequent lawsuits filed, and sometimes won, against employers, schools, and other agencies by people of color who were fired, passed over for promotion or hiring, or sent home

from school or work for styling their hair in ways that revealed its natural texture.⁷ The book is read by unrolling the text from plastic hair curlers, an intimate act that invites the viewer to participate in the hair-care ritual. The text wound around the rollers is based on negative comments about natural hair found in newspaper editorials. The tightly rolled text forces the reader to slow down and to contemplate. Hair is attached to the bottom of the book cavity, away from the rollers, almost out of sight, protected and nearly out of reach. The placement alludes to the inappropriateness of the question, “Can I touch your hair?,” posed by strangers and acquaintances of many who wear their Black hair in natural or cultural styles. The taboo of strangers touching hair can stem from the lack of agency of the enslaved over their bodies, the historical use of hair for spell casting in religious practices, and the unknown state of a stranger’s “cleanliness.”

Hair is a material used in ritualistic practices and connects us to our roots (ancestors). *Inheritance* (fig. 5) is a portable writing desk containing a book, an inkwell, a small quilt, and a brush made from human hair. Though we may not know them, we carry our ancestors in our hair. The theme of *Inheritance* is “hair day,” a custom prevalent in



Figures 3 (above) and 4: Wrongful Termination

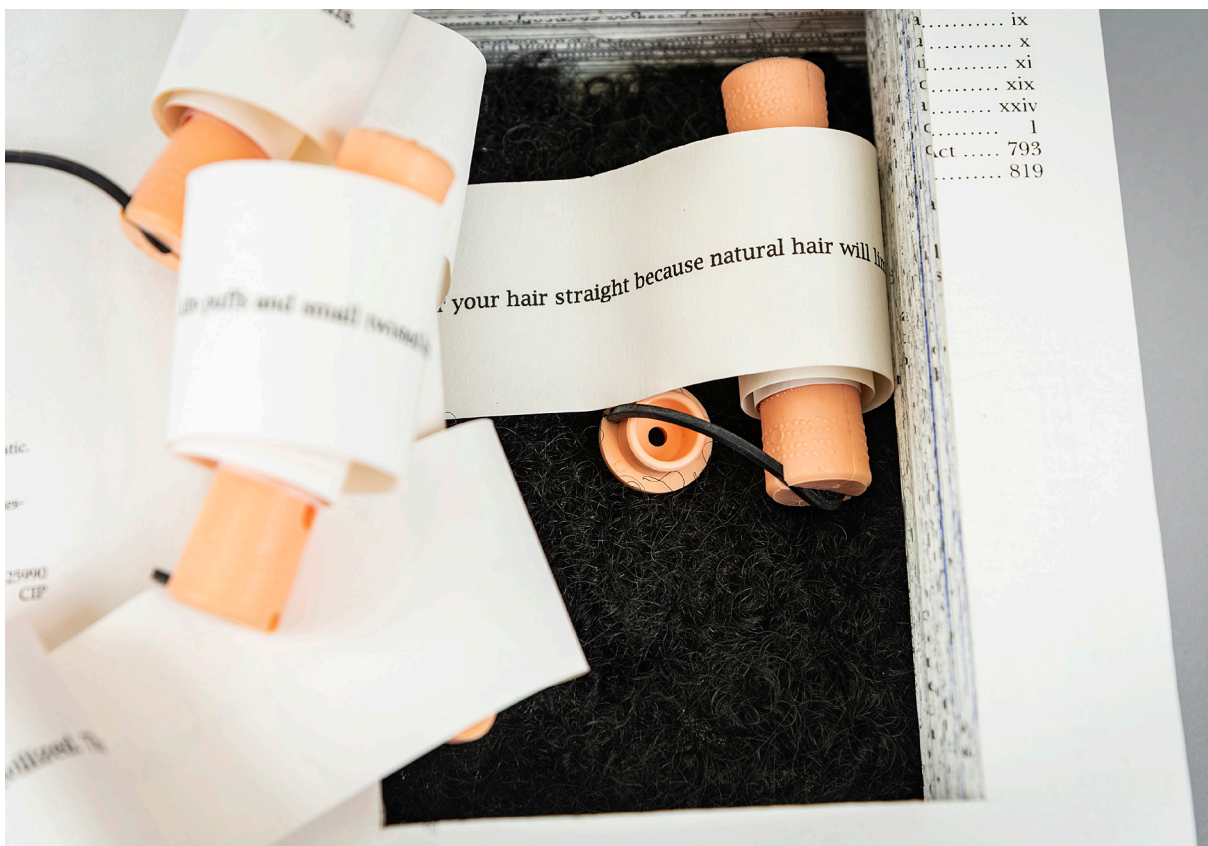




Figure 5: Inheritance

many Black households in the US and throughout Africa and its diaspora, from ancient days to the present. More importantly, the book is about the continuation of oral histories, particularly those that are shared within the context of daily life.

Books containing hair, such as *Afro Centric*, *Edges*, *Wrongful Termination*, and *Inheritance*, offer an opportunity to expand thoughts about common practices. The materials facilitate the ability to understand something more meaningful in the ritual: to imagine the hair and the act of grooming it as a site of resistance against westernized beauty norms that insist that “other” equals something bad/unattractive/worth less/worthless.

My history is also intertwined with plants, in my present-day garden and in places before my time: previous farms, plantations, and gathering grounds. My near ancestral memory is rural. Many of my investigations center around a former farmstead, a place I consider my ancestral home, where my family settled over two centuries ago. It is in a Louisiana parish that was the site of a Tunica village during the time it was first colonized by the French in 1699. Nearby were lands occupied and tended by the Chickasaw, Ofogoula, Natchez, and Chitimacha, among other indigenous groups. Enslaved persons of African descent arrived in the early 1700s. During early colonization, the area was very unstable, with allegiances made and broken between the various tribes, the French, and the English. Wars and skirmishes were frequent. In this insecure climate, French colonists and enslaved and indigenous persons forged alliances, resulting in the formation of a new race, language, and culture. The place informs my work through the selection and use of materials (cloth, plants, soil) and techniques (stitching, knotting, tying) that are related in some way to rural farm life.



Figure 6: Cotton Heritage

Paper and cloth share the same organic plant origin: cotton, which is used to make both. *Cotton Heritage* (fig. 6) features an essay on the cultural connection to “growing cotton.” The text is printed on cotton rag paper, and the book contains both a cotton plant sculpture and plants from my garden sewn onto cloth pages. The growing, harvesting, processing, cooking, and sewing activities involved in making both paper and books correspond to the daily activities that took place on my ancestors’ farm.

Additional connections are forged through engaging in these activities, particularly when those activities are place-based. To make *Ancestor Ink* (fig. 7), I gathered soil from the old farmstead, washed it, and made it into paint (fig. 8). Acorns and walnut hulls were boiled separately, and the liquid from each was added to the soil. Finally, I added a bit of indigo pigment. Each ingredient is significant to the place and links to roots. Indigo is symbolic as a former commodity that spurred the slave trade and as a connection to indigo cultivated in precolonial and present-day Africa.

Elemental is a series of cloth books centered on aspects of identity in relation to the elements: earth, fire, air, and water. Cloth was likely used more frequently than paper on the farmstead. By sewing plants into and onto paper and cloth, I am connecting them both to root, and at the same time, building a bridge to my ancestors. Cloth serves as a link that connects us to our pasts and informs our futures. As one whose history includes enslaved ancestors and whose great-grandmothers were not literate in the traditional sense, oral history, cloth, and ritual serve as both bridge and foundation for much of my work. Many threads have contributed to this cloth, as the enslaved were from diverse cultures. The threads are a continuation of origin cloth histories that traveled across the Atlantic in the hulls of slave ships from the shores of West Africa before landing in North America. Once on the shores of this continent, many threads were severed as slavers separated families, tribes, and languages. Often enslaved persons were selected for a specialized expertise: for their knowledge of cultivating crops such as cotton, tobacco, rice, or indigo, or for their mastery of skills like construction, metalworking, blacksmithing, weaving, pottery, or basketry.⁸ The enslaved reweave the severed threads into a new cloth, one that had not previously existed, though the origin or “root” remained. This is not unlike the centuries-old practice in African villages of unweaving and reweaving cloth procured from western traders to create new textiles. In the transplanted land, which would become the new home, the new cloth represents a new culture, one that continues to inspire and inform.⁹



Figure 7: Ancestor Ink



Figure 8: Soil-based paint



Figures 9 (left) and 10: Earth

In each book of the *Elemental* series, the viewer is required to perform the work as they are invited to partake in a ritual that slowly reveals the message. *Earth* (figs. 9 and 10) addresses the corpus and consists of layers of folded cloth. The imagery and text are separated into “outer” and “inner” by a cloth panel. The viewer must unbutton the panel to access the “inner” body, a deliberate act that slows the reader down and denotes the time it takes to get to know someone on an intimate basis.

The text in *Water* (fig. 11) is revealed by unfolding three silk accordion cascades of successive length, each containing an independent story. Various textures of cloth represent the way in which water is able to move from solid to liquid to gas. Water not only has the potential to heal and to quench, but also to cause devastation. Each story in the “waterfall” complements the symbology of water—that of creation, time, passage, and purification.

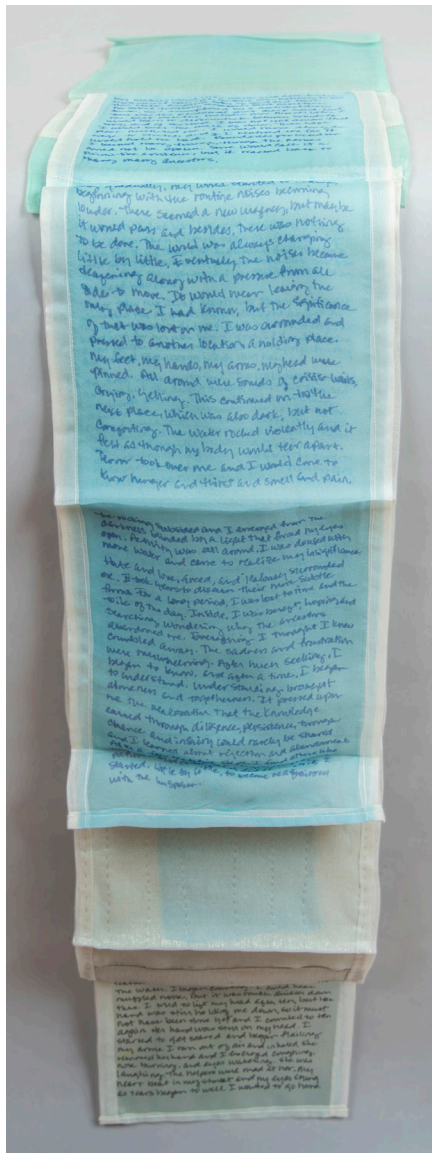


Figure 11: Water

The cover of *Fire* (figs. 12 and 13) is wool felt, a material traditionally used for fire blankets. As the book opens, the viewer is taken through the stages of physical fire through colored cloth. The act of slowly unrolling a long cloth scroll reveals a Passion-like¹⁰ account of a school desegregation experience. The cloth of the scroll is very soft in texture, taking the viewer by hand while moving through an uncomfortable story. At the center of *Fire* is a symbol of transformation, the outcome of fire on matter, the transformative power of action, understanding, and experience.

The materials in my books function as my personal tools for resistance against the pull of assimilation. In the twentieth-century period of English-speaking dominance in Louisiana, Creole culture began to be thought of as “backward.” Schools began to promote assimilation, which included the discouragement, often by force, of many customs, including the speaking of Louisiana Creole. Many parents came to believe that assimilation into “Mericaian” culture, as they called it, would help to shield their children from the harms of stereotypes and racism, offering them greater opportunity for advancement. As a result of efforts favoring assimilation, their language, which was my grandmother’s first language and likely the only one known by my great-grands and before, is now endangered.

Root reading is a way to reconcile my semi-nomadic upbringing. I speak at a distance from the root (Creole), but still connected to it, having heard many stories about my ancestors while belonging to, but remaining on, the outside. My parents’ Creole language was heard often enough to understand its connection to root, but not frequently enough to learn to speak it. Language is a carrier of values fashioned by a people over a period of time. Historically, colonial systems impose their tongues and then downgrade the vernacular



Figures 12 (left) and 13: Fire

tongues of the people.¹¹ Because my parents were discouraged from speaking Creole growing up, as adults they spoke it only privately, and my interaction with it was sporadic. And because it was rare, it seemed and seems mysterious. My parents' language was their heritage and, by extension, my heritage too. Though I can claim no hometown for myself, having traveled from station to station because of my dad's career, my experience is not too dissimilar from those who can claim otherwise, because from a cultural aspect, we are all to some degree removed from root. However, distance (that is, being on the outside) can bring a peculiar view to something observed from afar. One can grasp a kernel of the soul of belonging to a culture—the traditions and ways of living that persist in a community living outside of the mainstream. Distance can be beneficial to seeing. Being removed from root can provide space for appreciation of a language or other cultural aspect. *Island Girl* (fig. 14) presents a story of rejection, acceptance, and pride in the form of a cloth dress that features Louisiana Creole phrases. The cloth dress reminds the reader throughout the story of the negative effects that economic factors, coupled with the attitudes and actions of adults, have on children.

To enter a dialogue with and to preserve a history are valuable to those within and outside a culture. When the culture is recognized as “other,” artist books allow for inclusion of multiple modes of expression. These forms can consist of clues that relate to spoken and unspoken traditions. If history is communicated through an action and the action and its meaning are widespread within the culture, what clues could be built into a book to relay the importance of the action? *Emergence* (fig. 15) is a book in three parts: two drum leaf-bound books and a candle. Each component is symbolic in text, form, and tone, and the components are suggestive of those used in the Roman Catholic Mass, since Catholicism is woven into Louisiana Creole culture. The form of the entire work is that of a lectern, chosen because “truth” is often delivered or associated within a religious context. The text featured in the first book, *Litany*, is a recitation of superstitions, while the text in the second book, *Election*, contains a mantra of self-examination and determination. In the center, the third “book,” a candle carved with biased and stereotypical information and embedded with a medal of St. Michael the Archangel, dispeller of demons, symbolizes both the Paschal candle placed on the altar and a tool used in exorcism, or purging, of untruth. The two books, *Litany* and *Election*, placed at opposing sides and performed as call and response, pull the viewer in opposite directions. The flexibility of the artist book can accommodate both general and esoteric cues such as those presented in *Emergence*. The uninitiated will understand the holder of a text to be more than a substrate. And the initiated will understand the presentation of the book as part of the ritual and recollection. Both initiated and uninitiated will gain nuanced understanding of the message.



Figure 14: Island Girl



Figure 15: Emergence

The family stories (histories) passed to me growing up were oral accounts. Later I would be introduced to written accounts when I gained access to a generous archive collected and maintained by my late aunt, the same aunt who presented four-year-old me with my first book. The methods in which the oral stories were shared—over hair-care rituals, creative pursuits, and food—are as significant as the actual stories. Charged materials used in artist books function in much the same way as objects used in customs and rituals: they underscore the delivery of the message and serve as memory prompts. When shared with others, an artist book, like these customs and rituals, can connect those within and outside of communities flung across many countries and continents to a common denominator and to enhanced understanding of root. Awareness brings about increased understanding of our histories and of ourselves. It can, for example, instill pride as it fosters a new appreciation of a culture much maligned and often appropriated. Our roots tell us we are not alone.

I dip my feet in the mud, I get a hold of my roots. I spread my arms and bask in the sun and wind . . . I can breathe.—Tunu: The Gift¹² ■

NOTES

1. *Tumu: The Gift*, directed by Jordan Riber (Media for Development International, 2017), 1:26. Accessed at mfdi.org.
2. Mark P. Leone and Gladys-Marie Fry, “Conjuring in the Big House Kitchen: An Interpretation of African American Belief Systems Based on the Uses of Archaeology and Folklore Sources,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 112, no. 445 (1999): 372–403. Accessed at doi.org/10.2307/541368.
3. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Culture* (New York: James Curry Publishers, 2005), 23–72.
4. E. Jennifer Monaghan, “Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England,” *American Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (1988): 18–41. Accessed at doi.org/10.2307/2713140.
5. Deborah Brandt, “Drafting U.S. Literacy,” *College English* 66, no. 5 (2004): 485–502. Accessed at doi.org/10.2307/4140731.
6. Shane White and Graham White, “Slave Hair and African American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” *The Journal of Southern History* 61, no. 1 (1995): 45–76. Accessed at doi.org/10.2307/2211360.
7. Paulette M. Caldwell, “A Hair Piece: Perspectives on the Intersection of Race and Gender,” *Duke Law Journal* 1991, no. 2 (1991): 365–96. Accessed at doi.org/10.2307/1372731.
8. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 29–40, 73–74.
9. Jessica Hemmings, “Appropriated Threads: The Unpicking and Reweaving Imported Textiles” (2002), 524. Accessed at digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/524.
10. Passion named here refers to the Latin, *passio*, or suffering, and is capitalized in reference to the Passion, or suffering and sacrifice of Jesus Christ (for the greater good) in the Christian tradition. Though the story contained in *Fire* accounts for suffering and sacrifice, it does not include torture or death.
11. wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind*, 13.
12. *Tumu: The Gift*.

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- Serrano, Angel, and Toepke, Alvaro, dir. *The Language You Cry In* (California Newsreel, 1998). Accessed at newsreel.org/video/the-language-you-cry-in. A documentary account of how a song sung by a woman in South Carolina recorded in the early twentieth century by Dr. Lorenzo Turner was years later confirmed to be linked to a tribe in Sierra Leone. Dr. Turner (1890–1972), a noted linguist and former chair of the English departments at Howard and Fisk Universities, is known as the “father” of Gullah studies.