

# Cynthia Dillard, *The Spirit of Our Work: Black Women Teachers (Re)member*

Review by Neisha-Anne Green

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Dillard, Cynthia B., *The Spirit of Our Work: Black Women Teachers (Re)member* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022).

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Dear Reader,

My granny always told me that things happened when they're supposed to. What you are about to read is a review of Cynthia B. Dillard's soul capturing love letter to Black women educators. It is 2024 as I write this, but this is what I hope I would have written had I encountered this piece when it was first published in 2022. Inspired by the love and care Dr. Dillard has for us, I sought to write to the spirit of my younger self because I want to be whole.

Dear Neisha-Anne,

There is so much I have to tell you and I've delayed writing this letter for as long as I could, but if I don't write it then I fear we never become who we're fully supposed to be. I love you and I love us! That is a hard lesson to learn but the most important one cause you will struggle with it the most. It is also the lesson that even though it is the hardest, the faster you learn it the easier the rest will be.

By the time I write this Mummy has been gone for almost 7 seven years. No, she doesn't run away like she jokes she will, she dies December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017 from cancer she hides from everyone. Even though your job doesn't want you to be present, you do what you need to do and get on FMLA, tell them not in these exact words to kiss your ass and you pack your brother up in your black MDX and go to New York. You are fully present. I hear you trying not to cry and instead deflect by asking how the hell did we end up with a MDX and not the blue Subaru WRX we promised ourselves, but stay focused girl. Let the tears go cause yes you still miss her, but you (re)member her. Hard to believe that she died before Daddy, but she does. Her death will move your foundation and at first you think you're weaker for it. It will take you way too many years to realize that in fact this revised foundation is so much stronger than you realize. Things get hard and stay hard for a while. Just a few months after Mummy dies Uncle Trevor follows and so does Uncle Charles. You turn down a job offer "for the devil you already know" cause even in grief your instincts are strong! Girl, if you don't love yourself and trust your instincts!

Mummy's death comes at what seems like an inopportune time to you. A month before you fly to Chicago and become the first Black woman to give the keynote at the International Writing Center Association conference! Ain't you fancy! You are scared as you sit there waiting to be called up on stage. You panic and want to run through the

side door, but you don't. You get up on stage, barely making it through the chairs introducing you. You walk, laptop in hand, to the stage, yes you look cute. We went to White House Black Market cause Michelle Obama shops there and we splurge on a velvet blazer in our favorite rosey blush color! You look into the audience and you are nervous as hell. It's a rough start cause as tough as you are the tears are tougher. Through those tears you look into the audience and even in a packed space with thousands of people looking at you there are familiar faces. Vay and Frankie flew in from Canada! Sarah and Brian and the FIT tutors are there! Your little brother, the engineer who knows nothing about writing centers but knows about his big sister is there, and so you press on. You don't know it then, but you recognize it in 2024 as you're reading Cynthia B. Dillard's book *The Spirit of Our Work: Black Women Teachers (Re)member*, that what you do in that moment in 2017 by asking writing center folx of color to "get into this work and stay in it, but as their true authentic self" is aligned with what Dillard in 2022 calls Black Women educators to do (Re)member your ancestors! Also, remembering is not optional, (Re)searching—cause there are those times when we feel like we're missing something important, (Re)visioning—things can exist even when we don't see them, (Re)cognizing—the changes in your mind and heart, (Re)presenting—the truth will set us free and lastly (Re)claiming.

Little girl you are wondering why we're reading this book. Slow down and appreciate what happens in Chicago. Your first publication led to that keynote which leads to so many wonderful things! You are so smart you don't even know it. Still as I write this we still don't own it. Lesson 3, own who you are! You are the woman who by age 30 is Director of a Writing Center all by yourself. You keep keynoting, publishing, presenting at conferences, reviewing others' work for publication, chairing scholarship committees...oh and then you decide to go get a PhD. You've got three classes left before comprehensive exams. Don't worry yourself with what that is right now, just know that at this point in our life we are on our own path. As Vay says, "You're a peculiar bird". You're reading this book because you want your dissertation to focus on Black Women's self-recovery and this text helps you realize that in order to fully recover from all the things, and I do mean all the things (I won't tell you all of the horrifying things you endure as a Black Woman and Black Woman educator because they got us to this point), you can't shy away from your tree branches in Barbados, but also your roots on the Motherland. You don't quite know the Motherland yet, but this text gives us a roadmap to follow. From the introduction you want to sign up for one of Dr. Dillard's trips to Ghana. She's been curating these trips for many many years changing many more lives each time.

With each chapter Dr. Dillard awakens a bit more of your inner self and you start to cling to these (Re) words. You are on an insightful and purposeful journey taking note of just how resilient and determined you are. Her braided approach of autoethnography and ethnography where she uses narratives from participants along with her own brings together a fire to be whole in mind, body, spirit and even fashion! There is a renewed determination to resist anything that could be related to oppression.

In lieu of not giving you the cheat sheet to avoid all the hard things in your life, I'm giving you these five pursuits from Dr. Dillard instead. These are a much better use of your intellect and time. Put these in one of your notebooks and hold them close because "when Black women teachers (re)member, *everything* is possible" (25).

While not necessarily a linear process, (re)membering as endarkened feminist praxis is made up of five related processes:

**(Re)searching.** (Re)searching involves seeking, looking, and searching for something about Black heritage and/or culture that we believe will teach us something new. In this search, we are also open to the possibility that we might be changed in this process by looking again, by our (re)search. Whatever we are searching for within Black identity and culture, what we find also helps us see ourselves more clearly as teachers and as humans.

**(Re)visioning.** (Re)visioning involves an expansion of our current worldview of Black people, culture, and knowledge beyond solely what we can see (i.e., people, places, things) to engaging our *world sense*. This involves attention not only to what we see but to what we hear, touch, feel, and intuit, to the “evidence of things unseen.”

**(Re)cognizing.** (Re)cognizing involves the work of changing our thinking and our minds about who Black people are, what people have accomplished, and the cultural and social brilliance of Black people from the African continent to the diaspora and sometimes back again. While (re)cognizing is often manifest as a change in our minds, it also includes shifts in our heart or feelings.

**(Re)presenting.** (Re)presenting involves placing our understandings of notions of Black womanhood, Black identities and culture into the world in new and fuller ways. This includes how we present the length and breadth of Black culture and heritage in the world through our bodies, minds, and spirits. These acts of (re)presenting can be understood as a kind of truth-telling or a reckoning to right historical wrongs.

**(Re)claiming.** (Re)claiming involves going back (and forward) to lay claim to the legacy of Black/African people and to take your place within or in relation to this legacy (21-22)

I predict these five pursuits are what we’ve been searching for.

At the close of class yesterday, one of your classmates reminded you that you bring a Caribbean perspective to the African-American experience. For you, you aren’t African-American but the oppressor only sees skin color so for you this can be both enduring in the times of oppression and exuberant in times of happiness. Remember to (re)member, remember to love yourself, remember to trust your instincts, remember to own who you are and now that you have it, remember all those (re) words from Dr. Dillard because you are worthy and no where near your full potential yet!

I love you, Neisha-Anne

Neisha-Anne Shanese Green

(ps. They will disrespect the hyphen in your name, but keep signing it!)

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