

# Rodgers-Rose’s “Gift of a Map” for Negotiating Toxic Environments (i.e., “*Deserts with Mirrors of Hard, Distorting Glass*”), for Healing Self-Definition and Self-Identity, and Refocusing Attention to the Battle to Regain Freedom

Barbara C. Wallace, Ph.D.

Editor-in-Chief, *Journal of Equity in Health*

## Abstract

As the closing article, the special theme issue editor, Wallace, delivers a synthesis of the issue’s 14 core articles in Part I. This also is an opportunity for sharing reflections on the contributions made to the literature by each article. In Part II, the theme issue editor shares reflections on the nature of the “gift” given by Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose through her corpus of work. Within these reflections, the naming of *toxic deserts with mirrors of hard, distorting glass* seeks to capture the prevalence in America of challenging environments. For example, predominantly white institutions, universities, corporations, and varied settings in society may be toxic. Borrowing from the concept of *food deserts*, which are void of access to high quality nutritious food, the metaphor is introduced of exposure to *toxic deserts with mirrors of hard, distorting glass*. Here, the concept of there being “mirrors of hard, distorting glass” is taken from Ralph Ellison’s (1972) book, *Invisible Man*. Some environments may be considered unhealthy or toxic because they are like *deserts void of any accurate reflection or feedback regarding a Black human being’s existence and contributions*; and, by extension, this dynamic may be experienced by a variety of “diverse and different others” (e.g., Indigenous, People of Color, LGBTQ+, people with disabilities, etc.). They are toxic environments by virtue of the prevalence of interpersonal experiences where distorted images are being “mirrored or reflected back” to Black people, or people of African descent, as well as to others. This can include the *invisible covert violence* of projecting stereotypes and negative and low expectations upon any “diverse and different other” (Wallace, 2003)—such as a Black person in that toxic environment. A person may feel “bad vibes,” or perceive hostility, or sense a hostile climate. Meanwhile, they are not being seen or heard for who they are, or what they do, or what they have to say or contribute. There is the risk that repeated exposure to distorted images, projections, and a hostile climate in such a toxic environment may challenge an individual’s *self-definition* and *self-identity*. This may potentially add stress to their lives from experiences of invisibility, disregard, disrespect, and oppression that may occur in that toxic environment. The stress from exposure to toxic environments may manifest, as per Clark et al. (1999), in the form of psychological and physiological states of arousal that—if chronic and persistent (e.g., repeated or ongoing anger, disappointment, sadness)—may compromise health. The work of Dr. Rodgers-Rose is highlighted as providing the experience of *accurate mirroring and reflection* back to Black people regarding the nature of their being, contributions, and culture. In this manner, Dr. Rodgers-Rose provides through her work an *ideal antidote* for exposure to *toxic deserts with mirrors of hard, distorting glass*. Dr. Rodgers-Rose’s body of work may be likened to the “gift of a map” that provides guidance for negotiating toxic environments, for healing *self-definition* and *self-identity*, and refocusing attention to the “battle to regain freedom.” The additional focus on Maat/African spirituality permits the provision of a healing, reparative experience which benefits physical, emotional, mental, and *spiritual* health. The result is a powerful corrective healing experience for those who have been exposed to toxic environments void of any accurate reflection or feedback to Black people and others. Finally, the article ends with an expression of gratitude for Dr. Rodgers-Rose’s corpus of work, given the magnitude of the impact upon Black people, families, communities, “diverse and different others,” several fields of inquiry, and the whole of humanity.

Keywords: La Francis Rodgers-Rose, self-definition, self-identity, Black culture, values, Maat, invisibility, stereotypes

## Introduction

This special theme issue has established Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose (2023a) as a pioneer in contributing to the literature an answer to the question, “*Do Black Americans Have a Culture?*” After a decade of intense study, research, and deep thought pondering this question, the result was the 1972 publication of Rodgers-Rose’s Theory of Black Culture within her article, “*The Dominant Values of Black Culture*.” This article is re-published in this September 2023 theme issue of the *Journal of Equity in Health* (i.e., Rodgers-Rose, 2023a) in celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the release of “*The Dominant Values of Black*

*Culture*” in 1972. This re-publication makes the work of Dr. Rodgers-Rose accessible in print and online ([www.JEHonline.org](http://www.JEHonline.org)) for a contemporary audience, serving to disseminate her ground-breaking early description of Black culture and values.

---

Address correspondence to:  
Barbara C. Wallace, Ph.D.,  
Editor-in-Chief, the *Journal of Equity in Health*  
Professor Emerita of Health Education,  
Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY  
Email: [bcw3@tc.columbia.edu](mailto:bcw3@tc.columbia.edu)

This special theme issue's dissemination of the work of Dr. Rodgers-Rose makes an important and timely contribution to the literature. This contribution is especially important for all those seeking wisdom and direction at this historical point in time when telling the truth about the Black experience over the past four centuries in America is an endangered activity. We live in an era where the "lies of our conquerors"—of which Rodgers-Rose (2023d) speaks—extend to misrepresentations about the fundamental facts of enslavement, racism, and oppression as experienced by Black people in the United States. The state of Florida has emerged as the epicenter of a contemporary national battle that seeks to deny and erase the facts of this nation's history of enslavement, racism, and oppression. The NAACP (2023) issued a travel advisory for the state of Florida in May 2023 with key details, below:

The formal travel notice states, "Florida is openly hostile toward African Americans, people of color and LGBTQ+ individuals. Before traveling to Florida, please understand that the state of Florida devalues and marginalizes the contributions of, and the challenges faced by African Americans and other communities of color."

"Let me be clear - failing to teach an accurate representation of the horrors and inequalities that Black Americans have faced and continue to face is a disservice to students and a dereliction of duty to all," said NAACP President & CEO Derrick Johnson. "Under the leadership of Governor DeSantis, the state of Florida has become hostile to Black Americans and in direct conflict with the democratic ideals that our union was founded upon. He should know that democracy will prevail because its defenders are prepared to stand up and fight. We're not backing down, and we encourage our allies to join us in the battle for the soul of our nation."

### ***Rodgers-Rose's Timely Work Meets an Urgent Need, Given Today's Most Pressing Issues***

Not unlike the battle to defend democracy and fight for the soul of our nation, Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose (2023d) has directed attention to the "battle to get back a freedom lost so long ago that we almost can't remember that freedom." It is a battle inclusive of the historical and ongoing proliferation of the "lies of our conquerors," as well as the horrors and inequalities faced by Black Americans (Rodgers-Rose, 2023d). Because of lies—such as those proliferating in Florida, the act of telling the "truth again and again" about the experience of Blacks in America (Rodgers-Rose, 2023d) is vital. It is vital for the advancement and evolution of the whole of humanity.

Especially important is also telling the truth about Black culture and values—and their roots in ancient Egyptian/Kemetite culture (Rodgers-Rose, 2023b, 2023c).

In telling such truth, Dr. Rodgers-Rose has given us all a tremendous "gift," as captured across the articles in this special theme issue. The NAACP (2023) travel advisory warning about Florida underscores how the voice and work of Dr. Rodgers-Rose, as conveyed in this journal issue, provide timely and relevant teaching.

***Thus, her body of work may be further likened to the "gift of a map." It is a map urgently needed by those who can benefit from the wisdom of a deep Master Teacher who provides guidance on how to view and negotiate the experience of spending time in toxic environments—such as in Florida or anywhere else.***

***As a deep Master Teacher, Dr. Rodgers-Rose provides guidance for negotiating toxic environments, for healing self-definition and self-identity, and refocusing attention to the battle to regain freedom. The inclusion of a focus on Maat/African spirituality permits the provision of a healing, reparative experience which benefits physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual health. The result is the provision of a powerful corrective healing experience for those who have been exposed to toxic environments.***

\*\*\*

This closing article will provide the theme issue editor's synthesis of the prior 14 core articles—in Part I; here the focus is on the contributions to the literature made by each article in this theme issue. In Part II, reflections cover the nature of the "gift" given by Dr. Rodgers-Rose through the articles—in light of the challenge of negotiating toxic environments. Finally, in conclusion, gratitude is offered for Dr. Rodgers-Rose's corpus of work, given the magnitude of the impact upon Black people, families, communities, and the whole of humanity.

### **Part I: A Synthesis and Focus on Contributions to the Literature**

#### ***(I-A) Research Rooting Black Culture and Values in Ancient Kemet: Maat as the Greatest Cultural Strength***

Recall that through research involving over 100 interviews conducted from 1987-1995, Rodgers-Rose

(2023b) provided evidence of the extent to which mothers—including some born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century—taught values of Black culture to their daughters living in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Rodgers-Rose (2023b) demonstrated how these key values of Black culture parallel those from ancient Egyptian/Kemet culture as documented 5,000 years ago in the forty-two affirmations of Maat. Rodgers-Rose (2023b) detailed these findings in the article, *The Wisdom of Our Foremothers: Reconstructing African Spirituality*. The analysis of Rodgers-Rose (2023b) permits placing emphasis upon the Egyptian/Kemet concept of Maat/spirituality as the greatest strength of the Black community and Black culture. This article contributes to the literature a model for conducting research on Black cultural values. This includes an approach to rooting Black culture and values in ancient Egypt and Maat. Rodgers-Rose (2023b) concludes that it was Maat/African spirituality that was at work in ancient Kemet, Maat that kept our Ancestors alive so that we might be born, and Maat that is at work in contemporary Black culture—as revealed in the interviews. This is just not knowledge to hold and treasure; it is knowledge as a source for healing one’s *self-definition* and *self-identity*, and knowledge as a foundation for taking action.

***(I-B) A Social Actor, Activist, and Leader Exhibiting Emancipatory Embrace—Helping Us to Free Both Self and Community from Oppression***

As Lewis (2023) and Rose and Rose (2023) make clear in their articles in this issue, it is important to consider the theory, research, and body of scholarship of Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose within the context of her work as a social actor, activist, organizer, and leader. This necessitates recognition, for example, of her leadership as the Founder and CEO of the International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC). This includes the work of IBWC as a grant-funded provider of culturally competent care and service delivery to people living with HIV/AIDS; and as a provider of other varied services to address the increasing poverty and declining health impacting the well-being of Black families.

For Lewis (2023), this work of IBWC provides evidence of Dr. Rodgers-Rose exhibiting *emancipatory embrace*: i.e., *a moral perspective wherein one receives humans eagerly and gladly by engaging humankind in liberative ways that free both self and community from bondage, oppression, and restraint*. Lewis (2023) contributes to the literature the concept of *emancipatory embrace*. Lewis (2023) also contributes an analysis of numerous examples of Dr. Rodgers-Rose exhibiting this *emancipatory embrace*. The analysis reveals she has repeatedly exhibited *emancipatory embrace* through her life mission by “engaging humankind in liberative ways that free both self and community from oppression.”

***(I-C) Black Women’s Self-Definition and Self-Identity: Ancient Egyptian Models of Queen, Seer, and Leader—and the Principles of Maat and Symbol of the Red Dress***

More specifically, Dr. Rodgers-Rose has powerfully engaged Black women in multiple “liberative ways that free both self and community” from oppression, as examples of exhibiting *emancipatory embrace*. Her work through IBWC has also encompassed a mission to “bring forth exemplary models of African womanhood by defining ourselves and improving ourselves through social, economic and political empowerment.” Consistent with the “scholar as actor” analysis put forth by Rose and Rose (2023), Dr. Rodgers-Rose has pursued a key question. This key question has been explored in her scholarship, speeches, and numerous IBWC Annual Conferences: i.e., “*What should be the self-defined identity and image of Black womanhood, and what is the ideal model of Black womanhood for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?*” Rodgers-Rose (2023c) answers this question in the article, *Black Women Defining Self in the 21st Century: An African Centered Perspective*. Her answer draws upon models of Black womanhood from ancient Egypt/Kemet, while evoking the “Queen, Seer, and Leader” as African models to follow. There are also other recurrent themes that inform the task of Black women defining self, as conveyed in Rodgers-Rose’s publications and speeches, as well as numerous IBWC Annual Conferences. The recurrent themes include the instruction to follow the ancient Egyptian principles of Maat, which can guide contemporary Black women’s striving for truth, justice, and righteousness. Another recurrent theme is the recommendation to adopt from ancient Egyptian text the *red dress* as a symbol of Black women’s feisty nature, queenship, and spirit—in order to guide contemporary Black women in the task of defining self.

Further, the Rodgers-Rose (2023c) article illustrates a point made by Lewis (2023) that a major recurrent focus in the work of Dr. Rodgers-Rose involves *self-definition* and *self-identity*. Many 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century theorists, researchers, and scholars have focused on identity development, inclusive of Black identity development. This article makes an invaluable contribution to the literature by presenting Rodgers-Rose’s (2023c) approach to Black female identity. Rodgers-Rose (2023c) addresses the challenges to identity development that Black women face in an oppressive American society; and offers a solution for supporting identity development through presentation of her original model of African centered womanhood. The model is based on 20 Black cultural attributes to guide Black women’s return to self and re-creation of self. Rodgers-Rose (2023c) asserts that this is the most important task for Black women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Of note, through IBWC programming, as her *emancipatory embrace*, Dr. Rodgers-Rose has applied her

scholarship through practical action to improve the lives of Black women and girls. As Thompson-Gaddy (2023) and Lewis (2023) point out in this issue, Dr. Rodgers-Rose established the *City of Newark Genesis Rites of Passage Program*. Such work is described as part of her being “scholar as social actor” (Rose & Rose, 2023).

***(I-D) Seeing Through the Lies of Our Conquerors and Having the Courage to Tell the Truth Again and Again***

In the article titled *Threading the Needle: Will the Real Black Intellectual Please Stand Up?*, Rodgers-Rose (2023d) discusses the role of the Black intellectual. Their work necessitates having “a fine eye to see through the lies of our conquerors,” making this work comparable to the difficult task of “threading a needle.” The Black intellectual “must have the courage to tell the truth again and again.” Their work is focused “on the battle to regain a freedom lost so long ago that we almost can’t remember that freedom.” Rodgers-Rose (2023d) suggests that to name that freedom could well be the most important thing we do in the 21st century. We are advised to remember that our Ancestors’ vision of freedom was a collective freedom with all of us being free. The Ancestors had a vision of a Pan-African freedom that included all African people, while re-establishing Maat in the land so we live by the principles of truth, justice, righteousness, and reciprocity. As a paper that had been delivered as a speech, Rodgers-Rose (2023d) ends her discussion of the role of the Black intellectual with her compelling signature line: “*The time is now, the hour is late, and our Ancestors are calling us to thread the needle.*”

Rose and Rose (2023) place this signature line in perspective in their article, *La Francis Rodgers-Rose: A Clarion Call of Scholar as Social Actor*. They elaborate on the life history and work of Dr. Rodgers-Rose as “scholar as social actor.” Emphasis is placed on how Dr. Rodgers-Rose has repeatedly put out a compelling *clarion call* to other thinkers, researchers, scholars, community members, and a larger national and international audience. It is a call to take action to improve the lives of Black people and the whole of humanity in the process. Her trademark *clarion call* conveyed in a line frequently shared at the end of many of her speeches is also presented, as follows: “*The time is now, the hour is late, and your mother is calling you.*”

***(I-E) Capturing the Impact of a Powerful Clarion Call Within Inspirational and Motivational Oratory***

Many have heard and responded to this *clarion call*, given how Dr. Rodgers-Rose has delivered well over 200 invited Keynote Addresses, Lectures, and Speeches at

universities, conferences, churches, and community events. In this way, she has been highly effective in speaking the “truth again and again.” She has used a “fine eye to see through the lies of our conquerors,” while rallying others to action.

The potential roots of her gift of oratory are suggested through Lewis’ (2023) article. Highlighted is her family legacy involving the work and ministry of her father, the Reverend Carroll Rodgers, Sr., and her grandfather, the Reverend James E. Rodgers.

Lewis (2023) also pays homage to the influence of Dr. Rodgers-Rose’s mother, Beulah Smith Rodgers, as the mother of 7 children who had great “strength and determination.” As a mother, she “created for the children a sense of stability in an unstable world.” As per Lewis (2023), the influence of her mother “is often heard in the speeches of her daughter,” La Francis, as well as “reflected in the wisdom she shares” in those speeches.

It is Dr. Rodgers-Rose’s great gift of inspirational and motivational oratory that has compelled hundreds of participants to return again and again to IBWC Annual Conferences held since 1985. Others have sought out her voice in various venues, such as the conferences of the Association for the Study of Classical African Civilizations.

This theme issue makes a critical contribution to the literature by publishing three papers previously heard as speeches (Rodgers-Rose, 2023b; 2023c; 2023d). By publishing what Dr. Rodgers-Rose previously shared through inspirational and motivational oratory, this issue makes her deep *Master Teacher* offerings accessible in print and online. Now, her timeless wisdom can reach a contemporary audience.

To further substantiate the importance of her scholarship and wisdom codified in speeches, both Lewis (2023) and Rose and Rose (2023) analyze content from many of Rodgers-Rose’s papers delivered as speeches. This contribution to the literature permits the historical record on the life and work of Dr. Rodgers-Rose to include her legacy of gifted oratory. For, she utilized her Keynote Addresses and Lectures to share the results of her many decades of research, study, and inquiry into topics at the core of Black life and culture.

***(I-F) Reclaiming Her Original Theory of Black Culture—and a Tale with Lessons About Plagiarism***

In her closing article, *A Theory that Answers the Critical Question, “Do Black Americans Have a Culture?”: Reclaiming My Original Theory of Black Culture from 1972*, Rodgers-Rose (2023e) accomplishes several goals. She shares the story of how she grew up, and what she studied and learned across a long and intense academic



**“The time is now, the hour is late, and our Ancestors  
are calling us to thread the needle.”  
– Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose**

journey. A decade of study culminated in her bringing forth an original Theory of Black Culture in the 1972 publication of her “*Dominant Values in Black Culture*” article. She goes on to share a painful tale about having her original ideas appropriated by others. This plagiarism, perhaps inadvertently, highlights how her original Theory of Black Culture led to advancements in four fields, as follows: (1) Black children’s education and academic achievement; (2) counseling members of the Black community with cultural considerations—as a forerunner to the focus on provider cultural competence; (3) assessment with consideration of culture; and (4) research inclusive of a focus on culture.

***Rodgers-Rose (2023e) provides a cautionary tale with an inherent lesson on the importance of protecting one’s work, having it copyrighted, and remaining vigilante in reclaiming it from others who have appropriated one’s work.***

This is an important lesson many have missed. There are many examples of one’s original ideas and work being appropriated by others. The one who brought forth something original is left feeling abused and violated. Meanwhile, the thief has prospered. As Rodgers-Rose (2023e) states about her experience, below:

***“I couldn’t get over my feeling of being abused.”***

Experiences of this abuse may include being pressured into giving informal oral consent and/or written consent to thievery, including through work-related projects. Some feel the need to be compliant and tolerate abuse to maintain employment and income. Often the individual did not fully appreciate the value of what they had created and then shared with others. Or, abuse and thievery occurred because they did not know the importance of claiming and protecting one’s original creation through having it copyrighted.

#### ***I-G) Lessons on Learning and Adhering to the Hallmark Characteristics of a True Scholar***

There is an additional lesson that arises from an analysis of the Rodgers-Rose (2023e) article:

***It is a lesson on the importance of avoiding accusations of engaging in acts of plagiarism. One can avoid accusations of plagiarism by diligently citing and referencing the ideas and concepts one has obtained from others’ written work or spoken word.***

It is vital to provide reference citations to the source of an idea or concept (i.e., last name, and the year of publication

or delivery of a speech). It is also important when writing to put in a clearly distinct and *separate* paragraph one’s original discussion, opinion, observations, and responses—remembered as “D O O R.” This practice permits getting credit for one’s own original ideas, while one builds on the prior works of others and contextualizes one’s own contributions within a larger body of literature.

As part of my academic university teaching for 40 years, I taught in all courses this strategy for avoiding accusations of plagiarism. These courses ranged from those with new undergraduates just emerging from remedial writing programs at public colleges, to doctoral students writing doctoral dissertations at an Ivy League university. Yet, all students benefitted from this focus.

Sharing my motto, I repeatedly told my doctoral students, in particular, that they should create and wear t-shirts bearing these questions:

***“Who said What? When? Where?”***

Answering these questions when writing results in the following: (1) providing a citation reference in response to the question “*who*” (i.e., author’s last name); (2) carefully providing “*what*” they said (e.g. quoted material); (3) answering the question of “*when*” they said it (i.e., year of publication or speech) in the reference citation; and (4) also indicating “*where*” they said it (i.e., name of the journal, chapter, book—or name of the conference where the speech was delivered). My motto encapsulates in a mnemonic essential training for what scholars must consistently do—as the hallmark of a true scholar.

Mentors can direct those they are mentoring to read the Rodgers-Rose (2023e) article. New scholars, in particular, must get the key lessons to: (1) protect, copyright, and—if needed—reclaim one’s original work from those who have appropriated one’s original ideas; (2) reference the written and spoken word of others via a formal citation (i.e. last name, year) when writing or speaking about those ideas; and (3) put one’s original ideas in a distinct *separate* paragraph when writing to ensure one gets credit for them. These hallmark characteristics of a true scholar can be taught and, hopefully, acquired and adhered to throughout their career.

My colleague, Dr. Arthur Whaley, is a model for being a true scholar when both writing *and speaking*. When Dr. Whaley gives a talk, throughout his presentation, as he shares information, he will very quickly, smoothly, and automatically state the source of any idea, theory, concept or research finding. Dr. Whaley will state the last name/s of the author/s of a publication, the year of publication, and the name of the journal (or book) in which it was published. This includes his own solo work or work with other authors. As information he has memorized, Dr. Whaley constantly shares during his presentations an answer to the questions: “*Who said What? When? Where?*” Meanwhile, Dr. Whaley’s presentations contain the bounty of his own original ideas and research contributions. He is a model for all to follow in aspiring to be a true scholar.

\*\*\*

Finally, this theme issue's re-publication of the original 1972 article, "*The Dominant Values of Black Culture*," [as Rodgers-Rose (2023a)] is important for the historical record. This re-publication is vital, given how others appropriated Dr. Rodgers-Rose's original ideas on Black culture without acknowledging the source of those ideas. As the true innovator of a Theory of Black Culture, Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose can hereby be acknowledged within the historical record, given what is codified in this special theme issue--as a main purpose of this issue.

## Part II: Personal Reflections—and Gratitude for the “Gift of a Map” for Negotiating Toxic Environments

In serving as editor of this special theme issue it does not escape me that I have functioned in the role of a Black intellectual. At the same time, I have been both informed and transformed by this issue's review of the life, theory, research, and scholarship of Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose. I, therefore, feel compelled to “tell the truth again and again” in this closing article; and, will attempt the Black intellectual's work of “threading the needle”—or “seeing with a fine eye through the lies of our conquerors,” as advised by Rodgers-Rose (2023d). Here, I include reference to my long history of speaking truth to power at Teachers College, Columbia University as a tenured professor.

This is an opportunity to offer my more personal final reflections on the impact of Rodgers-Rose's corpus of work. In the process, I draw upon some concepts highlighted as recurrent in the work of Rodgers-Rose, as analyzed by Lewis (2023), specifically *self-definition*, *self-identity*, *African spirituality*, and *beliefs of Ancestors*.

### ***(II-A) Truth Telling: A Massive Positive Impact by a Deep Master Teacher***

First, there is an essential truth to tell, regarding the massive positive impact of Dr. Rodgers-Rose's body of work. This truth has been readily perceived by so many participants of IBWC Annual Conferences across the decades. Speaking my truth, I found in the IBWC Annual Conferences an oasis of healing waters (See Wallace, 2023b).

This perception is due to both the unique conference model created by Dr. Rodgers-Rose and her inspirational and motivational oratory. Dr. Rodgers-Rose's voice holds sway in the conference setting, being keenly listened to in her conference opening and closing statements and across all the conference sessions. This is true whether she is delivering commentary, observations, deep master teaching, vital history, or posing timely questions for a presenter.

The truth of Dr. Rodgers-Rose being a deep *Master Teacher* is made manifest in countless conference moments.

The resultant oasis of healing waters is soaked up and absorbed by IBWC Annual Conference participants. This is especially true for those who spend most of their personal, professional, and societal lives, metaphorically, in dry hostile desert land.

### ***(II-B) Just Because You Can't See It Doesn't Mean It Isn't There: Toxic Environments***

Some environments may be considered unhealthy or toxic because they are *void of any accurate reflection or feedback regarding a Black human being's existence and contributions*. They may be depicted as toxic environments, given the prevalence of interpersonal experiences where distorted images are being “mirrored or reflected back” to Black people, or people of African descent—as well as to anyone perceived as “the diverse and different other” (See Wallace, 2003). The toxic environment may include the *invisible covert violence* of projecting stereotypes and negative and low expectations upon any “diverse and different other,” such as a Black person in that toxic environment; or upon an Indigenous individual, Person of Color, LGBTQ+ individual, or person with a disability, etc.; a person may feel talked down to, treated like a stereotype, feel stigmatized, feel excluded and invisible, and may sense hostility—as part of their experience of *invisible covert violence* in a toxic environment (Wallace, 2003).

***Just because you can't see it doesn't mean it isn't there. For example, a Black person may feel “bad vibes,” or perceive hostility, or sense a hostile climate.***

They may report feeling like they are not being heard and not seen for who they are, or what they do, or what they have to say or contribute. There is the risk that repeated exposure to distorted images, projections, and a hostile climate in such a toxic environment may challenge an individual's *self-definition* and *self-identity*; and potentially add stress to their lives from experiences of invisibility, disregard, disrespect, and oppression that may occur in that toxic environment. The stress from exposure to toxic environments may manifest as psychological and physiological states of arousal. If these states of psychological and physiological arousal are chronic and persistent (e.g., anger, tension, disappointment, sadness), then they may compromise health (Clark et al, 1999). Diffusing or ending such states of arousal necessitates the deployment of adaptive responses to the stress; for example, reaching out for social support, engaging in meditation or exercise, using humor, cognitive reframing, prayer, or the use of other spiritual coping mechanisms (Wallace, 2005). Maladaptive responses to stress that are not effective encompass excessive alcohol intake, drug use, gambling,

and overeating, etc. (Clark et al, 1999; Wallace, 2005). Thus, there is the disturbing and pervasive reality of problematic exposure to toxic environments. There is the resultant need to learn effective ways of responding; Wallace (2005) has referred to this as the need to learn practical coping responses, or racial-cultural skill acquisition.

### ***(II-C) Exposure to Toxic Deserts with Mirrors of Hard, Distorting Glass***

Just as some describe *food deserts* lacking access to nutritious food choices, there are *deserts void of any accurate reflection or feedback regarding a Black person's existence and contributions*. The Black person is not seen. To capture this, what is introduced in this article is the description of toxic environments with the metaphoric term, *toxic deserts with mirrors of hard, distorting glass*. The term incorporates part of a quote from Ralph Ellison's (1972) *Invisible Man*. As Ralph Ellison (1972) eloquently explained:

"I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me...[I]t is as though **I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass**. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me." (bold added for emphasis to words above)

The term *toxic deserts with mirrors of hard, distorting glass* seeks to capture this refusal and failure "to see me;" and capture the tendency to see instead stigmatizing stereotypes as "figments of their imagination" that drive acts of bias, discrimination, bondage, and oppression. Or, people see that which they project upon the individual. This includes the *invisible covert violence* of projecting stereotypes and negative and low expectations upon an individual. The experience of spending a considerable amount of time living, studying, and working in *toxic deserts with mirrors of hard, distorting glass* has challenged me and so many others seeking to be truly free in America. To say the least, it is an unpleasant experience. Again, just because you can't see it doesn't mean it isn't there, as in: feeling "bad vibes;" wanting to leave the environment; not wanting to return to the environment; and suffering stress reactions from time spent in the toxic environment. Or, to sum it up succinctly, one is left feeling "unwanted in the land of our birth," to quote Rodgers-Rose (2023d) who elaborated on this, below:

"The challenges faced include being unwanted in the land of our birth, in an era of growing despair, while maintaining a focus on the battle

to get back a freedom lost so long ago that we almost can't remember that freedom. Yet, to name that freedom could well be the most important thing we do in the 21st century." (p. 41)

We can see how Dr. Rodgers-Rose is speaking as a deep *Master Teacher* when she shares such wisdom. As per Lewis's (2023) interpretation, Dr. Rodgers-Rose is effectively enacting an *emancipatory embrace*—as a moral perspective wherein one receives humans eagerly and gladly by engaging humankind in liberative ways that free both self and community from bondage, oppression, and restraint.

Thus, Dr. Rodgers-Rose effectively engages all who read her work or hear her inspirational and motivational oratory to focus on the battle to get back our freedom. This is a freedom from centuries of oppression. This includes freedom from contemporary exposure to *toxic deserts with mirrors of hard, distorting glass*.

### ***(II-D) Healing Work for Self-Definition and Self-Identity from Toxic Exposure***

Perhaps one of the greatest "gifts" that Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose gives the whole of humanity is a *clarion call* to take action to improve the lives of Black people, in the aftermath of over 400 years of hate, racism, and oppression. The *clarion call* to take action includes forging and travelling a path toward freedom for one's self, one's community, all Black people, and the whole of our diverse humanity. The path toward freedom necessitates that we all engage in healing work for *self-definition* and *self-identity*. This is vital work, given exposure to *toxic deserts with mirrors of hard, distorting glass*.

### ***(II-E) The Ideal Antidote for Toxic Exposure***

What action can be taken by those who experience exposure to *toxic deserts with mirrors of hard, distorting glass*? Dr. Rodgers-Rose's (2023a; 2023e) Theory of Black Culture and provision of "*The Dominant Values of Black Culture*" permit taking healing action in response to exposure to toxic environments. This theme issue's republication of Dr. Rodgers-Rose's 1972 article, "*The Dominant Values of Black Culture*" (i.e. Rodgers-Rose, 2023a) permits dissemination and access to her *ideal antidote* for healing from exposure to toxic environments.

In essence, Dr. Rodgers-Rose provides the "gift of a map" for negotiating toxic environments. The information is timely, meeting an urgent need, given the NAACP (2023) travel advisory, warning against travel to Florida. Florida is just one example of the extent to which hostile climates have proliferated—nationally and globally.



***Indeed, the whole of Dr. Rodgers-Rose’s corpus of work, as presented in this special theme issue, holds the power of mirroring back to the reader a much truer reflection of who they are as Black individuals, in contrast to the “mirrors of hard, distorting glass” of which Ralph Ellison (1972) spoke.***

***The work of Dr. Rodgers-Rose serves to accurately reflect the truth of our being the inheritors of the culture and values of our Ancestors from ancient Egypt/Kemet—thereby providing much-needed healing to self-definition and self-identity.***

Across the decades, as scholar and actor, Dr. Rodgers-Rose has provided numerous corrective healing experiences for toxic exposure to “the lies of our conquerors,” while traveling in *toxic deserts with mirrors of hard, distorting glass*. She has guided scores and scores of learners on Educational Tours to Africa that she organized and led. She has taught hundreds of students across three decades at various universities, exposing them to her transformative publications and oratory, as shared through the *Six Voices of Former Students* in this issue (i.e., Beard, 2023; Ponder, 2023; McNair, 2023; Jenkins, 2023; Thompson-Gaddy, 2023; Chisolm, 2023). Dr. Rodgers-Rose created the International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC); and, provided the IBWC Annual Conference model, which has thrived for four decades as an oasis for healing. She shared her gift of inspirational and motivational oratory in over 200 Keynote Addresses and Speeches, while serving as a deep *Master Teacher*. In the process, Dr. Rodgers-Rose has had the “courage to tell the truth again and again,” repeatedly exposing the “lies of our conquerors,” and dispelling the false reflections of Black people from hard, distorting glass.

And, she has done so while living up to her great stature as the enstooled *Nana Obaapanyin Akosua Asantewaa Ofosua, I of Aburi, Ghana*. She is fulfilling what the Ghanaian people know as a God given destiny for the highest service as a Traditional African Royal. It is, therefore, no surprise that her path as a scholar and actor has left huge footprints in the sands of time. Her national and global impact is massive.

***Dr. Rodgers-Rose has repeatedly and convincingly provided an accurate healing reflection for our self-definition and self-identity as resilient Black people benefitting from Maat/African spirituality and the beliefs of our Ancestors.***

She has allowed herself to serve as an instrument for bringing forth a powerful healing wisdom. At the same time, for all who hear and heed her *clarion call*, Dr. Rodgers-Rose provides reconnection to Maat/African spirituality and the beliefs of our Ancestors. These are the ultimate sources of instruction for healing from exposure to *toxic deserts with mirrors of hard, distorting glass*—and for negotiating toxic environments. In sum, Dr. Rodgers-Rose delivers the *ideal antidote* for toxic exposure.

### **Conclusion: An Expression of Gratitude for Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose**

In closing, I elect to speak on behalf of a collective, first; and then for myself, personally, to express gratitude.

Dearest Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose,

First, it is with a heart full of gratitude, admiration, and love that we sincerely thank you for your *emancipatory embrace* of people of African descent, Black people, and the whole of humanity as you have engaged us all in liberative ways to free ourselves and our communities from oppression. Thank you for refocusing our attention on the “battle to get back a freedom lost so long ago that we almost can’t remember that freedom.” Thank you for providing us with the “gift of a map” for the journey to remembering that freedom, healing *self-definition* and *self-identity*, and reconnecting to Maat/African Spirituality and the beliefs of our African Ancestors; this map is contained within the body of scholarship represented in your articles in this theme issue (i.e., Rodgers-Rose, 2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2023d; 2023e)—for which we thank you.

From within your corpus of work, thank you for providing the *ideal antidote* to traveling in *toxic deserts with mirrors of hard, distorting glass* by pioneering the Theory of Black Culture and codifying *The Dominant Values of Black Culture* (Rodgers-Rose, 2023a; 2023e). Thank you for seeing us and mirroring back to us a true reflection of who we are and have been as a people of African descent living with an enduring connection to ancient Kemet and Maat/African spirituality. Thank you for this opportunity to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the 1972 publication by Aframailibrary of your article *The Dominant Values of Black Culture* with this special theme—permitting dissemination of your *ideal antidote*.

Second, speaking more personally, I thank you

for being a deep *Master Teacher* who has informed me and transformed me at a critical juncture in my life: the point in time when I complete 33 years of service as a Professor of Health Education at Teachers College, Columbia University with retirement.

My time there fits the description of *travailing in a toxic desert with mirrors of hard, distorting glass*. My reflections take me back to the 1990s when a Black female colleague told me, “I can sleep when I am anywhere in the world, but I can’t sleep when I return to Teachers College.” This was because of her return to a toxic environment where resultant stress responses led her to leave the university.

Having personally persisted across 33 years at Teachers College, Columbia University, I am grateful for Maat/African spirituality and the beliefs of my Ancestors that allowed me to negotiate a predominantly white institution within academia for over three decades. I am grateful that when I called on my Ancestors to assist me in the most difficult times they came to my aid, fortifying me, and making miracles happen.

My gratitude extends to acknowledging every act of kindness I experienced at Teachers College, Columbia University. I am grateful for having had the opportunity to lead several movements (revolutions) for positive institutional change, as I spoke truth to power again and again, often taking great risks.

Key miracles experienced include connection in 1994 to the oasis of healing in your International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC) Annual Conference model. The Ancestors orchestrated access to what I needed to endure academia year after year at the September IBWC Annual Conference event.

I am grateful for my travel to Ghana and enstoolment as the Queen Mother, *Nana Ohemaa Oparebea Agyiriwa, II, the Abradehemaa of Larteh, Ghana*. My travel to Africa inspired me to create my own diverse community for support by launching in 2003 my Research Group on Disparities in Health (RGDH), which I directed for 20 years; this permitted doctoral students in the RGDH benefitting from the African technology implemented of the communal group approach.

Thus, brightest of all, is the record of graduating 145 doctoral students from 2003-2023 through my Research Group on Disparities in Health (RGDH)—and a total of 168 doctoral graduates when including those from the early 1990s. The RGDH pipeline allowed me to sponsor more doctorates of African descent and People of Color than any other professor in the history of Teachers College. The RGDH effectively addressed the

national and global shortage of diverse doctorates via this highly successful pipeline program.

I am grateful to a large, diverse group of graduate alumni, students, faculty, staff, and members of the administration for their assistance and support across the decades.

I am grateful for the honor bestowed upon me by the President of Teachers College, Columbia University of Emeritus status, naming me the Professor Emerita of Health Education upon my September 2023 retirement.

***At the same time, alongside this deep well of gratitude, there is the record and memory of also travailing in a toxic desert with mirrors of hard, distorting glass.***

There is the record of being made invisible, of being overlooked, and being excluded. There is the record of being the target of racism, microaggressions, and the projection of stereotypes and negative and low expectations upon my person. There is the record of experiencing hate, envy, jealousy, bias, and discrimination in the toxic university environment. There is the record of feeling “bad vibes” and a hostile climate.

There is also the record of my being the first African American woman to move through the ranks and gain tenure in the 100-year history of Teachers College in Morningside Heights, Manhattan, New York, doing so in 1994; and, also the record of still being the “only one” so tenured five years later. This was before there was an increase in the presence of Black women on the faculty in the new millennium.

***Those records persist alongside the bright shining history of my many victories and joys, including those that changed policy, impacted hiring patterns, and improved the overall track record of the university on matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion.***

***Most importantly, at this time of my retirement from academia, I am grateful for being informed and transformed by you, the deep Master Teacher, Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose, given the opportunity to edit this special theme journal.***

*The theme editor task has provided me with the healing balm of intimate exposure to your corpus of work. So, I now emerge from my over three decades of exposure within academia to toxic deserts with mirrors of hard, distorting glass, seeing clearly through the “lies of our conquerors”—and, seeing clearly the truth of my being. I have regained my freedom! Yet, I remain focused on the ongoing battle for an enduring freedom for myself, my community, and all who have experienced oppression.*

*I am firmly grounded in the truth of my being a Black woman, a Queen, a Leader, and a wearer of a red dress as my personal powerful healing experience.*

I THANK YOU, with a heart full of gratitude and love!

*Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose, finally, I thank the Divine Forces that have allowed you, to persevere and succeed in your life mission for more than half a century!*

Sincerely,

Barbara C. Wallace, Ph.D.  
Special Theme Issue Editor  
Editor-in-Chief, *The Journal of Equity in Health*  
Professor Emerita of Health Education,  
Teachers College, Columbia University

Nana Ohemaa Oparebea Agyiriwa, II,  
Abradehemaa of Larteh, Ghana



At left, Dr. Barbara C. Wallace and her mother, Mrs. Cynthia C. Wallace, each wear their *red dress*.

Below, mother and daughter share laughter and love during their photo shoot in the Philadelphia Fairmount Park in early November 2022.



## References

- Chisolm, K. L. (2023). My Expression of Gratitude for Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose, *Journal of Equity in Health*, Vol 4, No 1, p. 84
- Clark, R., Anderson, N. B., Clark, V. R., & Williams, D. R. (1999). Racism as a stressor for African Americans: A biopsychosocial model. *American psychologist*, 54(10), 805.
- Cruz., K.M. (2018). “Thorndike Report: A Case for Change,” Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/Thorndike-Report>
- Ellison, R. (1972). *Invisible man*. Vintage: New York
- Jenkins, C. (2023). Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose: Celebrating 50 Years of Sharing with My Mentor, *Journal of Equity in Health*, Vol 4, No 1, p. 81
- Lewis, T.R. (2023). Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose and the Emancipatory Embrace of the HIV Community, *Journal of Equity in Health*, Vol 4, No 1, pp. 47-62
- McNair, L.D. (2023). Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose: A Force to be Reckoned With, *Journal of Equity in Health*, Vol 4, No 1, pp. 79-80
- National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. (NAACP, 2023). NAACP Issues Travel Advisory in Florida, Press Statement, May 20, 2023. Retrieved from: <https://naacp.org/articles/naacp-issues-travel-advisory-florida>
- Ponder, R.L. (2023). First Person Impression of the Impact of Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose, *Journal of Equity in Health*, Vol 4, No 1, p. 78
- Rodgers-Rose, L. (1972). The Dominant Values of Black Culture, Aframailibrary, Harlem, New York (Re-published in this journal issue as Rodgers-Rose, 2023a, pp. 8-18, as listed below:)
- Rodgers-Rose, L. (2023a). The Dominant Values of Black Culture, *Journal of Equity in Health*, Vol 4, No 1, pp. 8-18
- Rodgers-Rose, L. (2023b). The Wisdom of Our Foremothers: Reconstructing African Spirituality, *Journal of Equity in Health*, Vol 4, No 1, pp. 19-27
- Rodgers-Rose, L. (2023c). Black Women Defining Self in the 21st Century: An African Centered Perspective, *Journal of Equity in Health*, Vol 4, No 1, pp. 28-37
- Rodgers-Rose, L. (2023d). Threading the Needle: Will the Real Black Intellectual Please Stand Up?, *Journal of Equity in Health*, Vol 4, No 1, pp. 38-46
- Rodgers-Rose, L. (2023e). A Theory that Answers the Critical Question, “Do Black Americans Have a Culture?”: Reclaiming My Original Theory of Black Culture from 1972, *Journal of Equity in Health*, Vol 4, No 1, pp. 89-88
- Rose, H.D. & Rose, V.C. (2023). La Francis Rodgers-Rose: A Clarion Call of Scholar as Social Actor, *Journal of Equity in Health*, Vol 4, No 1, pp. 63-75
- Thompson-Gaddy, K. (2023). Reflections on Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose from the Perspective of a Former Rutgers University Student and Member of the International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC), *Journal of Equity in Health*, Vol 4, No 1, pp. 82-83
- Wallace, B.C. (April 12, 1999). “The Dove report: A chronology of events and collective commentary on our current college climate and recommendations.” Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/DOVE-REPORT-BY-WALLACE>
- Wallace, B.C. (2023b). Celebrating 40 Years of the International Black Women’s Congress (IBWC): Dr. La Francis Rodgers-Rose’s Conference Oasis of Healing Waters, *Journal of Equity in Health*, Vol 4, No 1, pp. 85-88
- Wallace, B.C. (2023d). *A History of Professor Emerita Barbara C. Wallace at Teachers College, Columbia University (1990-2023): Celebrating 168 Sponsored Dissertations and The Research Group on Disparities in Health Pipeline for Increasing Global and National Diversity Among Doctorates*, StarSpirit Press: Phila., PA
- Wallace, B. C. (2003). A multicultural approach to violence: Toward a psychology of oppression, liberation, and identity development. *Understanding and dealing with violence: A multicultural approach*, 3-39.
- Wallace, B. C. (2005). A practical coping skills approach for racial-cultural training, In R. T. Carter (Editor), Vol. II. *Handbook of racial cultural psychology and counseling: Training and Practice*, John Wiley