the best of black love

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the best of black love

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*The editor would like to apologize to Mwatabu Okanata for errors that occurred in his article last semester. The article is featured in its entirety in this semester's issue on page 32.*
According to the media and the powers that be, African Americans, or blacks, have an insignificant amount of anything to offer to this country. Undoubtedly, we have even less to offer to this world. Any black person that has drifted into a position of authority, no matter what position, was an exception. The rest of us were and are either selling drugs or addicted to them. We have multitudes of children that we let run like wild animals in the streets. And, let us not forget, we are all on welfare because we need everything given to us. Thank goodness that we have come into the era when we no longer care what they, those who deem themselves to be superior to every race, speculate about us.

This is the season that we begin to acclaim the elite of what we have to offer. It is time to emerge. It is time that we manifest the best of our black love. It is time that we begin to mend our relationships. We need to revive a time when the man-woman relationship was the cornerstone of our families. It was an age when the ritual of becoming a man did not involve killing your own brother. We need to journey back to the day when children did not disrespect their parents. We need to go back to a time when the music was “our” music. We may have had to conceal it, but we knew it was ours. We need to start repairing ourselves. We need to express the best of our spiritual selves and understand a time when this was a basis for our existence.

We have the strength to do that within ourselves. We need only catch a reflection of ourselves. Once we get past all the bruises and the scars that we have sustained throughout the generations, we will find that we have the power to heal ourselves. I believe the best of what we have to offer as a people is still yet to come. The best of black love is not an element of the past but a manifestation of the future. Uhuru has devoted this issue to “The Best of Black Love.” May the healing process commence.
“There is only one thing that has power completely, and that is love. Because when a man loves, he seeks no power, and therefore he has power.” - Alan Paton, *Cry The Beloved Country.*

It is this power, the power of love, that has kept us afloat in a sea contaminated with hate. We are a people whose history in the ‘land of the free’ has revolved around degradation and injustice. We have been beaten down time and time again, yet still we rise. We have risen above fear, despair, sorrow and hopelessness. We have risen above every face of opposition that has stood in our way. We remained strong by the power of love. While everything imaginable was taken from us, love was simply all that we had.

Black love is phenomenal in its strength. It is uniquely ours, and can be viewed in every aspect of our lives, from our history to the present. Our black women have and continue to be the backbone of our families and have lived their lives struggling to keep our families whole. Our black men continue to flourish in a country that has done everything in its power to eliminate them entirely. Black men and women continue to love each other from the depths of their hearts and souls. They love their children with an intensity that is essential in a society that does not value their existence.

Our love can be seen in our never-ending perseverance, our determination to never be defeated. Our love can be seen in our fierce loyalty to one another, and in our constant courage to defend that which we put our faith in. At times our love is stern and demanding, but at other times we love with gentle tenderness. Black love carries with it a deep passion that is evident in our creative and evolving music, our rhythmic dance, our joyful laughter, and our physical aura. It is the unique quality of our love that has kept us from being destroyed in a country determined to keep us down.

Our love far surpasses the power of evil in the form of racism, white supremacy or hatred of any form. We must never lose our faith in our love, for it is this faith that will guarantee our successful longevity and happiness as a people. No human system, no opposing force or method of control can ever overpower the best of black love.
[Rap is outta control!]
Rap is outta control! This creative form of expression that is rooted in the black community is now governed by big business. Rap was once a pure outlet used by African American youth as a way of venting frustration. It has now become commercialized for mainstream audiences. Once again, the music industry is making big money off of black creativity, and as a result, hip hop's cultural transmission is suffering. It seems as if almost every other decade the black community gives birth to a musical expression that revolutionizes the music industry. Its latest creation is rap music, which is the voice for young black disciples who represent hip hop - the culture that shapes the thought process, language, dress, and art of its followers. But now, as it has done in the past, the music industry is cashing in on the black communities creativity. This time rap music and the hip hop culture are the perishing victims.

Black music was flushed into popular culture during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920's. Since this revolutionary introduction, white-owned record companies have capitalized off of black talent. This ultimately filters the values that black music was founded on. During the late 1940's Atlantic Records emerged as an "industry powerhouse" by being the first record company to slowly integrate black rhythm and blues into the mainstream consciousness.

The founder of Atlantic Records was Ahmet Ertegun. As the son of a wealthy Turkish diplomat, Ertegun was raised in Europe but felt that he knew "what black life was in America" because he had a deep passion for black music. Dissatisfied with popular music, Ertegun formed his own record company and signed black talent to record the very sounds that he had fallen in love with.

In 1949 Atlantic Records had their first crossover hit with "Drinkin' Wine Spo-Dee-O-Dee" by Granville McGee. This inspired Ertegun to sign more talent that was rooted in the black church. These gospel influenced additions to the label set "the tone for Atlantic's authentic sound of black music". But
liked the crossover sound that they recorded. Years later, the well-to-do Ertegun admitted that he forced “soul” on his artists by making them record songs that appealed to the mainstream white audience.

Atlantic Records had blazed a trail for the entire music industry to follow. Record companies across the country hunted for talent that could produce the “authentic” sound that Ertegun had popularized. It was also a priority for labels to sign artists who could possibly reach the many whites who were apprehensive about overtly supporting black music. Jerry Wexler, who at that time was the newest executive at Atlantic Records, was quoted as saying, “When it became apparent that this black music had great potential commercially for sales, it was an opening for the entrepreneurs to take the music, cover it, record it with white people, copy it, literally, and then put it on the market.” This idea called for record companies to have white acts plagiarize black styles with the hope of selling this music to mainstream America.

Elvis Aaron Presley was the first of many white artists to use black influences that catered to white listeners. He was a good ‘ole boy from Mississippi who molded his image by imitating everything from the hair styles to his vocal approach. The “king” as he is known to his die-hard fans, was the “funnel that taught the white world the joys, the euphoria, and the pleasures of black music”, said Wexler. Soon more white acts with black influences flooded the market. Record companies no longer needed black music with black faces to advance in the industry. This inevitably lead to the transition of rhythm and blues into rock n’ roll. America’s Jim Crow laws forced blacks to live as second class citizens while virtually all of the music industry was rooted in black culture. The majority of today’s popular music is a transformed expression that was founded in the black community. Rock n’ roll is the offspring of black rhythm and blues of the 1940’s and 50’s, as is country music. And, much of the “alternative” culture that is so popular among today’s white teens has its roots in hip hop music.

Rap music had its first exposure to popular culture during the late 1970’s. The Sugarhill Gang’s worldwide hit “Rapper’s Delight” sold over 2 million copies in the United States alone. As hip hop music matured within America’s inner cities the music industry paid little attention to what was going on right under its nose. Record companies doubted rap’s creativity and longevity, as well as its fan base. Local independently owned record labels were the center of hip hop culture’s enterprise. Big business didn’t invest in rap music until the early 1980’s. When Mercury Records signed hip hop pioneer Kurtis Blow, the idea still remained that “any minute rap was going to disappear, and Blow’s audience with it. It was the attitude shared by most in the industry, which treated rap and its decidedly non-upwardly mobile fans like a social disease.” Some sickness hip hop turned out to be. After the 1984 Fresh Fest tour, which included Run-DMC, Whodini, the Fat Boys, and Kurtis Blow, sold out in 27 cities across the country, industry executives realized that hip hopper’s would financially support rap music. Big business had found the antidote for the music industry’s ills - and it was called rap music.

In the fictional hip hop story/documentary “Fly By Night”, a record company executive at a major label further explains how big business jumped on the hip hop bandwagon: “Eight years ago we wouldn’t even release rap records, so rappers started them out themselves. But then they started small independent labels of their own and put started selling thousands of records so we absorbed the entire independent market. Cold Chillin’, Next Plateau; Columbia owns Def Jam, Sony owns Columbia, Public Enemy (a black nationalist group that is one of hip hop’s most influential and popular talents ever) worked for the Japanese.”

Rap’s creativity blossomed during the middle to late 1980’s. From coast to coast and ‘hood to ‘hood, hip hoppers enjoyed the originality of Biz Markie, EPMD, Big Daddy Kane, Eric B. and Rakim, Boogie Down Productions, Digital Underground, De La Soul and the list goes on and on (to da break of dawn)! Rap music’s messages centered around the importance of having knowledge of self, unity among black people, and recognizing the conditions of white supremacy. It also discussed male/female relationships and the test of a true lyricist was how well a rapper held their ground when in “battle” - a confrontation between two or more rappers. Hip hop didn’t endorse violence, drug use, nor the degradation of women, as it does today. In fact, it was taboo to disrespect another person, and whenever this norm was violated hip hoppers took it upon themselves to correct the misguided behavior.

Gangsta rap did not become a nationally accepted genre of hip hop until the late 1980’s. NWA’s (Niggas With Attitude) landmark release “Straight Outta Compton” would single handedly reshape the face of rap music for years to come as it illustrated the violent reality of gang life in South Central, Los Angeles. Hip hop fans nationwide rocked to the street consciousness that the west coast had offered to rap music. It was bold, honest, and so far removed from hip hop’s established mores that it captured the attention of mainstream America. 

Big business fell madly in love with gangsta rap. It was the only
form of hip hop that could consistently cross race, class, and gender lines; plus it sparked controversy in the mainstream media where it was becoming increasingly popular. The music industry flooded the market with gangsta rap by signing mediocre acts that were even partially close to NWA’s hardcore style. This is not to say that this genre of rap is not a direct result of the conditions that surround the black community, nor that there aren’t gangsta rappers who are creative, but it is true that big business focuses on gangsta rap because it will go to the sexually explicit and violent extremes that Hollywood promotes as entertainment.

Hip hop has sold its soul! The consciousness that rap was once centered in has turned into dollar signs for big business. Fortunately, some rappers are realizing how much the music industry manipulates this creative form of expression. Common Sense’s 1994 classic “I Used To Love H.E.R.” has sparked debate within the hip hop community about rap’s commercialization. In the song, Common traces hip hop’s evolution by symbolically disguising it as a woman:

“I might’ve failed to mention that the shit was creative, once the man (big business) got to her he alternated her native. Told her if she had an image and a gimmick then she could make money and she did it like a dummy. Now I see her in commercials, she’s universal, she used to only swing it with the innercity circle. Now she be in the ‘burbs, listenin’ to rock, and dressing hippy, and on some dumb shit when she comes to the city.”

The clock is ticking, but hip hoppers still have time to save their music from the clutches of big business. At the grass roots level, hip hop’s core members have remained unmoved during the commercialization of rap. Also, recent cultural shifts such as the Million Man March, support for Mumia Abu Jamal, and even the O.J. Simpson trial, have contributed to hip hop’s creative revival by highlighting blacks’ second class citizenry. But, regardless of how spiritual or clever the hip hop nation becomes, in order for it to survive, hip hoppers must completely sever all ties with corporate America.

If rappers continue to let the 1990’s version of Atlantic Records ride their backs to the bank, one day music’s creativity will not be rooted in the black community. Hip hoppers must regain control of their music! Not only do rappers need to finance their own record companies, but they must also create and distribute their music without big business. This means that rappers must pull their resources together to learn what really goes on behind the scenes where the real money and power rests. Rap is outta control! And if the hip hop nation doesn’t regain control of its music very quickly, rap music as the black community created it will not exist in ten years.
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THE REVELATION OF AN ARTIST
I remember how it all began. It was the fall of 1987 and I was twelve years old. I was approaching the seventh grade at W.H. Kirk Middle School in East Cleveland. Kirk was unlike a regular middle school. It was a rite of passage for any African-American male approaching puberty. Kirk introduced us to the advanced things in life: girls, sex, marijuana and hip hop music.

The parties in the lunchroom were real hype that fall. Those were the times when Big Daddy Kane, Milk D, and M.C. Shan’s records were the choice records at the party. But the most requested song during the fall of 1987 was Criminal Minded, by Boogie Down Productions.

“Boogie Down Productions. We’ll always get paid. We’ll take the wacky song, and make it better. Remember to let us into your skin, and then you’ll begin, to master, rhyming, rhyming, rhyming. You’ve been blinded. Looking for a star like mine, you can’t find it.”

Those were the words that rang throughout the cafeteria as the DJ mixed the hottest rap song of that era. Criminal Minded had everyone in the cafeteria jumping up and down as they recited the words to the song.

No one would have suspected that Criminal Minded would eventually become a classic hit or that Boogie Down Productions would become part of the focal point that accelerated the hip hop culture into the 90’s. No one expected BDP to still be around during hip hop’s cultural zenith.

Back then none of us knew the hip hop artists as well as we do now because then hip hop was still an underground phenomenon. We were only familiar with the big names like, Run-DMC, Whodini, The Fat Boys, Slick Rick and Doug E. Fresh. It was after the murder of Boogie Down Productions DJ, Scott Sterling, a.k.a. Scott La Rock, that hip hop fans across the country began to learn more about the lives of hip hop artists.

Scott La Rock’s death showed that a lot of rap artists are painting pictures of their worlds and others. After Criminal Minded, hip hop music began to tell its listeners that rap artists live among violence and are not just stage ornaments.

Hip hop music is a creation of oppressed people. The stories that we hear in hip hop music are real to the people who are writing them and real to the people who are living it. Hip hop music, also known as rap, does not promote violence, it just reports the violence that occurs in the world.

“The main thing is that before Criminal Minded, rappers were characters. After Criminal Minded, rappers became the everyday people on the corner,” said Krs-One, which stands for Knowledge Reign Supreme Over Nearly Everybody.

THE GENESIS
Scott La Rock was a youth counselor when he met Krishna (one of KRS’s nicknames since he studied the Hare Khrista religion) in a homeless shelter in the South Bronx in the early eighties. He was writing graffiti as KRS-One.

Scott La Rock and KRS-One began working together, and eventually created Boogie Down Productions. They released the classic Criminal Minded in 1987. After the death of Scott La Rock, KRS-One’s popularity grew and he gained more respect as a rap artist. This new found respect carried over when he made his second album By Any Means Necessary.

This album was aimed towards ending problems in American society and showed a more fiery and directed KRS-One. By Any Means Necessary brought out a new side of him. No longer “Criminal Minded”, he was
now dubbed as the teacher teaching philosophy in rap.

Even though the “teacher role” was originated as a marketing strategy, KRS-One was actually teaching his listeners through his music. Students started to become more aware of Malcolm X and other black activists by listening to KRS-One. The teacher and other East Coast rappers came together as one and created the single “Self-Destruction,” in 1989, which was aimed at curbing inner city violence.

With the rise of gangsta rap, which was based upon gang violence in Los Angeles, hip hop music changed. Without the original Boogie Down Productions crew, KRS-One released Sex and Violence, which was not as good as his previous four projects. (KRS-One made two more albums after his second, The Original Blue Print of Hip Hop and Edutainment.)

It began to seem as if the teacher was slipping into the pool of retired hip hop artists. Then he emerged again rocking the CB4 movie soundtrack with the single “Blackcop,” a song about the behaviors of African-American law enforcement officers.

As hip hop was becoming more advanced as a business and as an art, KRS was becoming more advanced within the rap industry. When he hooked up with DJ Premiere to release The Return to the Boom Bap, KRS-One stepped back on the scene hardcore as he exposed how fraudulent MCs (master of ceremony) fall off after two albums.

KRS-One topped his career off when he released his latest CD, KRS-ONE. Critics say that this is probably his best release ever. KRS’s career does not stop with hit after hit. He is also part of the lecture circuit, speaking at places like NYU, Harvard and most recently, Kent State University.

THE PHILOSOPHY

Members of the KSU audience sat in awe as he spoke to them on “Black Self Improvement”. KRS-One has great ability conveying his philosophical message on CD, but his message on “Black Self Improvement” was so deep and advanced that much of the audience could not understand it or were not prepared for it.

KRS-One has claimed to have read every black book that there is on the market and to have studied every philosopher from Aristotle to Martin Luther King. He said that now he does not read as much because he is, “more interested in conversation.”

It seemed that much of the audience was unaware that KRS-One has a philosophical mind set and that he speaks from a philosophical point of view. He was trying to have a conversation with his audience, and within his conversation he said some interesting things about history and religion that some agreed with and others disagreed with.

“We don’t rely on history to determine what our existence is about,” he said to the audience.

“Take a close look at what is going on today. If you don’t know where you are then you don’t know where you came from.”

As a philosopher KRS-One questioned the concept of history as a whole.

“No history is accurate. Everything in society has seven versions. So whose history is correct?” he asked.

“KRS-One is teaching reality. I think human beings must react to the real conditions affecting its survival. If that human being does not react to the real conditions affecting its survival, it will destroy itself. In a nutshell, the KRS-One teaching is: In order
to survive as a human being, you have to be non attached to your memory and past experiences.”

KRS-One was not saying that we should forget our history but that we should study and learn where we are in the present. He believes that we should study history and scholars but in a different way.

“I think the youth need to listen to more tapes and not read more books. Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, Ivan Van Sertima, all these people should be put on cassette.”

KRS-One has been studying different religions for many years, so as a philosopher he has questioned the concept of God and history many times in his music. Yet a lot of the audience did not know why KRS was questioning the history of God altogether, or why we call God a “him” and not a “her”.

He explained that in Africa the goddess was the creative force of the Universe. He thinks that human society must put aside the concept of God as a man, and respect the concept of the earth goddess. KRS-One said we have a dominating male history. He believes women have been left out of religion as well as history and that is why we must question religion as well as history.

“Are the Ten Commandments right for us?” he asked. “I don’t want to believe in God, I want to know him (or her).”

KRS-One believes that believing in the European standards of history and religion are not helping African people.

“The oppressed and the oppressor cannot share the same god because the concept of God decides the good and the bad,” he said.

“We do right by our oppressor and what is wrong by ourselves. We are moving in the way Europeans feel we should move. We define forward movement based in a European context.”

KRS-One said ignorance of
“With love, humility and respect, I salute him...”

Loving Our Elders

Dr. Alene L. Barnes

When I was a little girl, one of the mandatory rules for any “well-raised” child was to love and respect one’s elders. This idea was so ingrained in us that somehow we learned to place them in a sacred place in our hearts and thoughts. And even though I recall resisting those weekend visits to the homes of my old great aunties and uncles, my mother dragged us children along anyway. She constantly urged us to watch out for them; to care for them; and to remember them as we went about our busy lives. And although I didn’t understand the significance of it then, I now thank my mother for instilling this value in me. For what my mother was doing was indeed a value held in traditional African societies and continues to be upheld even under the pressures of technological change. In the African tradition, it is the elders who connect us to an otherwise forgotten past of the ancestors. It is through their wisdom that the next generation prospers.

I have learned to love and respect all of my elders with much passion. At every opportunity, I visit and listen to all that they have to share. The words of my grandfather, who shared with me my father’s family history and the information my great auntie presented to me which helped me to know her older sister who was my maternal grandmother shall never be forgotten. In the physical absence of three of my biological grandparents, it was also the love shared with me by two extended grandmothers (“Gran” and “Mama”) and an extended grandfather (“Granpa”) that I learned the commitment of the community village to the raising of the community’s children and their children as well. This was the way of life — the way we survived as a people.

For the past 20 years I have learned to love yet another of our elders. At a
point in my life when I was studying traditional medicines, I came to the realization that my knowledge about herbs was mostly academic. I met a gentleman in my hometown who was to be invaluable to me as a young woman in identifying and using nature’s herbs for health and healing. His name is Mr. Alvin J. Anderson. On February 26, 1996, Mr. Anderson turned 100 years of age. Known affectionately as “The Herb Wizard” or “Dr. Anderson” or “Al”, he has resided with his wife Luddie for more than 50 years on the outskirts of Buffalo, N.Y. in Depew where he maintains an herbal garden fashioned after an African village (“The African Herbal Village”). For as many years, “Dr.” Anderson has received visitors from around the globe who all have shared in his wisdom about traditional medicines. When very few of us are even confidently knowledgeable about treating a common cold, Mr. Anderson has used herbs his entire life for all ailments and illnesses. However, most of the illnesses have been someone else’s. Using herbs as a way of life has proven to be a preventive measure against poor health for him.

Born just over 100 years ago in Marietta, Georgia, Alvin Anderson’s mother raised her family using herbs — nature’s original medicine. He does not remember ever visiting a doctor as a boy. There was only the midwife and herbs. When he developed a hernia many years ago, he treated himself until it disappeared. In his healthy lifestyle, uncomplicated by too many of the urban culture’s modern conveniences, he reminds us of the wealth that can be found within nature itself. He has remained committed to a philosophy of life. Much of it has been developed by reading, believing and quoting from the Bible. He has stated many times throughout the years that the Bible says to keep the commandments and your days shall be long on earth. He has also quoted from the scripture, Ezekiel 47:2 which reads: “And by the river upon the bank thereof, on this side, shall grow all trees for meat and the fruit thereof shall be for meat, and leaf thereof for medicine.” Mr. Anderson is not a religious man but a moral one. He often refers to the teachings of the Bible as a text where much knowledge is contained and a recipe for living is prescribed. He adds that the gateway to longevity is clean living and herbs. There is plenty of health and happiness around if one enters that gateway. Mr. Anderson loves nature and reveals some of his pastime pleasures when he says: “I ramble through the woods and fields and listen to the birds singing their beautiful songs, the crickets chirping with joy, the bees gathering their nectar for honey, the billowing clouds drifting through the pale blue sky, and nothing to distract you from meditating and enjoying a glorious sunset.

You’re closest to Divine Nature and the Creator in this position and frame of mind.”

Alvin Anderson is truly a living example of practicing and “living” what you preach. I have never witnessed him straying from the path. Mr. Anderson has an opinion on most subjects. Not having a formal edu-
cation, he claims his knowledge to be Divine. He is a man who takes great pride in his race. He has always claimed his African ancestry and heritage even when it was not in vogue for people of his day. He has also always complimented natural hairstyles and the wearing of African garments and takes great pride in his photographic archives compiled through the years as a professional photographer as well as a collection of photos given to him from Africa. He photographed the first rubber tire put on a tractor as well as the first starter put on an auto in Mount Clemens, Michigan. This photo was used in Popular Mechanics Magazine. When he first opened up his studio on Williams Street in Buffalo back in the 40’s, he did all the photographic work for Kresge’s Drugs. His collection of photos also include several celebrities including some of Buffalo’s public figures.

Dr. Anderson is quite overwhelmed trying to comprehend his life on this earth for an entire century. He is proud to have predicted it and on his birthday wished for 50 more years. I feel proud to have known him for one-fifth of those years and appreciate him as I have all the elders who have influenced my life. With love, humility and respect, I salute him and call upon our ancestors to continue to guide and protect him and all the rest of our precious gems for the continuance of their journey.

Dr. Barnes is a professor at Kent State University.
Pursuing Psychological Freedom Through Our Past

by Sarah E. Spain

The door to our future cannot be opened without the key from our past. It is easy to believe that the past is the past, and that what is important is the present and the future. Yet, if one looks at our African American community in this country, one cannot ignore the detrimental effects that our enslavement has had on the lives of our people.

We must be aware of not only the facts of our history, but we must understand the harmful effects it has produced. The emotional conditions that surround our people today can be traced directly back to slavery. The lack of self-esteem that is lodged in our subconscious and the negative self views and ideas that possess our minds are not our own creations. They do not represent the state of society at large because these concepts are limited to our own race. These images are instilled in us not only by the white majority in this country, but also by our parents, elders, and peers.

It is crucial to understand the aftermath of slavery in order to come to terms with who we are today. Where we are, mentally and physically, today would change dramatically if our past were one that did not revolve around physical, mental and emotional dis-
memberment. It would be different if we were not raped, persecuted and dehumanized; all of which wreaked havoc on our hearts and souls. It would be different if we were not robbed of a culture that revolved around love, spirituality and community. But our history of torture and abuse existed for many, many years. This existence took part in shaping today's reality. To disregard our history means forever falling victim to the problems that came out of it, which hinders the opportunity to begin again with minds untainted by false ideas. Though racism's ugliness can be seen in the forms of joblessness, inadequate education and poor health, there are other areas in which it is not so easily identified. Until we look at the roots of such problems as materialism, greed, and lack of self-respect particularly among our youth, we will not be able to move forward as a people.

African Americans are consumed by materialism. Centuries of living in a land that thrives on greed has transformed us into a worldly and superficial people. Starting from a young age, our popularity and often our sense of self-worth is based on our material possessions. This search for self-gratification in the form of objects derives from slavery. Because we live in a country that is historically based on white supremacy, which is a system that is based on power and control, as African American people our concept of sharing, supporting and respecting one another has been damaged. In its place came new concepts of individualism and self-help before the well-being of the group. We became self-seeking and shallow, and fed into the notion that money would bring us happiness. Before long, the desire for objects, ranging from money, to fancy cars, to sex, dominated our daily thoughts and actions. Pleasure became our primary motivation, and we became driven not by needs, but by wants.

A combination of greed and hatred for American values influenced us to lash out at one another. We began to displace the frustration and anger we felt towards our oppressors onto our own people. White supremacy that governed the nation had transformed into a battle for power among our own people. Inevitably, the disease called envy infected the once pure hearts of African American people. Spiteful gossip, put-downs, and verbal abuses aimed at the weak plagued our daily lives. We began to judge one another on our outward appearance and material possessions rather than on the content of a person's character. We dealt with our unconscious hatred for ourselves that was instilled in us by the white community by hating one another instead. Though this hate was often masked in the form of humor or even love, it was hate nonetheless. The attempt at raising one's self-worth through the degradation of others only succeeded in accomplishing our oppressors' greatest desire: mental, emotional, and eventually physical genocide.

Today's generation is one that is plagued with greed, selfishness and shallowness. Our community as consumers fund our oppressors with hundreds of billions of dollars a year. There is sick irony in the fact that we fund our oppression rather than our liberation. Most of the money that we spend is not only money that is not our own, but it is spent on shamefully unnecessary objects. Our brainwashed youth do not see the problem with spending ridiculous amounts on clothing that is wanted for the sole purpose of getting respect or being considered worthwhile. They do not see that we are supporting a racist system that awaits our self-destruction, and they are blinded by the danger of not knowing the contents of their souls due to the lack of an original, creative, and spiritual identity.

We are very much a lost people attempting to find refuge in a land of immortality. This is evident in our
young people’s attempt to embrace a
style and culture that is bought and bor-
rowed, not created. It is one that is
based on having and owning, not living
and feeling deep within. Today we get
much of our style from the outside and
act as if these objects represent who we
are on the inside. Style and self-worth
that do not originate form the inside
and flow outward will never bring us
happiness. Our lack of true self-esteem
and understanding of ourselves is man-
ifested through behavior that is greedy
and self-centered.

Another problem that has roots in
slavery is our lack of self-respect. It is
true that this is a problem that plagues
our entire society and is linked to the
country’s political, economic and racial
situation. Traditionally, Africans have
always valued and respected themselves
as well as others, yet slavery and its
aftermath made that hard. Our families
were torn apart, our women raped, and
our men lynched. Our children’s mental
and emotional growth was stunted, dis-
torted or prohibited entirely. For gener-
ation after generation, we suffered
poverty and malnourishment of not
only the body, but more importantly, of
the soul. We clung to the only thing that
remained stable – our God.

The mixture of fear of judgement
from God and deep spirituality were
once all that was needed to keep our
people from following a life that, though
filled with human mistakes, was
on a moral path. Due to slavery, our
higher power became a conglomeration
of the god of our oppressors and of our
past. Unfortunately, the European god
was one of hypocrisy, created to ensure
control through guilt. The concept of
“sin” created by the founding fathers
was designed to control us. This same
god was our hope and promise for a
better tomorrow for centuries, and was
an instrumental part of our lives until
recently. As we fought to free ourselves
from our oppressors, our faith in God
remained strong, yet we realized that
we had to depend on ourselves for
change. Resentment and submissiveness
was replaced with desperate, angry,
aggressive action, which was successful
in producing change.

Though they still embraced God,
new generations viewed God differen-
tly. God became separate from daily liv-
ing. People began to do things their
own way, and justified their actions
even if they were wrong. Though spiri-
tuality and religious beliefs are still alive
among our younger generation, faith
does not control our lives as it once did.
The repercussion of disharmony with
God is that we’ve lost sight of the
importance of respect in our lives.

The terrible economic and social
conditions that we endured daily took a
heavy toll on our spirituality. From the
time of slavery, we were faced with
moral and ethical decisions that con-
flicted with our consciences. We were
forced to steal, cheat, lie, and misuse
our own bodies simply to survive.
African Americans were treated as sub-
human, and were robbed of the power
to understand and control their destiny.
Many times, we were given no choice
but to act in ways that did not align
with our belief systems. Our primary
concern for centuries had simply been
survival. By the time we were able to
make choices for ourselves, our belief
system had become distorted with a
combination of a capitalist mentality
and a debilitating emotional disintegra-
tion resulting in the loss of much of our
spiritual strength and self-determina-
tion. The emotion of guilt was pushed
so far back into our subconsciousness that
it was easy to ignore and often hard to
feel. The unification of actions with
moral and ethical values that had once
represented purity of spirit and oneness
with God among our people was nearly
forgotten.

With time, we have slowly evolved.
Much of today’s generation is one that
is guiltless and fearless. After years of
suffering pain and constant struggle,
today’s generation is not one that is not
overtly afraid. It has learned from its
elders that fear will not get you any-
where. But, African Americans are sub-
consciously frightened. They feel cor-
nered, lied to, deceived and permanent-
ly trapped as victims in this corrupt
country. In an attempt to deal with the
fear, grief and depression that plagues
us, we choose to infect each other. The
symptoms take the form of violence,
greed and apathy. Our young people
have no faith in a “justice system” that
is part of a larger institution that is not
only unjust, but sick and based on dom-
ination and hatred. They have nothing
but disgust and lack of respect for this
country’s corrupt and racist mentality.
Though our youth may believe in God,
their faith is weak, and their spirituality
does not rule their lives.

From the time that they are intro-
duced to the world, our black children’s
spirit is crushed. Their ambitions are
discredited, which destroys their confi-
dence. Their visions have been distorted
by generations of psychological stress
and torment. Life is no longer viewed as a gift, to be treasured and respected. Because the hearts of our children are filled with anger, despair and hopelessness, we witness self-seeking, harmful behavior.

It is apparent that years of emotional abuse has taken a heavy toll on the well-being of African American people. Though physically we are no longer in chains, many of us are still psychologically enslaved. We will continue to be until we look at why and how this destructive psychological evolution occurred. The damage is extensive and can only be healed with the painful reopening of old wounds. Only after these wounds are re-examined carefully and eradicated of debilitating impurities can we close them up. We must then re-embrace spirituality and find peace and happiness within ourselves. We must regain faith in ourselves and one another. But above all, we must learn to love with pure hearts and free minds.

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Beautiful Black Princess
by Tiara A. Burnett

When you find a Black Princess...
Decked in Royal Gold.
You’ll know she’s a Princess...
And a sight to behold.

When you find a Princess...
With beautiful Black skin.
Her voice will tell the tales...
Of all the places she’s been.

Your Princess will be bold...
Confident with a sound mind.
Stand with strength and poise...
And have the gift of rhyme.

Your Princess will stand beside...
Not in front or in back!
She bows down to no man...
For she is Proud...she is Black.

This Beautiful Black Princess...
is too worthy for many.
Thinking of her qualities...
She is too worthy for any.

Yet there is only one Prince...
Who has stolen her heart.
He is the only one...
Who may play the part.

God Bless you Prince, for you hold the key...
To the Beautiful Black Princess’ heart.
Cherish your valuable treasure...
May the two of you never part.

C’chocolate Deluxe
by Wallace Thomas

Skin, dark like midnight,
eyes glowing bright like the sun,
skin smoother than the ice,
that lay upon the ground during winter.
Her lips fully developed,
juicy like a ripe orange, just waiting to burst,
and release the flavor that dwelled there for so long.
Unknown to any man
because many are not yet worthy.
Hair as dark and vibrant as the universe,
as it lay upon her head glistening like the sun,
as it hits the waters upon the Earth.
Breath, fresh as the crisp morning air during the fall,
rushing through my body giving me new life.
Posed in a way that reminded me
of a statue, unmoving.
Her presence seemed to capture attention
like a natural disaster.
Her beauty rung deep within her veins,
it seems as though it will remain eternally.
However the real true beauty lies inside her,
which is everlasting.
I am moved by my blackness. 
It is the melting pot of all that has oppressed me, 
Yet made me the Black empowered me...
the Beautiful Ebony me.
The Pigme Kings, Yoruba Queens, and 
Madinka Warriors crying out of me.
I am moved by my blackness, even though I 
have not always known my pride.
I have not known its necessity...its strength, 
or honor.
And now I stand in awe because my blackness 
is Brother Malcolm, Sister Sojourner, W.E.B., 
and Sister Gwendolyn standing up in me.
My blackness is Emmett Till, Nat Turner, 
and Harriet Tubman bleeding through me.
My blackness is Frederick and Maya demanding 
that I be allowed to be me.
And I must bow down and reflect, 
because Reflection fuels the fire of change—and 
ponderance ruptures my inner fountain.
You see, the blood of my people flows fresh 
in my veins and rises up in me for my blood is ancient, 
as is my struggle.
And I am fanatic because my history is fanatic.
I am angry because I have travelled too far 
not to overcome.
I am perplexed because our reality is a dream 
and that dream has not yet become our reality. 
Still, I am proud.
I left my land as royalty, thus, I must stand 
boldly, looking down on adversity...for I am the 
strongest race of men, brilliant in mastery. 
Again I say,

MY BLACKNESS MOVES ME!
he knew the feel.
like an old
love, he never knew
when it would come again.

the time between poems
was never the same.
hard time.
his people had forgotten.
they had given poetry
its first name.

he wondered about the poetry.
amongst the poets
rumor had it
poetry had been executed,
it remains left
to the walking
dead:

she appeared as wordwork gathering in
his late spring storms.
(without warning)
the changing of his seasons
a mystery to him.

who was this woman with
lion poetry
roaring out of her eyes?
poetry healed him,
he could look
into its window,
into his reluctant Self.

she spoke pictures to him.
she came cloud-filled.
she came stories to tell.
she came clear visions.
she came water words
rushing over
the dry well of his being;
rendering him in need
of a walk
in her early summer evening rain.
it was happening again.
he knew
this must be the way it had always been.
she came a sign.
he became poetry.
the poets were
there to breathe new life
into an unwilling
people;
to word-craft them into an old Oneness--
a new Creation.

the poets were there
charged to be
eloquent guardians
of a soul
of the nation...

New Afreeca
Why is it,  
that when you look at me,  
You have such a dumbfounded look  
upon your face?  
A look that says confusion.  
Are you perplexed by my beauty so much,  
that you don’t know what to do?  

Are you awed by my presence?  
Do I make your thoughts  
jumble in your head,  
so much so, that you become speechless  
at the sound of my voice?  
Is it that you can’t actually speak,  
or just don’t know the right words to say?  
Afraid you’ll sound ignorant  
and be so embarrassed  
that I’ll shun you away?  

Is my beauty that astonishing,  
that you can’t look me,  
straight in the eye?  
Am I that captivating,  
that you can’t get up the nerve,  
to even say hi....or are you just tryin’ to be shy?  

Do I boggle your mind so much,  
that you don’t know whether to  
touch me or to hold me close to your heart?  

Are you confused by the things you feel  
whenever I’m around?  
Could it be that you feel all butterflyed inside  
and I haven’t even made a sound?  

Is my body so enrapturing  
that you can’t keep your eyes off of me?  
I feel you watch my every move,  
as if hypnotized permanently.  
The inner desire  
that you try so desperately to disguise  
Makes me wonder why you blush.  
The faint pink in your cheek,  
leads me to believe  
that I do intimidate you.  

The way I mix my sexiness  
with just a hint of my vast intelligence  
Makes you so curious  
that you start to sweat.  

I am so mysterious  
that you shake and shiver  
whenever I cross your path.  

Do I make you so scared  
that you get tongue-tied?  
Huffing and puffing  
not being able to breath,  
babbling to me  
in jumbled up foreign phrases.  
Suddenly,  
all skills at holding a simple conversation  
leave your body  
and cause you to lose all composure.  
Am I too much for you?  
Overwhelming perhaps?  

Please, my brother,  
I’m here to tell you,  
don’t be scared of me.  
Don’t be afraid to love me.  
Don’t be afraid to let me love you.  
Your timidity is just a cover  
for you wanting to have me for your own.  
My seductiveness is telling you  
that your manliness  
should get ready for a challenge,  
ego and all.  

The challenge, me, your queen  
my mind,  
my body,  
my soul,  
my love,  
Ready to challenge you,  
that is, if you’re up to it?  

Are you ready?
This is a question that lies on a lot of people’s minds, particularly students at Kent State University. What a lot of students don’t know, however, is that there is a course offered at Kent State that helps to answer this question. The course, The Black Woman, is offered through the Department of Pan-African Studies in Oscar Richie Hall and is taught by Dr. Alena Barrows-Harden, a well-recognized professor within the department. Dr. Barnes-Harden organized the course in the Spring semester of 1983. She said that, “It begins with a concern I had for the global woman, at first, and then I began to narrow my focus of interest down to the Black woman.” She stated that she wanted to turn into the many contributions that the Black woman has given to the society, beginning from Africa, through slavery, all the way to modern times. As students begin to explore the course and the readings, they are faced with the many struggles that Black women have endured, both in the past and in the present. They are also faced with answering questions or clearing up “myths” that they themselves have acquired about the Black woman throughout their upbringing, the media, and their everyday functioning in society.

But exactly how does the Black woman fit into today’s society and what affect has she had on students at Kent State University? Several students, who are currently enrolled in the Black woman course, took their time out to answer a few questions and comment on their perceptions of the Black woman. The interviewees include students from all walks of life (and not just Black), with different career goals and expectations. What they were taught and their perceptions of the Black woman vary because they come from diverse backgrounds. Here’s what a few of them had to say:

1. In terms of relationships, do you see the interaction between Black men and Black women as positive or negative? Do you see it improving?

James Stewart: (Elementary Education, 21) In many respects, the interaction between Black men and Black women has become negative and disrespectful. On the other hand, Black men and women must understand that without each other, we have nothing. I do believe we, as Black people, are realizing this and are trying to improve.

Carita Montgomery: (Junior, Psychology, 24) I think they are negative in some ways but I believe they are more positive; I believe that no one can do anything, unless you allow them to (example: Waiting To Exhale). Yes, men do use women for sex but only because some women allow them to.

Deborah L. Walker: (General Studies, 45) Negative. No (don’t see them improving). I feel sorry for the young sisters who are looking for a mate. Your choices, well you really have none. The men are either stupid, on drugs, in jail, have babies all over the place, no jobs, no ambition, no morals, no respect, they have no respect for themselves or anyone else, can’t read, or have nothing to contribute to society. Not all of them, but most.

Karen: Most Black women do not interact well with other Black women because we are so similar to each other in the ways that we think, we clash with each other. Yet, in crises, we (Black women) bond together and rise above everyone. Some Black women look down upon White women because: 1) we can see right through them, 2) they are not dominant like Black women, and 3) they sometimes try to take our Black men.

2. What are the most important attributes that stand out in the Black woman and do you see them as positive or negative or both? (example: characteristics, mannerisms, etc.)

Sara: The characteristics that I see that are portrayed the most in Black women are that they are powerful (aggressive), seductive, affectionate, and worthy of respect (haughty) and I personally see all these traits in a positive way and hope to master them before my time is up.

Karen: A leader—positive—because it forces the Black woman to get tasks accomplished.

Victor: Strength, beauty, determina-

Cara: Aggressive-positive—People or society are less likely to run over her. Forceful-positive—They know what they want and go after it. Versatile-positive—Able to endure and survive, able to adapt to any situation.

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as being uneducated, and portrayed as the worst kind of women out there. In the entertainment media, they always portray Black women as women with European features. Although there are Black women that live in situations as stated (welfare, etc.), the positive images that the media tries to portray are only those women with European features. The media forgets to tell the world that there are all types of Black women with predominately African features that come in all shapes and sizes, and the majority of them are educated.

5. In one statement, who is the Black Woman to you?

Corey: Beautiful, cut-throat, outgoing, and family-oriented.

James: The Black woman is a woman who will tell you like it is but at the same time love and care for you like one of her own.

Greg: A strong, independent procurer of the family livelihood.

Victor: She is God, because from her all life has come, in the past and will come from her in the future.

Deborah: (What I was taught from my mother)...(The Black woman is) A productive, decent human being, with values, who cares for and loves herself, and demands respect from others.

Carita: She is phenomenal, even though she carries the world on her shoulders.

Karen: A truthful and honest comforter to everyone.

Andrea: Strong, independent, and beautiful.

6.a) In light of the “Waiting to Exhale” craze, how do you perceive the images of the Black man and the way they were portrayed? Negative or positive?

Karen: They were portrayed just the way they act in real life. Some are dogs, some act like kings, but are dogs in disguise, and some are genuine gentlemen who care about their sisters.

Sarita: I feel the Black men were fairly represented in the movie. In every Black community you have a broken marriage where the man goes to a white woman (and vice versa), men who cheat every chance they get and then you have the lovable character that was played by Gregory Hines. I can’t say that it was positive or negative, but it’s just reality.

James: To be truthful, I believe the images were as accurate as the person who experienced them could make it. I also believe that if you (Black men) aren’t doing wrong, then you have nothing to worry about.

Victor: The movie showed both positive and negative images of the Black man. But all-in-all it showed the many faces of all Black men with having the potential for being good or evil.

b) While some of these images are true to life, do you think that such a portrayal helps or hurts relations between Black men and Black women (and/or White women)?

Juneous: It hurts the relationships between Black men and women. By having these images shown, some Black women may think that all Black men are really like that and may become apprehensive or defensive when the “Right Man” comes along.

Carita: Any time something triggers thought and discussion, I think it can only help. Whether people considered them positive or negative, at least the movie brought the issues to the forefront. It got people’s attention and that is what’s important.

Sarita: I think that what hurts us is the uproar that came from it. The shoe obviously fit a little too tightly for many in the Black community. Saying something (in offense to it) just made the ones that have done wrong that
much more visible (within the community).

7. What have you learned in the Black Woman course so far that you did not know and has it changed or confirmed your images of the Black woman? (i.e., Afrikan Queens, slavery, modern times)?

James: I have learned that in Egypt and Karen: I did not realize all the tactics

Deborah: I have learned that this story

African Queens, slavery, modern times?)

VICTOR: I have learned of the strength of the Black women Warrior Queens and it has only confirmed my beliefs in her strength.

James: I have learned that in Egypt and Ethiopia, Black women were queens and took the role of chief officer and ran their countries. This confirms, to me, that Black women are leaders and capable of maintaining and sustaining their families and themselves.

Karen: I did not realize all the tactics Black women went through to keep their families together. This just confirms the reasons why Black women today will do anything for their children and their husbands or boyfriends.

Greá: I didn't know that the Black woman played the “soother” role, (i.e., she is a “buffer” for the stress that a Black male faces in contemporary society). For example, if a Black male would “blow up” on his White, racist boss, then his wife is there to prevent this from happening. If this occurred, he would lose his job and hurt his family.

Deborah: I have learned that history repeats itself. If we, Black women, do not take advantage of becoming “all that we can be” through education, we will once again be treated as slaves. The Black women who are having babies by different fathers are acting like the slave women did. We must take charge of our lives, become educated. Then we can play the game, because we will know how to play it (like the White people).

The Black Woman course has allowed myself and others to be enlightened and informed about the struggles, past and present, of Black Woman. It has also allowed us to gain opinions and views from individuals who come to Kent State from various backgrounds and paves a way for students to form their own educated opinions about the plight of Black women and what can be done to make her way better for the future. The Black men and Black women at Kent State University need to come together and learn to communicate with each other and support each other. We are but a few, young, intelligent, and talented individuals that have to learn to exist on this campus and in this world together. As African-American women we must learn to interact with our men, our children, and our communities in a way that will be positive and non-threatening. We must be role models for those young women who are looking up to us and we must teach them the morals and values that go into being, what the Bible says, a “virtuous women”. As Bebe Moore Campbell said in Why L.A Happened, we need to put the “Black” back into the term “Black Is Beautiful”. We are beautiful, we are Black, and we are women therefore, we must be treated and respected as such. We must demand respect through our educations, the media, and our communities. We must learn to laugh and cry together, as well as stand up for our beautiful Black men. We must embrace each other, love each other, and support each other in all we do in life. The name of the game is survival, and the only way to do that is if we have each other’s backs.
Your lordship, it is just as Akpan, the sheep, has reported earlier. It was not too long ago. I was sitting in my home on the top of the giant Mangrove tree in the evergreen forest where the River Niger comes to rest with the Atlantic. I saw something my eyes have never seen before but have heard a couple of times. I saw a flock of sheep being lead into the wild bushed by a man holding a shepherd’s staff. At this sight, I had no choice but to call on the rest of the monkeys to see what my unclothed eyes were seeing. We began to ask amongst ourselves, “How can you lead your flock into the zone of wild life and put your life and those of your flock in danger?” Just then, Simbi, the vulture, was flying across the sky and we made it known to her what was happening. She then told us that you - your highness and the rest of the Chiefs - have made an agreement with the shepherds. That due to the scarcity of grass in the rural areas and the vast increase in industrialization, a certain part of the wild zone could be used for their flocks.

“As the sun traveled towards the west and the shadows of the trees began to get longer, I saw a funny looking kind of sheep catching up with the rest of the flock. It was funny because it was running as if it was not making use of its legs. I first had to take a very long laugh before I concentrated on looking again. It seemed that this sheep has gone through a lot of changes because when the rest of the sheep were being created, I know this one was not there.”

“Although I was tired of this weird situation, my eyes just refused to stop looking. Soon, from my wild life experience I realized that funny looking creature was an old friend. She was someone almost everyone has ignored for her continuous act of not playing by the rules. She was fond of preying on little animals our society had agreed not to prey on. She either did this in restricted zones or other family’s territory. What annoyed the animals most was that she tried so hard to fit in families or groups that did not belong to her. It was that same black snake, that creeping beast dressed in sheep clothing, that tried to prey on my daughter.”

“As she got closer to the flock, she was trying hard to blend in. What surprised me the most was that both the shepherd and the flock knew the kind of creature in their midst but refused to do something about it. As I watched on, I noticed a strange behavior amongst the flock. It seems they did not want her there but out of fear of being bitten they keep their tails between their legs, except for one. I have heard of this particular sheep a thousand times, as one of the seven rams that led the flock while the shepherd was asleep. It seemed to me that this ram rebuked the snake. Out of annoyance of being rejected again from a group she did not belong to, she made an attempt to strangle the ram by his neck but the ram was to quick for her, so she missed.”

“As she tried to chase him to get him killed in a territory which you - King Ota, the lion and the elites - have given to the shepherd and their flock for food, the flock scattered everywhere like brown leaves being blown weightlessly in the air by the harmittand wind. Just then, from nowhere came Ola, the tiger. As one of the Chiefs, he ordered that creeping beast to stop and reminded her of whose territory she was on. When she saw the rest of the animals running towards her, because of her disobedient nature, she quickly ran into a nearby hole in the soil not to be found again. That is what I witnessed to this case, my lord.”

“So Amina, what did the shepherd do to the snake when he saw his flock in danger?”, asked King Ota, the lion.

“To my surprise, he acted as if he did not care. When the whole drama was over, I jumped off the tree to meet Akpan, the attacked ram, and he told me that his shepherd was gone on a long trip and that had he hired a helping hand to look after them while he was away,” replied Amina, the monkey.

“Well, after all is said and done”, said King Ota. "As for the hired hand our laws do not apply to humans. As for the snake, we will just keep ignoring her as we have been doing, until she is found again. When she is found again, whoever brings her alive will greatly be rewarded because she has to answer for her conduct whether she likes it or not. The final verdict will be given after the real shepherd returns from his trip to say how he feels concerning the treatment of his flock on our land which we agreed to give to them. Other than that, do not pursue or chase her, when the time is right she will come and we will put an end to her continuous act of lawlessness.”
MORAL

Time is too precious to spend on an unreasonable trouble maker. It is just chasing after the wind. It was said that "When two lizards are running around a palm tree you do not know who is chasing who." (confusion)
Fihankra: Purification, Atonement, Reconciliation, and Healing
by Mwatabu Okantah

W. E. Dubois was right!

The problem of the 20th century has been the color line. In the U.S., the relations between Americans of European, African and native descent have defined and shaped the American experience. Denial of this truth is the problem. Each time I visit the Frederick Douglass memorial house in Washington, D.C., I am reacquainted with my own sometimes bitter ambivalence. At the midway point of the last decade of this century, our struggle has evolved into the need to resolve our festering bitterness. We are a people in need of spiritual healing.

Our ancestral spirits are restless in their eternal sleep. You feel it in Douglass’ presence inside his house. Even on stifling August days, you sense him moving about the grounds. You feel him wandering in the wind whispering through the trees on that majestic hill overlooking Anaustoria. Our citizenship has come too high priced. On July 5, 1852, he put it this way: “...I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance ... bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me... this Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn.” 1852. 1903. 1995. The truth Douglas spoke during his lifetime resonates for too many of us today. I did not fully comprehend the enormous cost of being an American citizen until I stood in the open “Door of No Return” inside the House of Slaves on Senegal’s Goree Island. The unfathomable depths of the African holocaust washed over me as I stood overwhelmed by the lingering stench deep inside the male dungeon at Ghana’s Cape Coast Castle. I can never forget the wailing echoes that engulfed me as I stood transfixed inside an empty slave coven on South Carolina’s Boone Hall plantation, sweltering in the 100 degree “low country” heat. I wonder: how to measure the distance from West African villages to teeming New World slums?

More than any other national observance, on each Fourth of July, I am reminded I am a citizen of this European settler nation as a direct consequence of what can only be described as a criminal enterprise. We are descended from those shattered Africans who were brutally kidnapped and routinely shipped into the so-called New World. Returning to Douglas, I stand in awe of his eloquence: “...if I do not faithfully remember those bleeding children of sorrow this day, ‘may my right hand forget her cunning, and may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth’ To forget them, to pass lightly over their wrongs, and to chime in with the popular theme, would be treason most scandalous and shocking and would make me a reproach before God and the world.”

Now more than ever, our ancestors command us to remember and retell their stories in the face of this society’s dogged and insistent call for us to forget. New World Africans. We are descended from enslaved Africans who were quite literally forced to refashion themselves into new peoples. Here in the U.S., no people who could be called “African-Americans” existed before the 17th century. As a new and culturally distinct people, we have managed to create and sing a new song in spirit of that same song. “Poet Maya Angelou proclaims, “the caged bird sings because it must...” For the better part of this century, the richness of our singing has fallen on deaf ears because we live amongst people who essentially do not care to listen. There is something sinister about this society’s refusal to sound the deep depths of this nation’s black song. The even deeper irony is the degree to which America has taken our music and claimed it as its own. Elvis has been proclaimed King of a music he did not create, and, it occurs to too few that Cleveland has now been rechristened as the place where America gave black music its current white face. Names. Rock and Roll obscures real origins. Our song is not blue, it is black, black as the night that gives birth to day. It is soft. It is hard. Its melodies are as sweet as they are pained. Thelonious Monk called it “the Ugly Beauty.” Our poets and our musicians are here to remind us, “the caged bird sings or it dies.” It sings because it does not know how not to sing. To sing in its nature. There is still music in our people today. We have stopped listening to our own singing, yet, there is movement. There is motion. Forward motion. Retrograde motion. If you listen closely, you always hear it in the singing. Our real music occurs away from the polluted mainstream; drum voices sound in the raw singing. It moves from one generation to the next. Black sounds. Be Bop to Hip-Hop. Find it in Rap music—today’s new black music. The dance floor remains a sacred place for the African centered talk. Movement. How do we name this same longing that speaks back to us from a new generation of black young people? Consider the X-factor. It is no accident our attention has been diverted from Malcolm X to Generation X to The X Files. Whose agenda is served when even the image of Malcolm X is turned into a crass, commercial icon? Beyond the hype, who is this new generation to reclaim Malcolm El-Shabazz when so few of their elders dare speak Malcolm’s name? I do not claim to speak for, so much as I speak as a U.S. citizen descended from those who would say, “Love it or leave it!”, you reveal more about your own doubt and insecurity, your own bankruptcy, in your own inability to practice what you preach. Mine is an historical point of view that exists within the larger black community, but is too often (and too readily) dismissed or ignored or distorted or obscured or labeled in generally negative terms. I realize this commentary probably sounds as threatening today as Douglas’ speech must have sounded to squash ears in 1852. I am certain his words quoted here are equally disturbing in our racially charged present.

The 500 People ask: why do we speak so much of blackness? No one seems willing to question the naked reality that Douglas’ Fourth of July address, delivered more than 140 years ago, speaks an even deeper truth today. The price of free speech in America has always been high. It is paid in consequences earned whenever that speech challenges the status quo. The majority does, indeed, rule, however, it does not neces-
Fihankra signifies the “concept of completeness or total security in the house.”

Sarily follow that that majority rules justly. Americans of European descent have segregated themselves inside their own preferred illusions. They have ruthlessly imposed those illusions on the world.

To exist outside of this Eurocentric frame of reference is to be forever defined as something oddly “other.” Today’s diversity/multiculturalism talk is designed to obscure this fact. There have always been those rebel souls within America’s New World African community who refuse to accept “other class” status. We define our American reality in our own terms. Issues being raised now are not new. We remember David Walker’s Appeal. Martin R. Delaney was a Douglas contemporary and founder of the Niger Valley Exploring Party. He organized a repatriation conference in Cleveland during the 1850s.

There have always been black people willing to return to our ancestral homeland. A conditional citizenship was the only option offered to freed slaves after the Civil War. Constitutional amendments replaced the ability to choose.

What is new, however, is the way in which the forward motion of contemporary black history has forced these not so new issues into this era’s mainstream debate. The question of reparations and a safe haven for descendants of enslaved Africans, for example, has reemerged to the absolute dismay of the more conservative elements within African-American leadership. Admittedly, there is no consensus within the national black community. There are those who think it is futile and counter productive to even raise such an issue. They feel it will only further alienate and enflame an already hostile white majority.

We are accused of living in a past our detractors, black and white, simply refuse to acknowledge. We are labeled haters of white people, and have been erroneously charged with further dividing an already historically divided nation. We have become a convenient scapegoat for those who lack the will to admit that America’s race problem is the creation of Americans of European descent. Skin color as a criteria for social advancement and acceptance, in this society, is a direct consequence of the European experience in the New World.

The current state of race relations in this nation are no better or worse than they have ever been. Who can look at the nightly news, or, the new “real cop” TV programs and deny that America continues to ask: “What is to be done with Negroes?” Talk of welfare reform and tougher crime bills only provides new code language to discuss this continuing American dilemma.

1968’s Kerner Commission report could have been written in 1995. Americans of European and African descent continue to live in separate and categorically unequal worlds. The distance between these worlds remains “immeasurable.”

America’s historical reality as an extension of England continues to cruelly contradict the myth of “the melting pot.” For all nonEuropeans in this society, the melting pot has always meant becoming as White Anglo-Saxon Protestant as possible. For non-English Europeans, it has always meant, until recently, as simulation and
acculturation according to the Anglo-Saxon ethic. Suffice it to say, for those of us who have reclaimed a healthy racial/ethnic identity, America is the land of our birth, but the melting pot is unacceptable. Too much is lost in the process. The real issue here is the power to define.

Speaking in an interview published in the New York Times Magazine (9-11-94), novelist Toni Morrison offers this insight: “You know, the term ‘political correctness’ has become a shorthand for discrediting ideas.... What I think the political correctness debate is really about is the power to be able to define. The definers want the power to name. And the defined are now taking that power away from them.” We are a people in search of our names. So long as we remain confused about our proper group name, we will remain a stuunted people; a people who has become an increasing danger to ourselves.

This nation’s status quo is not acceptable. Our American experience has rendered black people strangers to ourselves. We have no real memory of ever having once been a whole people. We have grown too accustomed to living as “Afro-American Fragments.” In too many not so subtle ways, too many of us have become more American than the Americans. Our only real choice is to begin to pick up the shattered pieces of our lives. Entry into a burning house is no solution to our problems. Our task is to restore our own house. We must look away from America’s blinding whiteness if we are to see and become our true selves. For most of the last two centuries, we have tirelessly implored America to hear us, to accept us. Contrary to popular rhetoric, we have never asked for “preferential treatment.” We have only asked for fairness, for inclusion as full citizens. It seems that only the experience of the indigenous people of this continent is more tragic. The view one gets of this country from the perspective of the people who were here when Europeans arrived is staggering. They have never been “Indians,” except in the minds of the people who conquered them. As mutually conquered peoples, we have lost sight of ourselves looking outward toward white society. A coming 21st century now demands that we look inward toward our own spiritual center if there is to be any hope we might save and reclaim ourselves.

Healing. Atonement. Reconciliation. Purification. Our bitterness and anger and frustration, our pain has turned us in on ourselves. Niggers and red sambos. What happens to peoples who become the caricatures of themselves? In real terms, there can be no genuine dialogue with others if we do not enter into serious dialogue with all of our fragmented and fractured selves. On December 9, 1994, an African centered spiritual process of purification and healing was begun in Ghana that will have international ramifications for black people at home and abroad. Fihankra. More than three thousand people participated in the inaugural “Ceremony of a Stool and Skin” performed in Accra, Ghana.

Fihankra is a term from the Akan language of the Ashanti people of Ghana. It refers to one of the Adinkra symbols. Each symbol represents a philosophical concept arising out of the Akan people’s cultural heritage. Fihankra signifies the “concept of completeness or total security in the house.” The circular design of Fihankra “is believed to reinforce its meaning of completeness and indivisibility.” The circle is regarded as the “aboriginal symbol of the perfection of God, for like God, the circle has no beginning and thus no end.” Both the Stool and Skin are sacred symbols of divine authority in which resides the very spirit and soul of the people.

This traditional purification ceremony was important because it marked the first time that contemporary African chiefs had gathered publicly to specifically perform rituals to atone for the misdeeds of those ancestral rulers who helped to sustain the trans-Atlantic trade in African peoples initiated by European powers in the 14th century. Present day Ghana, then known as the
Gold Coast, was a major point of demarcation. Over forty slaving castles flourished in Ghana. The Fihankra ceremony was intended to restore to Africans born in the diaspora two sacred symbols in one to reaffirm the cultural and spiritual ties that have been denied to us for so long. During the summer of 1995, a delegation from Ghana sojourned here in the U.S. to follow-up and continue this process of the Purification of Fihankra for those of us who could not be in Ghana for the historic inaugural ceremony. Their visit was conducted under the theme: “Fihankra, Reuniting The Divided House.” The delegation was lead by Odeneho Nana Odur Numpau II, President of Ghana’s National House of Chiefs. The delegation travelled to several cities including Cleveland and Akron. The Pan-African world is truly awakening. The 20th century has signalled a genuine African world renaissance. Our movement out of white darkness and into black light is real.

In closing, I see the call for a million black men marching in this nation’s capitol as part of this black renaissance. This call is consistent with the spirit of Fihankra. To declare a national Holy Day of Atonement and Reconciliation in black communities across America is a historic new beginning. To declare national “Days of Absence” is a call that must be heard by our people. Our times demand that we heed the call. We only need convince ourselves of our own group and individual self worth. For too long have we tried to convince our oppressors of truths we did not believe in ourselves. Fihankra is about believing in ourselves. It is about attaining a true sense of tranquility and wholeness within ourselves.

The tragic history of race relations in this society has fundamentally shaped the collective American consciousness. The specter of race has infected the formation of the American character. This nation will never become the America of its hallowed rhetoric if it does not confront and resolve its deepseeded contradictions. Nations, like individuals and groups of individuals, can also be in need of healing. Fihankra is about bringing final closure to a sad chapter in our history as African people. It is about claiming our own psychological and spiritual American space. In our minds, America has left us no choice but to find our own peace.

Mwatabu Okantah is a professor at Kent State University.
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–Langston Hughes