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# AN INTRODUCTION TO BIRTH SOVEREIGNTY: CHILDREN, INITIATES, AND INFRASTRUCTURE

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This intention statement describes the ethnographic and experimental practice of modern applications of African and Black Indigenous traditional dream practices. Specifically, the focus on birth sovereignty as it applies to the birthing and growing of children, initiates, and the infrastructure necessary for liberation. Birth sovereignty focuses our dreams and connects the groundwork of elders with the visions of the young.

Raised in Kenosha, WI – Tyrell Blacquemoss (they/he) is a prophetic dreamworker and descendant of a long line of African priests and Turtle Island medicine people. He founded DREAM School and is expanding DREAM School into a K-20 Afro-Indigenous school, sustenance learning farm, teaching birth center, and clinic. As a scholarly researcher with a Bachelor's of Fine Art with an emphasis in Africana Studies and Indigenous Studies from Cornell University, Blacquemoss reclaims and continues their family legacy of the science and art of dreaming. Blacquemoss has traveled globally studying with shamans, elders, and healers in many traditions. They were a 2019-2020 fellow in Freedom School's National Health and Healing Justice Fellowship. Blacquemoss currently based in Tucson, AZ, practicing as a Fruition Birth work with Rooted Doula Collective and an MFA candidate at Prescott College in Social and Environmental Arts Practice with Patrisse Cullors. Blacquemoss is the Sustainability Manager and Healing Artist in Residence at Southern Arizona Gender Alliance and a Certified Green Business Leader.

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***An Introduction to Birth Sovereignty: Children, Initiates, and Infrastructure***

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*My mother dreamed of me before I was born. I told her the breath techniques for her to use while birthing me (Childs, 1990). She researched the terminology she received in her dream and experienced dream realm inversion: the realm shift reversed the words. When she rearranged the order, she found that a local hospital was teaching the breathing technique. I arrived in this world with deep breaths and classical music playing in the hospital room in 1990. What is the medicine of dream space? How can this medicine create a new paradigm of purpose?*

**Why do we need a new paradigm of purpose?**

Throughout this intention statement, “we” refers to Black Indigenous peoples centrally and all humanity as an integrated collective (Bediako, 2020). We have been living in a time of great despair and paradigm-shift since long before the pandemic. Settler colonialism has solidified exploitative processes, temporarily blocking physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, and generational sovereignty for all living beings. Folks experiencing poverty are denied access to choices and are more vulnerable to domestic violence, threatening their access to healthy interpersonal relationships and wellness building. Workers exhausted by capitalism often have neither the time nor the agency to access the healing potential of their environment, especially its food and water systems. Lastly, disparities in education precipitate social death (school-to-prison pipeline/mental health pandemic), an assault on Black Indigenous genius, and the creation of innovative systems (sacred ecosystems). The children living in this realm reflect our reality: suicidality in Gen Zers is unprecedented, compounded by a global uprising and deep desire to return to the ancestral plane as soon as possible. Children possess a greater understanding of worlds beyond this one, and “it is our duty” to help them transform their truth into healing (Shakur, 1988). Sovereignty requires liberation education; clean, sustainable food systems; and medicine that combines traditional and allopathic practices (Shakur, 1988). Participatory art, as a branch of social practice art, gives us a practical example of the mechanics of dream medicine (“Participatory Art”). “In Bouchra Khalili’s work, the participants are the storytellers, herself, the cartographers, and the political decisions that create the borders. The viewers activate the collaboration between all of the participants creating a conversation between all involved” (Blacquemoss, 2020; Lisson Gallery, 2017). In the dream realm, we negotiate the symbology of everything we have seen and everything our ancestors have experienced, creating a new system of visual literacy. As with Khalili’s mapping of experience through many participants, we map the dream realm through interpretation. We become cartographers activating the dream interpretations through sharing the stories of our dreams. The curators of Soul of a Nation guide the audience through a catalog of Black grief, resilience, and experiments of what it means to be seen by whiteness (Cotter, 2018). If curators were reimagining a Soul of a Nation with Black Indigenous

Sovereignty at its heart, how would we experience the sights, smells, sounds, sensuality of a new paradigm of purpose? "I was speaking with an acquaintance this morning about curriculum development, and she groaned thinking I meant a set regimen of information to follow. I asked her to say more, and she described all of the interwoven systems that impact the ability for Black and Indigenous children to receive the information they need to support their interests (i.e., what viscerally moves them)" (Blacquemoss, 2020; Sparks, 2020). What if we all remembered how to follow intuitively where our ancestors lead us? The TEDx talk scratches the surface of what is possible when we look to nature and Black Indigenous practices to inform our design. The program design seeks to guide the students to understand "what is" in terms of understanding "cities are a tapestry of Indigenous histories, colonial histories, and contemporary realities" (Tedx Talks, 2015). Historical context is imperative, but in initiation (and birth), both parties, the teacher and the student (birthing parent and child), are radically changed by the exchange. What if we created curriculums principles that centered on nurturing the students' desires, dreams, destiny while also transforming the faculty to view new parts of themselves? What is the medicine of dream space when applied to lifeways and self-determination? How do we understand ourselves? How do we become ourselves?

## **Birthing Initiates**

*I dreamed I was speaking with the hottest fire. Pouring the water of all of my disappointments, triggers, and nervous system disruptions. The fire said, "yes, I see." You need to find some fun activities to do. When I woke up, it clicked. Initiation has reminded me that I have not always been a human being. In other lives, I inhabited forms within the landscapes. However, being in human form with the memory of other non-body existences teaches me a new paradigm to think about emotionality. I understood that I must prioritize releasing anger because anger causes eruptions (inflammation, acne, etc.) in my body.*

What is an initiation? "Initiation is spiritual death," a ceremony in which the initiate receives the transmission of "hundreds if not thousands of years of information," and their selfhood is "replaced with something radically different" (Blacquemoss, 2020). Initiation is an essential process for remembering traditional practices that have been displaced by colonial rupture. Black Indigenous spiritual and dream technologies allow for information storage in the ether, much like a modern cloud.

Who are Black Indigenous folks? What is their dream medicine? "We expand on Afro-Amerindian Research & Cultural Center's definition: "African American and Native American historical and contemporary cultural cross-sections," to include complete ancestry of a person of African or Black Indigenous descent. Moreover, the US government has a historical legacy of settler-colonialism that divides folks of African and non-Black Native American descent, which creates internal tensions for Afro-Indigenous folks who are afraid to claim their ancestral, traditional practices out loud. We are often invisible to each other, therefore, unable to rebuild our communities" of Black folks descended from enslaved Africans,

Maroons, Creoles, peoples of federally recognized tribal communities, and those re-membering and transmitting the Indigenous histories through stories and dreams (Blacquemoss, 2020, p. 4). What is the medicine in dream space? What is the medicine in transitory areas of incubation (birth, ceremony, and collaborative think tank)?

**Birth sovereignty requires the abolition of structural systems to rebuild the sacred ecosystems.** "Fruition Birthworking is a holistic support service for business owners and a business practice combining traditional Indigenous African research and modern operations standards. Fruition Birthworking parallels birth work or doula support services" (Blacquemoss, 2019). It considers the mental-emotional and physical tolls taken on the entrepreneur while offering the "medicine of presence" for sacred ecosystems to be born (Madison, 2020). What is a sacred ecosystem? Humans construct a sacred ecosystem when they accept their divine path of stewarding their mothers (including Earth). "In my work, I seek to elicit nostalgia for a forgotten dream that occurred during a forced migration that births a new dream in the present to demand one's birthright: sovereignty. I curated an exhibition called Diasporic African Dream Anthology (DADA), which lives in the world in three parts. First, there is the only exhibition space featuring 10 Black / Indigenous artists. Second, there is the Matriarchal African Memory Apparatus (MAMA), which serves as an oral history collection for the audience to contribute their stories. Third, there is African Legacy Lingers (ALL), which is a national tour of Wealth Redistribution Round Tables focused on a solutions-based approach to responding to our relationship to Mother Earth or environmental destruction or climate change or healing from colonization. The project seeks to redistribute at least \$1 million in resources across nine cities in the United States. Our Mother got it; she gone heal with or without us. Perhaps if we take a breath, we can move through the grief into something supportive for both her and us. As Bharti Kher says, "Mother Nature is more powerful than us all. When she speaks, we will have no choice but to listen" (Blacquemoss, 2020; Lescaze, 2018). How can our dreams reprogram ourselves and our audiences to be most comfortable in what is socially just and environmentally sustainable (i.e., Black Indigenous sovereignty and caring for our Mother)?" (Blacquemoss, 2020).

**We must look to our elders, the land, and our future descendants to continue unwrapping what's possible and what's at stake.** Vital areas to explore are the following Black Indigenous practices: oral histories and dream practices, nutrition, rest, hydration, medicinal presence, movement, voice, plant medicine, energetic body support, ancestral connection, and self-discrimination. Birthing sovereignty is a social practice, unfolding over time and generations, and in community.

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