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Chronicles of the Equator Woman is a work of fiction. The author is not attempting to make factual claims about individuals, organizations, or companies. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. If this story were true, who would believe me anyway....

To my husband Curtis D. Byrd,
To my kins and friends worldwide,

&

To grandmothers everywhere.

This work is especially dedicated to girls and women in the African diaspora who are raising their voices.

Chronicles of the Equator Woman

The Recipe for Justice Soup

Equator Woman is the autobiography of a time-traveling Black woman who saves planet Earth. The author, Axis Heart, provides a provocative glimpse into how the past impacts the future. Her reflections on adventure, soup, and self-defense reveal complex identities of females born in the African diaspora. This scribe chronicles life as an "Equator Woman"—a Black woman from Africa, India, Australia, Brazil, the United States, and beyond—to KeplerPrime, a human-inhabited planet in the Lyra constellation. The story begins in 10th-century BCE Ethiopia, from where readers follow Axis to several continents during six flavorful lives.

As a United Nations GalaState mediator, Axis finds herself pitted against violent forces that perpetuate fear and ignorance in order to control social and natural resources. In an epic struggle to bring balance to the home planet, she joins a group of creative activists to fight humanots and to tip the scales in a faceoff against the relentless Captain G. By challenging readers to "follow your heart" in order to solve human problems, these travel memoirs pose important questions about attitudes, behaviors, and choices we embody. This is the tale of an ancient "sassy" Black girl who learns to negotiate power through trade, technology, and law. Seasoned with experience, her soulful recipe for community building is clearly embedded in the text. As publisher of this narrative about a 3,500-year quest for justice, Dr. Stephanie Evans presents a timeless story to nourish booklovers and activists far and wide.

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Preface

There are three things you need to be successful in life: a wishbone, a jawbone, and a backbone. You need a wishbone for goal setting, a jawbone for speaking out, and a backbone for perseverance.

~ Inez Emerson, Ohio Senator Nina Turner's Grandmother

My name is Axis and I am a seeker. I am not from anywhere, I'm from everywhere. I am a nexus of place and time. In my final life, I was born in 2669 CE in the province of Atalanta, on the planet you will come to know as KeplerPrime. Atalanta was the Greek goddess that Pan-African philosopher W. E. B. Du Bois used as a metaphor for the city of Atlanta, Georgia, in his classic book *The Souls of Black Folk*. As with Atalanta the goddess and Atlanta the city, colonization of Kepler planets represented a chase for the riches of progress. Like much in Greek mythology and the African tales they mimicked, life is an endless search for balance between honoring history and preparing for the future. The ultimate objective is to not get distracted by shiny objects in one's path, and to keep an eye on the goal of reaching our full human potential. I am a seeker in that timeless quest for balance.

I am not a witch, I am not a thief, and I am not a killer. I have been called all these things. I am definitely not a vampire or a zombie. True, I have experienced some level of immortality, but I am alive, not undead. Yes, my "superpowers" have developed to a high level, but all humans have powers, if we only take time to identify and nurture them. I am simply a woman who has been places and seen things that some of you may have forgotten, never knew, or have yet to know about. I am a Jane of all trades, not really an expert at anything but being myself. Sometimes that puts me in good favor, other times being myself has gotten me into a whole lot of trouble. Reading my travel memoirs should take no longer than it does to make a good pot of gumbo, so let your pot simmer and I will explain.

This is a story of my six lives, a time span of more than 3,500 years. It is also my confession of innocence. I am humbled by human history and know my telling does not capture the whole truth or even present the most complete record. But to honor my Ancestors, this story must be told. My oldest grandmother, G'ma Seta, taught me several important lessons: travel as much as possible, remember where you come from, and never underestimate the power of a good pot of soup. These lessons—skills really—have helped me make sense of the world and I have carried them with me throughout my long journey. Stories of adventure, soup, and self-defense are all that I've ever had; they have been more than enough to sustain me.

G'ma's lessons have guided me through the endless perils of being a mobile Black woman. Because of her teachings, I have always felt empowered to explore. "Follow your heart," she would whisper with encouragement, "make the world better with your joy." As a result, I love to eat and I love to travel to find fun in unexpected places. But, because of the enduring reach of human cruelty, my path to joy has been rocky. As some women elders used to say, I have been to sorrow's kitchen and licked the pots clean. But I have also been to the most luxurious kitchens and licked those pots clean, too. Women's survival is funny that way... at its best it becomes less about survival and more about enjoying the thrills of life.

In the past, present, and your future, I have seen continents develop and civilizations collapse. I also witnessed the Lyra system inhabited and colonized... with the same human flaws that existed on Earth. Old-World problems did not disappear simply because we created new worlds. As the controversial 25th-century scholar Ananja Bethuna wrote, "Heritage is life. Human destiny is infinite possibility, but without heritage, a humane destiny an impossibility." Identity and heritage are the heart of humanity. That is the crux of my story: I write from the standpoint of a Galaxy Era African who has intimate knowledge of her distant past. Many dates and places have slipped through my fingers, yet I grasp fully my identity: a Black woman with a sense of wonder and clarity of purpose.

Humans as a species continue to amalgamate, yet ethnic variance and cultural distinctiveness remains. Identity markers (race, sex, gender, religion, social class) have never disappeared, and creation of humanots (humans genetically engineered on planets KeplerPrime and Lucy) made heritage debates and questions of which human traits to replicate even trickier. Gestures were made to "unite" humans into sameness as we colonized planets and encountered other plenary beings, and laws were even enacted to ban teaching about race, but cultural memory has persisted as a positive force in our human spirit. Despite legal efforts to prove otherwise, heritage is a birthright. Sometimes, living in Atalanta, I have felt displaced because the planet does not have the Earth's Sun as a guiding light. But the suns of other worlds shine brightly, nonetheless, and I know who I am by looking inward. My heritage is my compass.

In some places, an autonomous woman poses a threat, and exercising my freedom on a consistent basis has marked me *persona non grata*. By simply existing and by discussing the ordinary facts of my Black womanhood, I am an outlaw in many districts. But, despite the fallout of my immediate past that requires writing my autobiography at this moment in time, I am actually fighting on the side of good. I did, after all, save planet Earth from implosion. (Yes, a Black transnational, interplanetary woman saved Earth. Really, how many times must an American man save our home planet before those old Hollywood stories lose all plausibility?) I am not masquerading as a superhero; I am just stating my utility or, at least as is necessary in this case, claiming my innocence. My gifts have brought humans together, even if some have tried to twist my message to tear us apart.

In the end, this story is a mostly true account of my life exploring food and searching for peace. For you to understand the source of my passions, we must start at the beginning... my first life. I value brevity, so most stories I have gathered during six lifecycles are short enough to fit on a recipe card. But telling of my first life requires a little more preparation because that is where it all began. In the full view, my life book is not a novel, long and contemplative, but not a short story

either, truncated and abrupt. My life story is about the length of a novella, relatively quick, uncomplicated, and practical—like African Fisherman's Hotpepper stew.

Soup of the Ancient South:

My First Life

Follow your heart as long as you live.

~The Teachings of Ptahhotep, ca. 2200 BCE

My father was a world-class merchant and it was with him that my travels began. The foundation of who I am as a person is grounded in the childhood of my first life. I was born in Abyssinia, now called Ethiopia, in a village in the middle of the Shewa region of the Sheba empire. Though conditions were not always ideal in terms of material comforts, it was in this life where my heart was happiest and my stomach fullest. I have never been born a queen or a princess or anyone of importance really—just a regular ol' sassy Black girl. Special, just like everybody else. The unique aspects of my life have always come from the wonderful people whom I have met and how they added to my sense of self.

My favorite person in the world was my paternal grandmother, because she taught me real-world definitions of wisdom. Grandmother Sheseta was an Equator Woman—a Black woman from the ancient South. Her mother's name was Gondwana and her father called Laurasia. Sometimes she called me T'quor Wäf... Black Bird. Grandmother possessed a particular sense of knowing, reflected in the habitual way she put her hands on her hips, raised one eyebrow real high, looked you in the face, and asked, "Do you understand me?" when she corrected someone's foolish behavior. She had high expectations for everyone around her, including for me.

Perhaps, with her dark skin, the color of a plump raisin, it was the Sun who conferred her general lack of reverence for anything less than God or herself. Her spirit shone through her dark brown eyes, her shoulders always thrown back and her soft, full chin perpetually raised

high, though she never seemed to look down at people. The heat of her stare conveyed an abiding intolerance for nonsense... which I inherited. From her, I learned not be afraid to look into people's eyes in order to learn of their hearts intent.

My grandmother planted deeply in me a sense of self-knowing and a goal to give life more than I took from it. Women, she would say, give something holy to this world: where others have knowledge, Equator Women have knowledge and wisdom. She said, "Wisdom is your third eye; it is the crossroad of vision, discernment, and conviction." I learned early that wisdom helps you assess available options, to evaluate what choices you have made, and to create everbetter options and make ever-better choices. When I first met Queen Makeda of Sheba, she said, "Wisdom is the best of all treasures"—if so, Grandmother was the wealthiest woman I have ever met.

Though my grandmother gave root to my identity as an Equator Woman, ultimately, it was my father who nurtured my growth and instilled in me a love for exploration and a desire to work hard to make my dreams come true. My Abāt (father) was a middle child of five. Middle children are sometimes seen as less extraordinary than the eldest or youngest, but in this case, he was the one who gave his whole family honor. My father's name was Hadiyamanna Tana Tamrin Fikre Wedu Teshale. Ethiopians take the last name of their grandfather first, and his first middle name derived from a beloved blue lake at the base of the Nile, the edge of the Ethiopian township where much of our family was born. The other names Fikre Wedu and Teshale reflected his parents' everlasting dedication to love, peace, happiness, and self-improvement. Tamrin is the name of a palm or date-like shade tree under which he was born. His common name was Tana.

Abāt Tana's eldest brother, Uncle Taye, was an outstanding architect, taking after his father. Architecture in the 11th century Before Common Era (BCE) was a combination of natural science, physics, astronomy, art, and religion. Architecture was the physical embodiment and interpretation of balance. Building public or private space was a well-respected profession, because it required study and

creativity; construction work was arduous, but honorable. The next oldest brother, Uncle Jimma, was a healer. He was born with one green eye; it was said he was born to "see" the natural power of herbs and so was trained by the region's most trusted spiritual botanist. Funny how an accident of birth can play such a large role in one's destiny. Uncle Jimma was fierce and defiant, and chose to turn his awkward physical feature into an asset and became very powerful in our community, much in the spirit of G'ma. Odd habits, random incidents, and minute decisions can have an enormous impact on one's vocation... rulers such as King David and his son King Solomon knew that well and, like my uncle, they leveraged their quirky characteristics and used keen wit to build power.

Abāt's younger sisters were twins. Twins and defiant spirits have always run in my family. The twins were also architects, which was a very unusual profession for women of the time. Perhaps because they were twins, they were allowed to develop their desired talents outside of the usual roles of women. One of my aunts, Tata Limeeti, was legendary for constructing sound foundations, and she was a consultant for many ancient buildings and obelisks outside of Ethiopia. She was a true mathematical genius who used the language of math to shape marvelous buildings that still stand. The other, Tata Limone, specialized in bridges and gardens, landscaping really, and interior designs blending rich colors and metals.

Uncle Jimma often worked with Tata Limone to produce private and public gardens that were edible art. My twin aunts, uncles, and their father worked as a family and built more than buildings—they built a lasting reputation. A legacy of integrity is the only true immorality. Money fades but respect remains.

Our Ethiopian family was mothered by a kind and sharp-witted woman named Turkana Joma Azo, who was originally from the southern tip of Kenya. Grandmother was a woman who laughed a lot, but if one crossed her, her fierce middle nature (Azo means crocodile) surfaced in a flash. Her Kenyan descendants would become known for wearing bright colors, but I remember her mostly wearing white, in

the style of Kushites, to accentuate her dark skin and her odd penchant for nose piercings and silver rings, though everyone else was always wearing gold. She was dark, stark, loud, and boisterous—stylish and totally original in a society of relatively light-skinned Ethiopians and even lighter Egyptians. Skin color in ancient societies did not mean the same thing as in the modern era. Family name and reputation usually trumped appearance. But she wore her darkness like a crown.

Grandmother's nickname was Sheseta, a "lady of the house of books," because she was revered for her work as the village scribe. Though African peoples are generally renowned for their griots (storytellers) and oral traditions, artists and writers of papyrus texts were definitely present in the old days, though not always in our area. G'ma Seta (as she allowed me to call her in private) was a proud woman who loved sharing stories of all kinds. She even wrote a parody of Pepi's Instructions to a Son (written in 3000 BCE, around the time of Gilgamesh and a few hundred years before the great Egyptian text, The Book of Coming Forth by Day). Grandmother's version was a humorous set of survival guidelines for women on how to maintain trusting, loving, and open relationships in a world where many men were taught to be dominant or intellectually closed to women's leadership. The most important tip in her Instructions to a Daughter was this: happiness is a temporary attitude, but joy is a life choice. As a woman, no one is responsible for your joy but you.

Her favorite book was The Teachings of Ptahhotep, principles by which to live, written about 2200 BCE. Of course, this was her favorite writing because unlike later texts, it did not declare women the cause of worldly evil. The last principle reads:

37. If you take for a wife a good time woman who is joyful and who is well known in the town, if she is fickle and seems to live for the moment, do not reject her. Let her eat. The joyful person brings happiness.

G'ma Seta was not at all fickle, but she definitely was a good-time woman, and her way of living brought our house great prosperity. G'ma Seta was not always popular in her region because she seemed to do as she pleased, which inevitably encouraged a state of unrest in the women around her. Sometimes because they wanted the same freedoms G'ma Seta claimed; sometimes because they did not like anything outside of the normal women's separate social relations, which they deemed proper. From her early childhood, she was a trendsetter and, to some who valued tradition in a strict or narrow sense, she was a menace. It was rumored that someone tried to rape G'ma once when she was a young girl, just to break her spirit. But she took the man down... the hard way... and that was that.

She was pretty much left alone, because community leaders feared the wrath of her pen, they respected the stature of my Grandfather, and they desired the services of her children, especially the healer, Uncle Jimma, whose mixtures were highly valued in the community's most sacred and festive tea and kafa drinking ceremonies. And his herbs certainly made the best soup for women trying to catch or keep the attention of husbands. It was his herbs and spices that made our justice soup so good.

I made my first pot of justice soup with G'ma when I was six years old. We cooked community meals potluck style, so no one ever had the burden of preparing the whole meal in one house. There were so many meat and bean dishes that went well with soup that women's community meetings were always plentiful. My favorite were the fruit desserts like dates, palms, figs, grapes, and apples that blended aromatic sweetness with much of the grain breads we used to sop the soup. This time, the women leaders were gathering at our house to discuss what to do about a particular woman who was an incessant liar. Soup is the best beacon. It is the perfect meal for serious business. Similar to group meetings like Mbongi, where public court is held to make decisions, this gathering of women to confront Ms. Mpunga meant a certain social change.

Ms. Mpunga was a gossip who was causing much disaccord among several houses. Because she was ignorant, unskilled, lazy, and insecure, she gossiped to try to keep everyone else from being happy or productive. For Ms. Mpunga's red-hot tongue, G'ma Seta chose red lentil stew, using plenty of garlic, onions, and delicious ripe tomatoes, along with Berbere spice—a mixture of dried korarima chile, cloves, ginger, coriander, and allspice from Uncle Jimma's garden. While we prepared the pot, G'ma told me a story of the first and last time she had lied and caused relationship trouble. She had tried to attract the attention of her best friend's future husband, and it resulted in losing her best friend who, true to her word, never spoke to her again. I would have to learn the painful lessons of vices such as lying, pride, wrath, lust, and gluttony over several centuries, but each time I learned a lesson, I would remember that first pot of red lentil stew and the healing it brought to the neighborhood.

When invited to the meal, Ms. M. and her lying tongue were confronted by several women subjected to her falsehoods; she was forced to confess in front of all the women. The point was not to humiliate her, but rather to teach her and offer her an opportunity to make different choices in the future. The debate at this potluck grew very loud because there was no agreement on how to punish Ms. M. for the damage she caused. But consensus was never the goal of gatherings; disagreement was treated as normal. The goal was to undertake the process of community decision making. G'ma Seta took the pulse of the collective and, as an elder, delivered the verdict on behalf of the group. In the end, Ms. M. changed her ways and became one of the most trusted confidants in the community.

So, G'ma set worlds in motion with her writing and set people right with her cooking. She chronicled her values, exalted her husband's expertise, recorded her children's talents, documented her people's public history, and left dozens of recipes for Ma'at soup (Ma'at being the old name for justice). In doing so, she set my father Tana in motion, who in turn showed me who to become. I am because they were.

My great-grandfather traveled during the great movement of kingdoms when Egypt, Axum, Kush, Ghana, Mali, and Songhai were ever-expanding empires, so he took wives not from his village. Grandfather's name was Omeriah and he was an Axumite from an area near the capital of Adefa. He was a master teacher who fostered reverence for both tradition and ingenuity and thus generated knowledge systems and engineered architectural innovations long before Europeans supposedly created civilization.

My grandfather was well known in the architecture business, but also specialized in gold, ivory, and emerald trading, so of course Egypt was a favorite region to ply his trade. For years, he traveled all along the Upper and Lower Egypt Nile cities of Soleb, Amara, Semena, Buhen, Abu Sembel, Aniba, Amanda, Philae, Elphantine, Edfu, Thebes, Gebelein, Dendera, Hermopolis, Beni-Hassan, Cairo, Giza, Tanis, Buto, Rosetta, and the seaside city of Thonis, near Alexandria. He would bring back silk cloth, spices, succulent fruit such as pomegranate, and colorful plants from which to make green/blue and purple color dyes of woad, indigo and madder lake. Most important of all, he would bring home stories of different cultures and strange new recipes. G'ma's favorite was Melokhia soup from the area of Western Babylon, where the Ottoman empire of Turkey would emerge. The soup included chicken, pepper, coriander (dried cilantro seeds), and sunflower seed oil, similar to spinach used later in Sierra Leone's krain krain soup. Grandfather would also provide G'ma with an endless supply of papyrus and ink. He would take his sons and daughters around the region over land and by boat, so my father was raised in transit and hungered for the trading trail.

As G'ma told the story, when he was young, my father did not seem to have any discernible gift. He wanted to tag along with the others and learn about herbs and plants, building materials, cloth, foods, paper, ink... everything. After a short time, the family learned that he could negotiate better prices for their needed materials or services, so father became the family manager of sorts. It turns out his gift was talking to people about value. He became adept at bartering

and given the skills of the family, he became a master trader. As a young man, he grew up with the expansion of trade routes throughout Africa, Asia, and what is now known as Middle East. I learned my negotiating skills from him, though I would eventually use them in slightly different ways. He was especially popular in island areas; now, there is even a town named after him (though spelled differently) on the west bank of the island Mauritius, which lies east of Madagascar just beyond Reunion Island.

Father Abāt was firm but fair (mainly firm), and he was known to never cheat his clients. He was a tall, muscular man, with deep brown eyes, imposing jaw, long calves, and very long arms. Abāt was tall, and could wrestle with the best in our village because he was good at finding his center of gravity, but he almost never had to resort to physical intimidation: he was a giant philosopher. When negotiations crossed the line of civility or reason, he would simply ask in a calm and steady voice, "What is your final decision?" Then, he would emphatically state, "Choose wisely." To some, this sounded like a challenge, or even a threat. But it was simply an admonition, a heartfelt suggestion to do the right thing. He believed that each person in the negotiation circle had a choice. He was always adamant that a lasting transaction was not about manipulation or persuasion, but decision based on the genuine will of each party. Then, there was less probability of buyer's remorse, and even less chance of fighting over bad deals. And he was always willing to walk away. Negotiating in my life has been based on his basic model of exchange. It was his reputation for fairness that caught the attention of Queen Makeda. She was known as a wise queen and, as such, surrounded herself with people of Ma'at, those who revere fairness and righteousness. My family was such a family, and my father was such a man.

My grandfather, traveling with his father, took my G'ma for a favored wife, though not all men would take wives from other tribes. Similarly, my father, during travels with his father, saw my mother during a trip to Yemen and took her for a servant. They met midway between their worlds of Africa and Asia. My father, who could talk his

way to a winning deal through any tense negotiation, bought his precious cargo cheaply from a Persian slaver and grew to love her as a favored wife.

As in many cultures, young girls were stolen, sold, given, or taken as wives before they were able to develop themselves as women. Father was in his thirties, mother was fourteen. He chose her because, like his mother, she was dark-skinned and proud, despite her station in life. When he took her as a wife, she was not a virgin, but neither was she broken or shamed. When he stared at her, she stared back, and to hear my father tell it—she had the nerve to look him up and down as if it were she who was buying him. She denied it, but he even swore when telling the story of their meeting that she smiled at him that day—not so much a pleasant smile, but one of resigned approval. Mother did not smile much, certainly not as much as G'ma did. She only smiled at me on the (very) rare occasions when I acted like I had good sense. Mother was courteous, affable, and hopeful, but ornery in her own way, because, despite being rendered property of a man, she fully expected to be treated like a human being. And so she often was. She did not have the social standing to make major decisions for herself, but she had a cutting way of being nice-nasty when the situation called for it, fully exercising what little power she had. Yes, I am my mother's child, too.

My mother's name was Qwarafaa. She recalled her great-grandparents came from the area of Sigiria and she told stories of a massive stone mountain there; the trader called her Sigi when he sold her to my father. After her capture as a refugee, a prisoner of a war she had nothing to do with, she traveled quite a bit by land and sea before her final sale into our family. Abāt renamed her Thequare Qwarafaa, which in his Ge'ez language meant black and cinnamon—for her skin and the spice talisman that she carried in her dress pocket when they met. She had tied the cinnamon, native to her home, with basil, bittergourd stalk, and a thick leather switch. Along with a tooth (her mother's molar), a funny-shaped gray stone, and a beautiful multicolored string of shells she had picked up somewhere along the

way, these were her only possessions. My Uncle Taye, who was intrigued by the way she chanted and ritualistically maneuvered her shells and cinnamon sticks, called her Faa Faa for short, and the name stuck. Upon arrival, my G'ma Seta took my mother into the fold and apparently, with my spirited Uncle Jimma, conspired to best all of father's other wives to make Faa Faa the favorite. Perhaps they wanted to make up for how badly she was treated by the other Ethiopian wives because she was foreign born. My father had all sons by his other wives, so when I was born, my mother's only child, my G'ma clearly marked me special because I was the only girl child of my father's house. Despite my mother's best efforts, I was quickly spoiled. G'ma even taught my mother and me how to read and write Ge'ez (the language used to write the Biblical book of Enoch), and no one had the guts enough to protest to her face.

My mother named me Samaaya after the heavens she always studied in her journeys and the promise she made to herself to fight for my survival regardless of the perils we faced. I learned the science of survival and the art of self-defense from my mother. My name was Samaaya Tamryn Teshale. G'ma Seta called me Maaya, which she would sing three times when I arrived in her presence. With her singing and my eight brothers drumming, there was always music around the house. Maaya, Maaya was G'ma Seta's name for Orion's belt... the three aligned stars balanced on the Equator. She told me that the Equator was my home and if I ever got lost in my travels, always head toward home and she would keep the three stars lit for me. She told me never to forget that I was beautiful, a black bird in command of the sky. Beauty to her was clearly tied to being African (hence the admonition to stay close to "home"—the Equator and Sun—the proximity to which created black and bronze skin). From the beginning, being black had to be viewed from a wide lens, since my mother's people were from Sri Lanka and blackness meant different things there, too. Early on, my mother and grandmother pushed me to go far beyond narrow definitions of community or nation. So, throughout all of my travels, I always wandered far away, appreciating

the vast differences and gifts of all worlds, but I have also stayed close to home—always Black.

So, I was born and raised a willful, adventurous, literate, darkskinned girl. I was preened to wear the moon as a necklace, the stars as gemstones on my wrist, move my hips like I had the Earth in my pocket, and travel with a swagger of freedom, regardless of who felt they owned my title. Mother Faa Faa taught me to stare any man in his face and G'ma taught me to smile with kind confidence as though Mother God herself had me in mind to be a leader all along. Like the women who raised me, I simply moved in to different spaces and took over worlds when no one was looking. And usually, as an African girl child, in many areas, most people were dumb enough to underestimate me. This is the way it has been for each of my six lives: I have been re-born precocious, studied, and roving, with a home relatively close to the Equator and a compulsion to smile at strangers and swap a good story about faraway places. I am perennially Black, an Equator Woman from the ancient South. As a girl, some have at various times considered me a slave if not property of one man or another; somehow, I always found my way to self-determination. As a natural wayfarer, I worked my way into father Abāt's heart and won a spot in his traveling entourage, where I experienced exotic meals and tall tales in abundance. Traveling with him launched my incredible destiny.

My father arrived at Queen Makeda's court in Axum shortly after she had killed her first husband, who happened to think he was king. Though the murder of a king might have upset other houses, the energy of the Queen's court after she beheaded her adversary and hung his head from the palace gates was strictly business, smooth as the lake on a clear day but also with measured activity, regular as the waterfalls in early spring. Some have heard of the Queen of Sheba from references in the Bible, or Bilqīs in the Qur'an, but fewer know of Makeda. They are the same woman. She was known as Makeda mainly within the Ethiopian nation, and outside was called the Queen of Sheba, given the popular name of her empire at the time.

Makeda was a force known and respected far and wide. Though kind and usually even tempered, Makeda's reputation preceded her, due to this certain unfortunate incident that took place very early in her reign. But she had the calm nerves of her mother Rayhanah, so she kept a clear sense of focus. The killing was a calculated duty occasioned by social imperative; it was not an act of passion or ego. Her father was a responsible king and had worked tirelessly to unite many different peoples on both sides of the Red Sea; his efforts could not be in vain. She disposed of the visionless, violent young man that she married, who thought he was in charge but proved unworthy. Then she proceeded to expand the region as laid out in her deceased father's will.

Part of her expansion was increasing the region's strength in trade. This is where she beckoned my father Tana. By this time, Makeda's head trader Tamrin was the undisputed master of all land and sea markets, and he requested to add father to his team. They became best friends, not incidentally because they shared the name Tamrin. They both understood that collaboration engendered success, and respect harbored greater loyalty than fear, so my father became part of a prosperous alliance. As a sign of respect, I was given the middle name of Tamryn after my godfather, Makeda's main broker. It was rare to give a female a male's name, but because I showed such a love of roaming and was always nosing into the room amidst their negotiation strategy sessions, it seemed I earned the connection to such a great man. Since my adolescence, travel has been a mainstay in my life, as has trade.

Measured communication, mediation, negotiation, and prudent decision-making are all skills my father and godfather taught me with great care. These skill sets, as with lessons learned from my grandmother and mother, have proven timeless. The polities of Africa were not all empires of truth, respect, and reason. There were a multitude of ruthless leaders who thrived on military force, murder, concubine hoarding, and subjugation of the masses. It was those empires who were culpable in making the nation states vulnerable to

the European rape of the continent centuries later. Not all rulers were honorable, but many were logical enough to appreciate ethics in politics and integrity in trade; these leaders gained power through diplomacy.

Considering the recent execution of the king, there was some question in our family about whether father should be employed under a queen in such circumstances. Ultimately, he took the offer to become a trader in the queen's court because G'ma Seta told him that no one could judge the queen's actions but the Ancients, and while Makeda did behead her Yemeni husband, she did so because he was abusive, mean, arrogant, shortsighted, and would have without question set the empire on a path to ruin. Like my father, most men of stature had multiple wives, but the would-be king showed no respect for boundaries and took by force the wives of his subjects, so when his head fell and was displayed on a rail, none of Makeda's court, neither man nor woman, protested. None protested his murder that is, except his two previous wives and six children. But most felt Makeda saved their Empire of the Sun and the growth under her subsequent rule seemed to bear out that sentiment. Queen Makeda was wise and purposeful; while she did not suffer fools gladly (if at all), she had her people in her heart and determined to deal Africans a winning hand at a world table that was rapidly expanding. My father Tana and godfather Tamrin were key players in the expansion of the queen's lands.

Because of their location close to water and to other continents, Ethiopia and Egypt were both hubs of activity. Ironically, Mother Faa Faa had even passed through Nubia and Khartoum in the Sudan, reaching as far as the Al Mukhā shore and back, before my father purchased her. She was a young road warrior who grew accustomed to travel, which, along with her energy-balancing massages on my father's weary body, also accounted for her favored status... Mama was a rolling stone, too. Years after they married, she accompanied father on a trip back to Memphis (in the area known as Cairo) and I

was born on a cool June evening, at the Tropic of Cancer close to Lake Nasser where they camped by the water.

Being born in transit, I inherited nomadic feet. So, when the family packed up to head north to Makeda's court, it was just another welcomed adventure. While mother hated leaving G'ma, she was just as excited as the children about the adventures ahead. I was seven years old when we left my village, but I remember the song G'ma taught me about my name and I carried with me fig leaves from her favorite tree, folded in between the papyrus bundle that she gave to my mother to continue our writing lessons. Thankfully, by the time we arrived in the city of Debra Makeda, Axum, the queen had removed the king's head from the gates (where it had rested for an entire full moon cycle), so our entry to the court was welcoming and cautiously festive.

When we settled, we were accommodated with basic rooms and delicious, though meager, meals. Mother Faa Faa was one of my father's four wives brought to court. Shortly after we arrived and we had gotten set in our routine, my mother unceremoniously began to read and write by oil lamp, continuing our lessons begun at home in Shewa. This was old news for my other mothers, but some women in our new homestead were intrigued, and a couple even wanted to learn. Sadly, there was hardly time during a female's day for the leisure of reading and writing. We worked like everyone else, endlessly cooking, cleaning, and weaving for the beautification of the palace.

A couple of days into our lessons, some women complained about the extra oil the head mother gave to us for our purposes. When word got to Makeda that one of Tana's wives and young daughter were reading and writing, we were immediately summoned. At first sight of the queen, I was awestruck. She portrayed comfort with her power and did not appear to lord it over those in her presence. Her comfort put you at ease, but she exuded an aura of profound dignity, as well. Solomon described her as "dark and comely," meaning (in a phrase popularized much later), "black and beautiful." Purple, orange, and pink were her favorite colors and she

was enamored with rare pearls and sapphires, but especially fond of emeralds. Her adornment was not ostentatious, but she definitely had flair, usually with an ornate crown, a subdued top, and a magnificent dress bottom, just like the countless hoopoe birds that were always running around in her court. She, of course, was Jinn, and a hoopoe was her favorite transformation.

Makeda was an only child (her brother died early). Her mother, Rayhanah bt. Al-Shukr, came from Kamaran Island between Yemen and current-day Eritrea. Her mother was of mixed Yemeni and Ethiopian stock, some say with Jinn heritage. Popular depictions of Jinn—or genies, as they are commonly called—miss the mark. Jinn were shape-shifters and in the Holy Qur'an were made from smoke, just as humans in the Holy Bible were made from sand. Jinn were not confined to bottles but, rather, were more like the indigenous animal spirits of Australia and North America. Yes, Jinn could maneuver air, water, metal, or earth, but they took shapes of animals more than the shape of smoke. By her account, Makeda's father was a white snake and his father was a rather grumpy Ifrit viper. Makeda, herself, was a hoopee bird, and her son Menelik a lion, just like his seventh greatgrandson, Tafari Makonnen (also known as the Honorable Haile Selassie). Jinn lineage is strong and often victorious over mere human desires; as Emperor Selassie showed, a mixture of heritage and hubris often proved unbeatable. Makeda's family line was later traced in the Ethiopian Kebra Nagast and is one of the three holy texts that, when combined, attest to the expansiveness of her power. The queen was multifaceted as a woman, supremely competent as a leader, and marvelously magical as a human being. Having traveled so widely with my family, I was used to seeing miracles; I came to see miracles such as transformations, dream travel, and trances as natural, long before they would be given the misnomer "supernatural." I learned to study natural life just as diligently as I studied books. Eventually, respect for the holy potential of human nature became the source of my own power. I studied with master teachers.

After a brief session of reading and writing with the queen herself, our family was relocated to a room just off the garden in the main quadrangle, where we remained for the rest of my childhood. I worked in the main garden with my brothers and Mother Faa Faa. I had thirteen brothers by this time, but only Tarik desired to work in the garden with us. We worked with the head gardener and our tasks were lighter, allowing us to learn most of the day, practice reading aloud, and help the head scribe pen stories of the court and communiques to foreign leaders as part of our duties. "Wisdom is the best of all treasures," Makeda used to say, and her enthusiasm for our learning made us even more dedicated to our studies. She told me that the thing she liked most about me was my insatiable curiosity. She became very fond of mother's justice soup, and we served her court often, especially when she heard complaints from her subjects. Working directly for the queen surely was a preferred alternative to physical labor. However, my mother insisted that I clean everything in sight daily and that I continued to show ultimate respect for all women's labor, especially the art of domestic work, regardless of my own vocation. The queen treated most everyone with esteem, regardless of their station; she led by example.

I began traveling with my father in earnest at the age of eight. We accompanied him on a short trip to Djibouti to trade his abundant animal skins for Makeda's desired spices. My mother wanted to go on this trip, because her people's native land was just on the other side of India and Djibouti reminded her of her family there. Though she never returned to her native land and was buried with my father, she always looked mindfully toward her Sri Lankan origins. The trip to the shore was exciting, and in the next several years, I traveled to a number of cities: Ankh-Tawy, Thebes, Thonis, Edfu, Khartoum, (al-Mogran, where the White and Blue Niles meet), and then, a very sad trip south through Kenya, to Lake Turkana to bury G'ma Seta. The trip to commemorate G'ma's home going was memorable: I was overjoyed to see my aunts and uncles, but devastated that I would have to wait so long to again share stories of all I had seen with G'ma, my favorite

storyteller. On our return, we passed through what is now Addis Ababa. At that time, it was an important outpost, but much smaller than most cities. Now, it is a bustling metropolis.

I recall the area because it is where my father lost one of his oldest sons. My older brother Yosef was a strong and proud young man. So proud that he ventured a bit too far from the party and was mortally wounded by a lion. We took my brother's remains with us; we killed and buried the lion on the spot. Perhaps this is why two centuries later, King Menelik II chose this location for a major city. I believe it was a sacred place and my father's grandmother also was Jinn, so we knew all animals have valuable life. When Yosef was killed, he was the second oldest and most gregarious of the brothers. My brother Tarik, who was my age, was the hardest hit because Yosef took great care to mentor him on the drum. For soulful African men, the death of a brother can be one of the most devastating losses. When Tarik drummed and said the family prayer for the lion and for my brother Yosef, he established himself as a holy man in our family.

Ankh-Tawy, just south of Cairo, was my longest trip, taking four months, but by then I was a teenager and felt an old pro. So when the queen chose to visit Solomon's court, I had many years of travel under my feet; of course, I was more than ready to go along. Families did not always travel with the merchant clan, but when I saw the amount of preparation being put into the trip far north to Jerusalem—including packing up the children for the six month trek—I knew this would be a trip for the ages. Though Queen Makeda was also a journeywoman, the visit to Israel would intractably impact even her magnificent life.

Mixed-nation affairs and international marriages were not uncommon in old dynasties, even though some who thought themselves pure would marry their relatives rather than outsiders. Men of many cultures took several wives, and war was as prevalent as in our own time. Sometimes for love, other times for politics, world people mixed willy-nilly, though of course every group thought their own tribe the origin and center of the universe. No matter where I have traveled, questions of identity, culture, trade, and religion have

been at the center of social relations—between individuals, between nations, and between planets. It was these very serious questions of being, knowing, and doing (the philosophical trinity of ontology, epistemology, and axiology) that Makeda and Solomon danced around... and, yes, amid this interplay of life's big questions, they exchanged love.

I was only a teen when I witnessed this royal spectacle of the highest order, but I recall it was the most enlightening eighteen months of my first life—or any since. Much has been written about Makeda and Solomon. Queen Sheba knew what she was doing when she decided to romantically engage her interlocutor, and so did King Solomon. Makeda knew Solomon was wealthy, wise, and powerful, with great vision and a potentially threatening eye on expansion of his empire to the south. Solomon knew Makeda was respected and adored by all in her rule because of her shrewd combination of politics and economics that brought prosperity to those in her kingdom, not just to her personally. Solomon also knew that she had killed her first husband in the bedroom after filling him with wine, so it was definitely a delicate dance of diplomacy, where each step by the royals was taken gingerly.

When we arrived, the scene in the court pulsated with curiosity at the strangeness of foreigners, had its fill of romantic tension, and was thick with international intrigue. But at base, it was Old World negotiation of empire heads and a governmental courtship of equals. Much was to be gained, but it was a hairy situation that could have easily turned malicious in less-skilled hands. But this was a meeting of beautiful hearts and disciplined minds. Our stay lasted more than six months, and everyone was better for the venture. Tamrin was a great trader, but Makeda was truly her own best diplomat. I remember most the celebratory feasts with delicious kosher foods: meat, fish, cheeses, fruits, breads, wine, and lots of different kinds of bean soups.

In various cultures, it is said a wise child is taught with parable, so riddles were the coin of the realm within our African intellectual history. Too often this is called "the Socratic method"; however, if we

are to be historically accurate, we would refer to teaching through questions as the *Makedic* method. For the learned and wise, questions were normal parts of social conversation. It was unusual, however, for a woman to *test* a man in the manner that Makeda tested Solomon. They did not spar for dominance or for arrogance, but for the love of wisdom. She quizzed his knowledge of natural science, the stars and universe, his religious and ethical convictions and, significantly, social mores regarding the male and female place.

Makeda came to test Solomon's wisdom. She asked questions about discernment. She asked how to tell the difference between real flowers and silk, between a tree's root and branches, between girls and boys, and between religions. In essence, she asked, "How do you differentiate the authentic from an imitation when appearances are the same?" After necessary formalities and Makeda's gifts of wealth to her host, the air of the court became one of serious playfulness. As Makeda asked the questions, she was not eager or anxious; Solomon was just as calm in his answers.

I had firsthand experience and participated in this series of exercises: in one major test early in our visit, she dressed young boys and girls the same, lined us up, and asked Solomon how to tell one from the other. I was older and much more mature than the other children, but small for my age, so I participated as well. This was a great joust of wit; my brothers were on the sidelines as musicians, playing in the orchestra as the royals got acquainted. This was a major test for both of them; subjects of both courts were witnessing this intellectual wrestling match. We all had donned clothing that was neither male nor female fashion; basic handsome material with just enough fine stitchery to be intriguing and ambiguously complimentary to a variety of features. Essentially, she was asking, "What is the difference between girls and boys?" We all waited for the king's answer. I heard my brother Tarik drumming.

Solomon was not hasty, but answered her question rather quickly and, of course, cleverly. He had treats thrown in the middle of the floor so we would scramble to collect them. He surmised the

difference between how the girls modestly gathered treats in their skirts and the boys greedily gobbled them in their arms. Actually, I also gobbled up the treats, figuring the more aggressive I was, the more I could share with my mothers and brothers. Luckily, I went mostly unnoticed: though Mother gave me her threatening stare, she rolled her eyes but did not reveal my secret. Beyond the assumed physical distinction, difference between boys and girls was most recognizable in our social training. Makeda disclosed the inconvenient truth that life opportunities for children rested more upon social nurture than physical nature. Social limitations were based on expected compliance to norms of submission. The accident of gender impacted the fate of so many youth. Certainly, it affected my fate.

As a maturing girl, I had been promised to a man named Kashta-Sud, one of my father's trading entourage, a Kushite from Napata. He was nothing to write home about. Though he was older, I was satisfied because he was literate and often engaged me in a game of question and answer. We shared an interest in learning about the world, but he struck me as greedy and seemed always hungry, no matter how much he was fed. I did not feel ready to become a woman in the way that what was expected, but I didn't have a choice, and Kashta was definitely one of my better options: being with him allowed me to stay close to my family.

There was much concern initially because I did not get pregnant immediately. Then, about a year before the Jerusalem trip, my first baby died before birth, and things went downhill from there. At that time, much of society regarded childless women only as creatures to be pitied. Women without children were viewed as somehow incomplete, and because motherhood was seen as the "highest" function of a woman's potential, childless women often withered from shame. Because I did not conceive, I soon fell out of favor with my husband, and I was not-so-subtly shunned by his family, especially his mother and other wives who already disparaged my Asian and Ethiopian roots. During the very short time I had been a young bride, I grew more distant from my husband's house. But being child-free

gave me an opportunity to spend even more time with Makeda and her cast of intriguing personalities, especially during this important trip. Every day with her was a lesson.

As widely recorded, Makeda was triumphant in her imperial and personal relations with Solomon. She spent the rest of her years mostly adored and respected, but we did not stay in Jerusalem. During her time with Solomon, Makeda became pregnant with a son, Menelik. We made the trek home and I watched closely, with growing delight, as her belly swelled. Childbirth is magic. Though I had not yet experienced giving birth myself, it seemed to me to be the Creator's most impressive and most sacred gift.

One night while reading to Makeda at her bedside, as was our common routine, she fell into a deep sleep. As had happened several times before, I was drawn into her dreams. This time was different. I was afraid. Osiris was there and he only shows up when hearts are weighed and people are measured. Osiris was a ruler in the Old Kingdom realm of the dead. Together with Queen Is (also known as Isis), the goddess mother figure, and Anibus, the jackal-headed bailiff, they ruled the Hall of Ma'at, the Ancient World's oldest court of judgment for those leaving the land of the living.

The great chamber we entered was lined with writing in many languages: hieroglyphics, Ge'ez, Arabic, Sabaic, and more, which recounted the fate of others who had come before. There was a low and meditative drumbeat hum of voices in just as many languages as on the walls. The high sandstone pillars looked like polished grain and were open at the top to reveal a yellow moon; the imposing space felt hot and cold at the same time. It was a chamber of contradictions, the air was moist and dry, candles and incense burned so it was light and fragrant, but the positioning of the huge, ornate golden scale seemed to darken the room. The Great Hall simultaneously stimulated and muted each of my senses.

When we die, our hearts are placed on one side of the scale and the feather of Ma'at on the other. You are either innocent—your heart rises, and you are escorted to eternal life—or you are not innocent—

your heart sinks, the feather of Ma'at rises, and you suffer with the lost souls beyond the lake of fire. The scales reminded me of my G'ma's soup pot and I finally understood what she had been trying to instill in me all along: measure is the key to good soup; and balance is the key to good living. I looked into the eyes of Osiris. I saw eternity.

Osiris projected in a voice that rattled my spine; it was not loud, but the words vibrated around the room, "Queen Makeda, Ruler of Sheba, you are not innocent, but you are wise. It is not yet time for your final judgment. To balance the scales for this moment, the sentence for executing your first husband will be the sacrifice your first son." Osiris had come for Menelik! As Makeda had murdered her first husband, her first-born was chosen to die. Everyone must be brought to judgment... even the indomitable Queen of Sheba. Because her good work was not yet done in the realm of the living, she would not be taken from the world, but this punishment certainly would crush her.

Hearing this pronouncement, and letting the decision sink in, I cried much too loudly, "No! Wait!" and propelled forward to demand to be heard in the court. The humming voices stopped. Ammit turned his head toward me, anticipating he might have an unexpected meal this evening. Ammit the Devourer, an animal with the butt of a hippo, trunk of a lion, and head of a crocodile, gobbles up the hearts of those who do not pass the test on the scale of Ma'at. He bared his teeth in my direction. I glared at him and shook my head in disbelief, "Is it justice," I boldly asked Osiris, "to take the life of a child... an innocent?" I challenged the court, defending Makeda, searching for the words to state a moral law to bring mercy for both mother and child. I had known that loss. It wasn't fair.

Osiris snapped at me, "And how do you propose to balance the scales, young one?" His tone seemed familiar: Father Abāt's voice echoed in my head, "What is your final decision? Choose wisely." I looked past Osiris, staring into the onyx eyes of Isis that rippled like darkwater, and said, "You must give him a chance; he is the most innocent of us all. This surely is not Makeda's desire. She deserves

better—her sacrifices for the many have been great. Her desire must be included in this judgment." I pleaded for Makeda's heart. I begged for Menelik as if he were my own. My pronouncement sounded good rolling off my tongue. I continued grasping for reason, "Everyone must choose their own fate; only the scales can measure justice. There must be another way! I mean, aren't you a god? Can't you find another way?"

I could feel the ire in the stiff bodies in the court, buzzing like scarabs and crickets, outraged that a young woman would have such disrespect for the king of souls. It seems that, since that incident, I have always had an "attitude problem," which is basically how my response is interpreted any time I stand up for what is right. I put my hands on my hips, imitating G'ma Seta, and waited. I was not yet a grown woman, only sixteen. But I had seen enough of the world to know that I was ready to step out into it, come what may. I knew challenging the king would have consequences, but I believed my words would be a shield. He held up his hand to silence the court, returned to his throne, and leaned toward Isis to confer.

Makeda came to me, her face filled with anguish. I tried to mask the fear on my face in order to not cause her more pain. We looked at Osiris, Isis, Anibus, and Ammit, who had put his head down at what I could only imagine was disappointment at the interruption of his mealtime. Makeda put her hand on my heart and murmured, "Where is your heart leading you?" She cupped my hands in her face, squeezing my cheeks, searching my eyes to see if I had lost my mind. "Think about what you are doing." I placed my hands on her swollen stomach, and said, "I am," and then laid my head on her large belly. I closed my eyes, listened to Menelik's heartbeat, and took a slow, deep breath. Drawing in. Seeping out. I stood up, held Makeda's hand, faced the court, and waited.

After what seemed like forever, Osiris stood and pronounced, "Daughter, I accept your challenge to find an alternate solution. Someone must account for the six children's loss. We agree: You will be a fitting compensation for Makeda's crime; instead of taking

Menelik, we will take you in exchange." Uh, what? My eyebrows crimped into a horrified scowl. I tried to be cool, but my legs turned from bamboo rods into rubbery palm fronds. He continued, "You will not die, but your life will be atonement for the six children Queen Sheba's actions left fatherless." I was very confused, and did not know at all what he meant; I had not signed up for death—there was so much I wanted to do in life! I looked at Isis, whose eyes shined almost kindly, and I focused on the words, "You will not die." Whatever this meant, at least Menelik would live and Makeda would be spared a loss I knew all too well. And I had, indeed, requested an alternative. Be careful what you ask for. You just might get it. I asked with morbid curiosity, much more humbly than before, "But if I will not die, where will I live?"

I felt a cacophony of emotions: bliss, trepidation, excitement, nervousness, and an awful serenity. Makeda's tears were the last thing I saw before I passed out in the arms of Anibus, who had come to escort me away.

Soup to Go: My Middle Lives

Fine words are more precious than greenstone,
But they can be found among women at the grindstone.

~The Teachings of Ptahhotep, ca. 2200 BCE

My viewpoints are based on my identity. I have always been a 'mouthy' girl, ever expressive. I have always voiced my opinions, and I have written them down for others to read, assuming I have something valuable to contribute. I do not write out of hubris; I write to note my observations, especially those that may be useful in understanding mysteries. I write from my lived experience. I write to solve problems. My many lives have allowed me to note patterns of frightening sameness and compelling change. And so, while walking my spiritual path, I speak my mind. I inscribe life.

Law and religion are different sides of the same coin; they each have their own subtleties, but it is imperative to acknowledge their parallel functions. Each come with fine print and, by grace of a higher power, one can find mercy at the bench of both houses. The Creator gave codes of spiritual law to all people in all lands. Languages vary, messengers differ, but the message is the same: humans have been granted the gift of will; and the responsibility of will is accountability for one's choices. Regardless of your system of belief, you will be judged.

My family had a diversity of religions. Grandfather Omeriah was a devotee of Isis. G'ma only prayed alone by her fig tree... to whom was between her and her god. When she did mention God... G'ma always said, "May She bless your heart." Makeda worshiped the Sun before accepting Solomon's Father God of Israel. Their son, Menelik, accepted the teachings of his father and transported the Ark of the

Covenant to keep in his own care. Most of Makeda's progeny later bowed east to pray to Allah, while some of my mother's people meditated with Buddha. Follow what prophet you will, all answer to the Creator. Mosque or monastery, temple, garden, or nunnery, folks insist on fighting each other for primacy of interpreting the weights and measures of the soul. But when one from any nation sets his heart on the eternal scale of justice, no matter what language the prayer, the scale never lies. This I know.

Africans gods, Greek and Roman gods, Catholic saints, and Haitian loa all possess concepts of a higher court, whom we may petition for assistance and to whom we are accountable. Judgment was at the center of ancient African culture, regardless of the region. And so Makeda was measured. Because she was a wise and just ruler, she would be allowed to conceive her son and would eventually pass into the honored realm of Ancestors. But, there was a precious tax exacted: me. Many wise women are keepers of the secrets of healthy life and many are prophets; Makeda was one of these women. It was an honor to serve her. I never awoke from my sleep and my only regret is not getting to say goodbye to my family.

I was to undergo a curse because of Makeda's murder, but I also incurred a blessing because of my courage. In light of her murder, Makeda's mentee would pay the price for the pain of the six children her murder had left fatherless. In the eyes of the court, there are no crimes punished as harshly as those that harm children or animals. Anyone who hurts children is guaranteed to rot and people, such as ivory poachers, who mass-murder animals are damned to the hottest parts of the lake of fire. Considering what could have happened, my sentence was comparably delightful. The curse: I was to end my first life at that moment and be reborn five more times, one life for each fatherless child. Through rebirth, I would suffer as a constant witness to the failures of humankind. The blessing: in every life I would be reborn Black. As G'ma Seta said, women offer something holy to this world and, for all of the problems we endure, it certainly is a blessing to be an Equator Woman. All things considered, I believe I have been

highly favored... I have gotten to see the world, and for every horror I lived through, I have also witnessed numerous generations of miracles.

Because I loved to travel with Abāt in my first life, Anibus chimed in on the ruling and it was decided that I would be reborn every 700 years on a different continent, to add a little spice to my insatiable curiosity about history and geography, and to break up monotony of the sentence. About every 700 years major cities or empires rise and fall, so I would be reborn five additional times and I would continue to get to see the wide world and mark its changes.

I passed away from my first life in 969 BCE and woke up in each new life, fresh and unknowing of what had taken place before. My second life began in 269 BCE India, then the third in 569 CE Australia, the fourth 1269 CE Brazil, and the fifth life I was born 1969 CE United States. As I stated at the beginning of this story, for my final and sixth life, I was born in 2669 CE KeplerPrime, Atalanta, in Lyra (one of two successful Earth satellite developments that together form Tri-Planets, our three neighboring habitable systems). It has been quite a journey.

Only in my last life was I born with any recollection that I had endured a three-millennium journey. Seeking peace in each life was difficult, but I seemed to find a basic equation for balance that worked as a set of tools for my trip: virtuous attitude, lifelong learning behaviors, and definitive choices to ensure success. Balance was a lesson I did not master until halfway through my fifth life, and persistence allowed me to complete my life's work in my sixth. I gathered lessons in each reincarnation that combined to create the source of my power as Axis. Each life was a separate moment, but over time they blended into one.

My first name was Samaaya and I was fortunate to be born in Ethiopia during a time without widespread war, hostile international tension or social confusion. In my first life, I was born in June, when the star of Cancer was swinging on the Equator with its right hand and with the moon cuddled in its left. I was born on swinging stars. In that life, I found my loose spirit. I learned concepts of pendulums, breezes,

and equipoise. I know, inherently, that those you meet on the way up, you will again see on the way down. I became comforted by the concept of rotation. Everything you put out (good or bad) comes back around to you, so I learned early to stay on positive vibrations. From my first life, I recall vividly that first pot of red lentil soup with Ms. Mpunga so I value community discussions and appreciate the power of women's gatherings to solve social ills. From Makeda I learned that women can be great leaders. These notions were strengthened when I visited India, Australia, Brazil and the United States.

My second life, I was born in 269 BCE, in what became the city of Wathirayiruppu, Puthupatti, in what is now Tamil Nadu. My second name was Virudhun, but my family called me Viru, for short. Tamil Nadu is one of what came to be 28 states in the country of India, in the southernmost region, just north of Mother Faa Faa's Sri Lankan home. Humans had populated the area for 500,00 years and Tamilagam people occupied this region from 500 BCE. Our people would later be known as the bottom caste and I would be recognized as Dalit (a term that came into fashion in the 1970s CE). Mother wrote Sanskrit and taught me what she learned from those who were studying the book of grammar and ancient literature, *Tolkāppiyam*, written by the scholar Tholkappiyar.

I was born into a culture that was relatively equal during my time but that would evolve into a culture that not only placed women in a narrow social sphere, but that also placed entire generations of families at the bottom of the social structure based on an incident of birth. Caste did not have to do with skin color, but it marked difference in perception of belonging and, often, determined opportunity for social advancement. As in Africa, difference was always a factor in Asia. For example, people of the Zhang Zhung culture from which the Tibetans derived in China, differed from the peoples of Han, Manchu, and Mongoi; there have always been so many fascinating kinds of clans. Eventually, ancient people would be arranged in a global system where people of light skin were most often at the top of society and

those of us with dark skin at the bottom, but in every land variance made for beautiful contrast and complicated relations.

In India, I studied obsessively and I become a teacher; it was here when I began to approach the idea of learning as a profession. With the vast number of texts in Sanskrit, one could read for years and still not begin to scratch the surface of writings available for spiritual study. I began to see the many ways humans let the sheath of the body cloud the flow of energy from the inner life of the spirit.

In my second life, I was the firstborn girl for decades in my family, so both mother and father took special care to make sure that I knew the basics of literacy, to give me even a small chance at a fulfilling future. Through yoga practice, my search for peace was most satisfying. Meditation was my inheritance. I also learned to appreciate adornment of skin and body, and began to develop my sense of outer beauty that I tried to fashion to my own liking as much as the inner beauty I was working to achieve. I enhanced the connection of my inner and outer self. My manjira hand cymbals were chimes for keeping time on my quest for personal development and I loved to hear the many instruments that would merge into the sitar, a sound which plucks at strings in the air between the soil and the clouds.

From India, I brought with me a love for curry. Curry is a word adapted from the Tamil *kari*, meaning sauce. Like Makeda, I love spice! Curry is saucy, like my personality. The range of curry spices offers a plentiful palate of color and treats the tongue as an artist's canvas. There were so many flavors, such as tamarind, ginger, chili, poppy seeds, fennel, cloves, and the ever-present ancient garlic, that made vegetables so tasty I did not bother to eat meat in this life. I added rice to lentils and bread as my favorite soup accompaniment and also deepened my relationship to my spirituality through Hindu practice. My grandfather was a Samanar Tamil Jain philosopher, so meditation, literacy, respect for the holiness of animals, and the love of seasonal festivals were strong traits embedded in my environment that I carried with me on my next steps.

My third life began in Australia in 569 CE. This was the beginning of a period known as the "Dark Ages": a time that very little was recorded in Europe, so intellectual development is assumed to have grinded to a halt after the decline of the early African empires. Though I have always been literate and relished life as a writer, I understand that not everything worth knowing can be found in a book. My Aboriginal family established some of our most long-lasting cultural habits and, if world scholars would bother to look, we created ways of interpreting environmental relationships that sustain peace with the planet. While not widely written during that time, our ways of knowing are potent and have been carried down.

My third name was Gylma and my family was of the Bidjara-Pitjara clan. My mother was a healer and my father was a craftsman. In this life, for the first time, I had sisters; there were four girls and three boys in our family. Our home region was a couple of hundred kilometers from Brisbane in the northwest state of Queensland, where our people had lived for more than 60,000 years after crossing the Torres Strait from southern Asia. My Aboriginal people shared space with Nuri, Longabulla, Jiman, and Wadja clans. Over a thousand years before White men came to invade the land, rape its women, and steal children away to be herded like cattle and fenced in on reservations, we lived in our mother country with no borders.

Like indigenous people of North and South America, our older societies were built on understanding nature as both science and art. Our connection to Earth was not a romantic stereotype about the glory of "noble savages." The land and the sky were schools in our university. In the best sense of the word education, the land taught us to experiment, observe, create, produce, and grow in understanding. We are among the oldest stargazers; we called Lyra constellation Malleefowl (like the bird). Unlike later "civilization" in the "enlightenment" and "information" eras, everyone knew how to feed ourselves from nature. We were both intelligent and smart; in later days, some who went to migaloo schools were one, but not the other. Eventually, our people would be forced into wakka wakka homes and

hospitals, but our old ways and words would never be all lost, no matter how the White people tried to beat our indigenous life out of us.

Though there were no books in my house, I drew a lot; I used the earth as texts and enjoyed the physics and mathematical work used to create practical art such as boomerangs. I learned to read waterfalls and lakes like maps, and learned literature through the origin stories of our dreamtime past. In this life, I wandered more than ever and my feet loved the vast ground we covered. I stomped and chanted and gave my parents a bad scare when I was ten years old and decided to go on walkabout for a month. Walkabouts were half-year trips, usually rituals of manhood, treks where boys became men. I have always been a ritualistic woman so, of course, seeing my older brothers do it made me want to go out and see what's what too.

As I grew up, I learned to track, hunt, read the weather, and had a heightened sense of direction, all of which were essential to my man Holt and I keeping care of our house full of fourteen beautifully curious and rambunctiously wandering children: seven girls and seven boys. Our family had a pattern and the key to raising our children was providing a routine they could easily follow, but then peppering the routine with surprises so they didn't get bored. My favorite memory of Pitjara was the feeling of cooking outside with our clan when visitors came through. Australia has the biggest sky I had ever seen, and cooking in a pot under that sky made me feel like I could reach up and slice off a piece of the moon to add to the stewed kangaroo with a side of yams and wild plums. Plants were powerful for cooking and, like eucalyptus, carried healing powers to sooth anything that ailed us.

I learned to dance in Brazil—my fourth life. My name was Ovidia. Though I had been active in all my lives, it was in Brazil where my body really fell into the rhythm of the drum in a way where I felt comfortable enough to create my own movement. I was born in 1269 CE on land that would eventually become a *fazenda* (coffee plantation) in the lower area of Minas Gerais, about 400 kilometers west of Rio de Janeiro. I arrived 300 years before Portuguese Pedro Álvares Cabral

spearheaded European colonization. Our people had been in the area for more than 10,000 years. I was the youngest of sixteen children. My mother was a village washerwoman and my father worked as a representative tribesman for the Tupi Federation, as we constantly warred with the Gê tribes. Just like on the continent of Africa, our constant battling with neighboring tribes made it much easier for the Portuguese colonizers who attacked us. Despite our longstanding battles, we were prosperous, alternately living on the coast and then benefitting from the plentiful riches of vegetation that brushed the very southeastern edges of the Amazon forest.

Our family loved to travel to the coast and I had my fill of shellfish soups, especially the clam, muscle, and shrimp stew made with extratart lemon. Citrus fruit trees of orange and tangerine, and plants like the cassava, were plentiful long before sugarcane and coffee were planted as cash crops. With such rich foods, there is no wonder that Brazil also became known for the Festival of Soups that features pea soup, squash soup, and, my favorite, chicken soup. Chickens are as old as the city of Babylon, so most countries have their own version of chicken soup. I came to love the soothing chicken and vegetable soup with clear, healing broth, especially when my body was tired from helping Mother with daily chores and then dancing until late in the night.

Our tribal dance would centuries later intertwine with Angola warrior skills to craft the lyrical capoeira fighting style, and with Bahia rhythms to give the world the nimble Samba. The rhythms of our feet shook the ground from which sprang the vibrant Brazilian Carnival culture. Nivla, trusted friend and mentor of mine, was known as most commanding dancer in our village. He encouraged me to become a master dancer, and by looking at the way he constantly struggled improve his moves even when no one was looking, he showed me the power of self-motivation. He also reminded me of the ability of the drum to attract and organize people into a community circle. The drum called us together frequently because the world was changing and we had many issues of injustice to confront as our interactions

with strange cultures, and conflicting values, increased. It was in Brazil I got my first taste of leadership; I began to move beyond passive observation and spoke up to participate in ongoing community discussions. I was chosen several times to represent my family in village decisions and to convey the will of our village in several multiclan women's meetings.

In Brazil, I began to again pay close attention to the nature of interactions. The world had changed more drastically in this last 700 years than at any time before. Certainly, there were shifts tens of thousands of years ago that impacted people's features, habitats, and migration patterns, but it was during this era on the edge of global colonization that social psychology began to congeal. A consolidation of information, technology, and interaction in large patterns shaped how humans thought. Eras before this time saw mass movements that altered the ethnic makeup of large demographics; eras after this time certainly sped up the rate of human exchange, but the die for global stereotypes was cast between the 1300s and 1900s.

This period set the blueprint for all future communications between humans, and fired the cauldron that fashioned in place the human concept of race on a global scale. All of our instincts of discernment and discrimination along with the micro-aggressions of each individual nation's caste systems combined in a horrible chemistry of clashing classes based on heritage, identity, belief, and, increasingly, appearance. This was the era that the "isms" (especially racism, sexism, and classism) became an interlocked cornerstone of the world structure. This is the DNA that humanots—beings that humans created—would inherit. I saw the early stages of this color and gender hierarchy in every life, but it was in the fifth life in the United States that I began to experience, observe, and study in earnest this thing called identity.

In my fifth and most recent lifecycle, my name was Stephanie Yvette Evans Byrd. Because of technological developments, I was able to write much of my history of this life from documents such as birth and death records, genetic DNA tests, newspapers, book publications, journal articles, and family history recorded by siblings, uncles, and cousins. These documents allowed a level of detail I had been unable to preserve in former lives. As Stephanie, I was born in 1969 in Washington, DC, at Howard University's Freedman's Hospital to the Tillman family (maternal) and the Walker family (paternal). My maternal lineage included Guinea-Bissau (Balanta people), Senegal (Mandinka), and Sierra-Leone (Mende) roots. My paternal ancestry included Nigeria (Ibo) and Cameroon (Ewondo). In this life, I shared a born day with my Grandmother Mary Edmonds, a favorite teacher Pamela Copley, Africana cultural anthropologist Katherine Dunham, and science-fiction writer Octavia Butler. My cosmic alignment with these women was clearly no accident.

My maternal great-grandparents were Edward and Mary Tilghman. They had nine children: five sons (Jimmy, William, Joseph, Lewis, and Edward Jr.) and four daughters (Octavia Inez, Agnes and Annie—twins, and Jeannette). Great-aunt 'Tavie lived to be over 100 years old and, along with her sisters, was very active in the Roman Catholic community of St. Augustine's in Washington, DC. In a strange family quirk, all of the boys in the family retained the name Tilghman, but the girls' names were changed to Tillman. My mother had two siblings, a sister Diane and a brother Harold Jr. My maternal grandparents Mary Edmonds and Harold "Mr. Rhythm" King performed at the Howard Theater (my grandfather's talent was tap dancing on roller skates on a two-foot-wide table while blindfolded). Grandmother Mary told me stories about the liveliest times in DC. My family was imaginative and, on both sides of the family tree, our people loved jazz music.

On my paternal side, Charles and Ella Walker were sharecroppers of Charlestown, West Virginia; they had twenty-one children. Great-grandmother Ella lived to be 96 years old and was at that time of her death survived by seventeen children (Charles, Frank, Jessie, Jim, Sara, Ella, John, Liza, Mamie, Virginia, Harrison, William, Lula, Emma, Ann, Lucille, and Francis). My father, Booker T., was the son of Emma Walker and had two siblings: Percy and Emily. The accomplished

saxophonist Charlie Rouse was a second cousin. Mamie Walker and William Rouse had five children (Avalon, Charles, Lionel, William Jr., and Hamilton). Charlie Rouse, who played flute and saxophone, traveled with Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, and Thelonious Monk. Relatives on both sides of the family were entrepreneurs, educators, craftsmen, artists, and healthcare professionals. I came from innovative people who believed in taking care of business and having fun while doing it.

Early on, my parents Annette and Booker T. did their best to give me the best they had: Annette was a phlebotomist, but also became known as a bowling and roller-skate instructor; Booker T. had a magnificent garden in Grants, New Mexico with my stepmother Barbara where they grew Russian olives, apples, berries, carrots and zucchini. He could grow and build almost anything. My stepparents Barbara, Bill, and Mary also contributed much toward shaping me. I had a brother named Michael, a sister named Angie, and a younger sister by Bill and Mary named Michelle. I also had a brother, Booker T. Jr., and sister Denise, both whom passed before I was an adolescent, and several beloved satellite siblings and cousins.

As in many of my other lives, my family was an extended, mixed-race collective: I was fortunate to again have a strong mother who reinforced the will in me to survive, two caring fathers, and two stepmothers who cared about me and encouraged me, especially during hard times. This life further deepened my conviction of the utter inability to measure people solely by the color of their skin. While the evils of European colonization and white supremacy mentality were a reality, racism was developed as a series of calculated choices, not as an individual inevitability. Interactions with diverse and loving family networks in this Black life, including two White stepmothers and step-sisters, along with Latina, Native American, and Asian step-sisters, nieces, nephews, and "cousins" (folks we "been knowin' far back") proved that cultural difference is inevitable, so racism is simply illogical.

My stepfather Bill served in the Air Force, so as a girl, I moved quite often, beginning when I was six years old. Before I was a teenager, we had traveled to New Mexico, California, Germany, Illinois, and Arizona. Our family always lived apart, so we were never closely knit, but we always instinctively kept in touch from afar. Parents, siblings, and a multitude of aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews were spread throughout the nation, but we did not have to reside together to love each other across borders of time, place, and circumstance.

As Stephanie, I was a very strange child... traveling around the world at a young age or, when I was not physically moving, traveling through my imagination. My sister's nickname for me when I was young was "Thunderbrain." As in past lives, books were my favorite pastime and short stories, such as Richard Bach's Jonathan Livingston Seagull and Illusions, increased my confidence when I felt badly about always being the odd-girl-out or when I felt awkward for seeking something beyond what was popularly known to be "authentically black." I had a special love for comic books, and Spiderman was my favorite. I was always what they called at that time a geek. My proudest moment was being named valedictorian in junior high, when I read "If" by Rudyard Kipling in my speech. Recalling this event later, it dawned on me that I longed for G'ma Seta's rendition of a poem called "When" that certainly would have ended, "and what is more, my daughter, you will have found your womanhood."

In this life, I remember most moments that helped build my confidence, especially encouragement from a middle-school dance teacher, Pamela Copley, and the magic moment in high school when I was crowned winner of the Miss Black Teen Arizona pageant in 1985. Participating in the pageant and programs like the national NAACP-Act So competition, taught me to appreciate the rigor of competing and the importance of winning and losing gracefully. In particular, Ms. Copley helped me find my confidence after assaults by different boys my age and after surviving recurring violence by adults. As a girl I suffered through repeated attacks, molestations, and rapes by several

men of varying shapes, sizes and colors; it threatened to destroy both my body and my sanity.

My most striking memories in this life are the choices that I made to recognize that my life was worth something: at age six, when I told on a cousin who was abusing me, despite his threats to drown me in the family pool if I did; at sixteen, when I moved out on my own to again face the world head on, because I saw no one could take care of me as well as I could take care of myself; and at twenty-five, when I ventured into college to struggle my way toward completing a PhD in Black women's history. As a youth, I began taking lessons in martial arts, especially Kenpo and Tae Kwon Do. I moved too often to complete the belt systems, but I always took with me the core techniques and, like Bruce Lee in his movies, I refused to accept being treated as less than human because of my race or social status. At each phase of my development, some saints stepped in to encourage me in my struggle, and the heroic battles that many women who were close friends or family members fought also inspired me. But very early in my life, it became clear that no one was ever coming to save me, so I began to create my own solutions and find my own joy. I began to learn to save myself and, through my writing, teach others potential paths to do the same.

My wandering ways continued as an adult. I lived in or visited fascinating places, including Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Rhode Island, Maine, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Brazil, England, France, Tanzania, Zanzibar, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Hawaii, Grand Cayman, Grand Turks, and Jamaica. My feet kept moving; and airplanes were much more convenient than walking hundreds of miles or crossing oceans by boat. I explored more places than ever and researched African women's dissertations at the University of Dar es Salaam, a most enlightening trip into marginalized ideas. Even in my married life, where I enjoyed the comfort of a peaceful home, I traveled as much as I had when I was single. I am grateful that, though I had been on the move for as long as I

remember, I was blessed with the most wonderful travel companion in this fifth life: Curtis Byrd.

I had an array of relationships in previous lives, but I had not ever committed so fully my heart to another. When I met Curtis Byrd, we were both almost forty years old, so by that age we both knew exactly what we were looking for. "Byrd" had a light heart that reflected in his brilliant smile. His ability to appreciate good company and create community was inspiring. He loved music, especially jazz, had already traveled widely when we met, and had a hypnotic voice. Curtis dedicated himself to his own continued education through action research and helped hundreds of others get their advanced degrees as well. We agreed: all education is self-education and happiness or misery are personal choices that no one can make but yourself. Together we created an amazing marriage because we had similar tastes and thrived by seeing new places. Our favorite home was in Atlanta where we enjoyed the vibe of spots like Moods Music record store, always listened to WCLK radio "the jazz of the city," and constantly sampled the best restaurants in town—of which there were many. Jumping the broom with him was one of the wisest choices I ever made. The Ancestors were merciful in putting us together: his cooking often was much better than mine. With his grandfather Palmer's swagger and his grandmother Venella's cornbread recipe, of course he won my heart. I remember cooking him green chile chicken stew, made with carrots, potatoes, garlic, celery, and Hatch green chile from New Mexico. Smelling the heat of the chile with the basil and thyme gave us a feeling of warmth and health. His buttery cornbread went perfectly with my savory soup.

Though I had no memory of the cumulative experiences of my earlier lives, by the time I reached my fifth life, my senses became heightened and I began to notice the sharpening of my perception and the drastic sensitivity I felt to other people's energy. My connectivity to other living beings became so piercing that I could only bear to spend time with those who were aware of the preciousness of life. I had no trouble dealing with conflict (which I viewed as inescapable)

and I learned to work effectively even in spaces where other people were in chaos, but it literally pained me to be in a room with people who intentionally remained ignorant. I especially had a hard time being around those who could not fathom or did not care about the suffering of others.

I grew up painfully aware of my own suffering, but I had no understanding of how my individual abuse fit into a larger national and international picture of manufactured powerlessness. Once I took Black studies and women's studies classes in college, I found a way to put words to my experiences. I shaped my instinctual self-defense into language. Most of the time when subjects like the prison industrial complex in the United States came up, I fumed at anyone simpleminded enough to deny systematic racism and became furious at the apathy of those who refused to admit the ongoing institutional and social biases against women and people of color, and especially against women of color. Not having anyone in my close family graduate from college, I was a late bloomer and did not begin college until the age of 25. When I started, I did not stop and made learning my lifelong profession. I noted certain phenomena that would have great impact on the future... like the fact that 21st-century humans said they were "post-racial" but there were no White people on the FBI's terrorist list and White people could still rape and lynch Black people with relative impunity.

Human apathy literally made me ache. But in my later adult life, I also became aware of my increasing ability to shape and impact my environment: I began to master self-control. I began to feel patterns of knowledge in my bones. I began to have a definitive sense of understanding as to which direction to go. Of course, I would continue to make wrongheaded choices that turned into bad results. But I began to connect to my higher sense of knowing—an Equator Woman's wisdom—that made later life easier to navigate, even if the conditions were just as troublesome. Most importantly, I began to shape my world view based directly on Black women's ideas and put

my own ideas in writing, with hopes of improving the world. I became a professor.

I published my first books—Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History (2007) and Black Passports: A Resource Guide to African American Travel Memoirs (2014)—to show it is easier to make good choices when you have role models. My role models were my five or six best girlfriends, including a health and fitness expert, activist scholars, higher education consultants, and several of my dedicated sorority sisters. I especially enjoyed the collective experience of joining a sorority. Women's retreats in organizations like African American sororities harkened back to the women's leadership circles in the oldest of African villages. From the outside, a sorority meeting looked like a nice tea party of old ladies and young socialites when actually, at its best, these women gathered to lay foundations for significant social paradigm shifts.

But my best mentors in this fifth life were books. I actively searched out historical figures who represented the values I cared about and constructed a persona based on the multitude of mentors about whom I read. While I have been impressed with historical accounts, I was always drawn to first person narratives of those who took the time to define the world in their own words. As before, I used books as tools for growth: my library offered a cosmos of guides to better living. This is where I first formally learned about Makeda and, though she did not write her own autobiography, the several accounts from varied national perspectives confirmed the depth of her influence. I felt her legacy guiding me.

The best thing about my higher-education experiences as a learner was the endless valuable lessons shared with my professors, mentors, colleagues, and students at the numerous universities, community agencies, schools, and professional organizations where I worked. There was no greater satisfaction than being able to read and write for a living in a way that improved people's lives. Though the nature of higher education would certainly change over time, formally gathering for the explicit purpose of learning and community building

remained immensely attractive to me. Because I had spent much of my youth in the darkness of sexual assault, cultural ambiguity, and historical ignorance, education initiatives that benefitted children and young adults were most rewarding.

For me, formal education was important, but public and community education was equally constructive. Consulting with a network of engaged people was beyond fulfilling. The many discussions in college classrooms, board rooms, churches, and schools which I hosted or attended reinforced the need for continued growth regardless of what degree one earned. My favorite classes, especially the service-learning and community reach courses, mirrored *Mbongi* gatherings where we came together for problem solving.

The internet made communication through time and distance more accessible. I gathered as many soup recipes online as I did in person and my respect for learning knew no bounds. For me, perfection was not the goal of education because perfection was not attainable; humans are inherently fallible. A luta continua. My lives simply taught me that through learning we could at least try to become better. There were many lessons I gathered toward this end.

What's in My Soup?:

Reflections on Living

Speak when you know you have a solution.

-The Teachings of Ptahhotep, ca. 2200 BCE

In each of my first five lives, I seemed to add an ingredient of understanding in my quest for wisdom. These lives gave me the tools and skills I needed for my last lifecycle: I combined curiosity, meditation, direction, rhythm, and self-control to help overcome challenges ahead.

Of course, what I remember most about my multiple lives is the food. The best recipes I tasted include M'Tori (Tanzania), butternut squash and roasted banana (South Africa), pasta fagioli (Italy), West African peanut soup (Nigeria, Gambia, Senegal), Chicken Tortilla (Mexico), and tom yum (Thailand). During hot days, I grew to appreciate cold soups, especially the refreshing cucumber (France), the famous gazpacho (Spain), and what would eventually become my favorite, chilled two-star soup (Planet Lucy). So many countries have similar recipes for black bean, tomato, or chicken soup, it is hard to say which is best; I can only say definitely that soup is a cornerstone of all cultures. I learned to love many flavors and styles as I moved from country to country and from one era to the next.

Despite all I witnessed, I feel like a neophyte and still struggle to learn more about recipes, history, and nuances of cultural concepts. Much is lost in my translation. There is so much abundant beauty to digest, that not even several lifetimes seems enough to comprehend the world. Sometimes, I cannot distinguish what I actually lived, what I have read in books, and what was just a dream. Surely, I have mixed up names, times, and places in my telling, but historians and archivists

can more easily straighten out the record for those who want to check. Because of my endless travels, I remember my lives only in vague vignettes, but my purpose has become increasingly clear: to affirm peace and serve as a mediator for justice.

My best mirrors, and what has given me a calm confidence, are the life stories of a growing mass of Equator Women who write their own stories. Though most life narratives were not published until the 20th century, they have provided an essential basis of understanding the history of civilizations. Other women's stories help me remember my homes. Some of the most remarkable include Wangari Maathai in Kenya; Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf in Liberia; Mamphela Ramphele in South Africa; Nawal el-Saadawi in Egypt; the thirty-four Aboriginal women of Murawina or Jackie and Rita Huggins in Australia; Bama and Mahadevi Varma in India; Edwidge Dandicat in Haiti; Barbara Makeda Blake Hannah in Jamaica; Assata Shakur, Mary Crow Dog, and Maya Angelou in the United States; and Mae Jemison in space. Without a doubt, these stories are truer and more accurate than my own. However, they reflect much of my experiences, so I also share their stories as I tell my tall tales.

On Atalanta and surrounding planets, race and gender oppression is often more subtle, because eventually discussions of heritage and identity were outlawed, so officially, there was no race problem because, for a time, race was no longer acknowledged. But racism persisted because we are, after all still Earthlings, and it crept up in interesting ways. For example, the very act of "creating" humans on KeplerPrime set off a huge debate about skin color, eye color, hair texture, nationality, and "desirable" features. This debate debunked the idea that science could ever be totally objective. Even as we celebrated control over production of our species, our grasp toward unity was dashed on the reality of politics of racial (and by extension national) lineage.

The information I gathered during my first five lives and the ability to better understand human history became as important as the details of dates and locations. Paying attention to the world from the

perspective of a Black woman gave me tools that others in power did not have access to or that they chose not to use in the same way as someone from the bottom of the social ladder. In the end, it was the experiences collected on my path that shaped my philosophy and gave me power to contribute to the defeat of the humanots. Wisdom is the best of all treasures; it is also the most effective weapon against ignorance and the problems that ignorance creates. The sum of my first lives equates to a deep comprehension of labor, leadership, violence, self-hatred, religion, and magic. Make no mistake, no matter what the official record says, Equator Woman philosophy and knowledge of these things saved the planet.

Grandmother wisdom became the cornerstone of my life philosophy. Nina Turner, a senator in 21st-century United States, learned a life plan from her grandmother, Inez Emerson, who told her, "You need three things to succeed: a wishbone, a jawbone, and a backbone." These three elements strike me as the rules for making a good pot of soup: exploring vastness of the world and diversity of ingredients, learning heritage and giving voice to lived realities, and seeking justice to ensure everyone can fill their bowl. In my first and second lives, I learned to appreciate culture and develop my sense of self; in my third and fourth lives, I strengthened my planning and goal setting abilities; and my final two lives taught me how to fight for my survival and how to speak up for what is right by writing life-affirming texts.

Women are powerful culture bearers. Inspirational women have always been a part of my life, either personally or by way of stories I was told. Most, like my grandmothers, were everyday women, unsung sheroes who kept families, communities, and worlds together. As the poet Sonia Sanchez wrote about the incomparable memoirist Maya Angelou, "[Women] show us / how to arrange our / worldly selves." Several people I have met in more recent lives remind me of earlier family members who influenced me. For example, the Afropean sisters Hélène and Célia Faussart from the music group Les Nubians, singers of the song "Makeda," remind me of my beloved aunties Tata Limeeti

and Tata Limone, because they described themselves as complimentary architects in the team of building music. Music can be a powerful connector and it is beautiful in all its forms. I think G'ma Seta would have loved country music from the U.S.A. because it has the same values of embracing heritage, love of family, communal thriving, and sharing really good stories.

Labor is also a potential point for connection for understanding life. Both free craftsman and enslaved laborers built early civilizations. The Pyramids in Egypt, Kush, and Mexico stand because rulers sometimes listened to priests and artisans, and because regular laborers were sometimes blessed to be a part of building something bigger than themselves. When work is done solely under the lash and women's work is undervalued, a society will fall short of glory. The status of society is found in the value of its women. This too can be seen in North America (virgin sacrifices! Really people? Whose idea was this? Certainly not a woman's!). Proposing a fate for another that you would not accept is the first step on the path to social discord. Father Abāt showed me that when diplomacy, equitable trade, and invested citizenry are allowed to prosper, a society will flourish. Good soup takes the right spice. In 1785 CE, William Cowper wrote, "Variety is the spice of life." I say variety of quality spice is predicated on fair trade. My father's business grew continually because he put his reputation of ethics above short-term profit. People on several continents tasted the best food fusions on Earth (literally) because of his credo. Solomon's kingdom was also a rare glimpse of collective human prosperity, at least relative to future generations.

Politics, as does culture, begins at home. Community councils, local meetings, and family tribunals are just as important as large summits with international visibility. I have constantly been impressed by the organizing ability of masses of people working together, but sustainable change usually always begins in small groups and, often, revolutions are planned in a kitchen before ever being discussed in public venues. My mothers, other mothers, aunties, cousins, and sisters have taught me in many settings such as the red lentil soup

meeting, women's issues are a calorimeter for all social issues. G'ma Seta's measurements of ingredients, though flexible, were never random. Her soup recipes always felt like experiments, and her cooking was designed not only to feed people's stomachs, but also to bring people together to feed their hearts in order to guide the minds and feet on the right path.

Some women leaders have been in the home or the streets, but some, like Makeda, were more visible and moved successfully in masculine spaces of leadership. This became very important at the dawn of the New Galactic Era (NGE). Women leaders like Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf the first woman president of an African country (Liberia) and heads of councils in organizations such as the United Nations' Valerie Amos (Guyana), Radhika Coomaraswamy (Sri Lanka), Navanehtem Pillay (South Africa), Susana Malcorra (Argentina), Asha-Rose Migiro (Tanzania), Rachel Mayanja (Uganda), and Susan Rice (United States), paved the way for later women heads of nations. Like Makeda, their leadership was often seen as flawed or contentious, but they went to work in those spaces nonetheless and made public, political arenas better for their presence.

Women's governance is not a panacea for social ills, but our lives are enlightening and show why fights for justice are needed. Capture of women as spoils of war was common in ancient times, and the purchase of women and trafficking across borders continued well into the 2100s. Despite strict laws penned by several Tri-Planet councils, there are still those who insist on trying to own women one way or another. However, never again have women been captured by the tens of millions to *breed* wealth for another nation, as was the case in the Maafa, the 400-year trans-Atlantic enslavement of African women. Everywhere, I have found law or religion used as rationale to sequester indigenous peoples and create lower castes in order to steal land resources and to treat women as property and as physical bearers (producers) of property.

Only suckers romanticize history by oversimplifying complexities of war or glorify ancient empires by sweeping pre-colonial slavery,

servitude, or sadistic 19th and 20th-century hyper-masculine African militarism under the rug. We must not become, as poet Jason Carney writes in Southern Heritage, "practiced at turning our heads" from the ugly reality of atrocities we all embody as humans. Most of all, we cannot ignore the time-tested atrocity of rape. In every life—yes, every life—I have been a victim of rape, beating, torture, enslavement, or violence. For this reason, the fight against manipulation of women's and children's bodies is necessarily at the center of my narratives.

My writing is, at base, a protest. The actions of humans anger me, but I do not get overwhelmed by sorrow. I am blessed for having known honorable men of powerful character like my father Abāt and women of strength like my mother Faa Faa. I bang my drum and chant the prayers of Tarik for my African brothers in prisons, thinly disguised forced-labor camps, for-profit war fields, or the dangerous streets in every type of neighborhood from ghettos to gated communities. Instead of reading the egomaniacal drivel of Machiavelli, glorifying the murderously militaristic *Art of War*, or dabbling in the childishness of anarchy, male public servants and community members alike would do well read Ptahhotep and other primers of ethics that predate Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle. Gangsters are glorified and war is celebrated. Commonly, rape of women is presented in media, essentially conditioning men to experience voyeuristic pleasure through female dismemberment. Savages indeed.

Being hyper-sensitive, I internalized the struggles from every place I have visited: confinement, displacement, servitude, enslavement, forced labor, lack of marriage freedom, owned as property by a man or court, lack of control over decisions about children, segregation, poverty, prosecution, denial of education, religious fanaticism, skin color prejudice, political persecution and pervasive disenfranchisement. Everywhere, the male addiction to violence and the European hallucinations of supremacy spread like a virus. All across the world, I witnessed Equator Women go through hell. And still we fight.

Unfortunately, I also have experienced the acidic fire that we turn on ourselves. Some elder African women have tried to stomp the light out of the next generation, just because they had it rough. Some young African women have disregarded the sacrifices the elders made, and abandoned the collective struggle for their own personal gain. Mothers sell daughters, female guardians abuse children, and women leaders gain personal comfort by perpetrating inequalities through the domination and exploitation of other women. Some sisters have made us a spectacle by defaming our womanhood or have fashioned a lucrative career out of degrading themselves, leading young girls dancing down a path to self-degradation. My most disheartening times have been when I've seen us kill ourselves.

To be clear, I have been a Black women several lives over, but that has never meant only one thing. Black womanhood is a kaleidoscope of being, and I have found no singular ideal by which other Black women should be measured. Some of my hardest battles were against those who tried to define my identity for me, telling me what I should or should not be, believe, or do. I have no interest in defining others, I just insist on defining myself and the world as I see it. Self-hatred is the inability of one to claim the right of self-definition. But if you can truly define yourself, control of others becomes unnecessary. Simply, I am my own Black woman and appreciate most the sisters who have created, embraced, and projected their own image.

Willful ignorance and oppression based on difference are among our greatest human sins. Nowhere is this as damaging as the idea of race purity. For children of the Equator, purity (or at least authenticity) engenders pride, but the un-extraordinary truth of history is miscegenation. Evolution and adaptation are inevitable and the ageless adage "change or die" warrants a second look that social engineers ignore at their own peril. But, in old days and now, folks cling to purity as claim to fame and entitlement. This is where I say, "Hold up!" (I hear my crew respond, Wait a minute!). My skin has been as light as a Babile elephant's tusks, dark as dried lava from the Erta

Ale volcano, and every shade in between... but I was always African. The funny thing is African people come from thousands of tribes and all world clans came from every place on the continent, so there is no purity that any one group can claim.

Take a fool's advice: I have seen enough places under the sun to know better than to believe only one type of people holds the answers to life's questions. History is much more complicated than even I remember it. God gave the code to Hammurabi, to Vyasa, to Moses, to Solomon, to Jesus, to Muhammad, to Buddha, and to many others throughout time. It enrages me that women prophets have been ignored because they have sense to name God's Mother side, too. Many ancient people understood the nature of balance: Shakti the goddess of nature and feminine creativity, mothered the ebbs and flows of creation and balanced out Shiva's destruction. The goddess Ishtar intertwined the two headed beast of love and war. Queen Ma'at was justice personified. To insist God sent one messenger in one time to one people or to assume we understand the science of God is to severely underestimate God. It is insulting.

In my estimation, God and science are one and much bigger than humans can fathom, much less control. The best we can do is respect, investigate, wonder, and intuit in order to explore the parameters of goodness. Some have gotten the gist, some not so much. Nuance is lost on those who fail to distinguish between letter and spirit of the law or who, worse yet, cannot see the harmony between the two. Some folks cannot get over the fact that identity, law, science, politics, and religion are relatives, so they trap their minds in stagnant conservative extremism or invent stupid things like "holy war"— which is actually an oxymoron. The people who ignore codes of nature produce the worst of human magic; unfortunately, abominations that humans create are often contagious. Vampires and zombies are prime examples.

Vampires and zombies are those who have been judged by Osiris and banished to the realm of the dead by the fire lake. Yet, they refuse to accept their fate. They try to cheat in death as they cheated in life.

They bribe a steward of the court, escape the Afterlife, make their way back to the living realm, and continue to wreak havoc. Ammit, the hungry beast, has eaten their heart, which is why they need the blood of the living to survive: they have no beating heart of their own. Vampires can't follow their heart, they don't have one. They feed off of the living and make baby vampires to perpetuate their madness. For zombies, possession and manipulation by the spells of others stems from their unwillingness or inability to be strong enough to exercise their own brains. The undead and the brain dead are contagious: they spread the disease of heartless ignorance. I reject theses monsters and have fought them wherever we have met. Fortunately, my own condition of relative immortality has made me immune to their powers, but because of their heartlessness, they also seem immune to mine. Hopefully this revelation will put to rest the lies told by those who have interpreted my story of multiple lives as evil sorcery. I am neither a vampire nor a zombie; to further that rumor is slander. But, then again, women who exercise the full extent of their natural magic have always had difficulty clearing their name.

Lessons from my lives have created a distinctly robust menu which I seek to share with others. Yes, my cooking is conjure, but my soup is not bitter... it is simply too spicy for some taste buds to handle.

What is in my soup? Experience. To those who hunger for truth, my soup can nourish. I write my life into existence in order to feed children—travelers of future generations. But if we are not careful, there will not be future generations.

Future Soup: My Last Life

[Perfect the art of] self-control, [it] will be the match for evil utterances.

~The Teachings of Ptahhotep, ca. 2200 BCE

In this, my sixth and last life, I am known by my GAIN code name: Axis. GAIN (Global Activists Information Network) is a team of activists who participate in an ongoing effort to bring humans back from the brink of self-extermination. While we operate on all three inhabited planets, Earth is our main focus because that is the location of the motherland database of our heritage as a species. The 700 years between my birth in 1969 BCE and 2669 BCE mirrored the rapid change in the last shift of empires: humans inhabited two additional planets, KeplerPrime and Planet Lucy. Given the existence of over 2,000 planet candidates originally identified as possible locations for human habitation, there were several other attempts colonization, but these have been the only two successful bases. For better and for worse, natural magic and human evolution have advanced in the New Galactic Era (NGE), often becoming more intensely destructive. As a result, I have fully embraced the need to openly challenge oppression by employing all of my inherent gifts as an Equator woman. In this life, I developed both a strong backbone and a thick skin, and I have finally learned that control of self has greater impact on circumstances than seeking to control anything else that surrounds you.

I was born Alexis Eve Heart in the district of Atalanta, planet KeplerPrime, Lyra constellation. I have spent some time on Planet Lucy, but most of my time has been on Earth were most humans still choose to live, despite the meager conditions compared to the other two healthier planetary environments. When I was born in 2669 CE, I had an awareness of all of my previous five lives; the full meaning of my past lives really came into focus during my studies in primary school. Growing up for what I knew to be the last time, all of the questions I faced during my previous travels were laid out in front of my Black girl eyes with a sense of finality. Education and literacy were still keys to my success, but the usefulness of G'ma Seta's basic tools (adventure, soup, and self-defense) were more helpful than ever. I still made terrible mistakes in life, but my best choices this time around were much clearer.

My parents' families were from Earth and we were first-generation Lyra immigrants, so online communication was essential to connect with remote relatives in distant places. My mother's family was from Pendernales, one of the quad-capitals of U.C.S (the Unified Caribbean States). My father's family was from Angola, Brazil. My parents met while in college at the University of California on the home planet. My mother was an archeologist and my father an artist, poet, orator, and drummer. He specialized in haiku. Both of my parents were master storytellers, in different ways. They married and had me while my mother was in graduate studies in Georgia, so my national identity is based the United States, even though I traveled widely and as an adult hold citizenship in three countries, diplomatic immunity in ten countries, and have travel visas to all three planets. I was raised between worlds, sometimes in Atalanta on KeplerPrime, sometimes in Atlanta on Earth.

My path in this life has included work as an analyst with the U.S. CIA (Central Intelligence Agency of the United States) during my 20s, and as an appointed United Nations GalaState mediator in my 30s. The United Nations developed GalaState as the multi-planetary governing parliament, so my travel and trade background proved essential. In this life, I became an avenger for two years, battled humanots as a GAIN agent, and, ultimately, worked as a teacher and writing coach to encourage others to pen their own heritage stories. Each of these steps contributed to reversing the pattern of human self-destruction in my final lifetime.

The Earth nations have evolved, and I have had to adapt, like all sentient beings. Some have labeled me a "race monger" because I retain my sense of source. At one time a race monger designation was a GalaState federal offense, with a sentence of imprisonment and censure, but that was eventually reversed. If I am guilty of anything, it is that I have insisted on asserting my humanity as a Black woman, even when those around me tried to dehumanize me or characterize me as a monster. I have been vilified, so I now must write to correct the record. The funny thing about my predicament is this: I am a private person. I learned the hard way, you don't have to tell everybody everything all the damn time. And as the very old adage goes, when you argue with a child, you look childish, and when you argue with a fool, you look foolish. So I just let folks talk their talk without saying more than necessary. But for the good of those still in battle to claim their own voices, now is the time to finish my story.

In my last life, I was home schooled for my primary years and attended an Intergalactic Baccalaureate home-school collective for middle and high school. My parents, Lourdes and Jose, insisted that I learn all aspects of my human heritage, especially since the move to erase certain parts of history was so pervasive in all lower school systems, public or private. Heritage erasure started in 2010 CE, when U.S. HB2281 became a test case for criminalizing all talk of race. Race information legislation was not *singularly* about racial supremacy, more broadly, it was about thought control. In the early 21st century, school board officials removed books about Mexican heritage or "subversive" books such as Brazilian scholar Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* from classrooms and fined schools who included forbidden books in the curriculum.

Massive generation of pseudo-science for school textbooks infected several nations and the battle to reclassify information went on for decades, in science education but particularly in social studies and subjects like world history. This occurred when Black and Native people increasingly were derided as immigrants or interlopers in lands built on their blood, when the Hispanic/Latino population began to

outpace other races in the United States, and European populations began to reflect a minority White population. Instead of appreciating all heritages and acknowledging the history of colonial-driven genocidal conflicts, many people who sought to conserve economic foundations of social inequalities (hence the name "conservatives") were in a frenzy to reclaim Manifest Destiny (meaning White dominance). Then a rash of public school closings began first in Chicago, then in Philadelphia, and the battle to limit access to formal education ensued which aided in the limitation of access to histories of certain populations.

Book banning was an old concept enacted by many governments since the move from "bc" (before Christ era) to "ad" Anno Domini Nostri Iesu Christi (sometimes labeled after death) in the 1st century. Necessarily, some national interests had to be subverted in order to establish an international calendar, but much information from various cultures was purposefully destroyed to establish Latin (and essentially European) dominance over the definition of how to measure everything, including time. That in itself is not surprising: as far back as the Ark of the Covenant, control of published information has always been political. As further example, even the word Egypt is a Greek reference to a country that was, on the continent of Africa, known as Kemet. Language, especially the naming of time and place, are core areas of battle in the fight to define heritage.

The New Galactic Era (NGE) began in 2492 CE with the first colony on planet Kepler, and colonization of Lucy soon followed. At the same time, intergovernmental regulation of electronic book publishing was instituted because of the never ending struggle between the wealthy few and the impoverished masses. Information was permanently impacting the ability to maintain "order"; so, writing the story of planetary expansion became an opportune time for some to again re-write human history and justify enduring inequalities.

Many books did not have to be banned, because so much control had been given to privatized education by closing public schools. "Unpatriotic," "separatist," or "dangerous" books were simply

excluded from the National Association of Certified Charter School (NACCS) curricula by their governing board. Public school boards tried to "make suggestions" to the NACCS reading lists... but to no avail. After a while, GalaState totally lost its ability to influence education policy; they would create a curriculum that NACCS "should" adhere to, but it was like when Abraham Lincoln "freed" enslaved Africans—he did it by making a decree only in the areas over which he had no actual control.

Information control became a struggle to see who could generate knowledge. "Safety" was a buzzword that rationalized the consolidation of resources into the hands of the ever-increasing few and the COINTELPRO (counter intelligence program) of the 1960s took on a whole new meaning, as the powerful became more obsessed with preventing international and galactic alliances based on culture or labor. Safety was the basis of the New Pilgrim political party's move to repeal the Freedom of Information Act of July 4, 1966, on its anniversary in 2666, just as challenges also were planned against the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. These benchmark changes took place just a few years before I was born this final time.

Countless books have been put on the "errant literature" list and forbidden in schools. Gender, sexuality, and the White Consciousness Movement (mostly Canadian, Spanish, and Irish radicals who understood that embracing the beauty and glory of European heritage did not necessitate Nazi claims of supremacy) also fell to censure. Anything other than the Eurocentric Human Unity curriculum was banned in the remaining public schools. Though some advances were made, the "expectation of normality" clause allowed legal grounds for marginalizing others. There was little appreciation for the fact that difference could be grounds for deepened understanding: it became obvious that the more often White people explored their own complicated lineage, the less likely they were to use their delusions of white supremacy as a weapon with which to bludgeon communities of color.

Difference from the imagined norm was seen as grounds for exclusion. But a perusal of the large collection of ancient texts in any global library showed that difference IS the norm. That is why denial or hatred of LGBT people never made sense to me. They have always existed: Uncle Jimma from my first life was gay—a defiant spirit—and everybody respected him so much they just let him be, if for no other reason than fear of G'ma Seta's fury if they disparaged him in any way. In many circles, unique identity characteristics were not about guilt or shame, but about celebration and exchange.

But the movement to quash information about heritage or to deny rights to freely express oneself was too late. Once Wikipedia came online, the information train had already left the station and we were never going back to invisibility. Along with marginalized populations around the globe, digitization and the internet made Black history—American, Caribbean, Central and South American, Aboriginal, Afropeaon, African and beyond—increasingly available. The arc of history continued to bend forward, and people used the internet to organize intraracial, interracial, and international justice coalitions worldwide. These occurrences happened just as TES was being tested by the United Nations, and there has been a battle to control the flow of information ever since.

Timeflex Exchange Screening (TES) was an effort to monitor worldwide and galactic communications, in order to control the flow of information between individuals. Particularly after the Facebook and Twitter impact on activist organizing, international governments began guarded collaboration to monitor and control online communication through documents such as cell phone records. In 2681, a young techie (a 12-year-old girl) discovered the ability to transfer information through time via computers. While time travel of the human body hasn't yet happened as it was imagined in science fiction of the 20th century, information travel happened easily and unexpectedly. It was as simple as placing a file from 2681 in a folder to 2680. Thus "Operation Desktop" began and TES was born, sparking an

intensified struggle to create, disseminate, delete, control, capture, authenticate, and fact-check information exchange.

I was that 12-year-old girl. When I discovered Timeflex, we were in the Dominican Republic visiting my mother's mother, Mama Batista, and Mama's sister, Nana Perdomo. My great-aunt Nana Perdomo (we called her Dr. Nana) was very well educated (PhD in Educational Administration) and the kindest educated person I've ever met. She is the one who taught me that you can be sexy and smart at the same time. She was, as we kids used to say, always lookin' on FYAH!—she never lost her zest for life and always maintained her cultural flare, even as she climbed the professional ladder. My grandmother, Mama Batista, dropped out of middle school but was the real genius of the family: she was our "Nana Techie" and taught me more codes than I would ever learn anywhere else, even college. Her husband, my grandfather Nivek, was an auto mechanic, and taught me a love for machines and passion for figuring out the inner workings of machine technology. Nana taught me software and Papi taught me hardware. Most techies are limited because they only learn one or the other.

I was playing around on December 25, 2681, and wanted to crack Mama Batista's computer security to plant a birthday card. It took an entire three hours to create code to gain access to her unit (I created her initial security code, but, of course, she reset the password I gave her and created her own encryption code, so the workaround took forever). After finally getting in, when I saved the document to her file, I accidently entered the wrong year and it appeared a year earlier on her desktop. That explained the unexpected thank-you call in 2680 for the e-card... after I had already mailed her the hand-painted card I'd made that year. A year later, when I planted the card on her desktop... it occurred to me what I had actually done. From there, it was a just matter of duplicating the codes I used to hack into her space—and I had created my own skeleton key to the past. When my mother got the advertisement for a college scholarship for the most skillfully designed code, I entered and won. I won not only a college scholarship, but entry to the GalaState's CIA-sponsored spy youth

camp. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency invested in young agents and tried to encourage allegiance by funding college education, which had grown too costly for almost anyone but the wealthiest to obtain.

My mother insisted that I attend college as a public school student because, despite her commitment to home schooling, she valued collective education. So in the fall semester of 2685, at age 16, I was accepted into Atlanta Interdisciplinary University (AIU), a branch of the University System of Georgia created specifically to advance the interdisciplinary study of science, politics, philosophy, and art. We were called the SPPArt school. I chose AIU because they housed the CIA-sponsored Practical Research Institute (PRI). When I showed up to PRI with my hair locked and vintage Hands Off Assata! T-shirt, I was almost sent home for being too "ethnic." Then, almost immediately, I had an altercation: I maimed a young man who tried to attack me after he volunteered to walk me home after a party. We had only been on campus for a few weeks! He figured I was fresh meat. He was wrong. I made some people very uncomfortable because they saw me practicing my capoeira in the middle of campus on the grassy quadrangle every day after that incident. My father was a mestre and I loved the fierce rhythms of capoeira and the feel of my strong legs jumping and throwing hard, fast, swinging kicks. Suffice it to say when I started college at AIU, I didn't really fit in.

Dr. Yecarb, my undergraduate advisor, convinced the administrators that it was more advantageous to have "the very young, romantically African, and psychologically rebellious Ms. Heart" inside the PRI program than outside of it. Under that rationale, and because they had not figured out the dimensions of my Timeflex code, my attitude was tolerated. In my third year of college, I almost dropped out because I was fed up with the horrible practices of the CIA. They still had not found an ethical way to spy! Professor Y told me a story comparing the antislavery tactics of activists Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, and Frederick Douglass. When he finished, he asked me, "What do you think is the point of this story?" It was clear: abolitionists understood there are many parts to play in a freedom

revolution. I stayed in school. To the surprise of the program administrators, I graduated with honors from SPPArt and began my work with the CIA as I started my graduate coursework. Regardless of what the institutional agenda was, I tried to make my work in the CIA a barrier to any practices that oppressed people.

After college, I earned my Master of Arts degree in African American Studies from Clark Atlanta University. I recalled having a personal connection with the program in the past and I revered the legacy of Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois, the scholar-activist who had taught there for 23 years in the early 20th century. My thesis was on the role of international travel in *Soliloquy*, Du Bois's last autobiography before he died and was buried in Ghana in 1963. Then, I entered Howard University in Washington, DC, with the intent to earn both a JD (doctor of law) and PhD (doctor of philosophy). After college, I joined the CIA as a strategist, and work became so intense that, though I finished my courses for the JD and PhD, I did not submit my dissertation until much later.

With all of my passion for work, it took me a while to find my balance. I started formally with the CIA in my 20s and worked there until I was appointed a negotiator for GalaState ten years later. GalaState, as a multi-planetary governing body, needed much assistance in looking out for public interest because they were always subject to overt or covert aggressions. The main threat to GalaState's success was Secure Elite. Secure Elite, a private company that had its own paramilitary force, developed as an umbrella organization to advance interests of the wealthiest people on Earth. Because they were mainly sheltered from public scrutiny, they thought they were untouchable; through my work, I touched them every chance I got.

There was so much in society that needed fixing; humans had created plenty of problems in both public government and private business that needed attention. For example, U.S. courts had ruled that companies such as Nastomo could kill insects or plants, control reproduction, and control other producer's capability to reproduce seeds for food. The ability to control resources (information,

education, communication, food, water, energy, spices, and minerals) has always been at the base of strong societies. Smart leaders such as Makeda and Solomon discovered the value of trade and the imperative for strong national infrastructure, but some leaders still ruled by war. Military advances, along with continued abuses of forced sterility begun in parts of Australia, China, and Africa threw society out of whack by the 22nd century.

Labor, food, and law were a manic yo-yo, and problems were hidden by misinformation and a barrage of "entertainment" designed to keep people from noticing consolidations of power. Private industry-controlled laws undermined democracy and worked as a template for the development of the ICIG (Information Correction and Intervention Group) established by Secure Elite. That was before we were aware of bigger threats that required collaboration of the species. Human ignorance is one of the most preventable poverties, but some refused to listen.

As a UN GalaState negotiator, I brought many people to justice in both private and government sectors. I was known as an agent well studied in information management. I facilitated the hearing of leaders from all walks of life as they were charged in global courts of ethics, but I was neither judge nor jury. I was simply an equalizer. Through mediation, I brought closure to policy debates based on the Golden Rule (do unto others) and utilized a four-step model of slavery abolition as the basis of my arguments: information, education, legislation, and enforcement. The first two steps without the last two could not establish peace, and the last two without the first two would not sustain it.

I was effective in my consultation because my style was different from traditional business or legal models. I meditated alone before long meetings, occasionally went on walkabout when the job got too intense, and I had a home office with a skylight so that when I was feeling lost, I could gaze at the three stars of Orion's belt long into the night to make sure I remembered my home. In a model different from what many mediators used, I staged high-stakes cases as retreats,

often held at my house on Planet Lucy. But these meetings were not catered... everyone was expected to cook, especially the main players involved in the negotiations. So, just as back in Shewa, potluck dinners in my home were a central part of effective problem-solving tactics.

Cooking together and tasting others' food can foster trust. I shared my perspective and asked questions to facilitate agreements, particularly around intellectual property and labor rights. In a particularly tense case, the Blake deal, one party refused to relinquish a fairly minor point, which threatened to trash the whole weeklong negotiation process. Mr. Blake (co-president of a huge pan-Asian corporation) was charged with improving labor conditions and environmental practices in his company's agricultural plants. The problem was that improvements would make use of patented technologies which would financially benefit his rival company. His shareholders would be furious if he signed the deal, but if he did not, the multi-national industry sites would continue to produce death by wasting water and polluting what water they didn't use. Politicians were catching a lot of heat from demonstrators, so they were finally demanding regulation of the company. Blake was frustrated and under a lot of pressure; he was notorious for being a hard case and not budging, but in this session he actually seemed to want to be flexible, because one of the farms was by his grandfather's home town. When he was just about to give up and walk out on the deal, I stepped up to him, looked in his eyes and said in my best Abāt Tana impersonation, "What is your final decision? Choose wisely." He almost faltered at my straightforward approach, but I put my hand on his chest, and said in a steady, encouraging G'ma Seta voice, "Follow your heart."

He looked in the eyes, sat down, and signed the agreement. Without a word, he moved to the kitchen, signaling the end of negotiations, and he began to cook the most impressive spread of curry goat, ackee and salt fish, jerk chicken, rice and peas, beef patty, and coco bread we ever tasted. I made curry shrimp and mango soup, which he said was OK (high praise from a Jamaican), and everyone ate well. Blake's father was South African and his mother form St. Anne's

Bay, Jamaica; he was raised in Johannesburg and worked his way up through the company by learning Chinese. The company figured out early that it could be more prosperous by hiring "native" department heads, but some of those heads were little more than overseers. Blake was often a hatchet man for the company, but I could tell in prior mediation sessions that several bad decisions on behalf of his company had taken its toll on him. His wife, Isabel Blake was of Cape Verde descent, so she seemed pleased to attend a major mediation session at someone's home instead of corporate headquarters and she expressed genuine approval of her husband's decision. We all drank grogue, laughed, and partied until dawn. Despite the popular portrayal, experienced activists are not always angry; we have to laugh in order to not burn out. I dusted off some Samba moves that I hadn't pulled out in a long time and we danced until both suns rose on Lucy in a magnificent double dawn.

Unlike the stress that accompanied his rise to the top of the Chinese-based company, Blake became more confident and happily productive long after that deal. He brought his cultural consciousness to the table and diversified the outcome. As a result, our families became close friends, and the company prospered, benefitting more from his collaborative negotiations in the latter part of his career than from his cut-throat deals early on. Abāt would have been so pleased that I was able to close the deal.

That was the time I saved planet Earth. The Blake contract agreement set a precedent for profitable trade built on ethical labor practices between planet colonies (based on seven principles I learned in an AIU "Business Ethics" class). Without that deal, Earth would have died a trash heap. This negotiation became a model for operation that allowed us to sustain Earth's resources, but still turn a financial profit, the only change was that the individual shareholder's cut was not as large as before. It also revised plans for habitation of other planets. Increasingly, sustainability became a model for preventing problems rather than just for correcting them. Without that deal, we would have blown through the remaining water supply on Earth and the planet

would have died. True, we had long since found alternate planetary sources for habitation, but I did, technically, save the planet. Feeling inspired, I began my work in earnest after that negotiation. But not all of my major mediation sessions went so well.

A few years after my success with Blake, I had another tough deal to make. Exasperated by my inability to get a viable solution from Mrs. Traeh Nir, the president and ruthless mogul of an Australian mining company, I tried the same tactic. I walked up to her, put my hand on her heart, looked her in the eye, and said to her, "Follow your heart." To everyone's shock, especially mine, she tried to slap the hell out of me! I caught her hand but didn't hit her back, since I actually did touch her first. (Rules of engagement: if you put your hands on someone, don't act surprised if they hit you back; not everyone has yet subscribed to nonviolence). I gripped her hand. She did not struggle, but neither did she let go. People were shocked to see two women leaders nearly come to blows. I looked into her eyes. I saw not only her calloused soul, but also glimpsed an ugly reflection of myself: my arrogance had led me to haste and I blew the deal. I felt the hardness of her heart and her hatred for me rose like steam from her body. She was so hard, I felt wounded. She left the room, she cooked, and we ate, but we had no deal. Her lemongrass soup was as sour as her face. She probably would have turned down the deal anyway, but my prideful actions gave her the excuse she needed to say it was for some other reason than her own greed. We ate dinner in virtual silence and everyone retired to their sleep champers before 10 pm.

In the evening, after everyone had gone to bed, Mrs. Nir died in her sleep. Her heart stopped. Surely, Ammit ate well that night, bitter hearts are his favorite. I knew what had happened to Nir, because I saw her in my dreams that night. I was still very much connected to the Great Hall and I found with Nir that when I touched the heart of people, I channeled Anibus, essentially rendering the judgment of Ma'at and the scale of justice for the living. The scale of justice that favored Blake because of his change of heart was the same scale of justice that rendered a certain death for Nir. Rumors spread that I had

done something to her heart or poisoned her. That was my last deal. My GaleState career as a negotiator was over far too soon.

After working as Agent Heart for the CIA and as a highly sought after mediator for GalaState, I was involuntarily "retired" in 2714 at 45 years old. Because of the conditions of my termination, I was pretty much unemployable, so I went to work independently. I became Axis the Avenger. Given my newfound understanding of my ability to touch hearts, when the need arose, and duty required, I intervened on behalf of those most exploited. Where there was oppression, I interceded by approaching those in power to weigh and measure their deeds. Sometimes, their heart reflected lightness—they decided to change in order to help others. They lived. Sometimes when I approached them, they reflected a stubborn heaviness—a will to continue with destructive behaviors. They died. Now, let me clarify these situations: I have never, to my recollection, actually murdered anyone. I have simply told stories, asked questions, touched hearts, and let Ma'at decide the heaviness or lightness of a person's destiny. And, unfortunately, as an avenger, I found many heavy hearts.

Travel to other planets rekindled the greed of empire, and we repeated cycles of militaristic domination that had gotten us into our dismal situation on Earth in the first place. Folks generally were a bit uneasy around me, probably because I did not stop telling people to follow their heart. The egotism of those in power led some to believe they were above any law. In some cases, when I confronted CEOs or heads of corrupt companies about their options for change, those who were unrepentant power criminals simply fell fatally ill after our discussion. That's not really my fault, now is it?

As an avenger, I donned a signature pink and green outfit and a sun/moon symbol broach, I walked so lightly I appeared to levitate, and I was not hesitant to display my shrewd fighting skills when necessary. Looking back, I had the aura of a comic book character, but I did not wear a mask: I feared no evil. Out of vanity, I did not shun the tendency of witnesses or reporters to exaggerate the impact of my work, but it still was not the witchcraft of which I have been accused. I

sought justice, but did not hunt hearts. Wherever I happened to find myself, or where I was invited, I intervened.

Interventions ranged from preventing mass systematic catastrophes, such as the one averted by negotiating for ethical agricultural labor practices, to small-scale involvement, assisting individuals at the crossroads of major personal decisions to consider options that would have the least negative impact on others. However, I refrained from measuring political officials. I figured that political will belongs to the people, whether by ballots for structural change or by protests in the streets. Political destiny was always in the hands of citizens; they were the ones who were most fit to judge a congress, parliament, senator, governor, mayor, councilmember, or Supreme Court justice. The people would always be the most effective appraiser of a politician. And after their political careers, every public servant would have to face the scales in the Great Hall.

I had a growing reputation as a mysterious person who intervened in world affairs on behalf of others, but work as a lone avenger seemed unsatisfying and too dramatic for my liking. The need to affect social change on a large scale required more than just one-on-one or episodic intervention; given the mounting problems we were facing, masses of humans needed to move on a different course through collective action. We needed viable models to *create* lasting polities, not just to *destroy* tyrannies by weighing individual hearts. Besides, humanots were immune to my powers, so I had to become more creative. After two years of being an avenger, I gave up my suit, and I learned to touch hearts and minds of people through mass negotiation: I learned how to organize for change. GAIN was my training ground.

The Global Activist Information Network was founded in 2120, long before my last birth. Fittingly, the organization started over a pot of gumbo. Gumbo is one of the hardest soups to make. The secret lies in not burning the roux. Like Creole as a language, gumbo is a mishmash of food and spices from all over. Some gumbo has seafood such as shrimp, crawfish and crab, yet another version will have meat like

Andouille sausage, chicken, or turkey. Most recipes have a combination. There is not one way to make gumbo, and the original GAIN founders accepted that there is not one way to organize for change: you simply need to work with the ingredients available in your neighborhood. The GAIN founders did just that and created a recipe to bring people together to solve local, national, global, and interplanetary problems. Most of the sixteen founders, nine of whom were women, met at a food rights rally in Louisiana, then met the next year in New York City, then Belize and later solidified planning in Dominica. Most of their first meetings were social on the surface, getting together for dinner as a way to decompress from their activist work, but decades later, the first official meeting was held in Antarctica, and the organizing agenda was set. Soup was on the menu because it was a cold season on Earth, which was increasingly rare. The first president, Mrs. Elyl brought gumbo to the first official meeting, so soup became a symbol for the collective.

Despite efforts to monitor and "manage" personal information devices (phones, laptops, tablets), and body screens (developed in the 2400s) allowed shared information between the poorest populations. Use of technology for interpersonal communication made maintaining conditions of exploitation without some sort of revolt nearly impossible. Information passed through social networks also made it more difficult, but not impossible, to assassinate activist leaders in the tradition of Patrice Lamumba in the Congo, Steve Biko in South Africa, Medgar Evers in the United States, Walter Rodney in Guyana, and Mavon Tarmin of Keplar's city of Orange. Because of Secure Elite trolls, GAIN largely kept off the grid for planning, but still strategically used it to organize.

For every tool developed by multi-national agencies such as Secure Elite to monitor communication or limit personal freedom, GAIN activists created another way to turn that tool into a weapon against oppression. The most important development was the alliance between some grassroots factions of China, Brazil, and several African countries through the GAIN movement... especially since the

manufacturing and raw materials came primarily from these three places. The founding meetings were a mesh of the 1955 Afro-Asiatic Bandung conference, the International Women's Movement conferences, Bernice Johnson Reagon's treatise of Coalition Politics, Professor Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Globalectics (a model for effective transnational oral communication), and Minister Sojotru's manifesto The Basics of Golden Rule Living—Living Without the Gold.

Body screens also helped transmit information to our connections in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia, Israel, and Palestine where key labor struggles also took place. It is important to note that Israel and Palestine finally did negotiate a lasting peace treaty, but only after they put two women in charge of key aspects of the negotiations. Several governments tried to stop multinational activism, but their isolationist efforts to eliminate peace organizing and keeping the world at bay was about as effective as the Great Wall of China in 11th-century BCE. It just didn't work. People grow and change happens.

I became aware of GAIN initially with the CIA's encouragement, and attended my first Soup Bowl program in my mid-20s. We were a group of agents assigned to monitor information of international coalitions, but the plan backfired, because those of us charged with covertly communicating with the activists ended up inadvertently making them more aware of each other's work and they organized much more effectively after our participation than before. We also saw from the inside the positive intent of the group, so we didn't always report back details as thoroughly as we could have....

GAIN specialized in communication and organizing; when I joined the organization in my late 40s, I added my research and negotiation skills to a collective of extremely talented and insightful people. We knew the Euro-colonial model of suppression and domination did not work, so we emphasized a cultural-based democratic model that depended on inclusion of everyone; we brought all parties—literally—to the table. We found that the true test of democracy happens when you sit at the table with someone who you do not like, don't understand, or fundamentally disagree with. When you can work a

deal without always being the leader, those are the times when democracy can work best. GAIN organizers recognized that, in order to move the group forward, sometimes you have to lose and sometimes you have to be wrong. People cannot always get what they want, and the same people cannot always be in the lead... too many chefs spoil the pot.

As agents in GAIN, we were not nearly as effective as we should have been, but we did our best to coordinate communities, and we garnered much support from a wide variety of people, even in distant corners of Tri-Planets. We struggled to be fair and to stick to our principles of organizing without compromising ethics. We were not martyrs, so of course we benefited personally from our work, but as in ancient times, we found that reputation was worth more than money. Many of our members were artists, and the romantic idea of the starving artist was long dead. Most of us had grown up poor, so we knew poverty sucked. The goal was to be prosperous and ethical, but we did not always succeed equally at one or the other.

Despite ongoing organizational problems, after I joined the group we launched one of our most successful ventures: our chain of pan-African restaurants called Diaspora. I remember times when African restaurants outside of the African continent were few and far between. We created a network of businesses that made healthy, locally grown food as popular as Mexican, Asian, or Italian restaurants used to be. The main ingredient of our soup recipes was Keplerian kale, which was rich in vitamins and did not suffer from the millennial pollution buildup of Earth kale. Another of the main ingredients that made our food so popular was garlic from the Wonder region of Planet Lucy. The region was so rich in root and spice agriculture, the capital city was actually named Garlic. Drawing on the expertise of my father, Abāt Tana and godfather Tamryn, I helped coordinate and solidify the menu at all nine of our restaurant locations, which specialized in soups of curry, squash, chicken, lentils, yams, plums, oranges, and many other ingredients from my five life journeys. Food continued to be a passion for me because with foods from other

planets, my senses of smell and taste felt sharper than ever. Food sharing was such an enjoyable means to bring people together. And it was the way I again found love.

The Ancestors are merciful because I got to marry Curtis again in this last life. He looks only slightly different and has a different name, but it is him. He is the same strong-willed Aries, he's always quick to flash his amazing smile, speaks with the same deeply-hypnotic voice, and he is a master at the grill. And he still loves football, but in the New Galactic Era, sports have changed so much because of the humanots... it has lost some of its authentic gladiator appeal. He is a fan, but in his nostalgia for the element of real struggle (not fabricated victory), he only really follows the OFL (Original Football League), the one with all human players. We also began watching soccer because though humanots were engineered to be physically stronger than humans, sometimes their dexterity was diminished, so they weren't always as coordinated, so we still dominated that sport. Curtis was the head chef at one of GAIN's most popular Diaspora restaurants, and at one of the GAIN Soup Bowl events, we hit it off again. I remembered him; he did not remember me. But after just a few dates, we fell in love all over again. With his support and our extended family of "kins and friends," we not only bring people to the organizing table, but we hold potluck feasts that have become legendary.

As if Isis was trying to show her humorous side, in my final life, Curtis's name is, of all things, Palmer Wisely; reflecting his grandfather Palmer Byrd's name and giving new meaning to Abāt's advice to "Choose Wisely." Periodically, I felt the eyes of Isis upon me, sending me clues on how to move forward in a particular way. Just as in the Hall of Ma'at, she has given me comfort in my times of fear. I could not help but laugh at the utter cleverness of her wit. Isis, like most gods, is not the stuffy, two-dimensional kill-joy portrayed by serious scholars or rigid devotees. Gods have a highly developed sense of humor. I wouldn't be surprised if G'ma Seta herself put Isis up to pairing me with Curtis again. There are an endless number of signs that the Ancestors send us to give direction, if we choose to pay attention. Like

my nickname, Axis, which was a total accident. At one particular potluck after my termination from GalaState, my Uncle T. had had one too many glasses of Lucy Wine and instead of calling me Alexis, he kept calling me Axis; just as with Mother Faa Faa, the name stuck. Like the Earth, I have tried to keep spinning on my center: Axis, the personification of equipoise. Not stationary, but balanced even in times of sporadic movement. If we listen closely, we can hear the Ancestors whisper hints of our destiny, even from the funny slurs of drunken uncles.

GAIN's organizing sessions involved social movement, but were not always overtly about political action. We sponsored storytelling contests, music festivals, and other sorts of fun and relaxing gatherings at the restaurants. One of the most popular events was the Makeda Storytelling competition. The contest had begun long before I joined GAIN, but it was one that I enjoyed judging the most. Folks of all ages came up with creative ways to tell the story of Makeda and Solomon, and the contest kept our festivals packed every year. The three rules were simple:

ONE: Premise—Makeda, the main character, is a Black woman from the south and she is seeking wisdom (e.g., a virtue such as charity or a value such as creativity).

TWO: Content—In the story, Makeda must do four things: 1) kill or betray her first husband, 2) travel to meet and question Solomon then fall in love and have an affair with him, 3) return to her home with Solomon's son, and 4) find the wisdom she seeks.

THREE: Structure—The story must have a title in the form of a question and must contain a significant historical reference. The story must begin with "Makeda was a Black woman from the south. She was a ____ seeking wisdom." The story must end with "Makeda was a Black woman from the south. She was a ___ seeking wisdom and on her journey, she found ____." The story can be written, but must be told orally and can last up to 8 minutes.

This was a way of conveying culture through oral history, but accounted for imagination as well. The contests still happen and are second only to our Bone music festivals.

Bone music came out of the 2500s, a few years after KeplerPrime colonization. It was music of culture-based resistance, because accurate Black history was sometimes hard to find, especially on a remote planet. Bone musicians took galaxy-age instruments, such as the lightharp, miniphone, and longhorn, and combined them with older instruments, such as the saxophone, tuba, and piano. The two main instruments are bass drum and bass guitar. That is why it's called Bone music: the downbeat baseline rattles your bones. Bone music reminds me of the voice of Osiris. It sounds like a combination of reggae, Afro-Cuban jazz, funk, Samba, New Orleans second-line, and hip hop, but the core of Bone music is the blues. It makes me feel both blissful and miserable, like gospel. Musicians do many different things with Bone music, making it faster or slower, emphasizing one instrument over another, but the main connector is that it is conscious music. My favorite song is "We got faith in what love can do," by the group Bone Structure. Bone music is about retaining Black heritage; even though it was coopted and twisted by greedy no-talent imitators, the root musicians kept putting out music to enhance the soul. On days when I get most disheartened, the bone drums give me life to keep fighting the madness. And there has been plenty of madness to fight: mainly, the idiocy of humans, which created the humanots.

Both GalaState and Secure Elite tried to plant moles in the GAIN organization. Now, with so many people involved, it is hard to know who is working for which side. Even I have a hard time keeping up with who are on the "good and bad" sides of issues, because the stakes and imperatives for working together are always changing. The world of information moves so fast, it is hard to tell what is education and what is mis-education.

The "Human Unity" education curriculum was actually a coordinated effort to erase history, and it slowly but systematically removed or made illegal any historical information that might

enlighten readers to the diverse origins of humans. The "United World" agenda, while it had a nice-sounding name, confused issues about how to value diversity, how to maintain public control of resources, and how to communicate in order to organize for the collective public good. The agenda was developed by those of European ancestry, but it backfired when the humanots used the same rationale to claim superiority and try to grind human history into the dust. Human problems that always existed were made even worse with the creation of the humanots.

Several decades after the United States passed statewide bans such as the multi-state HB32281, Anti-Ethnic Acknowledgement bill, Europeans no longer controlled most natural resources. Legislation for two areas of control—heritage information and food resources became cornerstones for population control. The problems of the Galactic Age are not those foreseen by Isaac Asimov (who I admire) or his thinking robots (who have eerily emerged in our time almost exactly as Asimov anticipated). It is not villainous minds, evil machines, or artificial intelligence that have become the enemy of humanity. It is the hearts of the people who built the machines and who, by force or farce, fabricated control of all they survey. The idea to create human replicas was clearly a mistake. Humanots were created in a general environment of fear and xenophobia, so it is no wonder things quickly went sour. Imitations are rarely as good as the original. And because I had witnessed the beauty of Jinn in my first life, I was unimpressed with human creation of humanots: humanots couldn't even shape shift.

Evolution is magic: the gift of self-determined life. With gifts come obligations. Most pre-Galaxy humans did not get the big picture of the meaning of life, so humanots didn't get it either. But hearts always tell the truth under pressure. Pressure came in the form of the 2729 election for president of GalaState.

Humans created humanots as an "expendable" military force, which became "necessary" with the human colonization of two planets. Vast natural resources awaited exploitation after the native

species of the planets were bombed into submission. Initially, humanots were created as soldiers for the colonization fight that demanded more strategy and operations than robots alone could deliver. Humanots were used to operate machines, which could mimic intelligence but could not produce it... at least not to the satisfaction of humans. Humanots were also engineered as a nursing corps because maintenance was cheaper than "birthing" new generations. Geneticists figured they could engineer loyalty into the DNA of humanots and ensure lasting integration by creating an organic species that could actually mate with humans. Robots could be programed for loyalty, but the programs could be changed. Humanots were "home grown," so they had some "soft" physical sensibilities that could comfort their human masters, in all horrible ways imaginable.

Humanots were also used as a cheap labor force. They were engineered to have "superior" organs that required less maintenance, they could work longer hours with less food, and had a higher tolerance for pain. Colonization of the two planets did not happen overnight, but the humanot contribution made it possible. We had just begun to get comfortable on the planets when the election issue arose and threatened the "stability" so carefully created by those in power. Because the engineering process was similar to birth in a lab, and the science of creation had become so advanced, there was only one way to tell a human from a humanot: heritage. For anyone who had paid attention to history, the Humanot Awakening was inevitable.

Eventually, humanots lobbied the courts for "Humanot Rights," and any talk of human heritage or cultural history slowly came under fire for different reasons than white supremacists intended. Ironically, the tendency to argue that random human characteristics constituted supremacy opened the door for the eradication of all human rights. More White humanots were produced than those of other races, under the assumption this would "balance" the White and non-White population. The plan backfired when the humanots saw an opportunity to take power using the superiority argument. In a short

few hundred years, they were positioned to take over governance of all three planets.

Humanots assimilated well into Secure Elite, because most of them were designed with the European paradigm in mind. They blended well, so it was easy for them to take over the organization. Because of their rapid population increase, humanots threatened to take over GalaState, as well. History was the only thing that distinguished them from humans, so humanots had an agenda to destroy the Earth. This is the world into which I was born in my last life: humans and humanots in a tension destined to end in deadlock.

Keplerians and Lucians began the Humanot Movement as a way to "level the playing field" with Earth-born citizens. Humanots learned to manipulate information in their favor. Historical studies of ancient societies, geography, and religion came under attack because in the absence of historical life stories, corrupt power could be maintained and entire histories erased. People without a history had little consciousness and people without consciousness could not effectively revolt.

The humanot political platform was based on the eradication of history; their slogan was "The Future Is Now; History Is the Past." In essence, the private sector information control movement was only slightly more sophisticated than were the multiple attempts to destroy the library at Alexandria or militaristic missions to destroy ancient manuscripts in Mali. Storytellers know that control of history means control of the future. Dictators know it, too. Laws against public gathering were another area of contention, since organizations such as GAIN were so good at combining culture and collaboration. Honestly, I am surprised Secure Elite did not try outlaw soup itself.

Humanots knew that a civil war would result in too many casualties on their side; humans still outnumbered them and they could not mass reproduce themselves as effortlessly robots could. Besides, they were not as imaginative as humans, and they had "superior" hearts, which were actually underdeveloped, so they simply tried the low-level dirty political strategies of presenting lies as

"trending topics," manipulation of information in mainstream "newscasts," and redistricting to impact election outcomes. With humans still very much at war with themselves over interracial hostilities and same-race antagonisms, humanots saw an opening and sought to take ultimate advantage of our divisions and distractions. Greed was still the worst vice and so many humans were all too willing to support the humanot agenda if it made them money. And propaganda such as "Vote Superior" fooled people who didn't pay attention. For so long we were told that humanots were perfect solutions to human problems, so it was no wonder that so many humans were actually considering voting for the humanot candidate, even though it was against their own best interest.

Balance is very important; things do not always have to be only one thing or another. For example, capoeira is a deadly weapon, a sport, and a dance. Nuanced interpretation and the ability to embrace contradictory ideas are key elements to balance. Humanots weren't good at balance... they wanted it all. They had already gained overrepresentation in Secure Elite, so they took advantage of that organization and planned to run a humanot candidate for president of GalaState.

After having been unceremoniously ousted by GalaState years before because of Mrs. Nir's death, it was no small satisfaction for me to be called for assistance. They had my former advisor Professor Y. call me. We had a big laugh when he called and said, "Ms. Heart, I am calling on official CIA and GalaState business." He was much older now, but still very much involved in interplanetary affairs. I smirked and asked, "What could GalaState ever want with little ol' me... my termination file said that I am an "embarrassment at best and a security nightmare at worst'—remember?" We both knew what they needed: my information management skills and organizing networks. Go figure. Despite being fired, my independent work as an avenger made me a well-known envoy who had a reputation for getting results. I did not trade in guns or secrets... stories were my cargo, and negotiation my specialty. I traded life stories, ideas, and questions that

made people think twice. I was an effective agent not because I knew all wisdom's secrets, but because I was genuinely curious about how to improve the quality of life for others. My gatherings were discussion sessions more about reflection, information sharing, and clarifying goals than about manipulation. I came out of retirement not because I trusted GalaState, but because I knew too well who they were up against: Captain G.

The notorious Keplerian venture capitalist Captain Rigi Dīdeolo G. was running for president of GalaState against the Earth's Congolese Madame Leontine. Captain G. refused to bend in any way and pursued maximum profit from his contracts. He was savvy enough not to actually break any technical laws of commerce, only ethical ones. Captain G. was an Italian-design humanot with "desirable" features: tall, light skin, blue eyes, aggressive personality, and physically strong with a patented square jaw and dimpled chin. Of course, he was a former soldier and ran his campaign based on his military career. For so long the soldier class was pitted against the farmer and teacher class in a perpetuation of the myth of limited resources. There were many soldiers who transitioned into police and firefighter corps, but even their working-class labor was not valued like the high ranking upper crust of the corporate-military hybrid.

The message that military agendas were superior to all other social needs had been spread for so long, hardly anyone questioned it. Being one myself, I have the ultimate respect warriors, especially those who possess rare traits like the genius of Navajo code talkers and honor convictions of Japanese Samurai. For generations, I have had soldiers in my family. But insatiable financial appetites of military machines cannot usurp all other needs. Captain G. sought to fashion all walks of society into a war zone. G. married a human woman from Belgium and together they were the picture of perfection, according to definitions of what power should look like. Even though he was the CEO of a company, he insisted on being called "Captain" because he framed his businesses on paramilitary structures to ensure those in top positions in the company would not be challenged by lower

workers. This model made already dangerous aspects of capitalist practice even more deadly.

The Captain's wife, Marie Henriette G. was a 5th generation Secure Elite darling, and a humanot apologist with a notorious temper. She used her law degree from Lucy University to hunt and prosecute every feminist organization she could locate, of course on charges of "reverse gender discrimination." She really worked hard to not only maintain her personal privilege, but to defend and expand it by proving her loyalty to Secure Elite and Captain G. at every turn. Mrs. G. was always presented as the beauty ideal and her widespread media representation encouraged alterations like skin bleaching that continued to be a practice by women on many "dark continents."

Captain G. and his wife birthed three children and also had two more, manufactured humanots. As if to prove they were not purists, one humanot child was an African-design boy; his name was Tlar Comas G. and he was initially an appointed senior district judge for GalaState, but later resigned his position for a lucrative post at Secure Elite. I know in my bones that Tlar was directly responsible for the aggressive attack on my character after the election. I knew the whole family from my GalaState days when I was called to observe several negotiations. That group was a true test of my belief that everyone's voice should be included in a democracy. They were horrible people because they were not only rabid Eurocentrists, they were mean spirited. Mean people irritate me beyond measure.

Captain G. was unashamed of his violent womanizing; he was a known rapist during his military days (indeed, humanots emulated the worst of human practices). His past was known, even though neither of the two women soldiers that investigative reporters could locate would press charges. There was a third woman who came forward, but she had mysteriously disappeared. They said she had relocated off-line, to the back woods of Lucy. Sure she did.

The one time I got within five feet of Captain G. I felt nauseous. I was not active in the negotiation and even if I were, I would have surely failed. After he dispensed with all advisories in the room (and

trampled a few of his own team), he walked, pulsating with bravado, out of the room and winked at me as he left. Ugh. He pushed my respect for nonviolence to the brink. Like father, like son, Tlar was a pig of a man who was crude when around women and unbelievably regressive in his approach to anything involving legal or social justice. He could be counted on to advocate for policies that would snuff out the best human life had to offer. They were vulgar people and Galastate's rule by this family would undoubtedly wreak havoc on human kind.

Madam Leontine was also someone I knew well. Though I disagreed with some of her political party's approach to politics, I understood the nature of her platform. The viewpoints held by many of her consulting team were too narrow for my taste, but it was a direct result of upbringing in the Democratic Republic of the Congo: they were still fighting to increase options for Africans. Though also originally from Africa, I came from a vastly different country, time, and realm of experience, so my views were not exactly similar. But, Madam Leontine's leadership was most definitely in the best interest of humans. Madam L. had risen through the ranks of inter-global politics after overcoming many challenges. Her heritage was Nigerian and Congolese, and for generations her people had struggled to overcome corruption and violence left over from colonial rule. When male warmongers from the DRC realized that the world was passing them by, and that the kickbacks they got from deals on raw materials like coaltan stolen from the land were crumbs compared to prosperity of their nation, they slowly disarmed. Very slowly... world markets that profited from a destabilized DRC held on a lot longer than the Congolese warlords themselves and the country suffered through several externally backed coups by those countries that did not want to loosen their grip on the money train that was African natural resources. After several generations of raping the land and a systematic rape of women, education eventually gave women opportunities at political representation and official leadership positions in central Africa.

With women's leadership, Congolese people found ways to control their natural resources and turn labor into collective profit through a form of democratic socialism that defined profit as broader than financial gain. They again became masters of trade and the People's Profit political party was impressive. But I had problems with some details of their agenda, too. Leontine's team advocated for things I fundamentally did not believe in, such as reducing humanot voting rights to 3/5 vote, and some in her party were more radical in their desire to rollback humanot rights, suggesting relocation of all humanots to Planet Lucy, where the largest humanot birthing plant was located. I thought this approach was shortsighted, but considering the humanot platform of human history obliteration, I could definitely support Madam L.'s candidacy for GalaState president, even though I would rally to defeat any measures to disenfranchise humanots.

This political contest was a true test of human allegiance: would we elect a modest, dark-skinned, heavyset, working-class African female over a wealthy, Italian-design, soldier-class humanot male? GAIN threw our full support behind Madam Leontine and organized every street corner, community center, and coffee shop into discussion centers. From classrooms and news rooms to barber shops and beauty salons, the election captured the whole of Tri-Planet's attention. Humans were at a disadvantage, as most national governments had turned over television, computer, body screens, cell phone, and radio satellite control to private companies... owned by Secure Elite and now controlled by humanots.

I helped to design a campaign strategy for Leontine, and GAIN led old-school, grassroots communication soup centers that relied on positive messages, coalition approaches to inclusive issues, well-researched facts, and a balance of feeling and logic. Though we did encourage people to listen to what their heart was telling them, our work was less about individuals feeling good and more about a collective doing good. We had long hours of loud debates during the campaign, but people—humanots and humans—saw our party's

commitment to solving problems that at least considered everyone's position. And humanots realized their DNA came from somewhere, so even they had a stake in heritage discussions too. On the eve of the election, we all gathered at Diaspora headquarters on Lucy, the restaurant in the City of Garlic, and waited.

Around midnight Earth Time, the election results came in... all of the networks were racing to be the first to call the election, but none wanted to be the first to make a mistake and miscalculate the results. Given the rampant strains of misinformation, once a source was discredited, it lost all its advertising dollars and with so many other options, millions of people stopped support. So, more than ever, accuracy and reputation counted to certain news anchors. We tuned in to three networks at once.

I heard my brother Tarik drumming. My heart at one moment palpitated rapidly, the next moment it stopped. I took a slow, deep breath. Drawing in. Seeping out. We had won! Humans had finally figured out that, as Dr. Martin Luther King suggested, "we all came here on different ships, but we're in the same boat now." Though the humanots would continue to fight the losing battle against human collaboration, we had reversed the tide of destruction created by our own vanity. For so many thousands of years, human greed resulted in mass protests, conflict, and military coups that ended in needless suffering. There would always be human conflict, but there were ways to diminish the role of suffering in the world. GAIN's organizing model was one solution. Our recipe could not be beat: the key to our triumph was justice soup.

The hardest part of democracy is practicing it with people who you cannot stand and who can't stand you. The "war" was won, but the battle wasn't over, because we all still had to live together. That is the problem with military analogies, there is no end to the pursuit of fighting. Tri-Planets had to continue to try to find diplomatic solutions, which are much harder than blood-sport contests. The struggle certainly continued after the election. Again, despite my service to

GalaState, I found myself in trouble and on the outside of the institution.

Right after the election and Leontine's victory, around my 60th birthday, humanots in leadership of Secure Elite began a smear campaign against me and labeled me an outlaw. Information that was known about my previous five lives was twisted into lies, and stories began to appear about me being a witch, vampire, killer, and everything evil you can imagine. They called me a race monger, even though I had rallied for both human and humanot rights campaigns. They called me a thief. Secure Elite labeled me a Global Criminal because of my organizing. The Information Correction and Intervention Group (ICIG) petitioned against me by alleging that I stole international property by using TES systems for GAIN during the election.

Timeflex technology is a dynamic and ever-changing code. Very few people had ever unlocked the system, and machines could not figure it out because it required improvisation. Humanots couldn't crack the code either, because their creation patters were not advanced. They were engineered to be *almost* exactly like humans, but their fundamental problem was in their creation: they were engineered by humans... they did not evolve naturally like all other beings. They did not understand creativity. In trying to create unnatural life, humans tried to cheat God. And cheaters always fail.

TES relied not on calculation probability, but on human creativity and call-and-response cultural history: jazz. Humanots can emulate functions of jazz music, but they did not create it. They have hearts but, like vampires and zombies, they are not truly alive. I was labeled as a criminal for my imaginative use of technology to create a different kind of society, in the same way that old musicians reframed classical instruments such as the saxophone and trumpet for a different kind of vibe. I was called a thief simply for reshaping someone else's tools with my cultural imagination in order to build my own reality. Those who call me a thief for "stealing" TES codes from GalaState to use for

GAIN either don't know or have conveniently forgotten that I invented them.

While I admire some characteristics of humanots and respect their existence, much of what they have come to stand for represents the very worst of human paranoia and pride. Humanots interpret power as control; they compulsively try to control everything and everyone that is in their environment. But they cannot control themselves.

As a result of my participation in the election, Secure Elite ordered the harshest penalty: a Universal TIE ... Total Identity Erasure: an elimination of all records of my life. Though humanots were defeated, Secure Elite had always engaged in a thin collaboration between GaliState public-private sectors. It was no surprise then, based on a partnership of convenience, that neither the CIA nor GalaState came to my public defense. The ICIG tried to delete my story. Any mention of my name on the IN (Intergalaxy Network), WWW (World Wide Web), national registries, or state records was "corrected" by ICIG trolls charged with eradicating every trace of me.

First, they labeled me a terrorist, the first woman on the TBI Terrorist list (Tri-Planetary Bureau of Investigation), and then they just deleted my name. This was the collective sentence of all core collaborators in the GAIN movement.

For this reason, I have decided to publish my story in 2013, years before ICIG gained access to control information... especially information on Earth. Those alive in my time know that ICIG is the rogue group of militants and GAIN is actually a voice of the people. Madam Liontine herself wrote an appeal on my behalf, but it didn't matter. The Global TIE went into effect immediately and I began to be deleted from the records.

I cannot control the world. Unlike humanots, I have no desire to do so. But I <u>do</u> control myself, and because I firmly believe in self-defense, I am correcting the record on my own behalf. My name is Axis and I declare my innocence.

CODA:

The Recipe for Justice Soup

We are now in the 28th century. On our home planet, we neared human extinction, brought on by compulsive exploitation of natural resources (food, water, air, energy, waste) and social resources (equity, respect, compassion, logic, ethical judgment). When I became a GAIN agent, I was one of many who sought to stop our careening off of the cliff of sustainability; because stories of my life experiences changed minds—and hearts—I was targeted by those who wanted to maintain social control.

Perhaps my words, published in the so-called information age, can reflect the emergent voices of dark-skinned girls blackened like plump raisins by the Sun, who will grow up to be the powerful women that decode secrets of sustainable peace. Will our next world leaders come from my homes of Ethiopia, India, Australia, Brazil, or the United States? Or will they emerge from somewhere I have missed in my travels? Whoever comes forward must first and foremost study the vastness of human history and be unflinching about including contributions of all races to our collective heritage. I hope new leaders will come forward soon. My time is over, I seek rest.

Publishing my story now is a drastic measure. It will certainly alter the course of many lives, and perhaps place my own future in danger, but because I can't be sure of how much time I have left anyway, it is imperative for me to clear up misconceptions and to debunk lies about me. Though Secure Elite never gained the power to imprison me, and my interplanetary immunity was never revoked, I do not totally trust the system. I wanted to publish my story in case I'm ever charged formally and perhaps remanded to Secure Elite custody for "questioning." Or before my story passes with me. Though I have never been bodacious, I have always insisted on being a visible woman, so I must tell this life myself.

Because of my ICIG Global TIE sentence, some of those in my own time may have never heard of me or of my writing. My dissertation was titled "Bless Your Heart: An Inquiry into the Emotive Philosophies and Political Signification of Five Black Women Peace Activists of the New Galactic Era, 2500-2600 NGE." Even though my dissertation was accepted by Howard University, it "somehow" now cannot be found online in any of the Tri-Planet databases. Other books of mine that were banned include Let Ideas Live!, a treatise that argued for sharing intellectual property for the benefit of all, while providing an authentication coding system to ensure proper attribution and compensation for the originator; Game, Set, Match: A Guide to Coaching Youth Writing Workshops, which set up a three-step process patterned after tennis; and ¡Hola!: Five Fabulous Phrases for Easy Travel in Three Planetary Systems, which translated "hello, goodbye, please, thank you, and pardon me" in 225 languages and included, of course, a guide to the best soup restaurants on all three planets.

I am inspired to write my life as Axis because of Equator Woman philosopher Anna Julia Cooper. Her book, A Voice from the South, by a Black Woman of the South, written a decade before Dr. Du Bois's The Souls of Black Folk, brings to light the intersection of all I have experienced in my lifetimes. It also clearly spells out the danger of ignoring African history to chase after golden apples. After my work with GAIN, I became a writing coach to help people write their memoirs because too many voices are unheard, unshared, or erased. I was even fortunate to gain a short-term visiting professorship at the renowned Makerere University's School of Women's and Gender Studies program in Uganda, which had for generations produced some of the most informative women's doctoral research in Africa. Ultimately, I was happy to also find work in the most honorable professions as an archivist and librarian, to keep and share records that can be too easily deleted. Like G'ma Seta always said, remember where you come from. In the end, I followed G'ma's example as a writer, teacher, and teller of stories.

Though my records have been deleted, some still whisper of my work. They guess about my identity and my origins, and get most every detail wrong. Some people have even come up with "facts" about me, which may be technically true, but do not even cover a corner of the whole portrait. Since no pictures of me have been in public circulation since the election, I have often sat right next to big mouths who deny my existence. The story of time-traveling, Black woman avenger who saved the Earth is supposed to be just an urban legend. Even Snopes, one the oldest reliable investigative internet resource, does not provide the full picture of my existence. As I am at the end of my final life, it is finally appropriate to provide answers. Most of my family, people who I grew up with, and many who I have been acquainted with for decades still have no idea who I really am.

Some may interpret my work as mysticism. This is not correct. I am not an initiate of any one spiritual tradition; I believe even Isis and Osiris are messengers of a larger Creator we cannot fully understand. My relationship with God is solely my own and my belief in the probability that She has sent us many prophets does not require validation or belief of others. I simply believe in the magic of life, and I have the nerve to say so. As time has accelerated, we increasingly have participated in a culture of TMI... too much information. Silence is golden and it can also be strategic. But, just as silence can center a soul, well-timed words can set a nation, or even a constellation of planets, on the right course. Essentially, I was compelled to tell this story. I was hesitant at first, but when looking at the news each day, making sure this life book sees the light of day became an obsession. Like storyteller Zora Neale Hurston wrote, "There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you."

I am now an elder, more than 100 years old. I still have strong bones. I enjoy a healthy lifestyle through yoga and some dance (though I don't golf, Samba, or spar as much as I used to), and I still love to wander. I roam around worlds as an old Black woman. I could be anywhere. Wisely and I have two homes in Garlic and a condo in Atalanta, but mainly we stay on Earth near Lake Tana. When I cross

over this last time, I want to be close to home. I have so much to be thankful for; I want to thank the Ancestors personally for my six lives as an African woman. What some might have viewed as a curse, I have seen as nothing but the highest blessing. There have been challenges, but challenges turn to blessings if your attitude, behavior, and choices rest on sound belief.

When I get home, I will share my stories and recipes with my many families and once again spend time with Queen Makeda. As I used to visit her dreams, several times she has visited in mine, mostly when I was veering off track and getting distracted by the wealth of the world. Many times, my ways have been far from blameless and my heart has been heavy. When I stand in the Grand Hall for final judgment, I hope the scales of Ma'at will find me worthy. I sincerely pray Ammit, that ornery creature, will starve on the night of my judgment.

I have always been an Equator Woman and peace has not come easily. But I have followed my heart and found love, been a lifelong learner, wielded my pen for justice, and, equally as important, I have had a fantastic time sharing meals with beautiful, purposeful people. During the many times when I had little to eat, stories fed me.

It has taken me thousands of years to become the woman that I am: a wayfaring scribe full of life. I write to pass on my story to future generations so they might discern their own right direction. I write to honor my heritage—this history will NOT be erased! I write to honor my family, especially the younger ones as they follow their hearts and choose their own paths. And I write to honor my mentors, who have led by example.

I write this life story particularly for those who actively work to make their worlds better. I have no interest in saving anyone; I am neither a caretaker nor a savior. People must save themselves. I simply hope this story inspires others to become their own superheroes and to make way for women's leadership. I vividly remember the time that Makeda asked Solomon the difference between girls and boys; the questions of gender and social roles remain as enduring as the

questions of race and nation. The ability to answer these questions in a way that reflects human complexity is what makes civilizations progress or regress.

Human beings are infinitely creative. We do not have to create monstrosities. Our creations can be life sustaining without muting the Creator or mutating nature, but we must study more closely, use the right elements and apply careful techniques. We must be mindful chefs. I have lived long enough to know that the ingredients may change over time and tastes vary from place to place, but our creative instincts are constant. Ultimately, the recipe for GAIN's justice soup in the New Galactic Era was the same as G'ma Seta's ancient recipe in 10th-century Sheba. The recipe for justice soup is simple:

- 1) Make your favorite soup,
- 2) Have a potluck,
- 3) Work for justice,
- 4) Pass on the recipe.

~ Editor's Note ~

Through ups and downs of my life, something in me knew that I was just passing through. I am a seeker. When this story of Axis Heart's memoirs appeared on my computer in the summer of 2013, I was not startled; I was actually relieved at its strangeness. After reading the story and learning about my very own Timeflex technology, I was inspired by evidence of opportunities to create new realities. Several people tried to assassinate my character by claiming I was mentally ill. In fact, this story simply confirmed my sanity and solidified my conviction to indict the insanity of the world I observed around me. The story from my future self explained the anxiety, anger, and ambition I had always felt as a young Black girl who knew she was capable of much more than those around her could see. When the story appeared on my desktop in July 2013, it helped me heal from several hardships I had endured, particularly a miscarriage in January of that year. That spring, I was crestfallen. I felt I had really missed out on the opportunity to create something special with Curtis. We ended up having a house full of love despite the loss, so my sorrow was tempered by sustained joy. Yet, the thought of motherlessness haunted me and had me feeling even more out of place than I had already felt most of my life. Sharing this story made me feel tremendously creative and pleasantly fertile.

Publishing the Axis memoirs has at once soothed and excited me. I have been happy to steep in the depths of my own weirdness and feel blessed, at home in my skin. However, the story also placed my subdued anger and vengeful desires under a microscope. Apparently, when it comes to those who do wrong, I have not yet resolved my internal tension between patience and wrath. Also, I fear that some might mistakenly interpret my story as an attempt to tell all women's story-which is impossible. Still, by publishing the memoirs, I have gained a semblance of balance and have found a way to again swing on the Equator—a thrill I had lost along the way.

My sense of peace and passion has clearly been carried to the future. The dreams I had as a little girl desperate to save myself from a

world of neglect, devaluation, violence, and invisibility have blossomed into dreams to save other little girls from the same experiences, especially girls of color at the bottom of the global social order. Clearly, my belief that I actually can "save" the world is naïve, but I do believe that through collective action, we can better avoid wholesale destruction of life on any planet we inhabit.

I have seen the future: survival requires all hands on deck. Kenyan activist Wangari Maathi argued that we can simultaneously work to improve the quality of life for ourselves and for others. I believe her. I do not believe movies that depict an irreversibly horrific human decline with our only hope coming in the form of an individual (usually White) male mercenary or American superman backed by an army that has to blow up half the planet to protect it.

Earth's salvation is a collective endeavor and women can take the lead. We have particular experiences that give us a unique vantage point. We can see the folly of war zealots who are silly enough to think power can be indefinitely maintained through violence or masked aggression. Equator Women have known violence like no other humans, and our survival has made us fierce. Trust me, we don't need bombs to obtain power or maintain order in our midst.

If you value wisdom, take heed and learn from Equator Women, wherever they live. In my journeys, I have often found grandmother wit most instructive, found women diplomats particularly savvy in the fine art of negotiation, and learned that Black women, especially those who study history and culture, can offer practical suggestions that might just save you from yourself. If you are a seeker, listen, read, and learn well. Because in the end, every person, regardless of heritage, will stand in the Great Hall of judgment and every heart will be weighed on the scales of justice. So, choose wisely, and follow your heart.

About the Author

Dr. Stephanie Y. Evans is Professor and Chair of the Department of African American Studies, Africana Women's Studies, and History at Clark Atlanta University. She is a former Associate Professor of African American Studies and Women's Studies at the University of Florida. She is author of *Anna Julia Cooper: Human Rights Educator* (2017), *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History* (2007), *Black Passports: A Resource Guide to 200 African American Travel Memoirs* (2014), and co-edited *African Americans and Community Engagement in Higher Education* (2009) and *Black Women's Mental Health: Balancing Strength and Vulnerability* (forthcoming).

In 2003, Evans earned her PhD in Afro-American Studies with a concentration in History and Politics from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and in 2002 earned an MA in the same field. Also in 2002, she earned a Graduate Certificate in Feminist Studies.

While completing her dissertation, she worked as the Assistant Director for Youth Education Programs in the Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. In the summer of 1999 she was a research intern at Stanford University's Haas Center for Public Service and worked on issues of cultural identity and community service. She support of non-profit organizations, through partnerships with organizations including UNICEF and Boys and Girls Clubs.

In May 1999 Evans earned an Interdisciplinary Studies BA in Comparative Humanities (cross-cultural and gender studies) from California State University-Long Beach. In her undergraduate work, she was awarded Phi Beta Kappa, Cum Laude, and Outstanding Department Graduate. She was a Kellogg Fellow for one year and a McNair Scholar for two years. She started college at St. John's in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

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The full profile for Dr. Evans is available online at <u>professorevans.net</u>.

Chronicles of the Equator Woman:

The Recipe for Justice Soup

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