STORYTELLING, CULTURAL HEALING, AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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PART I

Introduction

Storytelling as the Heart of any Practical Approach
to Cultural Healing and Community Development
in African American Communities and Life

"It is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind"

Sankofa is an Akan word of the Twi language of Ghana, the homeland of my people. Sankofa means to "go back and get it" encouraging one generation to seek, speak, teach, and impact one another across time and space. Its symbol is a bird whose feet are firmly planted forward and its head turned backwards taking an egg off its back. The egg in the bird's mouth represents "gems," also known as knowledge of past "wisdom." This symbol is also associated with the proverb, "Se wo were fi na wosankofa a yenkyi," meaning, "It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten" (Sweet Chariot: The Story of the Spirituals). The Akan people strongly believed that the past offered alternatives to the present, and that the search for knowledge is a life-long process. A people's identity is heavily connected to those before them; their history lives because the past applies to their present. Looking back allows people the opportunity to see not only where they have been, but also where they can go.

Storytelling is Sankofa in the context of African American culture. Storytelling connects us to the voices of our ancestors, those who fought with the very blood beneath their skin for the right to be seen and heard as equals in social conditions which sought to deny their very existence. In this thesis, I will also refer to this African American culture as Black. I will discuss different time frames throughout history where African Americans were referred to as Negro(s)

and Caucasians as White. Using such terms in this thesis will help define and emphasize the tone of the political climate during those times.

The fight for Black voices “to be seen as well as heard” (Eyerman 14) has always questioned who would define what was seen and heard. For example, during the abolitionist movement and the Black free press, free Blacks created and told stories of their existence; however, White mediators and facilitators chose how the voices of free Blacks stories were presented to the public. As a result, these representative stories are still often told in a manner that presents a “likeness” rather than reflects the true identities of a people, a method of institutionalized racism which incorrectly characterizes a people. For instance, the larger African American culture today has been characterized publically by “its response to racial dominance, so much so that resistance becomes its defining feature and expectation” (Quashie 11), but that characterization limits the whole experience.

Racism and systemic racism toward the African American collective identity has led to cultural unrest, prejudice, and even loss of lives. For instance, national attention has recently been placed on police brutality toward young Black men. In fact, young Black men are nine times more likely than other Americans to be killed by police (Swaine, Laughland, Lartey, and McCarthy 1). A Guardian study recorded that 1,134 lives were lost in 2015 at the hand of law enforcement officers**.** Despite that African Americans make up only 12% of US population, “African American males between the ages of 15 and 34 comprised more than 15% of all deaths logged this year by police” (Swaine, Laughland, Lartey, and McCarthy 1). These situations create extreme challenges for our young men to overcome because they stem from a polluted system of institutional racism. According to author Michelle Alexander, “There are more Black men behind bars or in legal systems today, than there were slaves in 1850” (Alexander, Chilton

MP3). However, while there are many younger Black men living productive lives, the news catches those who have rightly or wrongly been arrested.

In *The New Jim Crow*, author Michelle Alexander explores the systemic problem of Black and poor communities devastated by mass unemployment, social neglect, economic abandonment, and intense police surveillance (Alexander, Chilton MP3). Her analysis directs our attention away from the American dream and into the actual substance of America's shame: the massive use of state power to incarcerate hundreds of thousands of poor Black male, and increasingly female, young people in the name of a rooted lie called "War on Drugs" which assumes Blacks to be drug users and runners. Laws also permit police the right to seize and keep private property obtained while enforcing this "War on Drugs," even if the charged individual has not been found guilty of a crime. Consequently, the Black identity picture gets painted by artists who do not clearly recognize their subjects, and this misrepresentation has been going on too long. First slavery, an early form of incarceration, and now legitimate incarceration plus other means of social exploitation further skew the picture.

The transition from traditional to modern racism is subtle; however, it is critical that we see it if we are to understand institutional racism's impact on the Black community. Traditional racism runs on negative beliefs about African Americans' intelligence, ambition, honesty, and other stereotyped characteristics. It also supports segregation and acts of open discrimination. Modern racism runs on hostility, rejection, and denial on the part of Whites toward productive activities and aspirations of Black people. In part, global television's inadvertent contributions to this phenomenon may arise from its coverage of Blacks involved in crime and politics. And in part, paradoxically, it may arise from the very responsiveness of global news to Black audiences. For instance, the Black Live Matter movement began in 2012 after Trayvon Martin's murderer,

George Zimmerman, was acquitted for his crime and dead 17-year old Trayvon was posthumously placed on trial for his own murder (Black Lives Matter Web).

While programs such as Affirmative Action have tried to combat institutional racism and the educational gap, disparities still exist. Students of color still receive more punishment than do Whites. African American students are suspended and expelled at triple the rate of their White peers, according to U.S. Education Department's 2011-2012 Civil Rights Data Collection (Resmovits 1). A new study done by the University of Pennsylvania reports that Black students made up fifty-five percent of students suspended in Southern school districts even though they made up only twenty-four percent of the student body (Gomez 1-3). The study also shows that disparities begin as early as preschool. Many minority students also have less access to veteran teachers than do their White peers, according to surveys released by the U.S. Education Department. Over seven percent of African American students attend schools where as many as twenty percent of their teachers fail to meet license and certification requirements. This damaging discrimination influences low academic performance for minority students, placing them at a greater risk of dropping out of school (Resmovits 1).

Today many fear admitting or accepting the reality that modern racism exists and refuse to acknowledge racial group members out of fear of appearing prejudiced. In my own life, I have frequently heard others say, "I don't see color. I just see people." This declaration denotes race as invisible and unimportant. It assumes that acknowledging another's skin color will show the speaker as prejudiced, and/or it negatively affects the speaker's idealistic sense of freedom in a just world. Such ignorant apathy toward racism has become a popular way of thinking called racial color blindness, in short, the belief that "race should not and does not matter" (Browne, Duran et al. 60). This concept seems admirable because a "reasonable person" would not

publicly argue that social and economic resources should be disproportionately available to specific racial groups. However, scholars have argued that the other half of this perspective is problematic simply because racism continues to happen, which makes it impossible to ignore; thus, race matters (Browne, Duran et al. 60).

Color blind perspectives restrict the truth of spoken stories, and this restriction isolates White Americans in comfortable distance to protect them from recognizing racial inequalities in society. Such denial fosters inaction, which subconsciously contributes to preserving racism and the privileges many Whites, especially the White elite, who gain from the current systems of racial privilege and institutional discrimination. With over 1,100 observation results, a 2000 research study accessed and analyzed cognitive aspects of Color-Blind Racial Attitudes. It specifically analyzed three factors: unawareness of racial privilege, institutional discrimination, and blatant racial issues. The results indicate that greater endorsement of color-blind racial attitudes correlates with greater levels of racial prejudice and with a belief that society is just and fair. Racial privilege refers to the disbelief that White privilege exists. White privilege is "any advantage, opportunity, benefit, head start, or general protection from negative societal mistreatment, which persons deemed White will typically enjoy, but which others will generally not enjoy" (Wise 1).

Embracing a color-blind perspective could appear well meaning; however, instead of preserving privilege for ethnic minorities, this perspective actually contributes to their further oppression. Drawing on the Marxist intellectual tradition, Jost and Banaji (1994) have described this phenomenon as false consciousness or "holding false beliefs that are contrary to one's personal or social interest and which thereby contributes to the maintenance of the disadvantaged position of self or group" (Browne, Duran et al. 63). Limited awareness of racial discrimination

could also prevent people from developing proper defense to deal with a potentially hostile environment (Jones, 1997), and moreover, may prevent them from actively working to change and transform the structure.

"Hearing a Culture of Silence" is a journal piece that explores the historical silence of forced migration of Africans to the "New World" via European slaving ships in Ghana. The author reflects on her personal experience in public school teachings in the US in which students learned that slavery was something that began on a boat and ended on a plantation in the American South. However, in the course of writing this article, she discovered the depths of slavery's cruelty and became dissatisfied with the invisible hands covering mouths, voices, and a culture's truth. Her awareness keenly sharpened in her research trip to Ghana, which shows as she reflects through journals and observations of the impact of slavery on modern Ghana as a taboo topic. She understood that there were "voices struggling to be heard" (Lind 1). One is the collective voices of Blacks in the Americas, people who still want answers to why it all happened. The author implies that the Middle Passage, from the perspectives of the enslaved, still exists today because of "illiteracy and imprisonment with the lack of information" of a culture of people who were not allowed to speak (Lind 1). It is time to speak.

Because my thesis is academic, scholarly, culturally significant, and highly personal, I offer my own poem as partial explanation of storytelling as an intense way to express our identities. Someone not of my ancestry cannot possibly capture my perspective correctly. It also illustrates the power of story to explain perspective, to understand one another's human condition, and because of it, to lead to healing the wounds of the past and moving positively toward the future.

How Does It Feel to Be?

My skin is brown, tie-died and dipped in my ancestor's blood

My eyes tell no lie, for they witnessed the twisting of lies and truth

And my language, my language is broken pieces of my native tongue

I still remember the first day of class as my eye's danced around the room

Unintentionally in search of a connection,

Our eyes connected speaking a language beyond our cultural differences,

Yet understanding our skin is brown,

Call it intuition, but one by one we shared a head nod,

Or smile confirming each other's presence,

Reflecting our common historical experiences,

And shared cultural codes, making us one people,

We shared the essences of the Black experience,

The connections associated with representations of a collective identity,

The stories of "we" and the other world,

The unasked questions by some through feelings of delicacy,

The eyes of others who curiously or compassionately,

And then, instead of saying directly,

How does it feel to be a problem?

They say, you know I've been to Africa;

Or how do you feel as an African American about these Oscar outrages?

However, in the words of the Scholar, W.E.B Dubois –

At these questions I smile, or am interested,

Or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require.

To the real question, how does it feel to be a problem?

I answer seldom a word.

My skin is brown, tie-died and dipped in my ancestor's blood

My eyes tell no lie, for they witnessed the twisting of lies and truth

And my language, my language is broken pieces of my native tongue

Le'Onna Lee

To create this poem, I had to remember and to write from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific to the African American experience. Storytelling is the gift of engaging our audience with the rich essence of voice or written words, giving people a sense of connection, purpose, and truth. Our world today would not exist as it does without the impact of past generations. As human beings, we are creatures of habit and tradition, and we have taught knowledge that has been handed down to us, from one generations to the next. All of us.

My truth is that I am someone's daughter. I am someone's sister. I am someone's friend. I am someone's auntie. But I am also a black woman, and "my being black shapes my experiences, and so if you are not attuned to that part of my being that is race, then it's very difficult for you to understand and respond to my humanity" (Nadworny, Milner 2). Story, however, offers me a way to show myself and my journey as a Black woman. Storytelling is a form of truth-telling, and while it takes vulnerability, courage, and bravery, it is worth it because "there is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you" (Angelou).

My thesis goal is to argue the need for racial understanding, recognition, and voice. To reach that goal, I will detail and analyze past cultural traumas and present realities of systems of

racial injustice that skew and limit the African American experience. My hope is to help correct this picture. To do so, I will implement a three core Call to Action Plan that will bring together African Americans and other community members to empower them to understand cultural consciousness and to create social change within our communities. Of course, storytelling is at the heart of this program, and its goal is to allow people to voice their experiences. Their stories enable both the storyteller and the listener to immerse themselves into a collective space of familial truths and present realities. Storytelling must be at the heart of any approach to cultural healing and community development for African Americans, because while "stories can break the dignity of a people, they can also repair that broken dignity" (Adichie 2009) and allow people a chance to live fuller lives.

PART II

To fully exemplify the critical role of storytelling in the African American culture, I will detail its historical roots which begin in West Africa. My goal in "Who tells your history?" is to challenge false African American cultural identity and to create cultural consciousness as a way of fostering and preserving positive African American cultural representation, history, and voice in all of our communities. Next, I will explore the systems of racial injustice inflicted by cultural traumas such as slavery in "The Doors of No Return," a story of the traumatizing realities of slavery.

Who Holds Your History?

The use of storytelling for African Americans is rooted in pre-literate ancient African societies and cultures, particularly in West Africa. These stories were the souls of our history conveyed through oral traditions to preserve the identity of "one's self, one's family, and one's ethnic group" (Champion 1). During the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, many

West Africans were brought over to America as slaves, and they did not carry with them "a network of beliefs, customs, institutions, and practices constituting what might be called with accuracy a unified 'African' culture…. The peoples of Africa created a myriad of languages, religions, customs, social, political, and economic institutions which differentiated them and gave them separate identities" (Levine 7). Many cultures would identify a specific person to play the role of the storyteller, and in West African cultures, these individuals were called Griot.

A Griot had to be born into a family of Griots and trained from birth. It was the Griot's duty to memorize historical accounts called epics and pass them down to generations by word of mouth; they used music, poetry, drama, and dance both to entertain and to educate. Griots flawlessly strung their fingers along the thick strings of their Koras, and sang songs while challenging and inspiring their audience to "match or surpass the heroic deeds of their ancestors" (Wolny 8). The Griots were the most important members of the ancient West African oral traditions because they defended the constitution and legal principals, because they were teachers and advisors to kings, tutors to princes, but above all, because they were artists. In The Guardian of the Word, Camara Laye described that "the Griot does not represent historical reality in a matter-of-fact way; he recounts it using archaic formulas; so the facts are transposed into entertaining legends for the ordinary man, but they have a secret meaning for those who can read between" (25). Because for the African cultures, all true science is a secret. It is not the ideal beauty that will capture the Griot, but rather the "expressive beauty of his mantra of his legends or his tale" (25). Over and over again, he powerfully transforms his listeners through historical truth submerged in the song or in the story.

Griots never showed fear in their presentations of their reality; they would allow the words to flow from the vocal cords of their hearts naturally moving around space and allowing

transformation to lead them into sometimes exaggerated facts, which Laye explains in the following:

> Deformation of the truth – which first of all underlines and accentuates the expression, the spirituality, and then, as a natural sequence, calls up other exaggerations (or deformations of the truth) intended to balance the first and to complete it. He creates thus a system of discourses which entertain the layman, and which instruct the initiates eager to learn their history. There are always, in the tale, in the chant, in the legend, two truths: a first truth, consciously created and peripheral, intended to amuse the audience; but on the reverse side of the first truth there is a second truth, profound, close to the reality, but in a different way that layman find difficult to detect. (26)

Griots possessed the art of telling historical truth (stories) from the depths of their hearts, spilling the words of their souls through stories. It was the rhythm of their tongues dancing against the play of their voices, the love of dialogue, and the love for the engagement of the listeners that could keep the young and the old under the spell of the stories for days – this was the story-telling essence of Africans and their descendants.

The Doors of No Return

Griots' songs ran the gamut of human experience, but some of the most tragic are about the early slave days. In West Africa, slave catchers raided villages throughout the night, bodies were laid stricken by death before daybreak, and those who were strong enough to survive the brutal raids were captured, shackled, chained, and forced to walk their way to the coast "carrying trade goods such as elephant tusks on their heads" (The Atlantic Slave Trade). Many died from exhaustion and starvation while awaiting slave ships, and even more died during the horrifying

journey through the middle passage. The travel could last between four to twelve weeks, depending the destination of the slave ship. The slave captives were packed like cargo into the ship; the men and women were separated. Stories told through slave narratives describe that "in some instances, chained slaves were fed and forced to dance themselves into shape on the deck under strict surveillance" (The Atlantic Slave Trade). Till this very day, Wolof Griots still sing this song of sorrow which clearly depicts the reign of tyranny during slavery times:

Nga bay sab gerté

Dugub ji ne gaňň

Buur teg ci loxo

Ne la

You grow your peanuts

And plenty millet

The king sets a hand on everything

And says it is not yours anymore!

Ngèèn tëdd ba guddi

Buur tëgg ndëndam

Ni jog lèèn!

Fii ku fi fanaan di jam

In the deepest of your sleep

The king beats his drum

And says wake up!

You are not free anymore

(The Atlantic Slave Trade)

The Transatlantic slave trade was the four-hundred-year exploitation of African men, women, and children, many being snatched from their home lands and deported into the Americas where they were forced to mind a master and to work on plantations. As a result of the slave trade, five times as many Africans arrived in the Americas than did Europeans. "According to the figures published by Hugh Thomas, around thirteen million Africans were deported among whom eleven million arrived alive in the Americas" (The Atlantic Slave Trade).

New World, New Language

The oral tradition of storytelling has been an important structure of many people's histories; however, it is at the heart of African American culture across the African diaspora. African American culture is well-supplied with rich oral history which was passed down for ages, making it one of the few cultures whose history is more oral than written. Author Geneva Smitherman states that "Black America relied on word-of-mouth for its rituals of cultural preservations" (Smitherman 199). She also mentions that "it was not until the late nineteenth century that the Negro spirituals were written down, though they date well back to the beginning of slavery" (Smitherman 199). For African Americans, oral tradition has served as a salient element used to move from slavery to freedom and also during the quest for full American citizenship at the end of reconstruction (1900).

Oral traditions, or storytelling, preserve African American heritage and reflect the collective spirit of the race because the stories are so deeply connected to African American cultural identity. Through stories, songs, folk sayings, and the rich interplay of everyday experiences and lessons, these stories taught precepts about life and survival. During slavery and still today, African American communities place extreme value on the spoken word, supporting a

tradition that many anthropologist call “preliterate.” Margaret Mead coined the classic bomb on the superiority complex of the western world stating that the “influence of Western culture on non-Western peoples was to make ‘preliterate illiterate’” (Smitherman 201). The African American oral tradition also links African American culture with other oral “‘preliterate’ people – such as Native Americans – for whom the spoken word is supreme” (Smitherman 201).

For West Africans, the New World languages were some of the most complex difficulties of their early times in their new surroundings. African languages such as Ki-Kongo, Igbo, Yoruba, and Twi sounded nothing like the western languages of Portuguese, French, Spanish, Dutch, and English. Upon their arrival in the New World, slave members of the same cultural communities were intentionally separated from one another. It was very common for families to be separated and placed in different states and on different plantations. This displacement resulted in many Africans losing the power to speak their native languages. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. states, “Eager to domesticate the African slave by denying him and her their language, their religion, their values and beliefs systems, and indeed their entire sense of order, the slave owners, first, forbade the usage of African Languages on their plantations” (Gross, Barnes 15). Slave owners forcefully meted out various cruel forms of punishments to break communication in any language other than English. As Gross and Barnes states, “The Americanization of the slave took place, most directly and forcibly, at the level of language” (Gross, Barnes 20).

Laws, War, and Freedom

In many of the Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic States, including Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, slavery had legally been permitted during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, a few decades before the American Civil War, almost all

slaves in the North had been emancipated through a series of state legislature statutes, creating the Northern "Free States" in opposition to Southern "Slave States."

Despite the new freedom for Blacks in Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic States, Whites in many colonies, particularly Southern, created laws forbidding slaves the opportunity to read or write, fearing that African literacy would become a threat to the slave system – a system that relied on slave's dependency of "masters" and that made it a crime for others to teach them. Whites did not want slaves to have access to principals of individual liberty. This nature of cultural silence placed on American slaves was intended to affect their "emotional experience, identity, human right" and their narrative identity (Pasupathi, McLean 86). So, it was not by accident that ex-slaves who managed to publish slave narratives almost always dramatized the manner by which they learned to read and write.

Literacy was very much a form of freedom for slaves because many of those who learned to read and write could possibility run away to Northern states and pass as a free slave. Learning to read and write also provided them skills to learn more and to transform their stories into ones that showed their "free" identity. Many slaveholders were aware of slave discontentment and were paranoid that literacy could "spoil" a slave. They feared that slaves who learned to read would free themselves from shackles of slaveholder-imposed ignorance and would be unsuited to a life of perpetual servitude (Wallace 1). However, soon after the ratification of the American Constitution in 1789, legislations were enacted throughout the US to ensure slave illiteracy and to curtail slave mobility (Wallace 1). The thoughts of "what if a slave understood the moral argument against their enslavement?" or "what if they seek vengeance against their enslaver?" brought fear to many slaveholders. Slaveholders also feared that a literate slave would teach knowledge or inspire discontent among others slaves in the community. They had witnessed the

insurrections of Nat Turner, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and Gabriel Prosser, all literate slaves (Wallace 2). Often those slaves who most wanted more power over their own lives were men, women, and children who disobeyed the threat of whipping, branding, and even death to learn how to read and write. Many odds were stacked against them especially because slaveholders had rights to reclaim their property. These rights were protected by legislation such as the Fugitive Slave Acts of 1793 and 1850, and because of these acts, many slave escapes ended in failure.

However, there were successful escapees such as Prophet, a Georgia runaway property of John Ruppert (Wallace 2). Prophet was literate and learned; he was also very discontented and desired freedom, so he risked his life to escape. Many slaves who ran away and returned received horrifying punishment such as amputation of a finger or even toes. All throughout Savannah, Georgia, Prophet's owner, John, placed advertisement of $10 rewards for his return. However, his owner also knew that since Prophet could read and write, he could likely pass as a free slave. According to Author Shaun Wallace, "Artfulness in slave's character was most attested to a literate and learned slave and was linked to excessive knowledge and transforming identities" (2). In many cases, a slave's being able to read and write characterized him or her as having knowledge and imagination. They were slaves who could learn to develop and forge their own identities.

Institutions of slavery and racism were oppressive systems created to silence generations of Africans and their descendants. These institutions caused oppressed people [to] suffer inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs through violence, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism. During his 1858

debate against Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln articulated White nineteenth-century's American political thought, contradictory at its best:

> There is a physical difference between the White and Black races which, I suppose, will forever forbid the two races living together upon terms of social and political equality; and inasmuch as they cannot so live, that while they do remain together there must be a position of the superiors and the inferiors; and that I, as much as any other man, am in favor of the superior being assigned to the White man. (Wallace 26)

The American Civil War created further racial separation in society. While it forced Whites to abolish slavery, Whites still did not really accept Blacks as part of society. Emancipation did not address the injustices and unfair treatment of Blacks, particularly that of Black incarceration. Blacks were often arrested when they tried to sit down to eat in restaurants that were open to the general public. These were common types of prosecutions that were unfolding throughout the country. Many states had Black codes (Laws) that made it a misdemeanor for a Black person to refuse to leave the premises of establishments when requested by the owner to do so. These codes were used to protect Whites from the inferior Blacks, and "arrests were effected for the sole purpose of aiding, abetting, and perpetuating customs, and usages which have deep historical and psychological roots in the mores and attitudes of white supremacy" (Wu 32). Because of such prevalent familial displacement, Black families who were torn apart suffered great loss: their parental figures, role models, spiritual guides, teachers, and ultimately, their storytellers. However, after the Civil War, the restoration of the country became part of a contentious postwar effort know as Reconstruction. Amidst countless losses and oppression, Black families saw a glimmer of hope. As they reconnected or

moved beyond slavery as best they could, they could pass down bits and pieces of their culture and artistic history to the next generation in the form of stories of escape, freedom, and returning to the motherland.

Stories were influential then, and they are essential now for implementing cultural healing for African Americans and their communities. Because when storytelling is at the heart for healing, we often speak our true voices. This truth builds our cultural consciousness which, in turn, allows our past to encourage the voices of our future. Storytelling, then, builds the confidence needed to initiate progress. Our stories alone are fascinating, but reaching back into early African American storytelling, we can recognize themes that told of the times. For instance, themes of human aerial flight were common mythology of African American storytelling. This theme helped slaves cope with the traumatizing realities of slavery and racial injustices. Many examples of the metaphor exist today in musical genres, myths, and poetry within the Black culture (McDaniel 28). This myth influenced generations to understand and avow the powerful and conscious image of systems of flight escape (McDaniel 28) as a form of cultural healing.

The story of Ebos Landing, better known as the "Myth of the Flying Africans" is based on an actual historical event tracing back to the spring of 1803. The Ebos were renowned throughout US southern states to be boldly independent and unwilling to take the humiliation of "chattel slavery." The following story tells the tale of a group of Ebos (or Igbo) slave's rebellion on St. Simons Island of Georgia's coastal waterways, and after experiencing the horrifying journey through the Middle Passage:

> The Igbo who became known as the flying Africans were purchased at the slave market in Savannah by agents working on behalf of John Couper and Thomas

> Spalding. Loaded aboard a small vessel, the Igbo were confined below deck for the trip down the coast to St. Simons. During the course of the journey, however, the Igbo rose up in rebellion against the White agents, who jumped overboard and drowned. (Powell 1)

Roswell King, a White overseer on a nearby plantation, recounts the story saying that "as soon as the Igbo landed on St. Simon Island, they took to the swamp – committing suicide by walking into Dunbar Creek" (Powell 2). While many White slave owners interpreted this historical event to mean nothing more than the loss of substantial financial investment for both slave masters, African American slaves interpreted the account very differently believing this act was not only the soul's return from exile, but also the ideological choice of suicide that enslaved Africans often made to escape the traumatizing reality of bondage.

African American oral traditions preserved a very different perspective of the events that took place that day on St. Simons Island. An older African American man, Wallace Quarterman, when asked if he had heard the story of the Ebos Landing, replied in this way:

> Ain't you heard about them? Well, at that time Mr. Blue he was the overseer and… Mr. Blue he go down one morning with a long whip for to whip them good… Anyway, he whipped them good and they got together and stuck that hoe in the field and then… rose up in the sky and turned themselves into buzzards and flew right back to Africa… Everybody knows about them. (Powell 2)

Quarterman's account of Ebos Landing transforms the hardships of slavery into the spiritual powers of freedom. There is a salient fundamental in the unity between the spiritual and material aspects of existence in traditional African world view. Both "the material and the spiritual are

necessary for existence, [but] the spiritual domain assumes priority" (McAdams 200). Spirituals are often used for hidden meanings, and in the Ebos Landing, the act of coming together and "going down to hoe in the field" represents their spirit of resistance to slavery. This religious form of resistance speaks to spiritual survival in a sinister world of sin. The secular usage speaks to internal methods of survival in a White world of oppression. The necessary acts of finding freedom challenges the human spirit to "keep on pushing" toward "higher ground" (Smitherman 99). This transformation happens through narrative identity "which refers to an individual's internalized, evolving, and integrative story of the self" (McAdams 242). Analyzing the stories, we study their composite parts to make a core sense of our lives in reverse to our "struggle to reconcile who we imagine we were, are, and might be in our heads and bodies with who we were, are, and might be in the societal context" (McAdams 250).

The Ebos Landing story has been retold and passed down for over 200 years, and it has taken on many different twists; however, each twist stays true to the empowering theme of special experiences that influenced the "secret dreams of revolt and freedom within slave context" (Wallace). Storytelling allowed spaces of perception and re-vision to explore choices, other spaces, and locations as reflective tools to fight against oppressive boundaries set by systems of race domination (Hooks 204). I will call this re-vision and intervention a *Brave Space* where we recover ourselves and give ourselves choice and space to tell "stories and unfold histories" (Hooks 203) to transform broken voices.

Through recounting and remembering history, we create awareness of the struggles and the challenges which African Americans have overcome in this country. This proven perseverance will serve as present and future inspiration and build positive representation within community. It will allow us to reflect and share open dialogue through vulnerability, perception,

and authentic truth-telling, or *"Storytelling,"* for cultural healing and community development. The reality is that in the US, every race is connected to the rich history of this nation, and the African American roots go deep. Knowing that our history is salient will help us break systemic racial injustice and take down invisible walls of defense. Knowing and speaking our past will reveal our wounds at their core, a necessary action, for us as we collectively begin healing these wounds: we must recognize them, define them, and move beyond them if we are to create authentic social change and cultural identity. Story telling must be at the heart of this enterprise.

The misrepresentation of Black culture had already taken root by the Reconstruction days, and as a result, society still portrayed African Americans differently from how they truly saw themselves. There was a disconnect between two developing cultures because the dominant White culture did not acknowledge the Black culture, rendering its experience as unvalued. For instance, Fredrick Douglass, an ex-slave and abolitionist, broke free from White abolitionists because they demanded that he tell only his personal story of enslavement and leave to them to tell the philosophy and ideological attacks on slavery. The White abolitionists attempted to silence Douglass, to reject his memory of self and of the society of slaves, personal and collective stories invaluable to understanding the lives that slaves endured.

Despite their said "freedom," many ex-slaves lacked social, political, and economic power, so the superior community often created culturally negative and narrowly written narratives of ex-slaves who had no voices in that telling. Douglass, however, desired personal and social change. Still, he knew it would be very difficult to sustain change without the support of a collectivity to provide a new communal narrative in which free slaves could identify and sustain changes in their own personal stories. Douglass understood that he was trying to be silenced, so he left the company of White abolitionists stating that he "was growing and needed

room (1881)" (Smitherman 71). He understood the power and justice in breaking the silence concerning historical truths, "*stories* "of slavery, while also contrasting silence and voice, and power and self.

From 1880s into the 1960s, the majority of American states enforced Jim Crow Laws affecting the lives of million; the law was named after a popular 19th-century minstrel song that stereotyped African Americans as ignorant and black, but as greedy as a crow, a demeaning description. Jim Crow personified the exploited system of government-sanctioned racial oppression and segregation in the United States where only power, only force, and only brutality was enforced as unwritten laws to place African Americans in a position of virtual slavery.

Laws enforced separate schools for educating children of African descent, making it unlawful for any colored child to attend any White school in Missouri and in many other states. In North Carolina, laws permitted textbook to be interchangeable between the Whites and colored schools, but primarily those books remained in the White schools. Institutions, first of slavery, and then of oppressive systemic racism silence generations of Africans and their descendants. These institutions caused "oppressed people [to] suffer inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs through violence, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism" (Dubrosky 203). However, times were changing, as the concept of the "New Negro" shows. Again, storytelling is important to the change.

The New Negro

Storytelling has always played a significant role in the African American culture to alleviate our suffering, facilitate creative expressions, and document social movement. The African American experience is rooted in the uncomfortable conversations of racial injustice and

the call for action to maintain positive cultural identity, still a fight we fight today. However, storytelling creates brave spaces that give African Americans release from their built up daily mental and emotional burdens. Storytelling is a form of cultural healing that can only be spoken, written, and heard with the resilience to still rise above the struggles. So as the New Negro emerges on the scene, we must ask, again, how our past influences our present and future. What should we "fetch" or risk leaving behind?

Consequently, to comprehend racial inequities today, we must understand how and why they began to evolve into what they are today. For instance, even with the lack of true representation, Blacks continued to hold true to their roots, and storytelling again became vital in uplifting Black culture. Desiring a more empowering life story, millions of African Americans left the oppressive caste systems of the South for Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic states to find a place where they could freely express their talents. Many searched for cultural healing, and this time period became historically known as "The Great Migration," which took place between 1910-1970's. In the mist of The Great Migration, the "New Negro," a term coined by Alain Locke, was first heard. The New Negro created a new social and cultural narrative for the African American culture, one that integrated oral traditions, storytelling, and music. This new social and cultural landscape also gave birth to new/old themes of cultural healing, freedom, voice, empowerment of Black identity, and community.

The Harlem Renaissance, an artistic explosion, drew master Black storytellers – writers, artist, poets, scholars, and musicians – to Harlem in the 1920's through the1930's. This period saw great stories of African American cultural, social, and economic achievement, and it permanently created artistic and cultural identity for scores of talented and expressive African Americans. Among those who achieved recognition were Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes,

James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Faucett, Claude McKay, and a list of others. Scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois, the editor of *The Crisis* magazine, a journal of the NAACP, encouraged talented Black artists to leave the South. *The Crisis* published poems and visual works of many artists, allowing more and more Blacks the opportunity to voice their own stories.

However, all Blacks had not yet arrived at a positive Black cultural identity. For instance, in his essay "The Negro Artist and the Radical Mountain" (1926), Langston Hughes tells the story of a promising young Black poet of the Harlem Renaissance who stated, "I want to be a poet but not a Negro poet." As Hughes traces the emotional logic of this young man's statement, he also explores the young man's meaning at its core, explaining, "But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the mold of American standardization" (Nelson 1). W.E.B Dubois would call "the mountain standing" a *Double Consciousness* which describes an individual whose identity is divided into several facets (Nelson 1). According to Hughes the young poet's statements reveal his feelings of two-ness, which Dubois describes as "an American, and Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (DuBois 2).

Hughes expresses his pride in being African American, stating, "I am Negro – and Beauty." He believed all young Negro artists should use their platforms to express "our dark-skinned selves without shame or fear" (Nelson 2). Hughes goes on to say that if "white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly, too" (Nelson 2). Hughes ends the essay by stating that he is ashamed for the black poet who writes, "I want to be a poet, but not a Negro poet," as well as ashamed, too, for the colored artist

who avoids painting Negro faces but instead paints "sunsets after the manner of the academicians because he fears the strange un-whiteness of his own features" **(**Nelson 2**).**

The Harlem Renaissance was much more than just a literary movement for Blacks; it was also a movement of racial pride highly influenced by the aggressive embracement of the "New Negro" with strong stories of identity in a time were Blacks were still fighting for political and civil rights (Wormser PBS "The Harlem Renaissance"). With its blues and jazz, the Renaissance attracted Whites to Harlem taverns where interracial couples danced. While the Harlem Renaissance helped pave the way for positive identity and representation for African Americans, it still did not break down the tight barriers of Jim Crow laws that separated the races.

By the mid 1950's and 60's, the African American civil rights movement made national prominence as a mass protest movement against racial segregation and discrimination. With the 1954 ruling of Brown vs. Board of Education which ended segregated schools for Blacks and Whites living in majority states, the movement also created prophetic geniuses who no longer feared examining cultural stigmas. Providing intimate life details, new forms of storytelling seeking racial justice, and empowerment through art, these playwrights and spokesmen fueled the civil rights movement with their representations of Black life. These storied representations also gave hope to African Americans who desired to experience life free of the traumatizing burdens of racial prejudice and injustice. Stories are powerful toward creating positive change.

Lorrain Hansberry, a professional writer and activist for Black equality, in 1959 produced the first African American play ever to appear Broadway, *A Raisin in the Sun*. This play tells the story of a poor black family living on the south side of Chicago who encounters an opportunity to escape poverty. Her own family's story and legal battles fueled her story. During her

childhood, her family had fought against racially segregated housing laws in Chicago's south side.

Hansberry also wrote many articles and essays about racism and world peace. And in her autobiography and play, *To Be Young Gifted and Black*, she portrays various representations of African American life in modern America embodying the past and present frustrations that Black men often face as they try to thrive in an economic system that promises equality but holds them back because of their race. She tells the story of the gifted, intelligent Black woman who aspires to participate fully in the American culture while she also attempts to remember her African roots. Storytelling provides a space, sometimes safe, sometimes not, for African Americans to assert ourselves as people with a recognizable culture worthy of respect and demanding to be acknowledged.

PART III

The Process of Cultural Healing and Community Development

The issue of representation for African Americans is both complex and problematic, for it has been a central concern since the early periods of slave trade to the present. This complexity has led to the current fight for cultural healing, social justice, and community development. Our stories are crucial in this fight because "the talk about the colonial past is embedded in our political discourses, our humor, poetry, and music" (Corntassel 137). Each is a form of truth-telling and "[another] common sense way of passing on both a narrative of history and an attitude about history" (Corntassel 137). The African American culture today carries embedded memories which reflect the realities of systems of racial injustice. Cultural traumas include that first inflicted by slavery, then by segregation, and currently in the fight for Black lives and positive cultural representations. Let us get the story right.

That fight for positive, truthful, "right" representation moved forward when Kendrick Lamar took the stage at the 58th Annual Grammy Awards in Los Angeles. Not knowing what to expect, I eagerly anticipated his next move. He walked to the stage shackled in chains from his hands to his feet to grab the microphone and launch into an emotionally-charged performance of "The Blacker the Berry" from Grammy award-winning album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*. With sweat dripping from his forehead, he spits poetic visions of stories with narratives of the interior voices of Black America today: "I'm African-American, I'm African, I'm black as the moon, heritage of a small village Pardon my residence… come from the bottom of mankind." I instinctively held my head up high as I leaned closer in to the television; my heart beat pulsed with kin knowledge, hearing build up emotions spill out to the ears of a nation. With his hands still chained, his image clearly spoke to the age of mass black incarceration. In pitch dark with one bright light shining only on him, Kendrick voiced his next verse which illuminated the many black lives lost because of racial injustice; "You hate me don't you? You hate my people; your plan is to terminate my culture. You vandalize my perception but can't take style from me. And this is more than confession." He had the audience's full attention, including mine, as he shouted, "You sabotage my community, makin' a killin' You made me a killer, emancipation of a real nigga." The "you" meaning the white slave master, "makin "a killin'" meaning the profit during slavery, "You made me a killer speaks of the profit made via enslavement and currently the profit being made through imprisonment. So the cultural healing in this context is the awareness. To be aware is to be emancipated.

Right there in my living room, I felt liberated, unbound in pure truth, our truth, their truth. His performance was powerful, a political message, a therapeutic message of the inner struggle forced by outer struggles. Kendrick Lamar used powerful storytelling as the heart of his

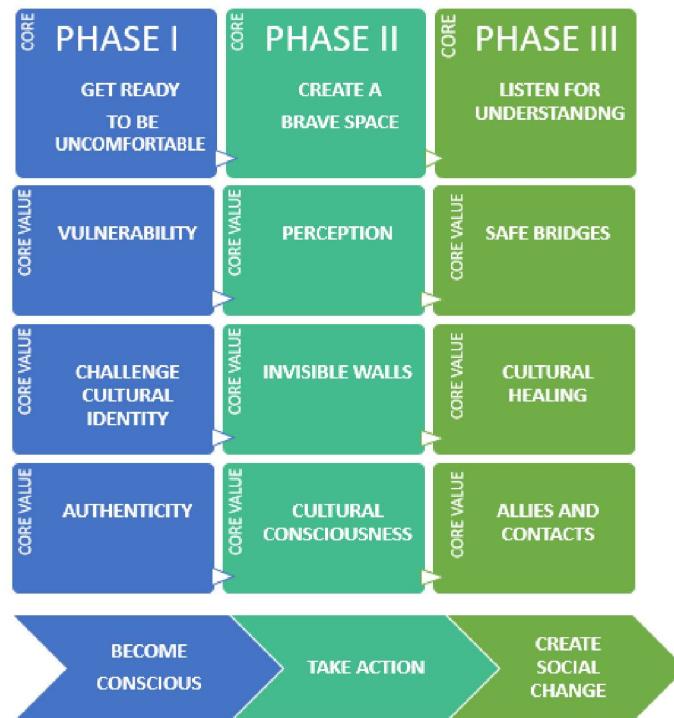
approach to cultural healing. Kendrick Lamar challenged the world to sit down and talk together about the racial injustice taking place in America today. To tell our stories.

Storytelling allows us our own voices because when we know and tell the story, we can see and comprehend the details previously hidden or misinterpreted. Storytelling, then, can create a sense of community and healing through sharing and receiving one another with a concern to understand values and investigate open dialogue. Sharing stories creates learning spaces, and sharing personal experiences encourages unique, individual voices which, in turn, through an empowered vulnerability, allows healing to take place. Through storytelling, we can document and create spaces in our communities where cultural healing can take place: we can dismantle voices of racial injustice and pour balm on the historical scars from the cultural traumas of slavery, segregation, racism, and false identity. In the words of Stuart Hall, "A damaging system of representation can only be dismantled, not by a sudden dose of the real, but by another, alternative system of representation, whose form better approximates the complexity of the real relations it seeks to explore and contest" (Gates 14). What Hall is saying is that we must decode the many representations through a true desire to understand the misrepresented. Dialogue holds the promise of healing in all these contexts in which community is broken. The sense of community depends on the quality of relationships, and relationships grow from conversations. Thus, hope for relationship and community healing comes when dialogue focuses on true personal stories, healing emotions, and resulting, conscious identities.

For America itself and for African communities to heal, we must break the powerfully invisible wall shielding covert racism and explore the interior voice of silence that racial injustice carries: what is spoken, what is unspoken, and the relationship between the two. It is time for cultural healing for African Americans so that community development can take place.

Storytelling can be a strong part in a process of a community collectively coming together to take action and generate solutions to this ongoing problem, one rooted deeply in our past. As African American and American communities, we can no longer hold the veil over our eyes; it is our civic duty to come together and build communities with strong commitments to social change.

I have proposed a Call to Action Plan which places storytelling at the heart of the approach to cultural healing and community development for African Americans. The Call to Action Plan framework consists of the following three core phases: Get Ready to Be Uncomfortable, create a Brave Space, and Listen for Understanding. Each phase includes three Core Values. The objective of my Call to Action Plan is to "Become Conscious," "Take Action," and "Create Social Change." I will break down and define the three core phases using their core values.



Core Phase 1: Be Ready to Be Uncomfortable

"Vulnerability sounds like truth and feels like courage. Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they are never weakness." Brene Brown

Walking around as if race, racism, and issues of discrimination are nonexistent is a privilege people of color are not afforded. However, we are afforded the opportunity to share our stories and take action in our communities to seek cultural healing and community development. But first as a community we must **Be Ready to be Uncomfortable**. This thesis has detailed past accounts of slavery, persecution, flight, bravery, Reconstruction, familial struggles, the New Negro's emergence, a beginning identify search for the "real African American," and more because the past is something we must "fetch" and remember, so that we can recognize it, appreciate it, and move beyond it. But talking about it all is not easy. Storytelling about systemic race driven injustice is not easy talk; many will feel fear, doubt, anger, and guilt. However, this discomfort is foundational because it dismantles the problems and then helps heal wounds from their sources, which leads us to the first core value ***vulnerability.***

What if I told you that vulnerability is related to both courage and fear? Brene Brown, a vulnerability researcher, states, "You can choose courage or you can choose [fear], but you can't have both" (Brown). Fear makes us resist change and often cop out of reconciliation. Fear in uncomfortable conversations makes us holds things in, allowing doubt "[Fear]sniffs out what it perceives to be dangerous from miles away and tries to get the group to turn back" (DeVinne 2). Fear makes us unwilling to explore change. Vulnerability is really about risking and for allowing ourselves to be seen and open to change, which calls for courage rather than for fear. So while our vulnerability is very aware of our fear, it also encourages us to create change and forge ahead. Though vulnerable, we must take a risk and explore the courage to change. Courage frees us to move beyond fear to say that if we don't do this, we risk staying small, not truly connecting

or creating anything new or being innovative. Our vulnerability in courage ironically invites us to risk change to happen which, in turn, challenges our current identity.

To C***hallenge Current Identity*** in the context of the storyteller and the listener is our second core value. This value requires that storyteller and listener examine their societal views and/or check their privileges at the door because "learning necessarily involves not merely risk, but the pain of giving up a former condition in favor of a new way of seeing things," all of which requires risk, difficulty, and controversy (Arao, Clemens 138). When people speak their truth with vulnerability and courage, it is likely that they will sound and appear authentic. Real. The reality will challenge any falseness, and they will be free to tell their stories authentically.

Authenticity *i*s the last core value of this phase; however, it is one of the most important core values because authenticity is internal. Tali Hairston, director of the Perkins Center for Reconciliation explains that many progressives "think 'action' means getting out there and 'helping'," not realizing that the first step to change happens internally (Hairston). Our authenticity shows more by the way we act than by the way we speak our good intentions. When our actions are genuine, we inspire a trust that allows uncomfortable conversations to take place. We can take full advantage of the courage in vulnerability, and challenges our cultural identities by growing and developing ourselves as we move toward authentic change. We must engage in the uncomfortable conversations, even if we all disagree.

During a community development course taught by Tali Hairston, director of the Perkins Center for Reconciliation, I had the opportunity to witness just how uncomfortable and unaware many are of the racial injustice happing around us. I watched as he talked about the uncomfortable conversations of race that ***challenged cultural identity***, one's societal views, and privilege. We discovered that many of the minority students in the classroom viewed life through

a race driven lens but that many of the white student rarely ever had to think about race. We all gained awareness that privilege existed, and the dynamics in the classroom became even more uncomfortable. I remember classmates speaking, and many of my white peers begin to feel white guilt. According to Hairston, white progressives, when confronted with the humbling realization that they are a part of the problem, suffer from guilt (Hairston). However, Hairston did not allow the class as a whole to become paralyzed by guilt. He pushed the class to realize the need for ***authentic*** active participants in reconciliation. His class that day and its awareness building experiences support the understanding that action begins internally first.

Core Phase 2: Create a Brave Space

"Person by person, we can end stereotypes and remove barriers to opportunity. Although this change begins with awareness, it doesn't end there we need action. And the way to move from awareness to action is to… Just. Add. Bravery." Mellody Hobson

A ***Brave Space*** is a community space where different perspectives on a journey of learning and growing are acknowledged (Brave Space Guidelines). Brave spaces help give voice to those uncomfortable conversations that can lead to healing and community development in African American communities. Brave spaces allow genuine dialogue and force us to look at ourselves inclusively. Inclusion is the act of including or being included within a group or structure, and it allows everyone's voice to be heard. Because when we can speak our own truth to compassionate, understanding listeners, we feel invited to the party, *conversation,* and also feel asked to dance, *share our thoughts and ideas*.

Brave spaces allow us to reveal our ***Perception*** which is "the ability to see, hear, or become aware of something through the senses"; perception is the first core value of this phase. Perceptions offers safe ways for people to shift their lenses of life beyond their own subjective.

Research has discovered that sharing personal experiences in community dialogues meant to support understanding others from a different social identity helps to produce "increased comfort, increased connectivity, and greater understanding of their own and others perspectives and social identities" (A. Nagda 559).

The second core value is *Invisible Walls* or walls of defense that often cause us to resist healing. These walls can show in the presence of guilt, resistance, anger, and unawareness. For instance, during a recent conversation about the impact of racism in my community, one of my White peers interrupted me while I spoke. She challenged me, pointing out that the LBGT community are oppressed, too. She was uncomfortable and resistant, almost as if she felt that I was accusing all White community members of racism. I agreed with my peer and agreed that the LBGT community is also a marginalized social group. As I became aware of her invisible walls of defense, I spoke up, "I agree; however, you seem a little upset and angry. Where is this coming from?" As group we could all feel her uncomfortable energy and walls of defense. Ironically, her defense showed that she understood the effects of racism because she is a woman of the LBGT community, and she has experienced racism, too. We reached a point where we could talk about the invisible walls we were breaking through, and then we could really hear one another which helped open the door to cultural consciousness, the final core value of Phase 2. ***Cultural Consciousness*** is the ability to be "aware of your culture, while still being able to understand other cultures and the differences that exist between them" (MixedNation Web). Uncomfortable conversations, brave spaces, and listening for understanding allow us to reach the state of cultural consciousness.

Core Phase 3: Story-Listen for Understanding

"Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen." Winston Churchill

To ***Story-listen for Understanding*** is the ability to allow self to become informed and to connect with others' feelings and emotions on intellectually and socially significant levels. It allows for critical empathy. We must be present and willing to sit and listen, not to give advice, but to show support, because telling and listening to stories is the way we make sense of our lives. This empathy often occurs in African American communities. Many share the stories of our families being brutalized; however, if we only focus our story on the brutalizing history and not the story of what came out of it, which is a story of survival, triumph, and love, then we could miss out on the healing. Listening to each other's stories carries the power to create safe bridges, to bring about cultural healing, and to form allies within the communities.

In Safe Bridges, *truth-telling,* is the first core value of Phase 3. Jim Rohn, a philosopher, explains that building safe bridges requires personal engagement, emotional involvement, and the complexity of holding multiple perspectives. This form of Safe Bridges, *truth-telling,* carries the power to dissemble systemic racial issues. For instance, there's the story of the conversation between the Jewish Shoah and the African American Maafa. Shoah is a Hebrew word meaning "destruction" which speaks to the massacre of millions of Jews and other marginalized groups during Hitler's tyranny. And Maafa is a KiSwahili word meaning "the great disaster," which describes the physical and psychic rupture that slavery of people of West African descent brought upon the global community. By bringing the Shoah and the Maafa into conversation, both communities where able to spark a creative energy that ignited new commitments for justice and peace in the Jewish and African American communities (Braxton 185-7). When others see and hear our stories, they are better able to interpret and understand our

true challenges and begin to build stronger relationships with us. Little by little, the cultural healing takes place.

The second core value is ***Cultural Healing.*** It is the act by which we repair and recreate a healthy representation of a culture's ritual, practices, and/or norms. Cultural healing happens when true representation of African American experiences through authentic storytelling take place in our society. Storytelling in the African American culture teaches the next generation how to elevate themselves because a people without knowledge of its past are like a tree without roots. People who do not know their history, who do not know where they come from, will struggle to figure out where they are going. Listening for understanding the past allows the African American community to use cultural consciousness for cultural healing toward the future. Listening for understanding also helps build allies and contacts, which is the last core value.

Allies and contacts are those who want to fight for the equality of a marginalized group to which they do not belong (Chescaleigh YouTube). Being an ally for the African American community starts with listening, but it is the first and most important step in becoming an ally to any group. White members of any community can become allies of African Americans and their communities. Perhaps many already think they are allies. For the purpose of this thesis, allies are any non-African Americans, particularly White Americans, who seek to engage with the African American community for mutual cultural healing. As an African American native of Seattle, Washington, I understand the city's concept that we are all *progressive* and post-racial. However, we are not. Current data shows that Seattle still struggles with racial segregation and with many other disparities. The underlying truth is that simply labeling ourselves progressive marks the assumption that "we have solved the issues of racial disparity and enmity" (Hairston). As a

potential ally, we have to assume racism is everywhere, every day. Just as "economics influences everything we do, just as gender politics influence everything we do" (Kivel 3), so does racism, and allies must accept this fact. The privilege of being White is the freedom not to have to deal with racism all the time. However, White allies have to learn how to see the impact of racism. They have to pay attention to how they pay attention. Listening allows allies to constantly educate themselves on issues facing those whom they want to help. Hearing African Americans speak passionately about social issues and change helps group members and White allies alike to be willing to challenge the dominate status quo and inequalities. For instance, rapper Macklemore released a song called "White Privilege II" in which he uses his platform as an artist to call for White awareness of America's racism. He raps, "Some of us scared, some of us defensive. And most of us aren't even paying attention. It seems like we're more concerned with being called racist than we actually are with racism." Macklemore differentiates between discomfort at being called racist and the larger problem of doing something about racism. He goes on to state, "I think one of the critical questions for white people in this society is, 'What are you willing to risk? What are you willing to sacrifice to create a more just society?'" Listening for understanding opens opportunities for alliance building which allows each side to relate and collaborate with the other in taking action toward cultural consciousness and cultural healing, which also helps creates accountability.

Using the Three Core Phase framework allows us to Become Conscious, to Take Action, and to Create Social Change. The framework places storytelling at the heart of the approach to cultural healing and community development for African Americans. To ***Become Conscious*** means being aware of what is going on in the community. Being Conscious in the context of Black culture often refers to being aware of issues of racial and political justice. To Become

Conscious is a form of taking action. To ***Take Action*** is to understand the needs, goals, and hopes of the African American community and to communicate the same to allies and contacts who believe in creating true social change. ***Social Change*** is all about being a risk taker and an agent for social justice and positive development in and for the Black community. It means discussing issues and conditions and finding solutions. It places the African American community collectively in a position to establish positive and true, cultural, and racial representation. While it may not heal every wound, African American storytelling is a strong, true, and trusted form of action.

CONCLUSION

Who Tells Your Story?

Iyanla Vanzant, an American inspirational speaker, talks of the pros and cons of holding onto the pain of the past. She explains as follows:

> Until you heal the wounds of your past, you will continue to bleed. You can bandage the bleeding…but eventually, it will all ooze through and stain your life. You must find the strength to open the wounds, stick your hands inside, pull out the core of the pain that is holding you in your past, and make peace with them.

It sounds good, but it is not easy to do; still, one experience of making peace with my past is relevant here. As I sat in the living room of artist (poet, painter, writer) Roosevelt Lewis, I couldn't help recounting how I ended up with such a groundbreaking opportunity. I recalled accidentally running across his paintings at the Columbia City Art gallery on my way to meet with an interviewee for my thesis paper. His work spoke to me powerfully, and I promised myself that I would stop by the gallery after my interview. As I walked to Empire Coffee shop, I

imagined the stories associated with each painting. In his painting, I saw faces that resembles my own; I saw colors dancing with rhythm of histories and familial truths. I saw jazz, I saw the blues, I saw gospel. I saw the blood, and I saw the tears; however, I also saw healing and the power of triumph. I wanted to know more about Roosevelt Lewis. What were the rooted truths behind his paintings, where were his brave spaces, and what kind of courage did it take him to display such thought provoking works of art? That night I researched him, and eventually contacted him directly, which led me to me sit in his living room sipping coffee, my tape recorder ready to engage in critical dialogues through conscious questioning and active listening.

He shared with me his truth, his stories, and his healing heart. Intrigued by his words, I listened to this man born in Natchitoches, the Cane River region of central Louisiana. I allowed myself to enter his space, to hear his booming voice full of wisdom. Once he began to speak, I sensed a silent trust form between Roosevelt and me. And, I listened. I listened for understanding of his stories of uncensored vulnerability. I listened attentively drawn into each word he spoke, for I wouldn't dare question his truth because I was no longer a stranger, I was family. I watched as his disposition relaxed into diverse emotions. I listened as he spoke about his grandmother Artries, about the dignified women working in the cotton fields, and about his godfather's struggle to guide him, a fatherless boy. I listened to his stories about his return from the Vietnam War, his consequent struggles, his mental breakdowns, and the love lost he had experienced while attempting to build a new life. As he talked, he walked me through his home's art gallery.

Roosevelt taught me that listening carries the power of cultural consciousness. I could be aware of our similar African cultures but also understand his Creole culture. Listening also offers cultural healing as it recreates realistic and healthy representation of a culture's rituals, practices, and social norms. Listening offers the opportunity to engage deeply through storytelling, and in

the process, it brings us hope because "if we can speak our story, and know that others hear it, we are somehow healed by that" (Wheatley Web).

That night I discovered that Roosevelt Lewis was also an author. In his book *Taught by Life,* he uses art to tell his story as he moves between abstraction and metaphor, lines and planes. His paintings show the meaning and depth of purpose by illustrating the Black experience. He was also inclusive about his world and understood others' struggles "because poverty and wealth—struggling black poor and working middle class—lived side by side in the black neighborhood at that time." Today, Roosevelt uses art as platform for healing and community development stating, "I believe my work is a reflection of the possibilities of moving one generation beyond the other" (3). As we parted, I remember his signing my copy of his book, and as he signed he hesitated until I smiled and let him know he was free to write whatever he wanted to write. I watched as he scribbled away, and once I got to the car, I turned on my lights and read what he had written: To Le'Onna Lee, from Roosevelt Lewis 2016, all the best *"The Struggle Continues... But Still We Rise."*

That night I went home, and I cried, not tears of sorrow but tears of relief. That night I let go of some things. I reflected on the stories of my father, a boy from the south side of Chicago who grew up so poor that he and his eight brothers often stuck cardboard in their shoes during the winter months. I thought about my mother who till this day has no high school diploma. I thought about my sisters and brother, all successful today. I thought about myself and the fact that I am so far the only Lee in my family ever to earn a college degree. And then I repeated to myself "And Still We Rise." I am proud of who I am, of where I came from, of my culture whose people have always had the courage to "Still Rise." I am grateful for our stories, even the

painful ones, because “without stories, life becomes a book cover without the pages—nice to look at, but not very fulfilling” (Stone Web).

It is said that in West Africa, when a person in the village becomes sick, the Healer will ask, “When was the last time that you sang? When was the last time that you danced? When was the last time that you shared a story?” (Cox 2000). Story telling is intrinsic in the African American culture, too. Recent studies show that the success of African American children’s early literacy is connected to African oral traditions of storytelling. Storytelling is said to enhance their early reading development. Through research, Nicole Gardner-Neblett discovered that “oral narrative skills were found to mediate the pathway between early language and kindergarten emergent literacy for poor and non-poor African American children” (893). The relationship between oral narrative skills and literacy did not apply to the entire study, but only to one group of children, African American. Gardner-Neblett’s findings support the important role of storytelling in African American culture, and Iruka suggests the findings are linked to a “historical precedent” (898).

When true African American storytelling reveals our past and present trauma, it will help us to speak the ultimate truth about the racism and hatred that still infects America’s soil. It will tell the story that shame, guilt, and fear has prevented us from telling. It can nurture cultural consciousness and healing as communities come together to speak to and to listen to one another, to respect and value one another’s journeys. Storytelling is powerful. It is the African American ancient ritual that still moves our people beyond language itself, shaping not only our perceptions but also our actions as we move forward together into the future. Storytelling may not heal every wound, but it can seek true and just alternatives for resolving the hurt and

conflicts of a culture of people. It must be at the heart of any practical approach to cultural healing and development for African American community development and life.

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