

Chanta Shenell Palmer

Language, Literacy, and Culture Program

University of Maryland, Baltimore County

6 July 2025

Resistance is Ritual: Black Women's Wellness from Queen Nanny to Escrava Anastácia

The Adinkra symbol Sankofa, commonly translated as "it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind," is both a call to remembrance and a charge to action. Rooted in Ghanaian philosophy, it emphasizes the importance of reflecting on the past to inform the present and shape the future (Wane 186). In a world where Black women remain targets of systemic violence, marginalization, and erasure, Sankofa offers a critical framework for analyzing how resilience, healing, and wellness are preserved and reimagined across generations. This paper argues that the principle of Sankofa is essential for understanding the continuity of Black women's resistance and wellness practices across the African diaspora, particularly in the face of coloniality and White supremacy. Tracing historical figures like Queen Nanny of the Maroons to modern cases such as Sandra Bland and Breonna Taylor, and exploring wellness as a site of political and cultural resistance, this essay contributes to the discourse on Black women's wellness as a form of historical continuity, critical pedagogy, and collective healing. This paper is being presented at a conference held in Cariri, Ceará, Brazil, and incorporates Black feminist Brazilian scholarship to honor the knowledge and activism emerging from this context.

Historical Continuities: Resistance from the Middle Passage to Modernity

The horrors of the Middle Passage marked the beginning of a long struggle for survival and resistance among African-descended women. From the earliest moments of forced migration and enslavement, Black women embodied resilience. One of the most powerful historical embodiments of this resistance is Queen Nanny of the Maroons, a Jamaican leader of Ghanaian origin who led guerrilla warfare against the British and preserved African cultural practices (Bilby 58). As both a military strategist and spiritual healer, Queen Nanny exemplifies the interweaving of wellness and resistance, which are core components of Black womanhood across the diaspora.

Queen Nanny's leadership in the eighteenth century laid the groundwork for understanding how resistance to colonial oppression was not solely militaristic but also cultural and spiritual. Her use of African herbal medicine, rituals, and communal support systems to protect Maroon communities from physical and psychological destruction illustrates the Sankofa principle. Her strategies resonate today in the actions and philosophies of modern Black women who reclaim ancestral knowledge for healing and survival.

Contemporary cases of state violence, such as the deaths of Sandra Bland in Texas and Breonna Taylor in Kentucky, demonstrate the persistence of anti-Black violence, particularly against women. Bland's death in police custody and Taylor's killing in her home both sparked national outrage and grassroots mobilizations (Ritchie 104). These tragedies demand historical reckoning. The systemic disregard for Black women's lives echoes centuries of dehumanization. Their stories, when viewed through the Sankofa lens, are not isolated events but painful reminders of a long-standing pattern that requires deep historical contextualization and communal resistance.

Wellness Practices as Acts of Resistance

Across the diaspora, Black women have preserved and transformed wellness practices spiritually, mentally, and physically not merely for survival but as deliberate acts of resistance. These include spiritual practices such as ancestor veneration, herbalism, communal care rituals, and the reclamation of bodily autonomy. As bell hooks argues in *Sisters of the Yam*, self-care among Black women is not a luxury but a necessary response to systemic violence and psychological trauma (hooks 15).

Wellness as resistance disrupts the colonial logics that depict Black women as endlessly strong and self-sacrificing. Instead, it centers their right to rest, heal, and thrive. These practices challenge dominant medical paradigms and foreground African and Afro-diasporic knowledge systems. From Yoruba spirituality to Rastafarian ital diets, from doula care rooted in Black midwifery to the rise of healing justice collectives, Black women assert agency over their well-being (Nelson 144).

These practices are not apolitical. As María Lugones explains, coloniality of gender imposes dehumanizing hierarchies that wellness practices directly confront (Lugones 748). Brazilian scholars such as Sueli Carneiro and Lélia Gonzalez also offer foundational insights into the lived realities of Black women in Latin America, revealing how racism and patriarchy intersect in unique yet globally resonant ways. Carneiro's work on "epistemicide" and Gonzalez's articulation of "amefricanidade" provide frameworks for understanding how Black Brazilian women resist through cultural reclamation, political activism, and spiritual healing (Carneiro 79; Gonzalez 223).

Escrava Anastácia: Silenced Yet Sacred in Afro-Brazilian Resistance

One powerful figure in Afro-Brazilian cultural memory is Escrava Anastácia. Though her historical origins remain contested, she has become an iconic representation of Black resistance and spiritual fortitude. Escrava Anastácia is often depicted wearing an iron muzzle and collar, said to have been placed on her by enslavers as punishment for acts of rebellion or speaking out. Over time, she evolved from a silenced figure into a venerated folk saint within Catholic and Afro-Brazilian religious practices such as Umbanda. Her enduring image—of a serene and dignified woman bearing visible instruments of subjugation—has inspired widespread devotion, especially among Black Brazilian women who identify with her strength and suffering (Brown; AfroRio Walking Tour).

Escrava Anastácia's story, like that of Queen Nanny and Sandra Bland, encapsulates the historical interplay between violence and resilience that defines Black womanhood across the diaspora. Her transformation into a sacred symbol of healing and protection illustrates how the reclamation of ancestral pain can become a form of spiritual and communal wellness. Through rituals, altars, and invocations, Escrava Anastácia embodies what Christen A. Brown calls “spiritual justice,” reminding us that healing is a political act (Brown). Her story exemplifies the Sankofa principle: recovering the past not just to remember, but to mobilize it in the ongoing struggle for justice and self-determination.

Alignment with the Broader Sankofa Movement

The Sankofa principle continues to shape modern movements for Black liberation and education. Contemporary wellness movements such as the Nap Ministry, the HealHaus Collective, and the work of practitioners including Rachel Cargle draw explicitly from African diasporic traditions.

These link the survival strategies of enslaved ancestors with today's practices of rest, restoration, and community care. They reflect what Layli Phillips terms "womanist sustainability," a model that centers Black women's spiritual and emotional labor as the foundation of collective survival (Phillips 172).

Tracing wellness practices from the Middle Passage to the present affirms their centrality in resistance. It also underscores a broader call for reparations not only financial, but emotional, epistemological, and cultural. Education systems that integrate the Sankofa principle, particularly in curricula shaped by critical race theory and anti-racist pedagogy, foster restorative justice and holistic development (Love 27). Teaching about Queen Nanny, Sandra Bland, or Dandara dos Palmares within educational contexts disrupts narratives of passivity and victimhood, replacing them with frameworks of resilience, activism, and healing.

Educational institutions play a key role in shifting how Black women's experiences are validated. Through community-based research, ethnographic storytelling, and critical pedagogy, scholars and educators can center Black women's voices, affirm traditional knowledge systems, and challenge colonial academic norms (Freire 35). Sankofa thus becomes more than a cultural symbol; it is an active methodology in the struggle for justice.

Conclusion: Contribution to Discourse and Transformative Power

Wellness practices among Black women across the diaspora are not new trends or isolated behaviors. They are historical continuities deeply embedded in spiritual, cultural, and political traditions that span continents and centuries. This research emphasizes how Sankofa enables scholars and activists to trace these threads of resistance, healing, and survival.

By centering the stories of figures like Queen Nanny and modern victims like Sandra Bland and Breonna Taylor, alongside Black Brazilian heroines such as Lélia Gonzalez and Dandara dos Palmares, this paper reveals the cyclical nature of violence and the equally enduring cycles of resistance. In academia and beyond, recognizing Black women's wellness as a site of resistance challenges the dehumanizing narratives of coloniality and instead uplifts traditions of care, courage, and continuity.

The transformative power of this research lies in its ability to reshape both scholarly discourse and community practice. It urges educators, policymakers, and healers to embrace reparative justice, affirm ancestral knowledge, and create institutions where Black women can not only survive but truly thrive.

Works Cited

AfroRio Walking Tour. "Escrava Anastacia." *AfroRio Walking Tour*, www.afrioriowalkingtour.com/exhibits/show/afro-brazilian-women/escrava-anastacia. Accessed 6 July 2025.

Bilby, Kenneth. *True-Born Maroons*. University Press of Florida, 2005.

Brown, Christen A. "Let's Build a Monument to Anastácia." *Public Seminar*, 22 June 2020, www.publicseminar.org/essays/lets-build-a-monument-to-anastacia. Accessed 6 July 2025.

Carneiro, Sueli. "The Concept of Epistemicide: Racism and the Death of Knowledge." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 117, no. 3, 2018, pp. 78–85.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Bloomsbury, 2018.

Gonzalez, Lélia. "The Unified Black Movement: A Political Perspective." *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*, edited by Ileana Rodríguez, Duke University Press, 2001, pp. 220–231.

hooks, bell. *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*. South End Press, 1993.

Love, Bettina L. *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*. Beacon Press, 2019.

Lugones, María. "The Coloniality of Gender." *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2007, pp. 747–759.

Nelson, Alondra. *Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Phillips, Layli, editor. *The Womanist Reader*. Routledge, 2006.

Ritchie, Andrea J. *Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color*. Beacon Press, 2017.

Wane, Njoki Nathani. "African Indigenous Knowledge: Claiming, Writing, Storing, and Sharing the Experience." *Journal of Thought*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2