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From Childhood through Adulthood to Godhood: Trodding the African Ancestral Path to Become a Shining Star of Ourstory

Salim Kenyatta
University of Missouri-St. Louis, sk87f@umsystem.edu

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Salim Jahbriel Kenyatta

B.A., History, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1999
M.A., Secondary Teacher Education, Roosevelt University, 2004

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Advisory Committee

Thomasina Hassler, Ph.D.
Chairperson

Kenton Mershon, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Keith Miller, Ph.D.
Committee
Member

Acknowledgment

I offer this work as a form of gratitude to the Most High. Through this service of devotion, I have learned so much from the most excellent teacher. Although this journey has been difficult, I appreciate the blessings and lessons gained from this peregrination.

An African proverb tells us that people who lack the knowledge of their pasts are like a tree without roots. So, in the spirit of remembering our roots, I pour this libation to my ancestors, the workers of the past, so that we may learn from them. We pour to honor the importance of family and friends. We raise our cup to God to show our reverence for the source of our lives.

We use cool water to symbolize life's continuity and to purify and nourish our souls. Omi tutu, ana tutu, tutu ile, tutu Laroye. Mojuba Babami Esu-Elegba. Mojuba Iyami Yeye Oshun, Moforibale gbogbo Orisa.

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needed to give your offspring a chance for betterment. I thank you for your courage, faith, stories, and beauty.

To my father for the sacrifices you endured to provide for our clan, I give thanks. What happens to a dream deferred? Does it wither away like a raisin in the sun? So many of your dreams died as you maintained a foundation for our family. After the ascendency of Grandpa SW, you became the cornerstone of our family, and I appreciate and understand your sacrifices. I saw the pains, isolation and burdens you faced having to bear a load that you were not ready to carry, but you did it unselfishly.

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Abstract

This autoethnographic narrative examines the importance of conceiving and sharing liberating stories, and participating in independent communal training processes that advance young African American males' psychosocial and mental development. To bring my analyses to light, I applied the foundational frameworks of African Worldview and Critical Race Theory to my research to uncover many of the influences that helped me evolve from boyhood (nescient) to manhood (laborer) and later to Godhood (master who is in union with all).

Employing the autoethnographic methodology enabled me to share key points in my educational journey, which propelled my transformation. This contemplative engagement was a moving meditation that revealed both my miseducation in America's racial caste system and the process that was critical to my liberation from a path of self-destruction to the road of excellence.

My findings highlight the guidance, social connections, mentorship and actions I needed to not only survive, but more importantly thrive. This journey involves reconnecting with the cultural and spiritual best practices from my great African past to create healthy communities in the present that positively transforms the future. Learning, in this context, created healthy spaces that helped me to develop a productive life story, and ultimately a personal trajectory of love, peace and happiness.

Term Usage: African Worldview, Autoethnography, Black Space, Cage Buster, Chicken Coop Complex, Critical Race Theory, Djeli, Dojo, Eurocentric Worldview, Mistaken Identity, Msafiri. Njia, Ourstory, Self-fulfilling Prophecy, Storydoer, White Space.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Eagle's Tale

Once upon a time, as the story goes, an eagle's egg was snuggled comfortably in a nest perched high upon a mountain cliff. One day after the mother and father eagle left the nest to find sustenance, a heavy wind storm began to crash down upon the mountain. These tumultuous winds blew hard enough to push the nest off the ledge, causing the nest to fall through the trees and land on the side of a road. Shortly after the nest hits the ground, a farmer noticed the egg lying before his path. The farmer felt lucky to have found this miracle; mistook the eagle egg within the nest for a chicken's egg, placed the nest into his truck to be carried home, and added it to his hennery. After several weeks, the egg hatched and assumed, to the best of its ability, the domesticated role of a chicken. After years of acculturation and assimilation, the eaglet learned to imitate the ways and actions of other chickens and pecked for grain, worms, and dung found on the ground. One day an elder eagle searching for a meal of chickens took notice of an odd yet familiar bird and flew down to obtain a closer view of the scene. Upon arrival, he noticed the eaglet's bazaar actions and asked the eaglet why he was living among chickens instead of flying high in the sky. The eaglet replied, "I'm not an eagle. I'm a chicken like the others!" After the elder eagle made fun of the eaglet, he carried him away from the farm's chicken coop up toward the mountaintop to show him other eagles in their natural habitat that looked like him flying gracefully in the air. The elder eagle looked down at the eaglet and said, "Young eagle, you are living outside your purpose and you are far from home." After a few moments of conversation, the elder eagle persuaded the eaglet to join the clan and learn how to be true to his authentic path and not return to the chicken coop to live amongst the chickens. After several moments, the young eagle realized he fit

in perfectly amongst the other eagles and was no longer an outcast. He accepted the apprenticeship of learning to be an authentic eagle. Slowly he was taught the rudimentary skills of flying, hunting, focusing, and providing. After the eaglet learned of his true nature and exercises his dormant flight skills, he never returned to the chicken coop. He continued following the path of soaring high in the sky as his ancestors did since time immemorial.

The Eagle's Tale written above was synthesized from material taken from *The African Eagle Story*, *Fly Eagle Fly*, and *The Eagles Who Thought They Were Chickens*, all were versions of a tale called *The Eagle That Would Not Fly* written by Dr. James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey (Armah, 2006; Chinweizu, 1987; Tolson, 1965; Wynn, 1998). James Aggrey was a Ghanaian educator and intellectual who wrote the story as a lesson for Africans to stop mimicking the ways of Americans and Europeans and return to their true African identities (Aggrey, 1988; Smith, 1929). This parable came to my attention during a conversation with my second mother, Mama Belle, on being true to one's authentic inner being instead of being caught in the web of material influence (Aggrey, 1998; Vivekananda, 1920). This story is so important to me because, as a Black man in this country, I was taught to assimilate into a society that failed to support and recognize the humanity of African Americans. Just like chickens who are domesticated birds with limited flying capabilities, my experience growing up in a city like Chicago was structured in a way that limited the reality of my potential until I was able to leave the comforts of home in search of my true identity and new opportunities (Campbell, 2004; Eliade, 1964).

Just as the carcasses of chickens are used to provide sustenance for meat-eaters or used as objects for sacrificial rituals, as a youth, I was unaware that my black body was aimed for the cemetery, incarceration, homelessness, or arrested development by the majoritarian society reminiscent of the Funkadelic's title song off the Album *America Eats Its Young* (Andrews, 2021; Clinton & Greenman, 2014; Coates, 2015; Perkins, 1993). Too many Black youth, especially the males I knew growing up, were unaware of their authentic potential and cultural identity. As a result, many of them were eaten alive by the ills of life (Hare & Hare, 1985; Kunjufu, 1982; Majors & Billson, 1992). Most of the males in my family have spent some time in the penal institution; myself included (Alexander, 2010; DeGruy, 2005). I grew up witnessing the devaluation of the Black body and have seen real-life examples of Black males who died before me. I knew others who were either senselessly murdered or died way before their time because they internalized the notion that their bodies were expendable, inferior, and worthless, so they acted according to a *self-fulfilling prophecy* myth (Akbar, 1998; Coates, 2015; Kunjufu, 1982). The myth of the self-filling prophesy is a false narrative promoted by the Eurocentric media markets that brand Black people in stereotypical roles of being lazy, impulsive, clownish, and uncivilized criminals with low mental capacity (Akbar, 1996; Ani, 1980; Burrell, 2009). Aggrey argues that people of African origins are not chickens as they were misled to believe in the narratives told to them by Western society; moreover, they are eagles waiting to learn to soar (Chinweizu, 1987; Jakes, 2017). As an incumbent champion of African progressive development, Aggrey (1998) was a cage buster (pioneer) who left us with the following words:

> My people of Africa, we were created in the image of God, but men have made us think we are chickens, and we still think we are, but we are eagles. Stretch forth your wings and fly! Don't be content with the food of chickens.

The following story comes from my early childhood. It reflects a time in my life when I was unaware of my true cultural identity, which put me on track to what is called the *school-to-prison pipeline*, which means if a young black boy is not adequately educated and socialized in this country, he is likely in spend time within a correctional institution (Alexander, 2010).

Little Ghetto Boy – The Backstory

In the third month of my third-grade year, students from Common Unity Elementary School, located on the Westside of Chicago in a predominately Black community, were selected to participate in a city-wide desegregation program (Danns, 2011). The target school, North Pole Elementary, was nestled on the city's Northside in an Irish/Italian neighborhood. I was 7 or 8 when 35 to 40 students from my school were selected to participate in this deseg program, including my older cousin Saturn. The bus rides to North Pole Elementary drove us beyond recognizable neighborhood landmarks that we were accustomed to seeing into a somberly unfamiliar world. We rode in deafening silence without knowing what horrors awaited us.

Our parents were sold the myth that intelligent students of color living in the inner-city needed white schools to help them obtain a better education, which would supposedly have equated to a better life away from our communities of origin. Believing this, our parents unknowingly left us to fend for ourselves as we battled heartless educational stepmothers and fathers. On my first day of school in this social experiment, I

was eager, yet oblivious to my participation in the first step of a rites-of-passage into *white space* (Anderson, 2015; Anderson, 2022). I was brutally assaulted by a group of white upper-classmen who afterward felt compelled to regurgitate their feelings of disgust by spewing peppered statements upon my being, "What the hell are you doing in our school? We don't want you here! Go back to where you came from, nigger!!" (Sue et al., 2007).

Injured, physically and emotionally, I lay defenseless on the floor in the middle of the hallway in a fetal position and cried to myself. To make matters worse, as we left the school building, at the end of the day, our school bus was violently attacked by the students' parents and neighborhood hooligans who threw bricks, rocks, and bottles at us while screaming obscenities. The parents insisted that we return to where we came from because they did not want us to attend school with their children. The tension, torment, and displays of aggression were so extreme that our school administrators were forced to call the police to escort our school bus out of the neighborhood during our first several weeks. Imagine the anguish I felt outside and inside the school during these brutal assaults by white adults and children. Imagine the emotions of a little boy who realized that not only was I different, but my body was not welcomed and was socialized to be inferior (Coates, 2013).

I was forced to endure acts of terror and cold-hearted neglect in order to get an education. I received an education, but its lessons centered on self-hate, self-defense, and eurocentrism (DeGruy, 2005). I was just a child! Nevertheless, I was found guilty as a black child because of my complexion (Diangelo, 2018). This experience reminds me of what writer Walter Dean Myers (1999) explains in his book *Monster*:

> Well, frankly, nothing is happening that speaks to your being innocent. Half of those jurors, no matter what they said when we questioned them when we picked the jury, believed you were guilty the moment they laid eyes on you. You are young, you are Black, and you are on trial. What else do they need to know? (p.78).

We were guilty of being Black in white space, and the cost to be paid was our childhood innocence (Anderson, 2022). My experience at North Pole Elementary School was the first time in my life that I realized I was Black and that my color was not ideal and appreciated (Alexander, 2010; Muhammad, 1965). During this time, I learned that white space was a different world that did not care for little Black boys and girls (Anderson, 2015; Anderson, 2022).

This school was not the beloved Common Unity Elementary, populated with people who took pride in our shared racial and cultural identity. No, this was public education at its finest – a school that reinforced daily that my kind of people was nothing more than a race of uncivilized heathens (Wilson, 1993; Wright, 1984). This sadistic mistreatment was a bitter pill to swallow for a Black child who was politely lied to by smiling white faces that he needed this educational experience in order to gain better opportunities than he would have received from his neighborhood school (Armah, 2006; Bassey, 1999; Some, 1995). My very existence threatened their comfortable illusion, and I was seen as one who needed to be kept in check by every available means, which included: beatings, bullying, name-calling, racially biased curricula, tracking, special education designations, and harsh classroom and school management practices (Sue et

al., 2007). In white space, my blackness was reviled in practice, policy, pedagogy, and procedure (Anderson, 2022; Diangelo, 2018; Majors & Billson, 1992; Perkins, 1986).

What is so interesting about this recollection is that in third grade, I went from being one of the top-performing students at Common Unity Elementary to becoming a low achiever in the fourth grade at North Pole Elementary. Consequently, even within a hostile environment, I soared in third grade because I had an inspirer for a teacher who saw me as human.

During my fourth-grade year at North Pole Elementary, I experienced the worst teacher a child could encounter. This woman was so callous in her interactions with me that it seemed only fitting to call her Ms. Crabtree in hindsight. Ms. Crabtree was a young, blond-haired teacher who created an exclusionary climate in her classroom by assigning me to sit in the back of the class for the whole year. She knew I needed glasses to view the board and should have been seated in the front; however, it was of no concern to her. Moreover, placing me in the back row enabled her to treat me like I was auditioning for the lead role in Ralph Ellison's (1952) book, *The Invisible Man*. Since I was totally out of sight, I could be easily out of mind.

In Crabtree's class, I was on my own and seen as a degenerate. During one of our special projects, Ms. Crabtree directed the class to work on a Family Heritage research project where students explored their ancestry. This project was a sight to behold, as bright-eyed and energetic Anglo-American students enthusiastically ran to the library searching for material about Italy, Ireland, England, Poland, Scotland, and other European nations and towns. These white students were supplied with abundant resources on European history that they could use to research their family origins. In contrast, the

only sources of information given to African American students came in the form of a small paragraph and accompanying photo in an old *National Geographic* magazine that depicted a cartoonish African-looking figure climbing up a tree to fetch a coconut (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2016). A second source was obtained from an ancient encyclopedia that featured three paragraphs on the history of African Americans. It was a brief history that began in the jungles of Africa and ended with slavery. The assumed lack of Black people demonstrating a civilized history embarrassed me to my core, and as Diane Millis (2019) explains:

> Each of us is born into a particular constellation of narratives, an assortment of taken-for-granted ideas and beliefs. These stories that we receive from our family, faith tradition(s), culture, and society become the lens through which we view reality. However, for the first decade or more of our lives, we are largely unconscious of the stories that hold; we are also unaware of their impact on both our identity and our agency. (p.10).

One of the few times Ms. Crabtree talked with me directly, outside of her daily redirections to work alone and figure it out, I asked the question, "How do I write a full three-page report using these little scraps of information?" She replied, "That is why it is called research. You have to search and research to find the information." I added curiously, "What if the library has nothing available to assist me with the report? What do I do?" Her condescending reply was, "Well smart guy, I guess, you are going to have to figure it out!" Well, I did not figure it out. Furthermore, I was humiliated by the project and frustrated by my teacher's lack of compassion, assistance, and culturally relevant resources (Sue et al, 2007). She assumed I could create gold from straw as in the

Rumpelstiltskin fairy tale. As a form of passive resistance, I welcomed my receipt of a failing grade for that project with a smirk (Asante, 2002). Inside, however, I felt ashamed of my people and myself. The Family Heritage project planted an early seed of self-hatred and a lack of respect for my race and others. (Woodson, 1933).

Welcome to the Terror Dome (Room 105)

After several traumatic racial incidents at North Pole Elementary School, I was strongly encouraged not to return for the start of 5th grade (Diangelo, 2018). I was happy to return to my school of origin, Common Unity Elementary School. Unfortunately, before I arrived at my desired destination, I was persuaded to attend Holy Water Catholic School for several months, ending in a big fight and expulsion.

Upon my return to Common Unity Elementary School, I was placed in a classroom with a no-nonsense, middle-aged, Anglo-American woman who seemed out of touch with the African American boys of the classroom, especially ones who had just recently returned battle-scarred from the frontlines of desegregation. As a result, I returned tainted, angry, confused, unsupported, and shell-shocked (DeGruy, 2005). The tension from the interaction between my 5th-grade teacher and me was so disturbing that her abusive and condescending behavior eventually pushed me to the edge. One day she pushed me out of my chair, which provoked me to throw that same chair at her while showering her with verbal abuse. I do not remember the immediate consequence. However, she earned every bit of my resistance. She belittled me, and I was determined not to take any more of her bullying. Needless to say, this incident did not go over well with the school administrators. Shortly afterward, the school suggested that I receive an Individualized Education Program (I.E.P.) and recommended that I enter room *105*, the

self-contained special education classroom, along with earning the label B. D. for behavior disordered (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010; Majors & Billson, 1992).

The mere mention of 105 classroom brought disgust and dread to mind for me and most of the students and staff of Common Unity Elementary School. The boys of 105 terrorized our school like bullies, ruffians, and sons of mayhem (DeGruy, 2005). Without warning or prompt, they would attack any random boy or group of boys as well as sexually assault any of the pretty girls who were either too passive or failed to submit to their groping marauds (Hare & Hare, 1985; Leary, 2005). These boys were boastful and arrogant in their aggression and unable to see that their antics would eventually lead many of them into jail cells or early graves (Akbar, 1996; Perkins, 1993).

At the beginning of sixth grade, I was placed in room 105, which became a tribulation, to say the least. My early experiences were fraught with sexual grooming, bullying, and physical violence that was unleashed upon me by the other boys in the class (Kunjufu, 1986; Perkins, 1986). After several weeks of this unwarranted harassment, I could no longer endure the torture and punishment. My anger management issues – a by-product of my experiences in desegregation – emerged out of my victimhood like the Hulk, and I eventually beat up two bullies simultaneously (Little, 1996). On that day, I earned all the boys' respect in the classroom. I was no longer a victim.

Room 105 was a place where gladiators were bred, and if you survived, you earned your respect not only in school but also in the community. Arguments and physical altercations broke out inside the classroom several times each day, and once we were released for recess, we fought with other classrooms. What is interesting about this experience is that after I won the war with the classroom bullies, they left me alone, but

they started bringing the ruckus to the new boys in the class and with other schoolmates who would not fight back (Little, 1996). Their skullduggery put me in an awkward position where I could try to help the underdogs and make it easier for them or become a pariah by *going along to get along* and becoming a bully (Akbar, 1985). I became both! I would play the role of superhero to help the other students needing a mediator or ally, but on rare occasions, I rallied with the *troops*, especially when fighting the seventh and eighth-grade boys on the playground (Ani, 1980). At recess, we were the *105 Boys*. Our room was our gang, and many boys in the class were later scouted as recruits for the major league neighborhood street fraternities known as the notorious Conservative Vice Lords, Gangster Disciples, Latin Kings, Black P. Stones, and 4 Corner Hustlers and, unfortunately, I along with so many members of my family were included in this process (Armah, 2006; Hare & Hare, 1985; Major & Billson, 1992; McCall, 1994; Moore & Williams, 2012; Perkins, 1986; Perkins, 1993; Some, 1995).

Problem Statement – Mistaken Identity

Later in life, I probed the lives of most of the fellows in Room 105 to discover that most of them turned to a life of crime and spent significant amounts of time in jail. This conclusion caused me to wonder what needs to be created to save Black youth like the ones I attended school with or played with in our neighborhood from a path of destruction and mistaken identity. I call it *mistaken identity* because many within the Black community have yet to find a way to deconstruct themselves from the stereotypical images projected upon them by the Western white supremacist worldview and reconstruct an authentic self-affirming African identity, similar to the eagle who mistakenly identified itself as a chicken (Akbar, 1998; Hilliard, 1997).

Based on my experience, without proper guidance, African American youth are socially conditioned to prey upon themselves – like *crabs in a barrel* (Degruy, 2005; Welsing, 1991; Wright, 1984). Misdirection or lack of proper direction in life can arrest the development of Black youth and produce the psychopathologies of immaturity and selfishness; the result is a perpetuation of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Akbar, 1998; Kunjufu, 1982). Many of our youth mistakenly internalized these negative images and later failed to earn the rights, honors, privileges, and responsibilities of mature adulthood (Hare & Hare, 1985; Hill, 1992; Hilliard, 2002; Major & Billson, 1992). Their cognitive and social development are stymied, and many are forced to lean on the care and generosity of others, especially from the state and federal government (Alexander, 2010; DeGruy, 2005; Muhammad, 1965). This mistaken identity inspires them to create fraudulent life stories instead of biographies that are genuine and purposeful in accordance with their highest potential (Millis, 2019; Tzu, 1983).

Ill-equipped, many of the Black community's youth are left to fight – often unsuccessfully and without allies – against educational and legal systems that are well-organized and armed (Alexander, 2010). Thus, it is predictable that they have few options to thrive, especially with limited soft and hard skills, and many seek to survive by selling drugs or playing sports (Smalls, 1994; Kunjufu, 1982). I was not savvy enough to engage in a longtime enterprise of street drug dealing, and I was not physically coordinated enough to be an adequate star athlete. So with limited doors of opportunity and based on my experience living in Chicago, I barely escaped the path of destruction that led so many Black youths I knew to become lost due to mistaking and rejecting their real identities for negative scripts marketed to them by the media (Burrell, 2009; Llaguno

Velarde, 2018; Wilson, 1993; Woodson, 1933). A cornucopia of resources and sacrifices was utilized to help me mature and reconstruct my path while undergoing an intentional development process to cultivate my self-knowledge and self-discipline. These resources helped me to create a strong sense of African identity, purpose and responsibility for myself and my community (Appiah, 1996; Hilliard, 1997).

Purpose of the study:

The primary purpose of my research is to critically examine the tools and experiences I used to repair the mistaken identity and distorted perceptions I had of myself and other people of the African diaspora. First, my investigation explores the influence of the Western worldview and its negative social conditioning on the identity of African Americans, including myself, and the path I chose to tread to keep from becoming a negative statistic. Secondly, my work aims to identify solutions I used to re-author and create an alternative life story that allowed me to achieve liberation and self-determination in an oppressive climate (Browder, 1989; Millis, 2019).

Keywords and definitions

- African Worldview – An instrument of empowerment and critical learning that includes the appreciation of the voices and contributions of African Diasporic people
- Autoethnography – A qualitative research method that has an author analyze his/her personal experiences to understand a larger cultural context within which s/he operates.
- Black Space – A setting that centers around African Americans who identify or appear *Black*.
- Cage Buster – A person who can recognize obstacles, find solutions, and manage ways to go forward and make great things happen for themselves and others.
- Chicken Coop Complex – A metaphor to describe a condition where a group of people are confined to a constricting and dismally negative space that oppresses the creative and productive potential of those within this state of being
- Critical Race Theory – A legal framework founded on the idea that race is a social invention used to oppress people of color.
- Djeli – A term taken from the Bambara people of West Africa, meaning storyteller.
- Dojo – A designated area in which martial arts are practiced.
- Eurocentric Worldview – A perspective that centers its interest around people of European descent.
- Mistaken Identity – A delusion or crisis where a person assumes the characteristics or identity of another being.

- Msafiri – A Swahili word used to describe a person who travels or goes on a journey.
- Njia – A Swahili term that means *the way*.
- Ourstory – Stories told from the interest of the storyteller
- Self-fulfilling Prophecy – A term used to describe how false expectations can lead to their affirmation for an individual or collective.
- Storydoer – A person who makes things happen that later become stories.
- White Space – A setting that centers around people of European Americans who identify or appear *white*.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Djeli's – The master storytellers

I am a descendant of people who practiced the science of stories called in the Bambara oral tradition *djeli,* one who frequently demonstrates the power of stories for imparting knowledge, entertainment, and meaning in this life (Ba, 1981; Gates & Tater, 2018). Djeli is a term used to describe a person who is a master in the craft of communicative arts. These storytellers are giants who are extraordinary in their delivery and are responsible for maintaining the living traditions, self-identity, and memory of the people as well as for teaching wisdom that helped community members maintain an honorable and spiritual life (Ba, 1981). As skilled craftworkers, djelis play multiple roles, including those of storyteller, singer, writer, teacher, and advisor, to preserve traditional knowledge, cultural inheritance, and a remembrance of the way towards oneness (Armah, 1973; Hilliard, 2002). In my journey, I have come to appreciate the truth of the djeli legacy I inherited.

As a youth, I used to get goosebumps from hearing incredible stories my mother and her siblings told at our various family gatherings. My mother had fifteen sisters and brothers, which made our holidays and other social gatherings quite entertaining. Being a member of a large family made it all the better because it encouraged healthy competition in our clan. These stories helped us reconstruct memories, promote confidence, and develop a collective identity that helped us stand out in our neighborhood and the schoolyard (Ba, 1981).

My grandmother was a master storyteller who told grand tales that were both lessons and blessings that offered a frail blueprint to help us on our journeys in life and

would later serve as examples to encourage us to become authors of our own life stories (McHugh, 2006). Grandma knew well that the cruel ways of living *in the world* could overcome a person not anchored in guiding principles or adequately prepared to survive and thrive in urban environments (Kimbro, 2005). However, Grandma wanted her stories to positively affect our futures and help us realize our infinite potential. Although my grandmother did not possess more than a sixth-grade education, she used her faith to show her things that were hidden and were not quite as they appeared. As a result, we learned to walk by faith, to place God in the center of all our ways and actions, and to value our African/African American folk traditions and cultural identity (Myers, 2013; Prabhupada, 1972). Unfortunately, I did not have enough actualized characters around me to reinforce the message my grandmother imparted.

My maternal grandmother Mariam was a great djeli. As an oral traditionalist, she used the oral arts to transmit wisdom to my family. She was a verbal shaman who used her tools of the Bible, folklore, and performance art to connect her past and other messages to our reality. Her stories resurrected a latent understanding that we were part of God's being and should never cut our umbilical cord to the divine force of life (God) (Washington, 2019).

It is hard for outsiders to oppress or manipulate people who demonstrate a strong cultural identity, know the power of their ancestral stories, and are not afraid to bring them to life (Wilson, 1993). My confidence was molded by my grandmother, mother, father, aunts, uncles, and the rest of my family. They wrapped me up in the mythic science of stories, and I carried these stories close to my heart, like sacred talismans (Campbell, 1988; Campbell, 2004; Martin, 2012). Our oral traditions have been

manifested in many ways and have served numerous functions since ancient times (James, 1993). For example, these stories and myths were used to interpret the universe, resolve natural and physical phenomena, teach morals, maintain cultural values, pass on survival methods, and understand God (Gross & Barnes, 1989; Mbiti, 1969).

What happens to a person when he or she is constantly bombarded with fallacious stories about the self? Again, the notion of mistaken identity comes to mind!

False narratives – Acts of character assassination

The Honorable Elijah Muhammad (1965) was a master teacher and compelling storyteller who urged Black people not to live in the darkness of the falsehoods promoted by the dominant society. Using stories he extracted from the Bible, Quran, folklore, and current events, Elijah Muhammad inspired Black people to search and follow the light of truth, which would end the fallacies they were taught by the Western patriarchal system that distorted the identity and sense of self (Armah, 2018; Haley, 1964; Myers, 1993; Muhammad, 1973). Thus, false narratives were used by the Western power structure to control, mislead and misguide the people (Hilliard, 2002; Kakutani, 2018). These fabrications aimed to justify a narrative that African Americans descended from primitive people who were nothing until Europeans ventured into Africa on civilizing missions to baptize the so-called savages into semi-civilization (Karenga, 1982; Rodney, 1972; Williams, 1987). Maya Angelou (1997) explains the impact false narratives have had on Black people:

> There is one primary explanation for the old negative image of Africa and all things African held by so many. Slavery profiteers had to convince themselves and their clients that the people they enslaved were little better than beasts. They

> could not admit that the Africans lived in communities based upon sociopolitical structures no better or worse than their European counterparts of the time. (p.14).

Wilson (1993) draws our attention to the greed that fueled the traders to persuade slave buyers that the Africans were primitive people who, by God's divine authority, needed and deserved to be oppressed. Scarcity was also a significant factor for Westerners to promote fallacious narratives of Africans to the world who needed to be saved from a culture of worshipping idols and tricked into believing in a white savior who would grant them peace and plenty in the hereafter (Muhammad, 1965; Myers, 1993). Commenting on the Occidental's use of fabrications, Jomo Kenyatta (1965) argues:

> The Europeans based their assumptions on the conviction that everything the Africans created or thought was evil. The missionaries endeavored to rescue the depraved souls of the Africans from the "eternal fire"; they set out to uproot the African, body and soul, from his old customs and beliefs, put him in a class by himself, with all his tribal traditions shattered, and his institutions trampled upon. (p. 259).

DeGruy (2005) identifies the deception and impact that the Maafa—the period of the African Enslavement holocaust—continues to affect the self-image of African American people. During the Maafa, enslaved Africans were not allowed to tell their stories. Instead, they were fed stories of themselves as villains and limited beings; therefore, they were socially engineered to become fractured beings, unaware of the wholeness of their past stories (Ani, 1994; Myers. 1993).

A broader perspective was adopted by Carter G. Woodson (1933), who examined the adverse effects false narratives had on Black people in his book entitled *The Miseducation of the Negro.* This text, centers on the premise that "When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions" (p.84), which is to say extraneous forces are negatively influencing the thought process of African Americans. Unfortunately, this notion leads many African Americans to take pride in their ignorance and act as operatives of their demise (Wilson, 1993).

Western/Eurocentric worldview

Asante (2002) is critical of how Westerners used a Eurocentric and white supremacist lens to inundate African diasporic people with fallacies that influenced them to disregard their cultural and historical traditions. By saturating the school curriculums and mass media with negative images of African and positive images of Westerners, Africans became decentered and dislocated (Asante, 2002). Brittany Cooper (2018) further explains the role of the Western worldview in influencing Black people to uphold a decentered existence:

> Before we thoroughly learn to love ourselves, most people of color in the United States learn to exist as supporting characters and spectators in the collective stories we watch and read, ask us to put aside their whiteness and relate to their very universal human struggles around conflict with the world, the self and others. The problem is that only the experiences of white people is treated as universal. Meanwhile, Black movies, shows, and books are typically seen as limited and particular. (p. 52).

Rodney's (1972) examination of the canon of Western literature revealed its aim to colonize Africans and introduce the notion of white supremacy. In our school system, Black people were victims of educational malpractice where they were taught to be inferior to white people (Akbar, 1996; Akbar, 1998; Ani, 1994; Carmichael & Thelwell, 2011; Chinweizu, 1987; DeGruy, 2005). In the church system, Africans were indoctrinated to believe in the divine providence of God and his son and the notion that psychologist Amos Wilson (1993) calls *the Ham Mythology*, which is the myth and propaganda campaign that asserts the theory that Diasporic Africans came from an uncultivated place called Africa and they were descendants of Ham and divinely cursed by Noah and meant to be conquered by the White race (Karenga, 1982; Wilson, 1993; Wright, 1984). Simultaneously, the Ham Myth was an integral part of the propaganda campaigns used by the Anglo-ruling class to promote a story of themselves as superior while simultaneously devaluing and de-Africanizing Black people (Wilson, 1993).

In this country, the Western media's new outlets taught the masses to worship the Western patriarchal system and turn a blind eye to the subjugation of Black people, women, children, the poor, and other people of color (Alexander, 2010; Burrell, 2009; Rodney, 1972). In the school system, Africans learned to be quiet and condone the appropriation of others' land, resources, and property because it was manifest destiny (Zinn, 1980). Theorists have long argued that the present Western educational system was designed to keep the Africans and indigenous people underdeveloped and in perpetual peonage (Hilliard, 2002; Johansen & Maestas, 1980; Leary, 2005).

African worldview

The first theoretical framework used in this investigation is the *African worldview*. The African worldview aims to resurrect African Americans' high self-esteem and cultural identity (Hilliard, 1997). It cultivates an appreciation for African diasporic people's present and future and their link to African ancestral roots in Africa (Asante, 1988). In addition, it helps African diasporic people understand the profound philosophical teachings practiced before their experience with colonization, enslavement, and being forced-fed and made to mentally swallow the *white self-esteem curriculum* (Asante, 1991). Through this discipleship, we learn not only knowledge of self but also self-mastery. Writer Chinweizu (1987) encourages Black people to understand how the:

> Repossession of our African tradition would bring us such far-reaching benefits, and especially help to restore our cultural confidence, Euro-hegemonists are strongly opposed to our reclaiming our illustrious African traditions. And they spare no trick or lies in their effort to keep the modern African intellectual enslaved to the Western tradition. Their basic strategy has been to deny, suppress or devalue the African tradition where they cannot steal it outright and declare it their own. They complement this by advertising their own parochial tradition as the universal tradition. And whenever their strategy is forcefully challenged, they mount a rearguard action, setting up roadblocks and diversionary signposts to impede our rout of their forces. (p. 276).

Just as there was a process to turn the identity of proud Africans into the enslaved, the African worldview is a process to re-Africanized Black people from the auspices of the slave mentality and restore them to their natural and ancestral identities; thus, the

disempowered find and embrace their power (Haley, 1964; Muhammad, 1965; Wilson, 1993). The African worldview is an enlightened value system centering on maintaining and strengthening the mental, spiritual, and cultural muscles of our people who were victims of colonial-minded atrophy (Armah, 2018; Hilliard, 2011; Muhammad, 1965).

The work and theories of The Honorable Elijah Muhammad have been used as a guide to help Black people uplift themselves and to aid in a better understanding of the oppressor's role in miseducating the masses and perpetuating an inferior complex (Haley, 1965; Knight, 2007; Muhammad, 1965; Wilson, 1993). Elijah Muhammad (1965) said his work was to wake up Black people—the sleeping giant from a position of being spiritually and intellectually *blind, deaf and dumb*—to becoming the sole controllers of their destinies. In his seminal work, *Message to the Blackman*, Muhammad (1965) exhorts Black people to learn to love themselves, do for themselves, and stop waiting for others to serve as superheroes to save them when they have the power to liberate themselves. Furthermore, he suggests that they embark upon a journey to gain self-knowledge that imparts the importance of social and political education while becoming aware of their suppressed creativity as they learn to overcome oppression (Muhammad, 1965; Muhammad, 1973).

To obtain an African worldview, one must learn and journey back into our past, pick up the valuable tradition, information, and culture that our people created, and use it to innovate new ways for our growth and development (Akbar, 1996; Armah, 2006; Asante, 1998; Browder, 1992; Fu-Kiau, 1991; Hillard, 1998; Martin, 2017; Myers, 1993). An African Centered Worldview encourages us to see the richness and beauty of our

traditional language, culture and thought as Black people (Ani, 1980; Asante, 1988; Myers, 2013). As Ayi Kwei Armah (2006) explains to educators:

> If we study the available information, then use it in our work as writers or critics or teachers, we will create conditions for the birth of a new generation of African intellectuals immune to the crippling effects of an education designed to poison our minds with too little information, of unconscionably low quality. That European colonial education injected paralyzing identity poisons into African psyches is no longer news. The relevant fact is that we have an antidote to the poisons: if we step outside the prison of our formal education, we can look at African realities, and from our own well-researched perceptions build up an accurate vision of our world, a worldview. (p. 135).

The phenomenal work of Dr. Linda James Myers (1993) synthesizes the Pan-African concepts of Malcolm X with a holistic perspective that includes a spiritual lens. She is a professor in the Departments of African American and African Studies and Psychiatry at Ohio State University. Dr. Myers' work focuses on *Optimal Psychology*, which encompasses a spiritual identity, holistic healing practices, and the authentic culture of African Diasporic people. Myers (2013) provides an in-depth analysis of the healing work of the African worldview, as evident in the statement:

> For health and healing, the necessity of restoring an African consciousness based on the best of a cultural legacy and heritage of people who lived and organized themselves toward ideals so high no separation was assumed between what it means to be human and what it means to be Divine, is clear. (p. 257).

Dr. Myers's work builds on the concept of the Western worldview being exclusionary and fragmented, and it does not correlate well with the spirit, nature, and identity of African people. African worldview balances the mind, body, and soul and connects all three to the universe (Myers, 1985; Myers, 2013). Furthermore, the African worldview implies centering the focus and affairs of African people worldwide on solutions that have their roots in Africa. The African worldview is alternatively referred to as Afrocentricity, Black Studies, and Black Consciousness. The African worldview is an instrument of empowerment and critical learning, not a method of re-painting history in blackface (Asante, 1988; Asante, 1991). Moreover, it includes larger human narratives of African people told from their richly nuanced tongues that were either previously excluded, falsified, white-washed, or appropriated by the theoretical mainstream canons (Amos, 1993).

The African worldview is a counter-narrative to dispel the inconsistencies associated with white supremacy and eurocentricity and humanizes the stories Africans have contributed to the development of this country and worldwide (Asante, 1988; Hilliard, 1997). As the military strategist Sun Tzu (1983) suggests:

> If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not your enemy, for every victory gained, you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle. (p. 18).

Thus, the more awareness Black people acquire of the people and mechanisms used to oppose and oppress them, in concert with possessing adequate knowledge of their historical accounts and cultural tradition, the better positioned they are to exercise their

self-determination and empowerment (Ani, 1994; Asante, 1991; Myers, 1985; Myers, 1987; Myers, 2013).

The African worldview not only advocates for African diasporic people to obtain knowledge of self; it also stresses the interrelationship between mystical intuition and scientific analysis as spirit-centered, which is to say it renews and realigns the hope while demonstrating the value of spirituality to center African people (Martin, 2012; Mazama, 2002; Myers, 2013). Thus, science aids in the ability to lean not on a limited rational thinking or mind-centered understanding only but rather balance it with the spirit-centeredness as the ancient scholars did who followed the teachings of the mystery systems of Egypt (Armah, 2018; James, 1954; Myers, 1993; Obenga, 1992; Zulu, 1992).

African worldview promotes seeking knowledge of self to promote self-reliance, which is a by-product of knowing one's true self and culture. It is an education that removes the shackles of servitude to reveal the unlimited potential of a people in tune with God's divine understanding and providence (Muhammad, 1965). Our elders used to say, *tell the truth and shame the devil*, and as stated in (King James Bible, 1991, John 8:32), "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Using an African worldview is a self-defense practice and protection against the Western worldview. Its educational and social structure facilitates a path to African liberation (Wilson, 1993).

Critical Race Theory

The second theoretical framework used in this investigation is *Critical Race Theory*. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a tool along with the African worldview to express and manifest the truth of the African experience in America. CRT aims to reveal

and herald our truth and distinguish facts from the folly and superstitions of false messages and propaganda campaigns disseminated by Western-centered institutions and media providers (Armah, 2018; Burrell, 2009; Myers,1993). Critical Race Theory originates in a radical legal movement that aimed to transform the relationship between race, racism, and power. It considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up but places them in a broader context that includes economic, history, context, group and self-interest, and even feelings and the unconscious (Bell, 1992).

Unlike traditional civil rights, which embraces incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory aims to uncover the truth and questions the foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, enlightenment, rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical Race Theory was created by an African American named Derrick Bell, who analyzed the detrimental conditions negatively affecting the self-determination of African Americans (Bell, 1992). Bell's research led him to conclude that there was no sense in reforming a white supremacist system that was irreparable and unwilling to tell the truth about the destruction it has caused Black people and other people of color (Bell, 1987). As Bell (1992) asserts, "I hope to emphasize the necessity of moving beyond the comforting belief that time and the generosity of its people will eventually solve America's racial problem" (p.13). He further insisted that we adapt and create our own systems that incorporate the themes of healing, self-determination, self-reliance, and self-love, and he further insists that we design productive tools for ourselves and learn to use them well if we plan to change our present state of affairs (Bell, 1992). Thus, CRT is a progressive

way to help African Americans become aware of the power previously hidden within ourselves, our stories and our culture.

Gloria Ladson-Billing (2013), a giant within the CRT movement, penned an interesting essay entitled *Critical Race Theory – What It Is Not!* where she carefully illustrates how Critical Race Theory aids the critical-thinking theorist in his/her quest to circumnavigate a racist system and advocate for the rights and due privileges of all people within this country. Furthermore, by studying the historical discrepancies and fallacies inherent within this country's biased legal and political system, theorists can help bring solutions to life to aid in the healing of this nation (Bell, 1987; Bell, 1992).

Understanding Critical Race Theory allows one to dig through Western hypocrisy to uncover the root of the problem causing African Americans to exist in their present state of under-development (Bell, 1992). CRT clearly articulates that the source of the problem alludes to a socially constructed concept called racism (Brown & Jackson, 2013). Racism promotes destitution, suffering, and confusion within our school systems and communities, and there are not enough resources available to remedy its cancerous effect on Black people within this nation (Gillborn, 2013). Until there is an end to the evil nature of racism intertwined in every fabric of this county, Black people will be unable to competently educate their children (Horsford & Grosland, 2013).

Unfortunately, the traditional Eurocentric narrative in education and the media is jaded in its ability to center its stories on the glory of White Americans and marginalizes all others, and it has used its influence to dumb down the Black community (Armah, 2006; Burrell, 2009; Fiasco, 2003; Menzise, 2012). Studying the rationale behind Critical Race Theory helps the inquirer to see the manipulation of historical policies and laws in

arresting the development of African Americans (Bell, 1987). Furthermore, critical race theory allows educators and social scientists to understand the origins of the falsehoods associated with the propaganda campaigns projected by white supremacy, aiding Black people in the ability to realize the need for healing the cognitive dissonance experienced from racism, discrimination, and bigotry (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Burrell, 2009).

Significance of this project

This study tells how I was led on a path of self-destruction by following an identity script that failed to guide me toward my highest potential. It explains the cause and effects of my imitating a fictitious social identity and later discovering tools that aided my deconstruction, reconstruction, and embodiment of an authentic African identity (Appiah, 1996; Asante, 1988; Hilliard, 1997). The false narratives I consumed as a youth led me to undervalue myself, resulting in my low sense of self and causing me to exhibit disregard for my ancestry. The negative stereotypes promoted by the Western worldview left me deficient of a robust cultural identity (Llaguno Verlard, 2018). This form of mistaken identity influenced me to act out of character as I competed to be what Reggae artist Dr. Alimantado (1978) called the *Best Dressed Chicken in Town*, as a result of which a person masks their authenticity and leads an unauthentic life.

The researcher's goal was to seek tools to help tell the truthful story about the consequences I experienced by following false narratives used by the Western power structure to discredit, miseducate and oppress Black people. Furthermore, the researcher demonstrates the utility of the African worldview and Critical Race Theory as conceptual frameworks and fundamental tools of liberation. Utilizing these instruments supports the

value of demonstrating a solid cultural identity along with giving one a new vision that teaches self-love—

the antibiotic to cure self-hate—connecting Black people to their self-determination and collective purpose (Bell, 1992; Myers, 1993). The actualization of a robust cultural identity was my saving grace and antidote that cured me of carrying out a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Autoethnography

For this study, I chose to use Autoethnography to show my journey as a djeli who learned the requisite information needed to not only free myself from the bondage of self-hate and ignorance, but also to prove that Black people can liberate themselves from the oppression and bitterness ingested through the unhealthy diet of white supremacist propaganda campaigns and superstitions (Akbar, 1998; Burrell, 2009). Autoethnography is a research technique that denotes examining one's personal experiences (Ellis, 1999). Furthermore, Esterberg (2002) identifies autoethnography as an introspective journey into the researcher's personal experiences or life narrative. Therefore, it was the best method to unpack the rich experiences I have had in education and life. Also, I used autoethnography is a method of qualitative inquiry because this method grants me the opportunity to use experiences from self-reflection to understand the specific path I took to become an African Centered educator (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Hilliard, 2002; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2010).

Stories and counter-narratives give us the vision to view our past, present, and future as stories of the heroic journey of African American people who survived and thrived under the oppression of free enterprise, unbridled capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy (Du Bios, 1903; Rodney, 1972). Therefore, as a progressive educator who has taught within an oppressive educational system, I utilized the autoethnographic process to produce a product that tells the story of my journey not only as a survivor of miseducation, self-hate, and white supremacy; but, more importantly, as a thriving

educator and community worker who made it beyond the traps hidden within the inner-city streets of Chicago (Jennings, 2014; Perkins, 1993).

It is a research approach that systematically analyzes and articulates the cultural experiences of an individual as it challenges traditional methods of research, wherein it treats research as a subjective *socially-conscious act* and not as an objective method (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnography articulates a counter-reality of the so-called dominant group. It validates the story or data of the research by emphasizing the reality that all stories matter, not just a few (Adichie, 2009; Delgado, 1989).

Autoethnography as a Counter Narrative

Autoethnography uses the *counter-narrative* as a critique and alternate way to challenge stories disseminated by the majoritarian society and tell the writer's point of view (Ladson-Billing, 2013). Using counter-narratives aids in dispelling the inconsistencies associated with colonization, white supremacy, and eurocentricity and humanizes the contributions and stories non-white people have contributed to the development of this country and worldwide (Chavez, 2012; Delgado, 1989; Goings, 2015; Jennings, 2014). In addition, the counter-narrative offers an alternative perspective lifting voices and stories often silenced or ignored by the majoritarian society (Chaves, 2012; Ladson-Billing, 2013).

It is incumbent upon the communal djelis to give the people stories that inspire them to be authentic and counter the mediocrity and bigotry that heavily influences this country (Armah, 2006). Virginia Hamilton is just one of many countless storytellers who wrote counter-narratives to restore the magic of the African American self-identity. Hamilton (1985) created stories that challenged the positionality of African American

characters by creating what she called *Liberation Literature*, which catalyzed the paradigm shift of liberating the respect and self-love of people who were taught to hate their existence (Adoff & Cook, 2010). Liberation Literature allows the reader to witness the challenges and triumphs of the protagonist, who finds his/her balance and purpose after centuries of dislocation (Asante, 2002). Those living outside *kinenga kianzingila*—the balance of life where there is poor health—will continue in that state until they heal from their brokenness and become one with self, community, and the universe (Fu-Kiau, 1991; Myers, 1985).

When African Americans recognize ourselves, our values, and the unique beauty of our legacies, we learn to stop believing the dominant narrative and write our own stories (Akbar, 1996; Asante, 1988). That is the ongoing healing mechanism of our tales. Ladson-Billings (2013) notes that storytellers must share therapeutic and cathartic stories and create mediums through which our humanity and creativity are expressed. The djelis made it their vocation to pass on the stories that healed, entertained, instructed, and called the people to purpose and togetherness (Armah, 1973; Ba, 1981). In addition, they used the craft to keep the community conscious of their oneness with *The All* (Armah, 2006; Armah, 2018).

By examining counter-narratives that tell our true story, we emancipate ourselves from mental slavery and miseducation, where we think and act outside of our true nature (Woodson, 1933). African Americans must rediscover and recognize the value of our historical and factual stories to extract the wealth and natural resources embedded in our precious legacies. It is the vocation of modern educators to go back and listen, read, and dig up the stories and best practices of our culture and ancestors so that that information

can be used as a springboard to help propel us toward our prosperity (Armah, 2006; Armah, 2018; Hilliard, 2002).

Data Collection

Per the autoethnographic method, I am the object of research. For this reason, data collected for this qualitative study comes from journal entries, personal memory of my life experiences, and investigative research (Chang, 2008; Ellis, 1999; Goings, 2015; Jennings, 2014). Considering I was the sole proprietor of the information for this inquiry, conducting interviews with other participants outside of myself was unnecessary.

Chapter 4: Njia

36th Chambers of Shaolin

As a youth, I was hypnotized under the spell of the karate masters and various movies produced by the best film production company, called the Shaw Brothers Film, renowned for creating classic martial arts movies (Elley, 2003). This Hong Kong collaborative created countless movies; however, they became renowned after producing a legendary film called *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin*, also known as *Shaolin Master Killer* (Lau, 1978). This picture would later become known as one of the greatest martial movies of its time (Ongiri, 2002).

36th Chamber of Shaolin resonated profoundly with me, not only because it displayed martial arts prowess but also for the philosophical journey of the protagonist Liu Yude who later was reborn as the monk San Te. By the movie's end, I was left spellbound by San Te's ability to overcome each of the thirty-six arduous chambers to learn inner and outer self-defense. Viewing The 36 Chambers and countless other martial art movies gave me a glimpse of life outside my neighborhood, where the heroes fought against oppression, fought for the honor of the people (community), and fought to create better circumstances for them themselves. During the duration of two hours, I was overjoyed to see the protagonist fighting evil and claiming vengeance against wrongdoings perpetuated by egomaniacs and power-hungry villains. I understood the fictive nature of martial arts movies; however, as the inhabitants of the inner-city ghettos, these movies gave me a lens to escape from the limitations of my bleak surroundings, simultaneously offering an opportunity to identify with people who were fighting against the wantonly treacherous oppression of the imperialist. These movies depicted the masses

experiencing repressive conditions similar to my own, and they demonstrated how they learned to defend themselves and appreciate their self-determination. Unfortunately, heroes of color were limited in the media back then and in our present time (Ongiri, 2002).

Many African Americans of the 80s and 90s lived vicariously through the adventures and triumphs of the unskilled Asian *underdogs* or *little guys* who went through the process of learning Kung Fu to use those skills later to struggle against persecution to bring justice. Even though many of the martial arts movies were apolitical, they sensationalized my inner yearning for adventure and purpose outside of the marginalized circumstances I dealt with day-to-day (Ongiri, 2002). Another major force within the martial artist movies were the contributions of Bruce Lee, a central character identified as a hero within the Black community. Bruce Lee was a modern-day real-life San Te who left behind a legacy of influential movies and a powerful philosophy he named *Jeet Kune Do*. Whether he was fighting the bigotry and arrogance of Japanese influence and its occupying presence in Hong Kong and China or fighting against the biases orchestrated by Hollywood's unwillingness to give him a platform as a lead actor by attempting to marginalize his talents to lesser roles as the suppliant sidekick to the mediocre Anglo males, his contributions could not be stopped (Oluo, 2020). With his talent being overlooked or opportunities denied and handed over to inexperienced and underqualified white males, Bruce Lee nevertheless fought through Hollywood's macroaggressions to become a major star and force to be reckoned with within the world (Little, 1996).

Watching and studying martial arts gave me a perspective outside the one the mainstream white majority projected. In the quest to find heroes to look up to, I identified Bruce Lee as a champion on and off the screen because I saw so few heroic figures who looked like me. Bruce Lee's Movie *Enter the Dragon* introduced the world to Jim Kelly, the first African American martial arts hero, who co-starred in the movie. I was fascinated by this cool-looking guy sporting a full Afro hairstyle looking like a relative or a regular guy from the neighborhood. However, Jim Kelly's appearance, style, and dialogue reflected a swagger I could identify with and emulate. He was a hero within our community and a superstar that influenced many young Black boys to join various martial arts schools, myself included.

Like many African Americans who appreciated the martial arts movies iconic influence on the world, I was spellbound by its theory, culture, and practice. Luckily, supporters encouraged my pursuit of self-defense and discipline; a few also practiced the art form. With my father's financial assistance, I enrolled as an apprentice in the Tae Kwon Do form of Korean martial art under *sabom* (teacher) Master Kwan and his nephew Chan, who served as a junior instructor. Master Kwan's family owned the dojo and an adjacent store that sold martial arts apparel, literature, and equipment. As an apprentice of Tae Kwon Do, I learned the basics of discipline, fortitude, honor, and respect for tradition. Twice a week, my cousin Ted and I practiced Tae Kwon Do within the dojo and at home to perfect the technique of throwing solid punches, chops, power kicks, and form. Master Kwon taught us the techniques of mindfulness, focus, and concentration to channel our chi or internal power and use it in unison with the techniques we practiced in class (Jwing-Ming, 1990; Pawlett & Pawlett, 2008). I must

admit that I did not master the training; nevertheless, the experience taught me valuable lessons about discipline, honor, and the importance of practice, which are still with me today.

I spent countless hours watching movies and studying books to sharpen my technique and dexterity with weapons: Nunchakus, butterfly knives, throwing stars, and a six-foot wooden pole. Studying and practicing martial arts prepared me physically and mentally for the training I would later receive during my service in the United States Navy. Studying martial arts gave me confidence and channeled my energy and focus, teaching me to be responsible for my conduct and actions. It also opened up my perception of the world, so much so that during my military trade school training process, I was requested to identify my top three choices to be stationed from locations worldwide. Most of my colleagues asked to stay in California or transfer to the east coast in cities like Norfolk, Virginia, or Palm Beach, Florida. In my case, due to my fascination with Asian culture, martial arts, and storytelling, I asked to be stationed in Japan or China. Lo and behold, I was given my first choice, and that choice and opportunity opened me up to becoming what Confucius calls a *man at his best*.

I could trace the origin of the trajectory of my studying martial arts and eventually living in the Far East, back to my appreciation of the teachings and discipline of The Honorable Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, which served as my Shaolin Temple. Just as San Te used his training and discipline within Shaolin Temple to help others overcome a life of mistaken identity and self-hate, I used my experience with the Nation of Islam to help me develop self-knowledge and God understanding.

Entering The Temple of Self-Knowledge

During my junior year in high school, I embarked upon an awakening process that the students of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad called gaining *knowledge of self* or *self-knowledge*, which is a method of gaining enlightenment and self-affirming information (Akbar, 1998; Myers, 1993; Muhammad, 1965). This influence has tremendously impacted my ability to re-write and re-route my life story and journey toward excellence. During this period, unbeknown to myself, I would be embarking upon a quest that would bring me to the crossroads where I had to choose to either be complacent by traveling the typical road that led to destruction or seek an alternate route that led to liberation and self-determination (Ani, 1994; Burrell, 2009).

Malcolm's Story

After many critical conversations on the plight of African Americans with my father and uncle, I was given a copy of the book *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (Haley, 1965). They insisted I read it to help me understand the trials and tribulations they experienced and some I would soon encounter, similar to Malcolm's story and many other African Americans in this country. However, by reading the book, they hoped I could take control of my life story and become part of the solution, not a problem for my people, as I was headed in the wrong direction. It is not easy to describe the impact Haley's book had on the odyssey of my life, but this book became an example and catalyst for the path change that I refer back to during my teens and early twenties. After reading and discussing Malcom's transformation, I could see myself and other characters in my community in his peregrination from a delinquent to a devoted husband, father and spiritual leader.

Reading the journey of Malcolm's Black identity transition, starting as a juvenile offender and ending with him becoming an international freedom fighter, shows the power of knowledge in changing a person's identity for the better (Jennings, 2014). With the aid of Alex Haley, Malcolm X masterly communicates a compelling story of how without formal education, he would later debate politicians, journalists, and scholars from Harvard and other Ivy League institutions (Haley, 1964). Malcolm's account of his transformation served as a manual and how-to book that illustrated: the limitations placed on him as a youth by society; the death of his father that he experienced at a young age; the low expectations placed on him by many of his teachers; and the influence of street life that would eventually lead to his imprisonment and later reconstruction and rebirth as a world-renown inspirer and change agent (Haley, 1964). While in prison, Malcolm found salvation in the teaching dojo of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, whose teachings were the cornerstones for obtaining self-knowledge and self-determination (Muhammad, 1965; Muhammad, 1973). Through Malcolm's example, I was inspired to find examples reflecting the outstanding and extraordinary contributions made by Black people, which helped me become more active in rethinking and perceiving life from alternate perspectives and angles on my journey to self-knowledge (Browder, 1989; Browder, 1992).

Through the experience of gaining knowledge of self, studying and practicing various philosophical traditions as Malcolm did in his life, I slowly came to understand the importance of maintaining a practice that cultivates the self, and allows me to learn from African ancestral culture (Asante, 2002). As I look at the trajectory of my life story, I experienced many trials, and my ability to survive and thrive was a direct result of

studying Malcolm's story, which served as a script I used to guide my actions and thoughts. Following this script influenced many of the significant decisions I have made in life, and it has helped me to become what the sage Lao Tzu (1983) referred to as being *a man at his best*. Malcolm was an excellent example of a disciple who entered the dojo of the Nation of Islam and studied the ancestral best practices with a master teacher like Elijah Muhammad to become a larger-than-life hero of the people.

Njia – The way of the ancestors

Central and East Africans use the Swahili term *msafiri* to describe a person who travels or goes on a journey (Awde, 2000). As I have learned from the wisdom of the lectures of Nana Kweku, a respected professor and mentor who explained to me that I am a descendant of ancient msafirians whose journey began on the banks of the Nile River and who later relocated to West and Central Africa (Armah, 2018; Ben-Jochannan, 1989; Diop, 1974). As legend was concealed and facts later revealed, covetous invaders' forced my people to travel involuntarily from West and Central Africa to the southern part of North America (Gyasi, 2016; Ricks, 2013; DeGruy, 2005). My paternal and maternal grandparents left their oppressive and hostile living environment in the American South to migrate north to Chicago, seeking better conditions and opportunities (Wilkerson, 2011; Williams & Dixie, 2005). Like my predecessors, when I came of age and times were becoming oppressive, I too would embark on the hero's journey from Chicago to California. Therefore, the title msafiri is an applicable term that identifies the journeyer who goes on a quest and leaves behind the comforts of the known world to cross a proverbial threshold and enter *kalunga*—the unknown domain—in the pursuit of betterment on the path toward *The Way* (Campbell, 1988; Campbell, 2004; Fu-Kiau,

1991; Tzu, 1983). Consequently, embarking upon The Way pushes us to become more and find material to help us become our best selves. It also gives us great content from which to develop our life stories.

Tuning into the Way of my ancestors helped to direct my growth and development. Using The Way helped me find the vision to reshape my thinking and improve my life. The Way encouraged me to establish and maintain a highly refined school of thought guiding my upward journey to align with the universal force (Barrett, 1974). Amadou Hampate Ba (1981) defines The Way as a vocation and embodiment of specialized knowledge handed down by the wise:

> Thus there is what is called the way of the smiths (numusira or numuya, in Bambara), the way of the farmers, the way of the weavers, and so on; and, on the ethnic plane, the way of Fulani (lawol Fulfulde). These are true moral, social and legal codes peculiar to each group, faithfully handed down and observed by means of oral tradition. (p.184).

During my study abroad experience in Ghana, I met the master teacher and professor Dr. Molefi Asante. Seeing him leading a group discussion with other travelers and scholars was a pleasure. I was intrigued to hear him talk about *Njia* as a way to transcend and improve Black people individually and collectively. I took notes from his conversation and later searched for books on the subject, where I learned that *Njia* is a Swahili word that means the way or path (Awde, 2013). In his pivotal work entitled *Afrocentricity,* Asante (1988) explains his theory on *Njia* as an ancient practice, and it blended well with my research and practical conclusions of using the best practices of our ancient African traditions, especially where he asserts the notion that:

> Njia represents the inspired Afrocentric spirit found in the traditions of African-Americans and the spiritual survival of an African essence in America…Njia becomes the main source of meditative activities and spiritual growth. When Njia is accepted, all things seem new, old things no longer please or seem adequate. The view of life, of the world and of one's self is permanently altered. Acceptance of Njia is an acceptance of yourself. There is no way more perfect than the way derived from your own historical experiences, everything modern can be based upon our ancient foundations. Njia establishes a link to our fundamental primordial truths. (p. 22).

The more I learned about Njia, the more I realized that the knowledge and disciplines I have practiced throughout my life could be used as a framework to help Black people journey into the *hikmah* (Arabic, wisdom) and awareness of the divine connection with the all and find a way out of the lower vibrational levels of the self. Njia, as a way of living, could be used as an applied science or a way to wisdom to help many African Americans find a way back to our source of greatness, as it helped me. As we are all born from the root chakra (muladhara), Njia is the way that leads us on a journey to ascend to the last chakra called the crown (sahasrara), which is the reunification of self with God, thus helping us to create a productive, beneficial and empowering life story (Judith, 2004)

The Four Components of Njia

Using my understanding of the journey of Malcolm X, my experience with my spiritual community, the Bismillahs, and my study abroad research with Nana Kweku, I could see parallels representing the best practices of ancestral African culture. From

there, I synthesized four significant components into a concept called Njia, *or the way* described by writers Ayi Kwei Armah, Amadou Hampate Ba, and Molefi Asante, which helped me to stay in alignment with my purpose. These four components were integral in helping me focus and sustain my vital life force. These four restorative values, which also coincide with African ancestral culture, have helped me maintain balance with the sacred way of personal and communal life. This blueprint that I propose has suited me well, and it is based on general instructions used to influence the development of many leaders who have emerged from the Black community. Here are the four keys components that encouraged me to become a being of excellence:

Navigation system – It alludes to the philosophical framework and guiding light used to help me realize my highest potential and cultivate a peaceful and purposeful life.

Journeyers – Denotes the companionship of the way. The fellowship and experiences I have gained with other fellows of the journey and the importance of supporting the mutual benefits of others. It represents the socio-centric nature of African society and the practice of collective responsibility.

Inspirers – Identifies those extraordinary beings who are light-bearers who provided me with quality guidance and practical leadership throughout my life.

Action – Refers to the internal and external work and practice I performed to cultivate myself to become a man at his best and a change agent within the community.

Navigation System

The first aspect of Njia alludes to the philosophical tenets I used to help me effectively journey through life. A verse in the King James Bible (1991), Proverbs 29:18, states, "The people perish due to lack of vision." Following a solid conceptual doctrine shared by the Bismillahs—an African-centered Islamic collective— led me to find vision and understand the value in many of the discarded customs that Black people have taken for granted had their roots in our southern traditions: my paternal grandmother's gardening; my maternal grandmother's imaginative storytelling; my paternal uncle's use of herbs and roots to treat his cancer. As I looked deeper into the origin of these norms, I was beguiled by the fact that these southern ways that my people used to survive and, more importantly, thrive had their roots in African culture (Asante, 1998). These folkways connected my people to the land, and a strong sense of self helped me grow to understand and appreciate that these practices connected us to our identity, story, and collective power (Chireau, 2003).

During the first two years of my military experience, I used to frequent a local Black-owned bookstore in San Diego called Pyramid Books, which became a home away from home. This bookstore doubled as a small community center for Black people living within the area who came to play chess, sell homemade products, buy great books written by Black authors, and parlay about anything focusing on Black upliftment and community empowerment. The proprietor was a community-centered entrepreneur who invited guest lecturers into the store on Fridays to share knowledge and experiences from their practice, epiphanies, travels, and collegiate or social lectures with the community. In Pyramid Books, I would learn and build great relationships with scholars and

practitioners who gave classes on urban gardening, financial literacy, martial arts, health improvement, music therapy, traditional African religious practices, poetry, and more. In one of the weekly classes, I learned the essential skill and practice of meditation taught by a Black woman in her early 50s named Mama Sekert, a yogi and priest within an organization called the *Ausar Auset Society*, which is a Pan-Africanist spiritual organization. Members of the Ausar Auset Society practice the Ancient Kemetic Sciences and taught the concepts of *Maat* (divine balance), *Medu Neter* (divine speech), and *Smai Tawi*, which equates to the metaphysical union of the lower physical-self with the higher spiritual-self through practice (Ashby, 2005; Browder, 1992; Amen, 1990). Within all humans, two contrary forces are battling for our attention. These forces are called the higher self and the lower self. Growth of either aspect of the self depends on which one we feed with attention and discipline (Amen, 1990).

Mama Sekert introduced me to the practice of Yoga, which derives in meaning from the Sanskrit word *yuj*, which is a process to *unite* or *yoke* an individual ego or lower-self back to the oneness with the Supreme Being or higher-self (Amen, 1990; Feuerstein, 1990; Johari; 2000). This yogic practice is so interesting because it gave me light in my darkest period. During my third year in the military, I studied many scholars and attended many empowerment workshops. However, I was stationed away from the community after leaving San Diego for overseas duty. I was a novice practitioner who no longer had the guiding light of the Pyramid Bookstore's workshops, community members, wise elders, and a specific place to visit and volunteer my services. Several months after my oversea relocation, I, along with many of the other service members I knew, existed on a carnal level: fighting, insubordination, and committing petty crimes. I

forgot all about the ancestral teachings and practices demonstrated by my inspired community elders back in San Diego and Chicago, who stressed taking control of life and not letting life take control of self.

Lower-self

By following the way to the lower self, I evolved myself with people, activities, and a mindset that failed to serve my best interest or progressive development. This way of living, as I would come to learn through my studies, kept me thinking and sinking into an immature existence. It was a path that led to self-destruction as I focused on the purely material aspect of life, where I was caught up in my self-esteem and how I looked, not caring about how my actions affected others. As a leader within a group of ruffians, we were consumed with what Julian Johnson (1939) called *The Five Deadly Passions*: sex, passion; anger; greed; attachment to material things; vanity, or egotism. We were arrogant in our ignorance as we tried to outdo each other in juvenile actions and words (Perkins, 1986). We instigated friction and fights with other Black males that we perceived as weak or competing for attention with the ladies we wanted. Every night, we lurked in the clubs competing for the attention of vulnerable young women. Later, we would regroup to brag about our exploits with each other for fun. We often lied to save face and to appear mightier and more significant than our superficial selves. We masked our insecurities and sensitivities with coolness. What was so interesting about this period of my life is, in retrospect, the same females that we tried to play manipulative games on were the same people who tried to get us to see the realness of our true nature (Majors & Billson, 1992). Considering we live in a society that tries to make Black males invisible,

women were the only beings with whom we could let our guard down and be genuine. Most of the time, we hurt them with our shallowness and immaturity (Welsing, 1991).

As it was written in the verse of the (King James Bible, 1991, Ephesians 6:12-13) states, “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." This biblical verse rang in my soul as I reflected on how I ended up having my freedom taken away.

During the first week, I was placed into solitary confinement, as was the usual procedure for all incoming inmates. On the first of the seven days, I was morose, mourning the loss of freedom I rightfully earned. Based on the nature of the offense and rules broken, I knew deep within my being that karma caught up with me, and I would earn an early release from the military and be sent home with a below-honorable discharge. On the second day, I refused to repeat the same negative thinking as the previous day, so I initiated some of the meditative practices I learned from Mama Sekert's workshop. After several days of practicing my mindfulness exercises, I felt I reached a nirvanic state of being, whereas a calming bliss took over my being. Finally, I was at peace with the mistaken identity I had to let go and muster the courage to face the consequences I earned from my intentional and unintentional misdeeds. Karma is not a thing to play with in this life! Throughout the rest of my detainment, I practiced my mindfulness techniques, read books, and planned for life after the military: college, career, community service, and continued training on the path of betterment.

In that four-cornered room, Njia was revealed to me, and I vowed to be my own man and seek the high path away from the path of confusion. The primary lesson I gained

from that experience was the importance of letting go of the ego and letting God come alive in my words, ways, and actions. Consequently, due to me abandoning my studies and practices, my actions were disappointing and a poor representation of my training, resulting in my body being cooped up for three-months behind bars. I needed to be in the cell to contemplate the hurt ones I had damaged and how I would execute a spiritual escape plan to bust out of the carnal way of life.

Higher self

After my discharge from the military, I enrolled in college as a part-time student. After several months following my homecoming, I felt like I had readjusted myself enough to start searching for workshops to expand on the wisdom Mama Sekert taught me. In my search, I was able to sit at the feet of the master teachers I highly respected, like Anthony Browder, Dr. Ben-Jochannan, Ra Un Nefer Amen, Queen Afua, Kwame Ture, and hear firsthand how they came into the wisdom of the ancestral way and dialogue about their journeys. Through these interactions, I was encouraged to work hard in my studies and training in the best practices created by our ancestors and learn to transcend the material limitations to reconnect with the divine within.

In many of the Cosmology seminars taught by Ra Un Nefer Amen and the other priest of Ausar Auset Society, I learned about meditation, fasting, healthy eating, and physical exercise. In addition, in the *Ausar Auset Society* Cosmologic classes, I gained further insight into Kemetic Yoga and the practice of uniting the lower and higher nature of self, identified in a concept called Smai Taui, the elevation process of sacred connection that leads toward enlightenment and manifests as the following gifts: divine inspiration, intuition, and profound ideas (Ashby, 2005; Krishna, 1975).

Michelle Obama (2018) championed the idea of leveling up or doing better in her 2016 Democratic National Convention speech entitled *When They Go Low, We Go High* while addressing ways to *manage opposition* in her advocacy of Hillary Clinton's presidential candidacy. In the practice of Smai Taui, I was able to incorporate the seven chakra system into my philosophy to be used as a measuring tool to understand the journey of leveling up or ascending from the low levels (material existence) of the root, sacral, and solar plexus chakra to the higher levels (spiritual existence) of the heart, throat, third eye and crown chakra to help guide my journey and understanding of the energy centers of the being and to measure my progressive levels of maturation and lifespan development. (Drapkin et al., 2016: Judith, 2002; Singh, 1983; Karade, 1994; Jung, 1996; Amen,1990). Utilizing the chakra system helped me to understand how to guide and raise my *ashe*—bio-energy/life force energy—from the root level chakra (Muladhara) of boyhood through manhood (Anahata chakra) toward Godhood (Sahasrara chakra) (Johiri, 2000; Judith, 2004; Karade, 1994; Thompson, 1983). While ascending from the animal level to the god level, I learned the value of letting go of anything that constricts the self from proper alignment with my best and highest intentions and purpose (Judith, 2004; Vivekananda, 1920). As I elevated higher in my life, school, and career development, I practiced letting go of my ego to allow God's energy and blessings to flow through my actions, words, and thoughts (Campbell, 1988; Jung, 1996).

Relying on my navigational system revealed the value that God and I are one, and we are here to do God's work as God works through us. This journey teaches the traveler to commune with the inner voice of God, which Na’im Akbar (1985) describes as:

> That inner voice is a history of experience, a multitude of determined ancestors who cherished freedom, and a culture that has developed from the efforts to obtain and maintain freedom. The inner voice is a compassion for each other and a commitment to the Creator, a respect for nature's laws, and a spirit that has refused to be defeated. The inner voice is self-love and an appreciation for a beauty and a being that goes back to the very origin of human time. (p.23).

Journeyers

The second component of Njia refers to the companionship of the fellows who journey together and support each other on the ancestral way out of darkness (ignorance) toward the light of wisdom and divine understanding (Armah, 2018; Muhammad, 1965; Myers, 1993). In many indigenous cultures, males were required to travel far into the plains, bushes, and savannas in search of game (sustenance) to learn how to feed the family and clan (Mazrui, 1986; Mbiti, 1969). Through this journey, they encountered many foreign situations that inspired their curiosity and learning. As they learned to create a network of allies, they also learned it was easier to work together than alone, especially to catch large or challenging game (Eliade, 1964; Hill, 1992). Thus, this bond created early forms of fraternity and collective identity amongst the hunters. In addition, this understanding formed bonds that brought forth the concept of respect for self and others. During these escapades, young members of the clan, accompanied by older, more skillful hunters, were helped, aided, and guided along the journey (Campbell, 1988; Hill, 1992; Kunjufu). Through this experience, they carefully learned the essential skills of the craft of adulthood as apprentices (Mazrui, 1986).

During the early years of my collegiate peregrination, I was fortunate to find a container that belonged to my paternal grandfather in the attic of my grandmother's house long after his passing. Inside this container, I found various forms of paperwork, artifacts, and paraphernalia that connected me to something larger than myself. However, the crown jewel was my grandfather's 32nd-degree certificate which is a document that states that he completed the proper work and learning needed to earn a high title within the craft of Freemasonry. To find this container at that point in my life was such a meaningful revelation to me because I was at the crossroads battling the notion of being socially influenced to exist as an ineffectively mediocre member of an ostentatiously crippled bourgeoisie class versus sacrificing much to live in service for the advancement of Black people (Armah, 1973; Carmichael & Thelwell, 2003; Frazier, 1957). The more I let go of conventional expectations associated with the black middle class and answered the call to a purpose greater than myself, the more my ancestors revealed profound truths and opened doors that could have never been perceived in my wildest imaginations (Frazier, 1957).

This phenomenal find gave me profound insight into understanding my late grandfather's philosophies, sacrifices, service, and the legacy he left for me and my family to lean on. I knew it was time to put more work into my internal and external progress and advance toward the light of growth and development. Through the work and legacy laid by my grandfather, I was bequeathed resources that helped me to make a way. With that understanding, I reached out to my social big brother and ally to obtain a petition to become a Master Mason as my grandfather and uncles were. Upon making that choice and following the steps, I became a worthy brother within an ancient craft.

Afterward, several of the older members of my paternal side of the family reached out to me to welcome me home. That decision connected me to a worldwide fraternal network of brothers working toward the advancement of humanity. Everywhere I go in the world, I can find a brother to look out for me if I am in need. The bond of the brotherhood is strong, and it is an extra blessing to fellowship with so many brothers from all walks of life.

True companionship with high-quality community members helped to usher me through life after the military. I made it a point to fellowship with people who demonstrated high integrity, and through our connection, we helped each other grow wiser, better, and subsequently happier. Such individuals, when collectively associated, complement the well-being and joy of each other, thus strengthening the collective as a whole. It is the communal and social support network needed for growth and development. This support system offers all within it social capital and a social support network that serves as assets for the mutual benefit within the brotherhood between fellow journeymen.

Inspirers

The third aspect of Njia is based on Ayi Kwei Armah's (1978) concept of the Inspirers. Inspirers are walking lighthouses and outliers within the community who have earned more than 10,000 hours, sacrificing much and putting in quality time, wisdom, spirit, and work to earn the respect of a master (Gladwell, 2008). These veterans helped me to recall the way toward excellence and the best practices of our ancestors when I needed support and guidance. They are the change agents who reached back and shepherded me toward success within the community (Armah, 1978). As leaders within

the community, they promote and facilitate a process of evolutionary growth and development. They also encourage me to work to uncover the root of the community's problems and bring forth productive solutions. The relationship between the successful inspirer and protégé is an opportunity to show others how to think outside of the limitations of their surroundings to produce the courage and vision necessary to acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities that help them to become whole and contribute to the improvement of their communities. On my journey, I have encountered many inspirers. However, two noble souls stand out for their arduous work and commitment to providing a prescription for a better life and a connection of the village/community to our rightful inheritance and universal oneness. Through their wisdom, these servant leaders helped me to remember that I stand on the shoulder of giants (wise elders) and have come this far through their contributions and sacrifices.

Baba Tarik Bey

My spiritual teacher, Baba Tarik Bey, was the first inspirer to impact my development significantly. He was a scholar and spiritual guide of a group known as the Bismillahs. He was originally from Brooklyn, New York, but he settled in Chicago with a mission to cultivate the spiritual consciousness and self-love of Black people. We met by chance outside a train station on the south side of Chicago as I was waiting for a bus when I noticed him parleying with a few pedestrians on 'how Black People fell from God's grace.' In his message, he explained how Black People were the original people of the Earth (Ben-Jochannah, 1989; Diop, 1974; Muhammad, 1965) and how they were also called Gods, and they were not the cursed people of Ham as propagated by mainstream religions (Karenga, 1982; Wilson, 1993; Wright, 1984). He even backed up his reasoning

with Biblical scriptures for us to research. Baba Tarik's exegesis of King James Bible, (1991), Psalm 82:6, "I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the Most High"; and King James Bible, (1991), John 10:34-38, "Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods? If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken" was a realization that enlightened us to our righteous connection to the divine universe. These two biblical verses were irrefutable and shocked me to my core that we could be gods in the flesh having a human experience.

Baba Tarik fused the Islamic instructions inculcated by the Bismillahs with his previous experience as a member of the 5 Percent Nation of Gods and Earths, a sect of Islamic-influenced youth who originated in Harlem, New York. The teachings of this organization were created by Clarence 13X (alias Father Allah, Clarence Smith), a past Lieutenant within the Nation of Islam under the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, founder of the Nation of Islam (Knight, 2007).

I was so captivated and intrigued by Baba Tarik's spiritual pedagogy that I was compelled to question him, and his replies were both authoritative and unpretentious, yet profound! Afterward, he said he respected my inquisitive nature and gave me a book on the Nubian scientists' teachings. He extended an invitation to join the collective in study class and ask more questions. This interaction with Baba Tarik and the Bismillahs became the critical ingredient and catalyst of a spiritual transformation that would take a young man like myself from the poverty-stricken streets of Chicago to places worldwide. These teachings inspired me to journey outside of my comfort zone, which led me to: Leimere Park in Los Angeles, the Temples of Kamakura in Japan, the mountainside

sanctuaries of Subic Bay in the Philippines, the slave dungeons of Elmina Castle in the county of Ghana and the historical sovereign nation of the Maroons in Jamaica.

As fellows within the Bismillahs, we were taught to be analytical in our life studies and critically question and investigate everything in the past, present, and future. We were also encouraged to challenge the teachings and actions of Abu Tarik and the other learned elders inculcating the sacred science of self-knowledge.

The disciples were inspired to read a vast array of literature from Bismillah's extensive catalog of books and newspapers, along with other suggested themes from various non-religious sources. With the Adepts, I learned to change the narrative of Black people being slaves and replace the story of us being displaced Africans unconscious of our godliness and our home of origin in Africa. This re-authored story gave me confidence and pushed me to question why the oppressor worked so hard to oppress us if it were not true that we were gods and soul controllers of our dynasties. With the confidence I gained from my studies and spiritual practices, I was focused and driven to go beyond my comfort zone, so I joined the U.S. Navy to broaden my horizons and enhance my skill sets.

Nana Kweku

The second inspirer and influence I shall mention in this work is Nana Kweku, the great paramount chief of the Akan people. I encountered Nana during a cultural continuity program when I participated in a month-long study abroad field experience in Ghana, West Africa, in conjunction with the University of Legon. The program's aim centered around bridging the gap between the African diaspora with Africa, the mother

country. Accordingly, my research focused on locating the best practices of traditional African spiritual systems.

During this endeavor, I came across people who looked like me and others who were in the States and were constantly reminded of family members within the faces of Ghanaian people. I was approached countless times by people who gave me the greeting, "As-salaam aliakum," which in Arabic translates as *peace be upon you*, and I replied, "Wa aliakum salaam" (unto you may there be peace). They automatically assumed that I was a member of the Hausa or Fulani tribe due to my height, weight, complexion, disposition, and facial features. From this home-going experience, I learned that African Americans came from an ancient culture and way of life that connected the people to the universe.

In Ghana, I learned to appreciate the warm embrace of the people as they warmly welcomed us home with the words *akwaaba,* which means "welcome" in the Akan language. I was welcomed by: The Nanas (traditional chiefs), Queen Mothers, ministers, professors, elders, children, university students, and the ancestors, guiding us through social rituals that explored African culture, beauty, perseverance, dance, spiritualism, and reestablishing a connection with our roots. Ghana is the home of two of my heroes, the first being my fraternal brother, the late Osagyefo Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first prime minister and president; the second being the notable writer and scholar Ayi Kwei Armah, author of several of my favorites books: *Two Thousand Seasons*, *The Healers,* and *Eloquence of the Scribes*. This trek in Ghana paved the way for me to witness the foundation and roots I descend from. I felt like a child being slowly and carefully guided by a knowledgeable elder during this homecoming experience.

My excursion through Ghana was overseen by Professor Nana Kwaku Gyename, a scholar and professor at the University of Cape Coast who also served as a paramount chief within his village. Nana Kwaku was the university's professor, liaison, and cultural conseguir for this study-abroad experience. He was a seventy-five-year-old lecturer with a wealth of experience, global tales, practical resources, and practical knowledge. As he was respectfully called, Nana came from a long line of djeli's who urged us to learn our African culture's highly valued practices.

During the various lectures at the university, I learned ancient theories to see how they fit into modernity. Nana patiently challenged me to use the best of African culture as a blueprint to help in the effort to build and maintain the community. I was intrigued by Nana's thorough knowledge of Ghana's history and probes, which provoked him and the others to cut through the mundane nature of life and the status quo to search for the sanctum sanctorum (holiest of holies) of life's bliss.

Along with the discussions, assignments, and projects required for his class, he aimed to stretch my creative imagination to the point of experimentation and action. However, most of all, I was shown the beauty of appreciating Africa's rich cultural past and charged not to let it die. This process, led by Nana and my professors, mysteriously and indirectly brought me back in touch with reality, teaching me to see past the fallacies projected by outsiders. Nana Kwaku influenced me to appreciate the beauty of my ancestral land and understand the concept that Black people stand on the shoulders of many great predecessors. He chose specific places throughout Ghana to introduce me to *the way of the ancestors:*

- In the capital city, Accra, the journey's first and last leg revealed the juxtaposition between tradition, modernity, and nature. Also, it demonstrated opulent buildings and significant monuments that exemplified Black identity at its finest, countering the false narratives promoted about Africa being an uncultivated jungle. At the ocean-side restaurants, I bear witness to the *way of the fisherman* as the master angler instructed the younger fellows on the proper way to untangle their nets and set out to catch fish in a method that was handed down from generation to generation.

- In Cape Coast, I visited the enslavement castles once used by the colonial magistrates to hold human cargo, later taken through *the Door of No Return* to be sold in the Americas. In this bastille, the tour guide shared a cold and cruel reminder of the brutal history of how Black people were ambushed, shacked, and brought there to be held for months. Below my feet, I stood upon petrified blood and excrement, feeling the pain, sorrow, and suffering of my people who suffocated within these damp and cramped four-corner rooms. It was here within the dungeons where I wept from the grime and gruesome reminder of how low greed and power can go to oppress the people and create misery.
- In Elmina, I toured another ghostly white trading post used to protect Western economic interests during the Slave Trade as I listened to the story of the inhumane treatment experienced by the people. I glanced to my right, and standing next to me was the brilliant philosopher and professor, Dr. Molefi Asante, wiping tears from his misty eyes. Later I was led out of the dungeon into a large common area in the direction of heavy drumming and singing. There I saw

Queen Sister Sheba, the matriarch of the area and transplant from New York, leading a group in libation and prayer to commemorate our return home. Afterward, I heard pulsating drumming of the Rastafari brethren who sang a song called Rastaman Chant, "*Hear the words of the Rastaman say. Babylon, your throne gone down, your throne gone down*."

- In Kumasi, I visited the site and abode of the renowned Golden Stool, a regal symbol of authority upon which the Asantehene served as the king of the Asante people. The tour guide boasted pridefully about the mighty and dignified people known as the Asante, a matrilineal tribe of great warriors. In addition, in Kumansi I was taken to the village of the world-renowned and original Kente cloth.
- In Tamale, I watched a demonstration given by skilled artisans and craftworkers who practice the ancient trades of leather smithery, textile manufacturing, and wood carvers of our ingenious and astute people.
- In Larabanga, I visited the ancient Larabanga mosque, where I performed salat (prayer) with the warm villagers. The Larabanga mystic stone, that immovable stone edifice that would not yield to the forces of man, forced the Westerners to create an alternate route around the tradition of this sacred rock.
- In Wa, I learned about the history of the palace of Wa Naa, reminding me that Black people come from ancient nobility that originates in the Northeast region of Sudan, Egypt, and Ethiopia.
- In Sankana, I drank the warm palm wine with the elders and chiefs and observed the ancient caves used hundreds of years ago by neighboring villagers to hide from slave raiders.

- In Salaga, I participated in the drum call of the durba chiefs.
- IN AFRICA, I observed the beauty of naturally enlightened and industrious people. However, upon my return to America, I was silent for a few weeks. I was lost in many overwhelming emotions and thoughts, reflecting on the enchanted encounters I experienced and learned in Ghana and, most importantly, the realization that I was returning to a system designed to keep me from a natural connection with my ancestral motherland.

I was fortunate to stay within Nana's homestead for several days and obtain a bird's eye view of him demonstrating leadership within his village. During this home visit, Nana shared stories, videos, and photos of people from around the world who came to his home to learn the secrets of the Akan spirituality and other activities that help build and maintain a village and memory. Through Nana's leadership, I saw firsthand how he maintained the balance between modernity and traditional Africa; consequently, his work and devotion to the people planted the seeds of possibilities and action within me, which would bear fruit in years to come. In one of our conversations, Nana shared the following:

> You are on a journey of remembrance and restoration led by your ancestors. You are here for a reason! So please tune in, focus on the purpose, and return to create better ways for our people. You are remembering and reconnecting to the best practices of our culture. When we are born, we come into the world as uncultivated energy, but through our journey, we find structures or processes to remind us of the divine from whence we come, and we are reminded of our purpose to that Source. The battle prompts the remembrance of the ancestral way

> to resist isolation and fragmentation. Realign and repatriate with our roots and the Source of our power. (B. Kweku, personal communication, July 13, 1998).

My trip to Ghana and my previous development practices gave birth to the concept of Njia as a way and process of being reminded or tapping back into ancient memories and sources. I could liberate my life using four general components: adhering to a well-developed philosophy, active fellowship with supportive companions, mentorship with experienced guides, and evolution of self and communal development.

Baba Tarik and Nana Kweku were the *jengas* (knowledgeable elders) who were instrumental in transmitting the heritage that helped me reconstruct the memory of my connection to a noble legacy of African greatness (Hilliard, 2002). This transmission of knowledge enabled me to become aware of the science of life and my place as a link in the chain of continuing the work for excellence and empowerment of the people. Thus, I was clueless to know then that I was undergoing an initiation into the Njia (ancestral way or path) that would help me better myself (Karade, 1994; Thompson, 1983).

My experience in education as a student and educator has led me to conclude that the existing educational and social system is designed to disconnect our youth from the tree of life, which symbolizes our community, and our ancestors exemplify the roots. The tree trunk represents our elders within the community, and the branches denote our family. The fruit reflects the adults, and the seeds within the fruit embody our youth or future. If the youth are not adequately prepared for life and self-sufficiency, how do we expect them to contribute effectively as adequately prepared adults? Therefore, it is imperative that we properly prepare our unskilled/underskilled males and females to

become highly skilled and high-functioning members of the community by exposing them to resources, skills, and opportunities (Hilliard, 2002; Kunjufu, 1982).

Action - Putting in the work

The fourth and final aspect of Njia comes through embodying the light and letting God work through ourselves by putting in the work. This embodiment is like the alchemical process of burning off the dross from base metals like lead to produce precious gold (Campbell, 2004; Jung, 1953). On a metaphysical level, it is symbolic of transforming our "base nature" into our inner "gold nature" or higher disposition. The transformation process inculcates the importance of subduing one's passions or ego to begin a journey of transformation and self-discovery that leads the journeyer toward purpose (Hilliard, 1997; Hilliard, 2002).

This is the application of the African Centered principles and philosophy through action. The practice and the hands-on trial-and-error experience is where I learned by doing the work, participating, and creating in the ritual space (Ani, 1980). The work produces mastery, which gives me confidence. Working in the community taught me to become independent and interdependent to better protect, provide nourishment and expand life for myself and, most notably, for the people (Fu-Kiau, 1991).

As previously mentioned, the process that I call Njia is the inner psychological and spiritual work and practice of diving deep into the inner self for self-exploration, self-understanding, healing, and transformation. This inner work loosens the shackles and control that the outer world has on the self and places value on reconnecting with the universal current and divine within (Myers, 1993).

My self-determination came through the application of African-centered principles and philosophy, which resulted in the practice and the hands-on trial-and-error experience where I learned by doing the work on self and doing the work as a servant within the community to become a blessing to others (Hilliard, 2002). The *work* produces mastery, which gave me confidence and vision while also guiding me on the path of reconnecting with our African roots, cultural identity, and spiritual connectedness (Akbar, 1985; Akbar, 1998). Putting in the work helped me to discover my inner power to realign and redefine myself and become a blessing to others. The King James Bible, (1991), Ephesians 2:10, speaks on the purpose of *good work* that states, "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." Thus, the deeds I have accomplished were arduous in the application; nevertheless, they planted seeds that will reap many benefits in the future.

As an educator and coach with over 20-plus years in the crafts of education and social service, I used my experience and research to create a village setting. As a coach, I worked with other coaches to promote paradigm shifts in the masses' consciousness to motivate them to pledge a commitment to turning poverty mindsets into excellence mindsets (Banks, 2014). Also, I have volunteered my time, talents, and skills as an advisor and co-creator of several Black male empowerment programs that supported, trained, and mentored African American males on their journey toward self-realization and Black empowerment (Smith, 2014).

As I previously mentioned, I volunteer my time, experience, and skills as a coach for the *Yung Stars Inc. Rites of Passage Program*, where I train the participants for

leadership, scholarship, and service to the community using Njia as the model (Hoskins, 2013).

Many of the graduates of these leadership programs are the present leaders of various high school and university campuses as a direct result of the skills and experiences involved in these socialization programs I have managed. As an advisor and inspirer, I feel obligated to use Njia to impart my talents, skills, and knowledge to our youth because I was given guidance and support from many giants whose shoulders I stood on to see a better view of the road that leads to excellence and wholeness. Therefore, I felt it incumbent upon me to develop a simple healing script to help lure people away from the narratives that poison their life stories. Using Njia, I aimed to provide medicine that cures the self-hate existing within our community, thus helping the community to invest in themselves and develop productive legacies to pass down noble inheritances for future generations (Akbar, 1998; Myers, 1993; Myers, 2013).

As a community leader, I aim to chart the roads leading toward communal healing and wholeness and help the youth achieve excellence. The process of healing the fractured nature of our community is a task that one courageous person cannot accomplish with good intentions working alone. The community's healing must be led by groups of dedicated people who understand the healing vocation and have charged themselves with healing the broken fragments of our community while focusing on wholeness (Armah, 1978).

I am committed to aiding and assisting the process of helping our community heal. Thus my quest with my research was to study the best practices of African ancestral programs that aid in restoring the wholeness of our African American youth from their

present-day fractured natures (Myers, 1993). In addition, our community needs a great deal of healing and socialization programs that serve as a method to aid the Black community in healing and returning to the sources of its wholeness (Williams & Dixie, 2005).

Examples of Njia

Njia – Example #1: The Autobiography of Malcolm X was a beautifully constructed narrative demonstrating the capabilities of a person who emerges from ignorance to find the *deen*, a term used by Muslims and Christens alike to denote a path of righteousness or way of life. Here is Malcolm's use of the four components of Njia:

> Navigation system – Malcolm followed the tenets of Islam and he also honored the established doctrine or script as proscribed by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, and his teacher Master Fard Muhammad called the Supreme Wisdom.
>
> Journeyers – Malcolm fellowshipped with the Fruit of Islam (Males members of the Nation of Islam) and many leaders within the Black and global community.
>
> Inspirers – Malcolm had reverence for and close relationship with his mentor, Honorable Elijah Muhammad, and other reverend elders within the community.
>
> Action - Lastly, he put in the work by evolving himself through discipline and training; furthermore, Malcolm worked purposefully and unselfishly in service of Black people's respect as a speaker, human rights activist, and community organizer.

Njia – Example #2: Nana Kweku gave me the experience to see firsthand how the four components of Njia were demonstrated with him in the following way:

Navigation system – Nana was primarily an Akan priest who practiced his people's traditional belief system and was a practicing Christian. He used these two guiding systems to govern his actions and thoughts.

Journeyers – Nana was an active member of the various social groups within his tribe and the inter-tribal council.

Inspirers – Nana was a motivational speaker, paramount chief, and chief priest in the Akan traditional belief system. He regularly counseled and mentored people throughout Ghana and within the United States. Nana and the other tribal elders were the highest authority, guiding the clan's daily affairs. However, he was mindful of his role as a wise elder, which influenced him to invest quality time in training the youth who would someday be his replacements.

Actions – Nana's worked extensively within the village, city, and university as a professor, administrator, community organizer, and chief priest.

Njia – Example #3: Salim Kenyatta, my progress was gained from following the ancestral path and was demonstrated in the following four components:

Navigation system – I have been a practitioner of Smai Taui and my study of Taoism, Yoga, Sufism, Kabbalah, Christian Mysticism, and Ifa.

Journeyers – I maintain a close relationship with family, active membership with various communal and fraternal organizations, and my fellowship with other drummers, poets, writers, artists, and disc jockeys (sound technicians).

Inspirers – I have drawn inspiration and guidance from my relationship with Mama Sekert, Baba Tarik, Nana Kweku, my professors, and the other elder members of my family and community.

Actions – Inwardly, I cultivate my internal strength through meditations, prayers, and maintain a healthy mental, spiritual, and physical diet. Externally, I support my family and community as a devoted husband, father, and family elder, and as an educator and community organizer who is passionate about creating opportunities for people to experience love, peace, and happiness. In addition, I incorporated traditional African, alchemical, and Eastern philosophical models that fuse music, art, and science into messages of elevation and transformation. Lastly, I put in the work by facilitating fire ceremonies, drum circles, male and community empowerment gatherings, leadership development, and life counseling. I work to be a blessing for others as so many diligent inspirers have blessed me.

Indicators of Njia's success

Our ancient ancestors assembled a framework for teaching values to its inhabitants designed to promote summum bonum or the greatest good to produce good character (James, 1992; Myers, 1993). My ability to follow Njia has brought me honor and respect and helped me create a brighter and better life narrative for myself, my

family, and the community. The following areas were identified as a result of practicing Njia:

- Improvement in self-esteem and confidence.
- Improvement in self-respect and responsibility.
- Decreased use/abuse of drugs and alcohol.
- Enhancement of positive cultural identity.
- Development of analytical and critical thinking skills.
- Improvement in interpersonal social skills.
- Improvement in work performance and academic grades.
- Appreciation for the importance of life-long learning.
- Enhanced valued in and importance of giving back and being a blessing to others.
- Increased appreciation and demonstration of independence and interdependency.
- Improvement in post-secondary education preparation and participation.
- Promotion and expansion of social capital.
- Model interconnectedness (collectivism).
- Reduction in self-destructive/unproductive behaviors and increased adaptive behavior.
- Reduced contact with the justice system.
- Support and promotion of servant leadership.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The Chicken Coop Complex

In chapter one, I spoke of the turbulence I experienced in Room 105 of my elementary school, a microcosm of the larger neighborhood environment and the cage-like surroundings that maintained a pathological existence over its inhabitants (DeGruy, 2005). The *Chicken Coop Complex* is a by-product of an oppressive existence experienced by diasporic Africans. The chicken coop complex is a term I coined to explain a condition where a group of people are confined to a constricting and dismally negative mental, spiritual, and physical space that oppresses the creative and positive potential of those within this state of being (McCloud, 2011). Such social constraints inhibit the self-determination of Black people within these environments. As East Indian author Aravind Adiga (2007) contends in his book *The White Tiger* that the coop is a metaphor for one who is confined within a space of subservience and lacks the ambition to gain freedom:

> The greatest thing to come out of this country in the ten thousand years of its history is the Rooster Coop. Go to Old Delhi, behind the Jama Masjid, and look at the way they keep chickens there in the market. Hundreds of pale hens and brightly colored roosters, stuffed tightly into wire-mesh cages, packed as tightly as worms in a belly, pecking each other and shitting on each other, jostling just for breathing space; the whole cage giving off a horrible stench—the stench of terrified, feathered flesh. On the wooden desk above this coop sits a grinning young butcher, showing off the flesh and organs of a recently chopped-up chicken, still oleaginous with a coating of dark blood. The roosters in the coop

> smell the blood from above. They see the organs of their brothers lying around them. They know they're next. Yet they do not rebel. They do not try to get out of the coop. The very same thing is done with human beings in this country. (pg. 147).

Furthermore, the chicken coop complex represents a subservient mindset that subjugates the people within it and motivates them to stay in their comfort zones (Degruy, 2005). Therefore, the natural inclination of the eagle should influence it to emerge from the small confines and comforts of the Chicken/Rooster Coop as they age. However, the oppressive conditions created by racism gives an illusion of freedom, but in reality, it is a cage (DeGruy, 2005). They can no longer fit comfortably in the coop physically, and they become trapped between a rock and a hard place. Trapped within their limitations, these chickens become cooped up away from their true selves, the noble eagles (Gifford, 2015).

Cage Busting - Escaping the Chicken Coop Syndrome

In retrospect, stories like The Eagle's Tale serve as a rewarding journey and excellent life lesson about mistaken identity that inculcated in me the importance of finding a guiding light to believe in and follow. This story demonstrates the notion that *birds of a feather flock together*, which alludes to the idea of fellowshipping with people who actualize noble character and work towards a common purpose. Also, it demonstrates the value of learning from great inspirers and working to push through challenges to ascend and soar to the highest heights of excellence (Richardson & Walker-John, 2010).

With great help and determination, I found and studied under competent inspirers who provided unselfish service to the community as cage busters that worked tirelessly to help people in the community see and understand life beyond the limited chicken coops of their comfort zones and restricted surroundings. As I look at the trajectory of my experience as an educator, I learned so much in my studies and peregrinations that I was influenced to go back and become a cage buster to help others learn to fly and escape the self-fulfilling prophecy of entrapment in suboptimal circumstances and the chicken coops of the world. I created a style of pedagogy called Njia designed to propel individuals to reach their highest potential like the protagonist San Te of the *36th Chambers of Shaolin* (Kunjufu, 1984). Scholar Frederick Hess (2013) coined the term *Cage-Buster* to refer to those valiant individuals who recognize obstacles, find solutions, and manage ways to go forward and make great things happen for themselves and others. I was fortunate to have numerous cage busters to help me bust out of the cage (coop) of my limitations. Cage busting requires a critically cultivated mindset that looks curiously at problems and examines ways to solve them. Singer Rick James (1979) wrote a popular song that speaks well to the premise of cage busting in his smash hit *Bustin' Out,* which goes, "We're bustin' out of this L Seven square. Freaks like you and I could never funk from there. We're bustin' out, everybody come along." Just like the caterpillar that undergoes a transformation to later bust out of the constrictions of its cocoon to become a butterfly, I busted out of the low expectations and stereotypes placed upon me to become a master of my destiny.

The key to our liberation is to bust out of the constraints placed upon us by our narrow interpretations of ourselves. Once we are able to bust out of our limitations and

mistaken identities, we can make use of our unlimited potential to start creating a better future for ourselves and later share these stories as a form of motivation to inspire others to do the work and use their wings (faith) soar to their highest potential (Washington, 2019).

Soar

San Te used his training and discipline within Shaolin Temple to go back and be a blessing and help others overcome oppression, conflict, and fear to soar to their highest potential. I was motivated by his story, along with other great legends, to go through the training of college, fraternal organizations, martial arts, and many community-centered self-improvement programs that helped me become a better person and go back and share my experience and knowledge with the people. As an educator and coach with more than 20-plus years in the crafts of education and social service, I have used my knowledge, experience, and research to create transformative programs to help Black people and humanity to level up and ascend to our highest potential (Banks & Banks, 1995; Tzu, 1983). In addition, the people who participated in the programs and services I managed improved their self-actualization and did more in their efforts to connect, care and guide other community members toward the greatest good. As T.D. Jakes (2017) explains:

> You, too, hold within your hands the power to soar. You may not have known it and believed it at an early age as I did, but it remains true nonetheless. You do not have angel wings sprouting from your shoulders blades, possess superpowers like many heroes on our movie screens, or own a Cessna aircraft, but if you have the desire for advancement in your life and you're willing to risk the familiar comfort of where you are for the adrenaline-fueled thrill of where you want to be, then you

> can fly. Flight is possible even for those who are emotionally, financially, and creatively fatigued. You can take your vision, build it into something remarkable, and reach heights you could have never imagined. (p. 5).

Thus, my work has aided the process of helping the community transform from the allegorical chickens and roosters into eagles born to fly. Part of my purpose is to raise giants or people who are spiritually, physically, and intellectually fit to battle the forces of chaos (Chandler, 1999). It is this battle that will allow the people to grow and become the eagles. I used the African Eagle Story Myth to allude to the idea of the Eaglet returning to the Source of power: knowledge of its true self—the embodiment of its God potential (Washington, 2019).

Ourstory: Telling the real story

Before I moved to St. Louis, it was commonplace for my father and me to fellowship on Saturdays to repair and maintain the family's various properties. During these Saturdays, after completing the day's tasks, we would prepare a meal at home or go out to a restaurant to feast on good food; listen to good music; talk about politics, family matters, and social issues; and share tales from our personal legends (Coelho, 1998). During many intimate conservations between us, he routinely shared a quote that goes, "The Child is Father to the Man," which talks about the lessons one learns from one's experiences in life and how these experiences are the parent that gives birth to the adult. Unfortunately, as a youth, I fell under the influence of miseducation, mistaken identity, and hopelessness. These results caused me to settle for less and accept the identity of the chicken within a cage called the ghetto, destined to go nowhere in life. As a result, I lost my sense of self and had yet to develop an identity strong enough to withstand the

overwhelming narratives projected upon me. Finally, however, I busted out of the constrictions of the false narratives that aimed to make me become part of the self-fulfilling prophecy: if you believe in the mistake identity, you are destined to become that mistaken identity.

Society deemed us monsters cast into nightmarish chicken coops called ghettos (Perkins, 1993). However, through awareness of my purpose and God potential, I learned that I came from eagles and was destined to soar to the highest heights. Great stories like those of heroes like Malcolm X and sheroes like Assata Shakur shaped my thoughts and feelings and how I interacted with members of my family, community, and outsiders. Seeing and hearing productive stories from and about African diasporic people, I learned to love myself and my story. Back in college, I had the blessed opportunity to fellowship with Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), the renowned civil rights activist who advised me on the importance of keeping the movement of God's people going forward and remembering to share my story with the world. Slowly I understood the importance of good stories being part of the glue that binds families or communities to one another while serving as guides that lead to healing and unity. Henry Louis Gates (1989) said the following:

> Telling ourselves our own stories—interpreting the nature of our world to ourselves, asking and answering epistemological and ontological questions in our own voices and on our own terms—has much as any single factor been responsible for the survival of African-Americans and their culture. The stories that we tell ourselves and our children function to order our world, serving to create both a foundation upon which each of us constructs our sense of reality and

> a filter through which we process each event that confronts us every day. The values that we cherish and wish to preserve, the behavior that we wish to censure, the fears and dread that we can barely confess in ordinary language, the aspirations and goals that we most dearly prize— all of these things are encoded in the stories that each culture invents and preserves for the next generation, stories that, in effect, we live by and *through*. And the stories that survive, the stories that manage to resurface under different guises and with marvelous variations, these are a culture's *canonical* tales, the tales that contain cultural codes that are *assumed* or internalized by members of that culture. (p. 17).

Now I strive to inspire other storytellers to share their stories in many roles as writers, directors, comedians, motivational speakers, poets, and musicians to take on the task of changing and healing the pathological narratives we have experienced under the exploitation and domination within this country. As djelis, we have an incumbent job to help Black people gain and maintain a high appreciation for life, a commitment to the progress of our community, and a solid connection to The Source (Vivekananda, 1920).

My grandmother used to say, "God is always with you," and during the early parts of my life journey, I neglected this advice, and that is when life became dark and cumbersome. This doctoral excursion allowed me the privilege of channeling and exemplifying the best practices of our ancestral culture and ways of knowing to realign us with the universal all (God) (Myers, 1993; Myers, 2013). This journey uncovered within me the realization that every human is a storyteller, and throughout their life, they are constantly adding to their life story through their choice of thought, words, and actions. No matter how challenging the first few chapters of a person's book of life are, with

proper direction, supportive allies and guides, and practical application, they can turn their lives around and create something beautiful.

Storydoer – working for a better tomorrow

In association with the African worldview comes the notion that everything material and immaterial is sacred, and this sacredness is connected to godliness and universality (Ani, 1980; Myers, 1993; Washington, 2019). Maintaining a conscious connection to this sacredness gives one the power and ability to do more, see more, work more and be more. The brokenness that comes from disconnecting from this Source cuts off one's ability to create magic. Everyone is connected to this Source, but not everyone acts in alignment with it, whether due to ignorance or because of the influence of ego, power, or material attachments. When I came to understand the value of this connection, and more so when I started to embody this connection, my life changed for the better. As a storydoer, I help others connect to their divinity and continue the work to create a better tomorrow for the people (Chireau, 2003). By putting in the work, with divine connection, we do God's work by serving as instruments of its majestic plan (Washington, 2019). Also, this understanding led me to stalk a healed future outside the chicken coop, which brought to life the importance of my story and, more importantly, uncovered my connectedness with my family, my people, my ancestors, and humanity (Godliness). This journey revealed to me the latent magic, wisdom, and treasures hidden within our stories waiting to be uncovered by the diligent cage busters who are the storydoers who put in the work to make life better for themselves and the community and later share the story of how they made it happen.

I am a grandson of black Southerners and an heir of Africa. I am one of many who answered the call bequeathed by my ancestors, those noble and beloved souls who are the spiritual connections to universe consciousness (Armah, 2006). Following the path forward, I will keep working to guide the people forward with positive messages, empowered stories, and noble memories of African greatness to aid the birth and resurrection of our legacy and self-esteem (Myers, 1985). Ancestors, my predecessors, the roots of the tree of my bloodline from whence I spring, who magnetized my path with purpose—thank you for charging me with the task of helping others to find their mojo (magic and power) so that they may remember the plan to keep going and growing forward to create better ways for brighter days for our people (Chireau, 2003). Thank you for showing me how to create productive examples and endowments for my offspring and the descendants of my collective community. I honor you with a question and statement from the following poem by the incomparable singer Abbey Lincoln (2008) called *Where are the African Gods?*

> Where are the African Gods?
> Did they leave us on our journey over here?
>
> Where are the African Gods?
> Will we know them when they suddenly appear?
> The ones dismissed with Voodoo, Rock, and Roll, and all that Jazz
> And jungle mumbo jumbo and razzmatazz.
>
> Where are the African Gods?
> Who live within the skin?
> Within the skin, without the skin
> And in the skin again
> Do they hide among shadows while we stumble on the way
> Or did they go with heaven to prepare another day?
>
> Where are the African Gods?
> Who'll save us from this misery and shame?

Where are the African Gods?
Will we find them while we pray in Jesus' name?

Where are the African Gods?
Who live and set us free.

We are the African Gods!
We are, you and me!

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