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FINDING JIHAD: HOW URBAN & AFRICAN-CENTERED LITERATURE IMPACTED MY
LIFE

By

JIHAD S. UHURU

Under the Direction of Jonathan Gayles, PhD

ABSTRACT

By taking an introspective look into my beliefs, perceptions, and life experiences this study will use an autoethnographical approach to examine the researcher's evolution from street life, to prison life, to academic life. This study will examine the urban life experiences of the author, tracing a forty-six year span of Black male urban life to examine the potential value of America's Urban youth. Critical pedagogy will be used as the theoretical framework for this narrative. This research is important because it will explore how Urban and African-centered literature was pivotal in inspiring the researcher to move from a criminal mentality to one of resilience, self-determination, and community uplift.

INDEX WORDS: African-American studies, Autoethnography, Black male, Urban

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JIHAD S. UHURU

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2016

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Jihad S. Uhuru
2016

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Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to all the African-American children in the United States that have been diagnosed with an attention deficit disorder.

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I give thanks to the Creator for the breath, strength, passion, and wisdom complete this part of my life's journey. Ebony Zenobia Gibson you are a godsend. There is absolutely no way I would have completed this journey and this thesis without you. I sincerely thank you Queen. Thank you King John Horne for being there for me and making sure I was on task during this Thesis process. Your phone calls and emails were well received. Dr. Brian Williams thank you for being a living example of the man and educator that I strive to be. Thank you Dr. Jonathan Gayles for your direction, and all your help. I want to thank Dr. Makungu Akinyela and Dr. Georgene Bess Montgomery for everything you have done to make this thesis what it is today. I want to thank Dr. Gary McGaha President of Atlanta Metropolitan College and Dr. William Dorsey, Dr. Akinyele Umoja and the African-American studies department, and Georgia State University for taking me on this invaluable educational journey.

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1 CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The afternoon of September 19, 1992, I was standing in front of the Honorable Judge Robert Vinings. He'd just sentenced me to 132 months in federal prison. He asked if I had anything to say for myself. My mouth dropped wide open, but nothing came out. Although I did not say anything, a couple of questions kept spiraling through my mind. "Why now? Why today?" I never asked, why me? It was as if I was mentally prepared to go to prison, just not at that moment. Almost every man I knew had gone to or was in prison, even my dad.

Since I was a child, I wanted everyone to like me. I wanted to have enough money to do and buy whatever I wanted, and I wanted to have the adoration of the finest women in the hood. The only people I saw that had an endless supply of what I wanted were folks like my dad, Dollar Bill, Stinker, and Shine. All of them were drug dealers, fences, number runners, and strong-arm robbers.

They all had had run-ins with the law and even did prison stints, just like almost every Black man I knew. However, when they finished serving their time, it was as if they were royalty because of the way the hood celebrated their release. The party planning leading up to someone's prison release and the parties thrown in honor of them being released were some of the happiest times I had growing up. Therefore, around nine or ten I realized going to prison was bad, but it was somewhere I would end up if I wanted to live the life of what I thought was a successful Black man. At around fourteen, I began having trouble with the law and a month before my twenty-third birthday, I was in jail headed to prison.

A year into my prison sentence, I read *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*. Jackson said, "Black men born in the U.S. fortunate enough to live past the age of

eighteen are systematically conditioned to accept the inevitability of prison. For most of us, it simply looms as the next phase in a sequence of humiliation” (Jackson, 1994, p. 1). After reading this quote I asked the same question over and over, “How could this brother know me so well? At the time he wrote this I was in diapers.” As Jackson’s words ran through my mind and spirit, I thought of Pretty Mike, one of my close friends that had been shot and killed in the hood when he was only 17. His killer, another young Black male is serving a natural life prison sentence. I thought of Eric, Perry, Fro, Beau, Pork Chop, Bam-Bam, and so many more young men I had grown up with that had lost their lives before they were 18. Then, I started counting on my fingers how many Black males that I knew that had done a prison bid and/or were serving prison time. I eventually gave up, because I kept losing count. Next, I remember trying to think of all the black males that I knew that were in college. I gave up when I could not recall more than two or three. Then, I remember thinking of how embarrassed I was at sentencing when I had nothing to say. This is what George Jackson was writing about when he articulated the urban Black male outlook, I thought (Jackson, 1994, p. 2). I remember thinking that if I could understand and articulate my thoughts and feelings like George Jackson did in his book of letters, then that judge would have been the one that was speechless.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

As I lay on my top bunk with Jackson’s book on my chest and his words in my mind, I asked myself, how did I get here? Why was I really here? How did George Jackson know? These were the three questions that led me on a journey reflecting on my life up until then. I was 24, serving time in a new medium-high security Federal prison in Manchester, Kentucky—or, Klanchester as the inmates had renamed it. We called it Klanchester because of the predominately white male, tobacco chewing, snuff spitting, confederate flag praising guards and

staff. I'd already served close to two years and I would not be getting out of prison until I was 30. The year was 1994, I had just started reading Donald Goines' urban novel, *Black Man's Justice White Man's Grief* and I found myself nodding my head and saying, "that's right" as I reflected and agreed with the narrative. According to Goines (1973, p. 7) every day in America thousands of poor Black men were being picked up and arrested, booked and held in county jails for months, often losing their jobs, housing and cars while waiting on a court date. They do not have family members or friends that can afford to post their bonds, so many of these innocent and targeted Black men develop feelings of hopelessness (Goines, 1973, p. 7).

This was so true and I never really thought about the pre-trial system until Goines wrote about this. I was nodding my head and becoming emotional as I read, because I had family members and friends that had sat in jail for months, because they were waiting on a court date and were forced to accept a public defender. When they did go to court months after being locked up, on several occasions the case was dismissed or the public defender which I liked to refer to as the public pretender talked his client into accepting a plea that would give them time served. Innocence or guilt did not matter to the defendant nearly as much as their freedom did.

When I was reading Goines (1973) about the pre-trial system, Willie rabbit came to mind. Willie Rabbit was an older handyman I knew while growing up. Most folks called him Willie Rabbit because he seemed to hop like a rabbit as he walked due to a leg injury he'd suffered in some war. Somebody led the cops to Willies apartment where they found a stolen bicycle behind his patio in the projects. Everybody in the hood knew Willie did not have anything to do with the stolen bike, heck he couldn't ride it and Willie didn't steal. Nevertheless, the cops charged him with theft by receiving and Willie sat in jail for almost seven months before he went to court. When Willie refused to accept a plea at his public defenders prodding, the judge dismissed his

case. Willie was exonerated by the courts, but he was guilty of being a poor black man, at times this proved to be much worse than being a well off guilty Black man that could have made bond in a matter of hours. The guilty well-off black man could have saved his job and by saving his job he could have continued working to pay his bills and pay an attorney with his best interest at heart. I have a brother that was charged and convicted for theft by receiving and he was out in hours and almost a year later my brother had to serve a little under 90 days for having a stolen four wheeler worth twenty times as much as the ten-speed found behind Willies patio. My brother didn't lose anything and his attorney worked a deal where my brother would not have a criminal record. My brother went back home, while Willie had lost his apartment and everything he had. Last time I remember seeing Willie, he was strung out on crack living God knows where. Donald Goines was writing about the America that inner city black man lived. It was this America I was comfortable and familiar with. The problem was that I had never thought about hood life, my life in this respect until I read urban fiction. Although fiction, the stories where as real as the fingers I'm using to type this narrative. The problem was I had never thought about how unjust and biased the pre-trial system was. Goines (1973) is an example of literature mirroring life. Goines (1973) had me thinking of and wanting to seek out other injustices in the hood that I had not reflected on or thought of. *White Man's Justice Black Man's Grief* inspired me to read something a little deeper. I read Amos Wilson's, *Black on Black Violence* and upon reading it, I critically realized that I was adding to the statistics published by the Federal Bureau of Investigation that reported that over 40% of prison and jail inmates between the ages of 17 to 29 were Black (Wilson, 1991, p. xi). Now, having read all sixteen urban novels by Donald Goines, most of Iceberg Slim's urban tales and a sprinkling of African-centered scholarly books I came to the conclusion that was like the projects that I'd frequented and grown up in and

around. Most of the people in the projects were black, poor, and had not graduated high school. Many were illiterate, and everyone seemed to be moving in circles, repeating the same routines daily. In prison, most were black, poor, and illiterate, everyone moved in circles; and the administration controlled human movement, social services, and policing. In the projects the government controlled human movement, through social services such as welfare, social security, disability, and the government controlled the force of the police. I had never cared or thought I cared about Blacks and my community before I read Urban Literature. Now, that I was reading I wanted more information. I was answering questions that I never knew to ask and I was learning things that I never knew that I did not know.

After reading *Miseducation of the Negro* by Carter G. Woodson, I thoroughly understood his statement, “If the Black man in the ghetto must eternally be fed by the hand that pushes him into the ghetto, he will never become strong enough to get out of the ghetto” (Woodson, 2011, p.74).

As I began to delve into the critical realization of what the ghetto was and what the problem was, I began to look at the ghetto as more than just the physical environment. As I continued quenching my thirst for understanding with books, I began to see the “ghetto” as physical and mental poverty. Dr. Woodson refers to this as the hand that fed Blacks (Woodson, 2011). Because of Woodson, Goines, Slim, Akbar, and others I was reading, I began to view education in terms of food. Mental food that nourishes the mind into moving the body from an unhealthy state of not knowing to one of understanding how to effectively communicate ideas and knowledge in ways that help propel the self and community forward is what I began to understand as I thought about everything I was reading in reference to the way I had lived and believed. As I continued reading urban novels and scholarly studies written with Africana

peoples at the center of study, I began to really care about others, because I saw myself and who I wanted to become in these narratives that were about people that looked, walked, talked, and had lived like I had under similar circumstances that I had lived and had worked out similar problems that I had.

The problem seems to be that none of America's traditional systems of education inspires African-Americans to want to liberate the group consciousness through education. First, the traditional systems of education in America uses memorization techniques, in which the question and the answer are provided for the student to remember which leaves no room for cognitive thinking. Paulo Friere describes this method as banking education or depositing information (Freire, 2014, p. 72). Freire explains banking education as an act of depositing information, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. This act requires very little if any cognitive thinking. Second, the African-American student is trained to only see himself through the eyes of his oppressor, and this yields him no true self-consciousness (Dubois, 1994, p. 2.) These ideals and others will be further examined in later chapters to help understand the problem.

1.3 Statement of purpose

For the next five years, while serving time in seven different prisons, spending twenty-one months in twenty-three hour a day solitary lockdown, I reflected on my past while reading. I immersed myself in literature about all aspects of Western, Eastern, and primarily Africana culture. I had to know how George Jackson knew me, and the more I read, I had to know how scholars such as Cheikh Ante Diop, Frantz Fannon, Naim Akbar, Yosef Ben Jochannon, John Henrik Clarke, George James, Jonathon Jackson, Anthony Browder, Asa Hilliard, and hood scholars such as Robert Beck, Donald Goines, Claude Brown, Joseph Nazel, Odie Hawkins and

so many others who had never met me knew me so well and how they could write about problems, causes, effects, and solutions that addressed my beliefs, my politics, and my reality. Eventually, I came to realize that all of them had employed the same strategy.

The authors told historical truths about Africana peoples and how and why they survived, persevered, and moved forward despite the inhumane and terroristic treatment they suffered at the hands of systems and groups of people that did all they could to prevent Africana peoples from being self-determining agents in their own destiny. These stories captured my attention for myriad reasons. One being that they were told using words and phrases that were similar or the same as I was comfortable and familiar with, and two, because not only were they about people that looked like me but these stories were told with Africana peoples as the subject of study. In school the only stories about Africana culture and history that were discussed were stories that placed Africana peoples as objects of study around other cultures, primarily European culture. These stories always seemed to embarrass or make me feel that I was inferior to other cultures, especially White culture. So, When DuBois, (1994, p. 2) said,

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongoli and, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro... two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

I felt these words. I nodded as I read and re-read them. I thought that DuBois was explaining why I reacted the way I had when the old gray haired White judge asked me if I had anything to say for myself at my sentencing hearing. DuBois had me thinking that the judge represented the system of oppression. Me not having anything to say was me feeling as if whatever words I could say would not be good enough to make the white judge respect me. I wanted Judge Vinings, who was a representation of oppression, to accept me as he would his own sons. To be appeased, I started to understand that my conscious needed for Judge Vinings to see and accept me. I subconsciously wanted this because everything that I had been taught about who I was, was created by a society of men and systems that shared the same skin color as the Honorable Judge Vinings. Reading DuBois's, *Soul of Black Folk* while reading Robert Beck's urban novel *Pimp*, I began to understand that despite my anger and disgust for racism, white men, and the system; the shame I felt while standing in front of the judge later made me realize that part of me yearned to be accepted by White America, while another part of me hated White America for not accepting me. After reading DuBois's explanation of double consciousness, I reflected back to when Judge Vinings asked me if I had anything to say. In retrospect, I think I was more ashamed of being Black in front of an exalted white man than I was of the drug offense that I was convicted of. Reading DuBois and Beck helped me to understand the feelings of hopelessness, shame, anger, and hate that I felt on September 19, 1992 when I was sentenced. It took me reading an urban autobiography about a Chicago Pimp, to understand that I was ashamed that I was not intelligent enough to express myself in a way that would allow the judge to view me as human while I stood before him.

In *The Soul of Black Folk*, when DuBois asked how does it feel to be a problem, I remember saying out loud, "It feels like I ain't shit and my life ain't worth shit."

Growing up, I did not understand how the system of Whiteness saw my black skin as being a problem and I definitely did not know that there was a problem with the way I thought, until I read about the back door mentality that Carter G. Woodson spoke and wrote about in his 1930's era critique of the United States education system (Woodson, 2011). According to Woodson (2011, p. 5), Black people had been going to the back door for so long that they no longer had to be told to go; they automatically went there and when there was not a back door they created one. Before prison I sold drugs to people that shared my culture and my history. I robbed people. I even stole from my own mother who was and is my foundation. The backdoor mentality Woodson is referring to is taking all paths to least resistance, despite hurting others while traversing that chosen path. It was easy to steal from my own people in my own community. I didn't have to leave my house or my neighborhood to get money to buy the latest shell top Adidas, or the Dukey gold rope necklaces, cars, or whatever I desired. I just took it by cunning or force from my family. I didn't really care or give much thought to how I was hurting others by taking from them. Getting a job and working for what I wanted was not an option when I saw so many in my neighborhood robbing, stealing, and selling drugs to one another. I never even considered robbing, stealing, or selling drugs in the white community. That required more work than doing what felt comfortable. What felt comfortable is what I was use to doing and seeing and that was taking from my family and my community.

However, I read Clarke (2011) and the text read, "To control a people you must first control what they think about themselves and how they regard their history and culture. And when your conqueror makes you ashamed of your culture and your history, he needs no prison walls and no chains to hold you." By now, I understood that the author was saying that if you give a people a history and make them believe that story is theirs then you can control what they

think about themselves. If a people think that they are nothing or close to nothing then they will strive to be something. If that something is their oppressor, they will even strive to be like the oppressor. When a people look up to their oppressor and look down on themselves then they will be self-destructive because they end up despising themselves and others like them. From that point on, I immediately understood that I had been locked up all my life and that the bars were there, I just could not see them.

Right then, in 1994 from behind my barred cage, African-centered scholars, such as Clarke and Akbar inspired me. They gave me purpose to *want* to paint a picture of struggle, oppression, and liberation as I was beginning to see and understand these realities differently than I had before I was introduced to Urban and African-Centered Literature that made me reflect on my life through characters that were like me and those I was reared around. The African-centered writers were writing about how Blacks had empowered themselves despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles, while the urban authors reintroduced to me what had been my reality before African-centered scholarship. These stories of individual and collective Africana struggle, whether actually true or just true in concept, inspired me to want to tell others so they too could feel empowered. Donald Goines, Robert “Iceberg Slim” Beck, inspired me to *want* to tell stories centered in the urban African-American reality, using the language, and social setting relative to the environment and the time. In my literature review through reflecting on my past experiences I will provide examples of how African-centered Literature and Urban Fiction helped liberate me from believing false ideals that led me to act against the interests of myself and others in my community.

1.4 Research questions

My narrative analysis of my life before, during, and after being released from the U.S.

Federal Penal System will revolve around this question:

1. How has reading African-centered Literature and Urban Fiction been transformative in my life?

1.5 Operational definitions

African-centered literature: Written work that places African and African-American characters and issues at the center of examination.

Africana: African, African-American, and those that descend from African peoples.

Big dog/ Big homie: Friendly terms used to address someone one does not know.

Boss hustler: an expert at exploiting the poor or working class community. The Boss hustler is characterized by his or her colorful use of language to wow their victims. The Boss hustler has his or hand in multiple illegal and legal enterprises in the community. They are masters of manipulating people into doing their bidding. The Boss hustler usually drives the finest cars and wears the nicest clothes and jewelry in the community. They are also seen as being benevolent as they often put some money back into the community that they exploit.

Bread/Cheese: Money.

Brother/Brotha/ Bruh: endearing term used by a man addressing a black man.

C.O.'s: short for compound officers which were prison guards.

Critical realization: An understanding that looks at the question from a multi-directional analysis inspired by cognitive thought and questioning of the subject to be analyzed.

Dro/Loud/Indo: very potent type of marijuana with very high levels of THC.

Five-oh/ One time/ the poh-poh: Another name for police officers.

Flunky wanna-bes: people that wanted to be accepted by the criminal minded so much that they went above and beyond to impress them. These people were usually very weak minded

individuals.

Game: is a narrative spoken and acted out with the underlying purpose to manipulate the person or persons being spoken to or manipulated.

Getting money/Get paid: involves acquiring money at the expense of hurting someone physically and/or emotionally.

Ghetto Superstar: Men and women that live or frequent congested, impoverished communities, drive extravagant vehicles, and wear expensive clothes, and jewelry.

Gumps: Homosexual males in prison

Hood scholars: Writers, philosophers, and educators that usually speak and teach primarily from their experience and experiences others have shared with them. These people generally lived and grew up in impoverished areas where every day survival was a task.

Hustling: Doing almost anything legal or illegal to generate money and/or a means to live life on one's terms.

Jacked: refers to getting robbed.

L seven/squares: characterized by a person that generally follows the laws and the rules of society. The L seven is a good worker/employee and usually follows a daily routine. An L seven has a way of life that is ordered by the standards of dominate society.

Literature: the art of written work. Literature can be fact or fiction.

Mid: marijuana

OG: Stands for original gangster, but the term simply means someone that's been involved with criminal enterprises for years and usually has done prison time.

Ounce of hard: 28 grams of crack cocaine

Playa/ Playa-playa: affectionate term used to address other heterosexual black men. The

term denotes sexual prowess.

Road dogs: another term for friends.

Running game: creatively using words and language to manipulate someone else into bending to the will of another.

Screws: prison guards

Shoes: Rims on a car or clothing that cover ones feet.

Slinging/Slanging dope: hand to hand selling drugs, usually in high drug traffic areas.

Spiritual mother/father: people that wrote books that I had read that were instrumental in my transformation from being enamored with the street life to loving human life.

Struggle: hardship derived from the 16th century kidnapping and physical enslavement of Africana peoples in the U.S. Usually associated with Black and Hispanic peoples striving for survival and moving up the financial ladder.

Trick: generally refers to a person looking to pay for sexual favors.

Twinkie-twos: Twenty two inch car rims.

Urban fiction/literature: Colorful written work/novels/books/papers that is centered around inner city poor, poor working class, and lower middle class people issues such as drugs, poverty, criminal activity and any real life issues that are common among the inner city. Stories about inner city struggle.

Wiling out: Aggressively make a big deal out of something.

Whip: Another term for a car.

1.6 Design of the study

I chose to do an autoethnographic study, because I have a deep desire for people to understand how my thoughts, actions, and belief systems were genocidal. It is my hope that by

writing and studying my life story, educators will be inspired to use African-centered and Urban literature as a teaching tool in the classroom. Having over twenty years of experience in studying and writing about urban black life in a fictional and non-fictional format, I felt that doing a scholarly introspective narrative of urban black life using my own life as the subject is the most impassioned way to convey how I was able to overcome several obstacles that many urban black males have been unable to overcome obstacles that have led so many Black men to prison and an early grave. Having written and published thirteen novels about the urban black experience, I have seen how the language and flow of my narratives have moved readers to act on the information in my books. I want readers to keep in their minds and feel in their bodies the complexities of concrete moments of lived experience (Ellis, 2004, Pg. 30). By writing an autoethnography using my personal life narrative the reader will be much more captivated than he or she would than if I chose to use another method to explain the impact that African-centered and Urban literature had on my life.

Literature about urban life helped me to understand the problems and what constituted a problem in urban Black America. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Alex Haley, although not an autoethnography per se, it is still the story of a man that I saw myself in, a man that I identified with on so many levels and I saw how he was able to navigate through life's obstacles and how he became a man that I want to one day become. Urban novels like *Whoreson* by Donald Goines was a reflection of my reality and who I thought I was. Critically studying Urban fiction, in particular the works of Donald Goines uncovers Africanisms, class-critique, neo-slave narratives, and deep connections with Hip hop aesthetics (Stallings & Thomas, 2011). According to Stallings & Thomas (2011), critically studying street fiction literature may force us to redefine not only African-American literary history but also large areas of modern American cultural

history.

1.7 Significance of the study

This study will demonstrate the basic tenets of autoethnography and how Urban literature helped me overcome a cycle of self-hate that led to me committing crimes against myself and humanity. The overall goal of this autoethnographic study is to paint a clear and colorful picture of my life and what inspired me to move from having a genocidal mentality to one of cultural liberation.

According to Akbar (2004, p. v), knowledge is the hallmark of civilized human life. It is the capacity to know oneself and to have the ability to communicate that knowledge to others so people can move above the level of habit and actually gain and transmit knowledge about themselves and the world that they live in, over the course of generations.

African-American culture was created by and is a result of Chattel Slavery (Rucker, 2008). During this period, Africans were stripped of their language, culture, and history. The systems and people that perpetuated these horrendous events are also the same people that gave the African in the United States their language: They helped create African-American culture. Someone once asked me if I thought that these same systems and people would give African-American society knowledge of self that would potentially liberate their minds so that they could free themselves of a mentality that perpetuated genocidal acts. It is American systems that are rooted in racism that help perpetuate African-American circular and habitual movement (Kunjufu, 2012). This habitual circular movement has benefited White culture in moving greater society forward. According to Akbar (2004, p. 2), animals may alter their genetic code by altering their habits over sustained periods of time, but they are unable to leave a record of the rationale for developing certain patterns, mastering certain obstacles and breaking down the

complexity of some aspect of the environment. Knowledge is a record of any and everything that came before now. According to Akbar (2004, p. 1) the job of each generation is to add further understanding of yesterday's knowledge to solve today's social and physical societal ills.

African-American culture's knowledge of yesterday is largely influenced by oppressive factions.

This study will also explain how historical movement among African-Americans in the states has been circular because the same or similar information and methods are repetitively used in educational settings. Using the same methods over and over expecting different results is what Einstein once defined as insanity. I will use my life experiences as the tool to paint a clear and colorful picture of how I was inspired to think critically and how this inspiration led to me to aspire for knowledge that would potentially help young Black males learn to love themselves and their community.

2 CHAPTER II REVIEW OF LITERATURE

By taking an introspective look and analyzing my beliefs, perceptions, and my life experiences I plan to examine how Urban & African-centered literature affected my life. This study will use an autoethnographical approach to examine my evolution from street life to prison life to academic life. This study will examine the urban life experiences of the author, tracing a forty-six year span of Black male urban life. This qualitative study will use critical autoethnography as its methodology. Critical pedagogy will be used as the theoretical framework for this narrative. This research is important because it can be used as a blueprint and/or tool to understanding the motivations of adolescent and young adult Urban males. Furthermore, it is my hope that this research will prompt educators to use Urban & African Centered narratives in the classroom as a solution to inspire urban youth to want to read, analyze and reflect on past individual and group behavior.

2.1 Overview

I had never given much thought that there could be a different reality other than what I personally experienced and saw with my own eyes; at least that was before I read my first novel at the age of 24. It was a Donald Goines novel: *Black Girl Lost*. Before discovering Donald Goines I had never read a book in my life. On several occasions I put some effort into reading, but I could never remember what I read from one page or scene to another. The narratives did not interest me because I could not see myself or others I liked and looked up to in these readings; the language in the books I opened before Goines did not speak to me like the language of the streets did. Language in urban inner cities across America consisted of words, gestures, and masculine greeting rituals that express love and camaraderie. For example, Big pimpin, Player player, Big dog, and Baby boy are vernacular greetings often used to express love for another male. Creatively using denigrating terms to describe a peer and or a peer's family member is another way that is used as a popular form of communication among urban males in inner cities. Black's reared in inner cities all over the nation have been reinventing the already bastardized English language to make it their own. An example of this is the way that inner city southern Black's replace the consonant sound at the end of words with the 'uh' sound. The above ways of communication is the normative reality for so many inner city Blacks. It was often difficult for me to see myself or people that looked like me in the Public school narratives. None of these narratives were centered around inner city Black characters or inner city struggle. Therefore, the teachers often found me daydreaming, disrupting class, sleep or on the verge of falling to sleep. The school narratives may even have blacks in the text, but the black characters did not speak like me or the black folks I knew. They also did not dress like me or the black folks I knew, so even this was boring and hard for me to follow.

So, when I cracked open my first Urban novel, *Black Girl Lost* by Donald Goines I was immediately drawn in. The first three sentences in Goines (2006) reads,

The Sounds coming from inside the house were more than just loud and helter-skelter.

“You black Mother fucker!”

The cuss word seemed to fill the night air whirling around the child who stood shivering in the Los Angeles early March wind.

I grew up in loud apartments and houses and the phrase “black mother fucker” was as normal as “good morning”. Just these first three sentences made me wanna read more because calling someone a black mother fucker either meant someone was angry and some mess was about to jump off or someone was about to get made fun of. In either case some type of drama was coming and I wanted to know what was about to happen so I kept reading. Characters, conflicts, and language in Urban literature easily captivated me because I knew people that talked and acted like the characters in the urban novel. The conflicts in urban novels were conflicts I had seen, heard about or been a part of. Therefore, Urban fiction stories seemed real because I felt that I was part of the story.

To reach back to the source of Urban/Street literature we have to look to personal narratives such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1966) and Claude Brown’s *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965), classic titles in African-American literature about the cruel urban lifestyles of African American men growing up in Detroit and Harlem (Morris, Hughes-Hassell, Agosto, & Cottman, 2006). According to Morris, Hughes-Hassell, Agosto, & Cottman (2006), such titles began the street literature movement by describing raw, gritty realities on big city streets. In the early 1970’s Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines set the tone for Urban literature as a sub-genre of African-American literature with their realistic depictions of ghetto life in Detroit

and Chicago (Morris, Hughes-Hassell, Agosto, & Cottman, 2006). Like many current Urban fiction authors, Goines and Slim brought credibility to their writing because they were involved with drugs and served jail time for various crimes. This is an authenticity that the great Urban novelists bring to the Urban narrative. I say great Urban novelists because Urban literature is about the culture of inner city poverty, powerlessness, and hopelessness and the central goal in urban America is to rise out of poverty, powerlessness, and hopelessness. A number of urban males think criminal behavior is the easiest and/or the only way that an urban male can rise out of their urban condition. In the Indianapolis and Atlanta hoods I grew up in, the role models were the boss hustlers and the OG's with good game that had served prison time like Goines and Beck.

The classroom was an extension of the playground for me. It was just a playground with rules. In the hoods I grew up in, the ones who seemed to get ahead were the ones that broke the rules and did not get caught. Among my urban classmates I thought I was popular because I often found ways to interrupt the boring narrative with some type of mischief, such as blowing spit wads through a straw in the back of a classmates head, or making and flying paper airplanes. I did all this behind the teachers back while that teacher was attempting to teach. All of my classroom lessons seemed to be wrapped around what white people had achieved. All the readings were centered around white culture. These lessons were incredibly boring to me because I could not and did not want to relate to the narratives.

Later on in High school when career week would come, I would have these dreams of being a pilot and when I entered back into the real world those dreams would fade into a memory because I never saw a black pilot and one day a counselor told me that I would have to go into the military and go to college. This was out because I couldn't see myself listening to a white

man barking orders at me and that's what I saw white military folks do in movies. Secondly, I hated school and I didn't know if I was going to even graduate high school.

Growing up in the several hoods that I had lived, scores of Black men would attribute their poverty, joblessness, and overall powerless condition to the "White man." To me this seemed to be the reason why Black men did not try harder to overcome poverty and feelings of powerlessness. Without any evidence or understanding it was just easier for me to accept that I couldn't be a pilot because the "White man" wouldn't allow it. The reason that I didn't go straight from High School to college was because I hated school, wasn't good at school, and I was making more money being a criminal than most made with college degrees. This mentality is one of acceptance and capitulation to people and systems that have communicated that Black life is less and or inferior to non-Africana peoples. Historically, the major tool used to uplift American Whites were Black people that had been convinced of their inferiority to Whites (Clarke, 2011). Me thinking that the "White man" wouldn't let me get ahead because that was the common narrative in the hood is exactly what (Clarke, 2011) meant in the prior statement. I had been convinced of my inferiority to Whites by my peers and family. It did not even seem hypocritical to me when my dad would tell me that a black man had to hustle hard because the white man had his foot on our necks and in the next sentence he would tell me that a "nigga under the hood ain't no good" and to always take my nice cars to the white man. I did not think it was hypocritical because I did not think. It was just easier to accept what people in authority said as fact.

This type of persuasion was achieved as a result of what Carter G. Woodson describes as mis-education. Mis-education in its foundation is the cultivation of an alien idea – an idea that

begins at the level at which the person is taught an alien identity and nothing about their true identity (Akbar, 2004, p. vii).

This type of persuasion had been successfully accomplished since 1865 when the Freedmen's Bureau opened up the first public schools for Blacks – public schools with instruction that trained Blacks how to be subservient to White culture. In regards to the Freedmen's Bureau opening up the first thousand public schools for Blacks in 1865, historian and scholar Carter G. Woodson (2011, p. 18) described this event as “the way we drifted away from the truth.” Woodson (2011, p. 18) goes on to explain that the Freedmen's Bureau had way more enthusiasm than they had knowledge when they set out to build 1000 public schools for Blacks in 1865. Woodson was referring to an enthusiasm that did not consider the traditional curricula that would be used in these newly built schools – a curriculum that did not take Blacks into consideration except to condemn and pity them (Woodson, 2011, p. 17). Traditional public school pedagogy trains children all over America to look at and analyze information through the eyes of a system that was established to uplift only White America through the mental and physical oppression and suppression of Blacks.

In order to illustrate how Urban literature was transformative in my life, this literature review attempts to first provide understanding about the roles of Urban and African-centered literature. Urban literature is written to entertain and educate others. It's educational value for me was its power to make me reflect on actions, beliefs, and preconceived notions I had. When I tried to place many of these past beliefs into African-centered constructs, they did not fit. For instance, when my dad would say “niggas ain't shit” or when Momma Fluffy would say “niggas is just trifling and lazy” that didn't fit when I read African-centered literature that explained that Blacks worked for 246 years for free during enslavement, so that doesn't sound like Blacks are

lazy and trifling by nature. The above is an example of me thinking about who I thought I was as a result of using Urban fiction to self-reflect on my values and re-assessing that thought process once I read African-centered scholarly literature that contradicted former notions that were past down as fact with very little if any African-centered factual evidence.

Next, I will explain what literature is and the relationship that literature has on society. Then, I will examine critical pedagogy as a means to educate Black children. Afterward, I will assess how others have used Urban Literature as a pedagogical tool in the classroom.

2.2 Ties that bind: Knowledge, Consciousness, Education and Literature

The American public school education system trains American youth to accept European culture as if it were their own. Grade school history texts all over the country describe America as “home of the brave” and “land of the free”. Black children all over believe this to be true for them just as it is for all other American children because they were often told so by a teacher or someone in authority. Unfortunately, on many occasions when Blacks have sought to exercise certain freedoms that the American Constitution promises, Blacks have been killed, raped, enslaved, and or imprisoned. According to Wa thiong’o (1993), problems such as the above arise when people try to use the vision from any one center and generalize it as the reality for everyone. Wa thiong’o (1993) asserts that this is done through language.

The language and information in textbooks all over America, describes Africans that were stolen and forced to work and do the bidding of their Anglo captors as slaves. The enslaved and slavers come to believe that the African captors were slaves because of the language used to describe them, when in fact they were human beings that had been enslaved. The word slave is a noun. A noun implies something that is. The word enslaved is a verb. A verb implies action. Africans were not born as slaves. All people are born as human beings. Despite

the fact that Indigenous peoples had thriving civilizations when Columbus accidentally landed on the shores that are now called America, the narrative in the textbooks and in America still affords the discovery of America to the Spaniard, Christopher Columbus.

By accepting this Christopher Columbus narrative is to denounce Indigenous American culture and African cultural influences on Indigenous Americans from earlier voyages to what is now called the United States of America. The above is an example of how information is manipulated. According to Woodson (2011, p. 4) the mere imparting of information is not education. The Christopher Columbus narrative is a direct example of this. When I read Ivan Van Sertimas African-centered narrative *They Came Before Columbus*, I was able to reflect on what I was taught growing up on how Columbus discovered America, and I was disappointed in myself for accepting what now seemed to be common sense. I never even considered that the indigenous people were here when Columbus arrived, which meant that America wasn't lost when Columbus arrived. When reading Urban literature with African-centered narratives I began to understand that my cognitive ability had been disabled through the use and contextualization of American language.

Early grade school readers introduce stories about middle class white America, and in these narratives items such as saucers, top hats, ravines, guest bedrooms, and teacups may be introduced. Although these items may sound commonplace, they are far from commonplace in the realities of many urban Black students. I know I thought a saucer was a UFO. Many urban families have never had saucers. Many Black children have never seen a ravine, but they know what a creek is. Many Black children have never seen a teacup, because many have either the good glasses that you do not touch, or they have just plain old cups to drink tea or anything else out of. Most urban households do not have guest bedrooms, instead they have a couch or some

blankets or comforters to make a bed on the floor. Many Blacks go through life never seeing a top hat or anyone who would be caught wearing one. This cognitive disabling is usually blamed on the student and not the discourse, and if the student does not conform to the texts than they are often left behind as they fall behind the standard.

You have many Black students who do conform and assimilate to the views espoused by the standardized pedagogy in the public schools system of America. Many of them subconsciously hate themselves so much that they do almost anything to move away from other Blacks. An example of manifesting black self-hate is when so-called educated Blacks vote against the interests of Black people. Many seek out mates and companions that are other than Black because they feel that Blacks do not measure up. According to Kunjufu (2012, p. 3) those who are able to seemingly keep up and adopt the foreign standards are socially stratified to accept a conditioning that breeds self-hate and subservience, stemming from the lack of what knowledge is.

According to Akbar (2004, p. 1) knowledge is the capacity to know oneself, and to have the ability to communicate that knowledge with others. Knowledge allows human beings to act on awareness instead of habit. Awareness comes from the historical record of the rationale for developing certain patterns, mastering certain obstacles and breaking down the complexity of some aspect of environment (Akbar, 2004, p. 1).

When Black students are given information to read or are given information from the instructor to memorize for a multiple-choice exam, this does not necessarily mean that the information is education or knowledge. According to Woodson (2011, p. 4) the mere imparting of information is not education. However, on a test the first question may ask who discovered America. Based on the information in the curricula, the answer may be Christopher Columbus.

But, if one is conscious of self-knowledge, then he or she would understand how this would have been impossible to do in 1492, because the self-conscious (inner-awareness) one would analyze the historical record of the rationale that informs that Columbus discovered land that was already inhabited by human life (Akbar, 2004, p. 46.)

It is largely in part due to the lack of consciousness that enables people and systems to influence Black people to believe and act in ways that are counterproductive to their survival (Wilson, 1991, p. 49). Consciousness is the internal manifestation of knowledge (Akbar, 2004). To be conscious is to be aware. Education is the vehicle for the transmission of consciousness (Akbar, 2004, p. 1). According to Akbar (2004, p. 1) each generation has the responsibility of maintaining the “level” of consciousness attained by the previous generation, and of advancing the community to even higher levels by the development of their own consciousness. This process is characterized as education. The word education is derived from the Latin word *educare*, which simply means to “bring up” or “bring forth.” In its inception education was understood as a process of harnessing the inner potential that was yet unexpressed and bringing this inner potential “out” or up” into consciousness (Akbar, 2004, p. 1).

Many children growing up in the mid to late 20th century were introduced to the yellow Dick and Jane books outlined in black with stick characters drawn in the image of White kids. The Dick and Jane series of books was often the first introduction to story reading in school. Dick and Jane were stories about white people doing white stuff in a white world. The family, the stories, the scenery around Dick and Jane narratives were always written from a European center and standpoint. Although Dick and Jane had a black friend named Leroy, Leroy was thrust into Jane and Dick’s world and Leroy’s voice was only in response to Dick and Jane’s calling. In essence the instructors were attempting to teach all the children as if Dick and Janes world was a

shared reality for all cultures. The instructors were trying to do exactly what the public school system was designed to do, and that was to universalize education (Van Scotter, 1991). Black males from the inner city ghettos like myself were diagnosed with some type of attention deficit disorder because we could not and did not want to follow along with the foreign narrative. Reading and listening to Eurocentric narratives like Dick and Jane might as well have been in Spanish as far as my elementary mind was concerned. I didn't talk like these kids in the Dick and Jane narratives and it was just easier for me to tune the teacher and the text out and think about something I could relate to.

Once I started reading Urban & African-centered literature as an adult, I learned that I only had attention deficit disorder when what I was being fed to read or understand was foreign to my way of life. Reading Urban & African-centered literature I remembered quotes, authors, and entire excerpts from books with very little conscious effort. This brings me to universal or standardized education in the United States.

In the late 17th century less than a decade after the American Revolution, Horace Mann then the Secretary of Education in Massachusetts created a statewide system and developed teachers, based on the Prussian model of "common schools" which referred to the belief that everyone was entitled to the same content in education (Van Scotter, 1991). Mann's early efforts focused primarily on elementary education and on preparing teachers. The common-school movement quickly gained strength across the North. According to Van Scotter (1991) no one did more than Mann to establish in the minds of the American people the conception that education should be universal, non-sectarian, and free.

It is this universal education that led to my hatred of school and hatred of myself. In elementary school I believed that I had a problem with reading comprehension. My grades were

bad. I couldn't focus and adults told me that I had a learning disability. They were the adults, I was the kid so in my mind they must be correct.

Historically, public education in the United States for Blacks has been the only legitimate hope for escape from poverty for those from racialized communities (Darder, 2012). Blacks have paid dearly for the right to be educated and are paying dearly for the education or mis-education that Traditional Pedagogy provides. According to Darder (2012) Traditional American pedagogy upholds the notion that the object of education is the free, enterprising, independent individual and that students should be educated in order to adapt to the existing configurations of power that make up the dominant culture in America. Adapting to these configurations of power is accepting the myth that Blacks are inferior to Whites.

During my elementary and high school years I just accepted that Blacks were inferior to Whites. I did not know that I believed this at the time, but I remember all my heroes being White. Superman was my favorite. Tarzan was my favorite show as a child. I used to beat my chest and holler like Tarzan. My family and friends never paid any mind as many of their heroes were also white. In school, the heroes in history were all white so what little I did learn was an acceptance of European ideals, which often meant disassociating myself with my history and my culture.

Universalizing education in America is what has and is mis-educating the nation, by training dominant culture that it is superior and training Blacks that they are inferior to European and all cultures (Kunjufu, 2012). According to Akbar (2004, p. vii) mis-education in its foundation is the cultivation of an alien identity, and the process of mis-education begins at the level which the person begins to learn to see themselves as player's in someone else's story and do not learn their story, which is exactly what I had done.

2.3] Relating literature to consciousness

In this section I will show the relationship between literature and consciousness. Consciousness is a state of awareness (Akbar, 2004, p. vi). Awareness is the way one understands a situation. People come to an understanding based on their self-analyzation of their environment and the way they process the information that they have. Literature provides information about society and the way people navigate through life (Duhon, 2015).

According to Duhon (2015), literature reflects the society, its good values and its ills. Donald Goines was a Black man that was reared in inner the inner city during the 1950's, 60's and early 1970's. Goines wrote about life as he saw and experienced it. Most of his writings were fiction based on actual things he had been involved in. If Duhon is correct that literature reflects society, then the story in Donald Goines' *Black Girl Lost, Whoreson, and Dopefiend* reflects Urban life in an urban social structure and although the actual stories are fiction, the messages reflect the lived experiences of Black people living in impoverished, urban inner city America.

Duhon (2015) further acknowledges that literature in its corrective function mirrors the ills of society with a view to making the society realize its mistakes and make amends. If this last statement is true than, it seems that a large part of urban society's ills are due to the lack of exposure to literature that tells the story of Urban America in Urban America's moving and changing language.

In reference to Black fiction, Manie Barron of the Mensa-Barron Literary Agency once said, "We've been publishing for Black women since the 1960's, we've forgotten about the Urban man (Rosen, 2004)." Barron continues with, "Up until now there wasn't anything that spoke to them. We had Donald Goines and Iceberg Slim, *Down These Mean Streets, Manchild in*

the Promised Land, Make Me Wanna Holler, and The Autobiography of Malcolm X. That was it (Rosen, 2004).”

2.4 Critical Pedagogy: Education for liberation

Reading Urban fiction allowed me to see myself through other characters and I was able to reflect on my previous actions that were similar to the urban characters actions that I was reading about. I was also able to see what my victims and their families may have felt as a result of my victimization. When reading African-centered literature such as Carter G. Woodson’s, *Miseducation of the Negro*, and Anthony Browder’s, *Contributions to Nile Valley Civilizations*, I was able to see how Blacks were and are duped into hating themselves by Euro-culture attributing firsts, and feats to Europeans in history books. I found myself nodding my head in agreement as Woodson (2011, p. 6), explained how Blacks are taught in public school to hate themselves through being taught that they had not done anything to advance world culture. While reading I realized that the *Mis-education of the Negro* was written almost a century ago and Woodson’s words rang as true as they were written today. Euro-centered books in public school began history at the beginning of the Euro-Christian era, but when I read Anthony Browder’s, *Contributions to Nile Valley Civilizations* my face and my spirit beamed with pride as I learned how Africans were scholars and engineers that had underground sewage systems, and had performed successful brain surgery thousands of years before the Christian Era. I felt good about being a part of this family, these people. I no longer saw myself as an individual in this world alone. The more I read African-centered literature the more I felt connected to Africana peoples that struggled, fought, and died to live life on their own terms. That pride and feeling good about being African-American led to me wanting to teach others what Africans had done and how they had worked together in harmony to overcome and achieve great things. Later,

in life once I went to school and majored in African-American studies I learned about this thing called Critical Pedagogy. That's when everything I had read and learned came full circle. I realized that my journey that began with reading Urban literature was part of a methodology that was used by an African-American educator named Septima Clarke in the beginning of the 20th century and later developed and given a name by Brazilian scholar Paulo Freire.

While greater America was determined to continue standardizing education, activist, educators, and scholars such as Paulo Freire, Septima Clarke, and Myles Horton were determined to change the pedagogy to one that was culturally centered to the student (Darder, 2012). This form of teaching came to be known as "True Education" (Payne & Strickland, 2008). In the early to mid 20th Century True education came to be known as Freedom teaching and later evolved into a methodology called Critical Pedagogy (Payne & Strickland (2008). This meant teaching African-Americans and other cultures about their history and culture with them as the subject of analysis as opposed to teaching Blacks as the object of another culture's views (Freire, 2014). This in itself helped free me from my criminal mentality driven by my self-hatred and it helped free other Blacks from thinking and believing that they were limited to boundaries imposed by the oppressive dominant society. Freedom or liberatory teaching is learning aimed at democracy, which is the opposite of the goals of the most popular and widely used pedagogy in America; *Standardized or Universal Pedagogy* (Payne & Strickland, 2008). According to Darder (2012) Traditional American Pedagogy upholds the notion that the object of education is the free, resourceful, independent individual, and that the students should be educated in order to adapt to the existing designs of power that make up dominant culture. Liberatory and Democratic education is centered in uplifting the group (Freire, 2014).

Paulo Freire was a pioneer in the field of liberatory pedagogy. His methodology espoused

the “each one teach one” concept. “Each one teach one” is an African proverb that originated in America during Chattel Slavery (Merlo & Wolpin, 2015). The enslaved were seen as chattel and therefore denied an education so when one enslaved person learned to read or write, it became his duty to teach someone else (Merlo & Wolpin, 2015).

Liberatory teaching and learning aimed at freedom/democracy has been refashioned into a term called Critical Pedagogy (Payne & Strickland, 2008). Critical Pedagogy combines the philosophy of education and social movements within critical theory (Darder, 2012). Paulo Freire describes the philosophy of critical pedagogy as one that places the learner as the *subject*, and not the object of the learning process; he says through this approach the learner can become the subject of society (Freire, 2014). The educator and the learners are equal participants in the learning process. According to Freire (2014) all are producers of knowledge. A continuous dialogue between the educator and the learners develops the learning process (Freire, 2014). The objective of the learning process is to liberate the participants from their external and internal oppression; to make them capable of changing their reality, their lives and their society (Cole, 2009).

2.5 Connecting Urban Literature to Education

Donald Goines’ and other urban/street fiction authors critically tell the stories whose characters and plots concern the often-underrepresented Black underclass (Stallings & Thomas, 2011, pg. 14). This is not to say that other forms of fictions do not tell stories centered around the Black underclass. In Urban literature, individual identity centers the text because the author of Urban Literature is operating from the view that ideologies about collective identity and ownership in White America have not fed the hungry and the poor (Stallings & Thomas, 2011, p. 17).

In the Urban novel *White Man's Justice Black Mans Grief*, Donald Goines gives the reader a view of the United States Justice system from the lens of the most victimized group, the inner city Black male.

According to Goines (1973) every day in America thousands of poor Black men are picked up and arrested, booked and held in county jails for months, often losing their jobs, housing and cars while waiting on a court date. They do not have family members or friends that can afford to post their bonds, so many of these innocent and targeted Blacks develop feelings of hopelessness (Goines, 1973, p. 7). The incarcerated victim is scared—scared because they have no choice but to accept an attorney that is assigned and paid for by the same side that is trying to convict the person (Goines, 1973, Pg. 7). So, now months later they have their day in court, the lucky ones beat their cases only to walk out of court, penniless, no job as a result of losing theirs while waiting on a court date, and no place to live as a result of being evicted after spending months in jail waiting for a court date (Goines, 1973, p. 7-8). The above is an example of literature mirroring life. The culture and society that Goines spoke to is a mirror of Urban Black culture. Black men getting arrested and coming home months later after they either beat their case or it was thrown out was and is more normal in the Urban/poor Black community than attending college.

Today educators and parents are beginning to see the educating value that Urban Literature has on today's youth. Taressa Stovall did research into what Black youth are reading. In this study Charlene Cobb, now a college student says that she got into Urban Literature at age 12 and is still a fan of the genre (Stovall, 2005). Charlene says, "I like the drama and regular stories with people I can relate to." As Charlene matured she began to discuss the storylines in the books with her aunt and mother (Stovall, 2005).

Stephanie Wilkerson-Hester of Baltimore, Maryland emphasizes that rather than trying to limit her 17-year-old son's reading materials, she uses them as a springboard to frank communication (Stovall, 2005). According to Wilkerson-Hester her son did not read much before he discovered Urban fiction. Wilkerson-Hester goes on to say, "We talk about everything, including some of the situations and dynamics he's reading in those books."

Shirley Aaron, an adolescent crisis counselor and great-grandmother in Minneapolis, Minnesota is an avid reader of Urban fiction. She says, "I don't have a problem with young people reading it because it's a part of life (Stovall, 2005)."

Morrell & Duncan-Andrade (2002) argues that Urban fiction can be used to support literary terms and concepts as well as ultimately foster literary interpretations. The authors further assert that since urban texts are rich in imagery and metaphor that it can be used to teach irony, diction, and point of view. Furthermore, Morrell & Duncan-Andrade (2002) argues that urban texts can be analyzed for theme, plot, motif, and character development and once learned these analytic and interpretive tools developed through engagement with Urban fiction can be applied to the canonical texts as well (Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002).

While Rosen (2004, p. 32) claims that Urban fiction is capturing the attentions of young Black men other critics feel that Urban fiction reinforces stereotypes and exploits the Black experience (Chiles, 2006; Rice, 2008). It is not surprising that with such vulnerable groups as at-risk Black males, the debate over appropriate literature is impassioned (Guerra, 2012). Literature is powerful in its capacity to introduce new ideas and contribute to belief formation (Escalas, 2007; Green, 2004; Wheeler, Green, & Brock, 1999). Urban literatures content contributing to belief formation is exactly what many critics fear. Arguably the most contentious concern of all is the content of Urban Literature. Advocates have framed Urban fiction as cautionary tales, or

even modern day descendants of didactic folk tales (Morris, Hughes-Hassell, Agosto, & Cottman, 2006). Cynics have contended that street lit reifies crime, substance abuse, promiscuity, and violence (Chiles, 2006; Stovall, 2005). Although street/urban Literature does reify crime, research proves that when youth “see” themselves in terms of race, culture, and lived experiences in the literature they read, they benefit academically, personally and socially (Bishop, 1992; Diamond & Moore, 1995; Mason & Au, 1991).

When youth identify with the characters, the environment, and the story line in a novel, the youth often feel like they are a part of the story and they become culturally responsive active participants in the dialogue about the story (Freire, 2014; Guerra, 2012). Urban fiction as earlier stated, mirrors the complex and multidimensional aspects of urban life; therefore, when taught in a classroom, Urban fiction is a way to get cultural responses out of the youth that the stories speak to.

Culturally responsive teaching or "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" results in increased student engagement and positive gains in achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1994, Gay, 2000, p. 29, Guerra, 2012). Unfortunately, culturally responsive teaching can be a challenge when the culture of the students conflict with dominant cultures ideas of education. The life experiences, and frames of reference of underprivileged, gang-involved, minority students are diminished and regularly outlawed in general society (Gay, 2000, p. 29). The research on culturally responsive education indicates that if educators are to engage these students academically, it is those same life experiences in the urban story lines that provide the most fruitful field for connection (Guerra, 2012). According to Guerra (2012) Urban fiction may provide a unique bridge between literacy and real life for urban

youth, and thus holds potential as a powerful tool in building literacy and cognitive problem solving skills.

Guerra (2012) contends that Urban literature can be used in the classroom in the same ways that any literature is used. Guerra goes on to explain that titles lend themselves to specific instructional purposes based on their strengths. For example, Kwan's novel *Gutter* (Foye, 2006) would make a great study in plot development or the valuation that urban youth put on Black life.

Urban fiction represents the master narrative of individual choice and accountability for many Black students being reared in urban and suburban America (Ayers, 2008). Saying that urban students reading Urban fiction will transform conditions that plague young Black males such as poverty, drug abuse, crime, and irresponsible fathering is terribly naïve; however, to ignore the potential of active literacy for ensuring that fewer Black males perpetuate the cycle of genocide that plagues our urban and suburban Black communities is equally naïve (Guerra, 2012).

By looking at the urban novel from a critical literacy standpoint, rich opportunities for discussion around questions of power, privilege, identity, and race could be examined (Guerra, 2012.) An example of this could be realized by studying an excerpt from my Urban Literature novel, *World War Gangsta Uhuru* (2012, p. 198);

“The way some of them good dancin’ broads was sweatin’ me, hell if I don’t go up in one of ‘em,” Thug said.

“Them females got business about themselves, Thug. Your pockets ain’t long enough to pull any of dem,” D-Bo said.

“Nigga, I ain’t like you. I got more game than Milton Bradley and Parker

Brothers. I wish a ho' would ask me for some money." Thug turned his head to the side.

"Nigga, bitches pay me."

"To leave them the fuck alone," D-Bo said before he cracked up.

"You the most hatin' ass nigga." Thug looked at D-Bo sideways. "Got damn," Thug said.

"You got hatin' mixed up with realness baby boy. Ain't nothin' wrong with payin' for pussy. Everybody pays one way or the other."

In the classroom the students and instructor could discuss and take an introspective look into questions surrounding "power." Questions surrounding power could be examined around the sentence where D-Bo explains to Thug that everyone pays for sex one way or the other. Furthermore, classroom conversations surrounding questions of privilege could be looked at in terms of why Thug thinks that his money and his status in the black community was cause for women to submit to his sexual desires.

When D-Bo says, "Them females got business about themselves, Thug. Your pockets ain't long enough to pull any of dem," (Uhuru, 2012, p. 198) could imply that D-Bo feels that because he is a black male, he is not good enough to garner the affections of women without paying them, which could very well be a question of identity and race, and could make for good relative discussion in the classroom.

Excerpts such as the example above can be used to offer Black youth a chance to interrogate narratives that mirror the narratives of their own lives and also to "consciously use texts to mediate the world and their senses of self" (Bean & Stevens, 2007, p. 29).

Bean and Moni (2003) offered scaffolding for such discussion, including questions around novel structure, reader positioning, and gaps and silences that can be applied to almost any piece of literature (see also Bean & Stevens, 2007). Such critical discussions can lay the groundwork for students to read the world with attention to agendas, inequities, and social transformation, and reposition themselves as actors with agency in these areas (Morrell, 2008).

3 CHAPTER III RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study will continue to allow the reader to visualize my life experiences, perceptions and beliefs. I hope that by studying my life experiences the reader will understand how I was able to evolve from being an incarcerated criminal to being a resilient academician that now lives to inspire and uplift America's young Black males. This research will use African-centered literature and Urban fiction narratives I read and wrote to illustrate how my mentality was transformed.

3.1 Purpose of the Study

As I began assembling the next chapter, I reflected on Linde's meaning of "lifestory": "A 'lifestory' consists of all the stories and associated discourse units, such as explanations and chronicles, and the connections between them, told by an individual during the course of their lifetime (Linde, 1993, p.21)." I feel like I have been empowered and I am duty bound to share my life story because my story paints a picture using words of the hurt and pain young men can cause to themselves and to others by fostering a criminal mentality similar to the one that I had the first twenty-three years of my life. Therefore, it is not my intent to just represent general examples of my lived experiences (Ellis, 2004). Rather it is the purpose of this study to share with the readers the complexity of my life experiences as they could possibly relate to the life experiences of other urban Black males.

3.2 Methodology

Since reading my first African-centered scholarly book *Visions for Black Men*, I have been analyzing and re-analyzing my beliefs, perceptions, and actions. After reading Akbar (1991), I developed an unquenchable thirst for knowledge – in particular, knowledge told through narratives that I could see myself and/or my peers as an active participant in. As I continued reading hundreds of African-centered and urban narratives over the seven years I was incarcerated, I came to understand that stories that did not include people and movements that I could relate to were painstakingly difficult to comprehend.

While writing my autobiographical novel *Streetlife* (Uhuru, 2001) in 1998, I began analyzing my experiences and perceptions through the lens of fictional and non-fictional men and women of Africana descent.

For the last twenty-two plus years I have been collecting and reviewing data in reference to myself and the urban black male. I have written and had published thirteen bestselling urban novels and a self-help book; all of these tackle everyday issues in urban society from an urban perspective. In the analysis of this narrative, I used Ellis' (2004) sandwich example where I built the final study with the bread of “academic literature and theory” in the beginning and end of the study. In the middle of the sandwich I placed the meat, which is my life story with morsels of research within that narrative.

Autoethnography was the vehicle that allowed me to take an introspective look at my own history – a history that I was able to understand and analyze much better as I contrasted and compared it to male characters in Urban literature. Through stories that are set in a similar urban social environment in which I was reared, I was able to examine them in the context of behavior that I perpetuated.

Sparkes (2002, p.210) struggled with the argument that autoethnography is no more than an exercise in self-indulgence. This narrative of my life compared and contrasted with urban fiction has served a self-gratifying purpose. Urban fiction has illuminated the reasons that I and so many urban Black males perpetuate a cycle of ignorance that leads over one out of three American Black males between the ages of seventeen and twenty-nine to jail or prison (Wilson, 1991, p. xi). However, it is also the intention of this research to serve a greater good by making visible and tangible strategies to empower urban Black males to be self-determining agents that strive to be community leaders and community builders. It is a goal of this research to identify patterns of positive and negative behavior by comparing and contrasting Urban literature to the researchers urban upbringing. These patterns are further dissected through a Critical pedagogical framework.

3.3 Autoethnography

Many researchers have defined autoethnography in different ways but each express the idea that autoethnography seeks to explain and understand the self and others in common social contexts. Below are varying ways that other researchers situate autoethnography.

Autoethnography is a balancing act that works to hold self and culture together (Jones, 2008, p. 207). Furthermore, Jones (2008, p. 207) stated, “Autoethnography writes a world in a state of flux and movement – between story and context, writer and reader, crisis and denouement.” Jones (2008, p.207) further contends that autoethnography creates charged moments of clarity, connection and change.

According to Ellis (2004, p. xix) “Autoethnography is research, writing, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social.”

Spry (2001, p. 710) makes the claim that “Autoethnography is a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others in social contexts.”

According to Reed-Danahay (1997, p.2) autoethnography is the intersection of three genres which are becoming increasingly visible: (1) “native anthropology,” in which people who were formally the subjects of ethnography become the author of studies of their own group; (2) “ethnic autobiography,” personal narratives written by members of ethnic minority groups; and (3) “autobiographical ethnography,” in which anthropologists interject personal experience into ethnographic writing.

Autoethnography also claims the conventions of literary writing (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). Literary writing tells a story. Rather than keeping an academic distance, I tell my story from the stage and through the researcher’s eyes. I want “to invite the reader to join actively in the journey of understanding” (Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.67).

Personal stories inspire a reaction from the reader. They are the kind of art that takes you deeper inside yourself and ultimately out again (Friedwald, 1996, p. 126). Schank (1995) explains, “We need to tell someone else a story that describes our experience because the process of creating the story also creates the memory structure that will contain the gist of the story for the rest of our lives (p.15).

3.4 Telling the Story

This autoethnographic study comes from the voice of a Black male that grew up in inner city America – a black male that embraced a life of criminal behavior as a child, like so many black males reared in inner city America do. As an adult having served over seven years in just as many U.S. prisons, I have come to understand the motivations for my childhood and young adult criminal behavior. Over the last sixteen years, I have been able to give a voice to my

experiences through writing twelve national bestselling Urban Literature novels and one critically acclaimed self help book targeted at adolescent and young adult Black males. I've written all thirteen books with the underlying theme of struggle, self-determination, and redemption in the lives of urban Black society in hopes that others would be able to better understand and better dissect the behavior of the inner city Black male. As stated earlier, Friedman (1996, p. 126) says that personal stories emote a reaction from the reader. Furthermore Friedman goes on to say that personal stories are the kind of art that takes you deeper inside yourself and ultimately out again. As I go deeper inside myself and come out, the difference between my narrative and the general urban Black male narrative and scholarly voice are at times blurred. Why is this important?

Ellis (2004) had not officially used the term autoethnography until writing *Final Negotiations* (Ellis, 1995). In deciding how to determine what was worthy of scholarship, Ellis (2004) recommended writing about things we are working through or trying to get over. Since I read my first book *Visions for Black Men Akbar* (1991), I have been asking myself how did I get to this place and why was I here? To even begin to fully understand the questions "Why" and "How" I had to journey back and take an introspective look through my life and the life of others that looked like me and were reared under similar circumstances to my own. Writing my autobiography and fictional stories about urban life helped prepare me to re-write my lifestory story using empirical studies to help explain "why" I chose the paths that led me to prison and "why" I chose the paths that led me to becoming a positive force for change in my community and the world.

Interweaving my life story while contrasting and comparing my journey with urban fictional stories with theory further deepened my understanding of the role that autoethnography

placed in a scientific saturated research community. More importantly, autoethnography brought me full circle with my life story in relation to the inner city Black male story. My story – the inner city Black male story is one of blind struggle yearning for self-understanding, resilience, redemption, and ultimately the struggle for freedom and the capacity to know oneself in reference to all humanity. Through the retelling of my story, it is my hope that the inner city Black male no longer has to look outside of himself to define his identity.

3.5 Research Design and Methods

Although I framed my writing using Critical Pedagogy as the theoretical framework, I used autoethnography as the method for sharing my story. Critical Pedagogy combines the philosophy of education and social movements within critical theory (Darder, 2012).

3.6 Data Collection

Autobiographical narratives; Urban, mainstream and historical fiction; personal conversations; African-centered scholarly articles, journals, and personal narratives were collected and used in this study.

3.7 Data Analysis

Frank's (1995) notion of *narrative analysis* is the most sufficient way that I found to examine my life story. Narrative analysis focuses on the ways in which people make and use stories to interpret the world. While stories can be represented by an author in many forms, they can also stand on their own. The researcher is intrinsically involved with the story. This analysis recognizes that “the stories are the materials that... model theorizing – and living – with stories” (Frank, 1995, p. 23). As I intermingle the dialogue with theoretical notions, and culturally relevant fiction narratives, I am able to understand how these experiences affected my ideals,

beliefs and decisions as a young urban Black male. In this study I focused on telling the story, framed it with analysis and literature and generated understanding into the adolescent and young adult urban Black male psyche.

4 CHAPTER IV AUTOETHNOGRAPHY-FINDING JIHAD

Blackball. Blackmail. Blacklist. Blackmarket

African-Americans have been programmed to think that black is something to be ashamed of. It's strange that people who gave the world culture, science, religion, and civilization know so little about their ancestral heritage. All we have to do is study our history and the perceptions that we have of ourselves will change instantaneously.

-Anthony T. Browder

From The Browder File

4.1 Why tell my story

It was the first Friday night of the new millennium. I had just dropped my date at home in the dilapidated Atlanta urban suburb of Lithonia. It was my second year back in the free world. The world was still as it was before. No computer black outs. No nuclear nightmares. I shook my head in shame as I glanced at the three babyfaced young black men holding up the wall outside the Citgo gas station. All three looked like penitentiary gumps trying to catch a trick. My co-worker's fourteen-year-old SS Imapla coughed up fumes before I bent the curb and turned in to the well-lit service station.

As I pulled up to the pump a sickening feeling came over me as I looked out of my rearview mirror. Every time I saw sagging young brothers it was like looking at myself when I was in my teens and early twenties.

This young brotha had on two, three pair of boxers, different colors, and a pair of bright purple “Fruit of the Loom” briefs under a pair of beige Dickie work pants that would fit comfortably on someone at least fifty pounds heavier than the manchild penguin strutting toward me. It was unseasonably warm for January, but not nearly warm enough for penguin strutting manchild to have on just a wife beater T-shirt under his button down matching Dickie work shirt that was flapping in the winter night wind.

I remember thinking that it was 2000 and urban black men were still marching to the beat of someone else’s drum, just as I had in the 80’s and early 90’s when I was in my teens and early twenties. The manchild penguin strutted my way looking like a beltless prison inmate.

“Big dog?”

I was about to put my debit card in the gas pump slot, when I saw a piece of paper blowing like a flag in the wind while hanging on to the pump with two pieces of gray duct tape. The paper read, “Pay Inside.”

“Big dog?”

I turned around aiming the pumps gas nozzle at the young man. The light made the gold teeth that took up the top row of his mouth gleam.

“Big dog! I got that fire, my nigga. Dimes and dubs, mid and dro,” he said while using one hand to pull up his pants and the other to reach in his pants pocket while he pulled out several plastic bags filled with marijuana.

I looked him up and down. I had a did-you-really-just-walk-up-to-me-and-ask-if-I-wanted-to-by-some-dope look on my face. It was bad enough that he was dressed in prison like clothes, just like I had worn for over seven years while locked up with the exception of the way the too big pants were falling off of him. He even wore Timberland boots that looked almost

identical to the prison issue boots I wore in prison. West Coast rappers like N.W.A. and Ice Cube had made the prison issue like clothing popular, and other East coast and southern Trap music rappers made the sagging pants popular in the 90's and the new millennium.

The three or four pair of underwear and shorts he wore under the sagging pants matched the purple and gold Laker hat he wore on his head. Usually when I saw a young brother wearing sagging pants four and five sizes too big, I would shake my head and talk about him behind his back. But this time was different. I saw a young adult version of me and my road dogs that I ran with when I was his age.

If it weren't so sad and so real I would have laughed at the way the young man looked. "Little bruh, how you know I ain't five-oh?" I asked.

"Five-oh don't push no SS with twinky-twos on them."

I should have told him that the officer who arrested me was driving a Black SS Impala very similar to the one I had borrowed to impress my date. Instead I asked, "If I was five-oh, how do you expect to get away with them big ass pants on. Are you trying to go to jail?"

"Miss me with that Big homie," he waved a hand across his face. "I'm just out here tryin' to show you some love and you wilin' out on a nigga."

"Love? You are trying to sell me some dope that's going to kill my brain cells and have me discombobulated and you call that love?"

He waved a hand in front of his face. "Nah, big Homie, It ain't even like that."

"It is like that, little bruh, you just can't see it," I said. "Me talking to you about your actions is love Little bruh. I love you too much to not check you. I just got out the joint and I'm trying to steer you away from that hell."

In the late 80's, I was a teenager, probably about this young brother's age when I wore flashy big gold dukey rope chains, that were made popular by rappers Run DMC, LL Cool J, and Eric B. and Rakim. The same way this brother wore pants several sizes too big way under his behind, was not much different than me in the 80's when I wore designer jeans so tight I had to do several deep knee bends to move in them. I was thinking that there was no way this fool or his boys could run in their over sized beltless pants if five-oh rolled up on them.

I thought back to the late 80's when me and my road dogs walked and ran up to cars with a pocket full of drugs while wearing shell toe Adidas without any shoe strings in them. The same Adidas that Run DMC had made popular in their 1980's videos. None of us back then could have run and got very far from five-oh in those shoes and tight jeans. As a matter of fact five-oh chased down and caught many young brothers as a result of their clothing and jewelry.

"I'm sayin' big homie, whachu' need?" The young man asked still displaying his drugs.

"I'm good, but you need to...." I stopped in mid sentence as I looked at the young brother and decided not to waste my words.

"I need to what?" He huffed.

"Nothing," I said blowing him off as I walked away toward the store to pay for gas.

I remember feeling sort of like I was looking into a mirror. The young man did not physically resemble me, and he did not act like I had at his age but he carried himself with a similar false confidence that I had. The young man was much like I was at his age. I was selfish and did not think or care how my criminal behavior affected my victims. I acted without fully thinking many times such as the young man had by approaching me, a stranger with drugs. I remember thinking that my generation had thus far, failed his. We did not teach this generation

how to avoid repeating the same mistakes we had made. While waiting in line inside the store I thought further.

By the time the attendant gave me my change, I had decided to go back outside and talk to all three young men about self-respect, dignity, loyalty, and self-determination. If anybody can get these young brothers straight, I could I thought as I exited the store.

The first thing I saw when I walked out was a Dekalb County patrol car. The three young men were nowhere in sight. I was so disappointed in myself for again failing the current generation.

I had spent over seven years in prison. Older self-taught brothers inspired and made me want to be better. They made me want to speak better and learn about history, especially history told from an African-center. I did not pay them or give them anything for their words of encouragement. Most of these inspirational black men only asked me to do one thing. That was to give up the game I was getting to others that would listen when I got back into the free world. Most of these heroes would never physically see the outside of a prison wall, so I felt that it was up to me to inspire others to want to move toward a liberation mindset of understanding self through cultural social movements of the past. But, when given the ideal opportunity to try and save some lost brothas, I had not.

I left prison with one main goal. That was to inspire Africana youth into wanting to learn about Africana culture. It was so important to me that Africana youth learn about African-centered Africana culture because I believed that through understanding the historical movements of ones indigenous culture, one can avoid and/or overcome current obstacles that their ancestors faced in the past.

Out a little over a year and I had managed to continue “failing” our young black men by waiting to try and inspire the three young men to be better just like I had failed the young men that sold dope for me before I was locked up. I could not do that again. I knew better because I understood better. I vowed then, that night standing outside that Citgo gas station looking at the wall that three young lost brothers had held up a few minutes ago to not fail another young man without trying to save them.

Since then, I have written and published thirteen books. All of my books are about redemption. Most of my stories are about our urban youth. I wrote every last book with the goal of reaching and helping to redeem our wayward urban youth through showing them a different reality out of the reality they currently perceived.

In order to make a stronger impact on our urban youth and learn more about my African-American culture, I made the decision to go to school and earn an African-American studies degree. Now I am in grad school, and I have decided to do an autoethnography for my thesis in hopes that academicians will promote Urban and African centered cultural texts to Africana youth.

4.2 Make it make sense

I was one of over two-thousand inmates being housed inside the Atlanta Federal penitentiary in 1993. I was serving the first year of my prison sentence.

After I was sentenced in September 1992, I had decided that I was going to treat prison as a stepping stone; sort of like a kid earning a college degree to get a good job. Prison was to be my university. Instead of graduating with a B.A. or a B.S. for business, marketing or some other field, my graduation was going to be my freedom after I mastered some white collar crime such as bank, check, or credit card fraud. In essence I was determined to earn a degree of knowledge

about criminal endeavors that involved making a lot of money and did not carry much time if caught and convicted so I could do a job instead of getting a job.

Once I was transferred from the county jail in early 1993 to the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary's holdover unit, I just knew my education was about to begin. When I strolled into my unit, it was like a family reunion for hustler's. Several brothas that I had ran, partied, and did crime with in the free world were serving time in the prisons holdover unit. We were all there to be sentenced or waiting to be sent to the prison destination where we would serve out our time. After a few days of telling lies and truths about our exploits in the streets I decided that my brotha hustlers could not help me with my white-collar education because they were all drug dealers and armed robbers. None of them were involved with white-collar crime.

A couple days later I stepped outside my circle of drug dealers, strong arm men, and flunky-wanna-bes. That is when I came upon this tall well spoken brotha standing up with one leg on the stainless steel cafeteria/card table speaking to a small classroom of captivated black men. The first thing that came to mind was why was this brotha so clean? I mean he had on a prison orange jumpsuit like the rest of us, but his was crisply ironed. His white socks and shower shoes even looked new. He was cleanly shaven and there was not a hair out of place on his head. It was not visitation day, so no one was coming to see him and he surely was not going anywhere. If he was going to court, the screws would have come and got him early this morning.

It was as if the brotha was the Second Coming, the way the cons were holding on to his every word. Now that's what I am talking about I thought. This commanding brotha made me reflect on one of the life lessons my father bestowed on me in my childhood.

He told me that in life you have puppets and masters. He had said that the master pulls the puppets strings, therefore controlling the actions of the puppet. My pops told me that he was

a master and a master controls his puppets actions by convincing them that the master is going to help them succeed. Throughout my young life I learned that convincing others to do my bidding required their apt attention.

This caramel colored middle-aged brotha had the attention of twelve or thirteen cons. Whatever he was saying I had to know so I could possibly use his words and wisdom to get others to do my future bidding.

I walked over and stood near the crowd that were circled around him. Before I knew it, I was nodding my head up and down like the other brothas around him. I had never heard a black man speak so eloquently, articulately, and passionately about Black people and the Black experience in America and on the African continent.

Later I introduced myself to the brotha and learned that his name was James Smith-Bey.

Smith-Bey, as the cons had called him, came into my cell later that evening while I was laying on my top bunk thinking.

"Black man, where's your mind at?" he asked.

I'm just reminiscin' about the streets, my bitches, them hoes, you know—shit a nigga don't think about until too late."

"Ho-hold on, li'l brother," he said, waving. "Ninety-nine percent of our brothers, including yours truly, came into the system with the same contagious disease that you have."

I rose up and put my legs over the side of the bed before patting my chest. "Bruh, I'm clean as the Board of Health. I always wraps my jimmy up."

"Nah, brutha. You don't overstand." Smith-Bey smiled, shaking his head.

"You mean understand."

"No, I mean overstand."

"Huh?" I replied.

"Our problem is that we are so busy trying to understand we never get it. We have to stop going under, taking shortcuts. We have to rise above and go over the stand to understand."

"Ooooo-kay," I said, somewhat confused.

"I, too came to the prison-plantation behind, with little hope of ever catching up."

"Catch up? Catch up to what?" I had asked.

"You see, Brother, for over four hundred years we've been plagued with the gravest sickness ever known to man. The European beat a virus in us that passes down through generations, and it's responsible for the condition that we find ourselves in today."

Oh lord, one of them Malcolm X-Farrakhan cats, I had thought. I didn't know much about Islam but I was always told that when I go to prison, to join the Muslims if I was scared. I was told that only thing the Muslims hated more than the white man was somebody bothering one of their Muslim brothers.

Smith-Bey continued, "The worst part is the European has the cure, but instead of healing us, he sets up institutes, schools and universities designed to spread the virus."

"What virus?" I asked.

"Perpetual ignorance, or better yet, mentacide."

"What kind of ignorance and menta who?" I asked.

"Perpetual ignorance and mentacide. Mentacide occurs when people willingly think and act out of someone else's interpretation of reality to their benefit, and that benefit is counterproductive to the people's survival."

"Come on Smith-Bey, speak English. Make it make sense," I said.

"Brothas and sistas in L.A. killing and hurting other people because they are wearing red

or blue. Did you hear me young King?" I didn't say they were fighting and killing the men in blue with badges that were unlawfully targeting our people. When a major wrong is committed against our people we even riot, trashing, destroying, and looting businesses and homes in our own community. For what? For what, young King?"

I shrugged my shoulders, not knowing how to answer or if I needed to answer.

"Mentacide is repeating acts that hurt and destroy the Black community and Black people. Mentacide is perpetuating acts of self-hate on self or community while thinking that you are helping your situation. We have been misguided, misinformed, and miseducated. We've been missed all around the board. The only thing we didn't miss were the boats that brought us to the Americas."

I nodded as his words rang true to my limited understanding. I had never thought about the Crips and Bloods warring over colors or Blacks rioting in our own hoods after the Rodney King verdict.

He continued, "I mean, just look at us. We walk around in circles demoralizing one another."

"Man, on the streets I stayed to myself. I ain't demoralize nobody," I said, not knowing what the word demoralize meant. I just knew it did not sound like a good thing and I did not want Smith-Bey to look at me in a negative light.

"Just listen," he said. "We playfully address one another not as gods, which is our true selves, but as the exact opposite."

Gods?

"We walk around talkin' 'bout 'What up, dog.' 'You my dog.' 'Cat-daddy.' 'My cat.' 'That's a cool cat.' Even worse, we call our sistahs bitches and foxes." He paused to ponder.

"Not kings, queens, not even human beings, animals. We've been so far removed from reality, we don't even know that we don't know who we are. Since we've been told for so long that we're not human, we unconsciously and subconsciously believe it, so we identify with furry, four-legged, wild and domesticated animals so much that we lovingly address each other as animals."

Deep.

"And that word nigga. We call each other nigga in casual conversation so much, the White man no longer needs to."

"Yep." I nodded.

"Carter G. Woodson said it best some fifty years ago. 'We've been going to the back door for so long, no longer do we have to be told. We automatically go, and if there is no back door, we will carve one out.'"

"Man, that's heavy," I said.

"We have been dehumanized and demoralized for so long, called nigga, and our women called whores, that is what and who we subconsciously think we are today. The seeds were planted, and they have grown and spread like weeds. And these weeds are strangling us, the black community."

I nodded while feeling shamed. The words Nigga and Bitch were probably the most used words in my vocabulary, I thought.

"What is a bitch but a female dog in heat? If our women are bitches and whores, what does that make her children? Dog. Big dog. My dog.

"You see, brotha Frazier, the White man has implanted the mentacide virus in us to keep the Black race subservient to him and to keep us from ever rising black, not back, but black to

our original state. We are the first, the original, no special recipe. No extra crunchy."

Sounds like KFC.

"We've had everything stolen from us. We don't know the truth, our history, our religion—hell, we don't even know our names. Take for instance, your name, your cellie's name."

"My name?" I asked.

"Yes, Elbert Frazier, your slave name. That is what it is. And take your cellmates name."

"Link?" I questioned.

"Yes, Lincoln Jackson. He was named after the same white man who tricked us into believing that he freed the slaves because he thought the institution of slavery was wrong, when in fact Abraham Lincoln said if there was any other way to preserve the Union, he would have never freed the slaves. Abe called us inferior, but Lincoln's parents gave him that name to wear as a badge of honor. Your name Elbert Frazier, does that sound like an African? Does Jackson sound like an African name?"

When I didn't answer, he continued.

"Yeah, Mr. Jack's slaves were called Jack's boys or Jack's sons. So at the time we were freed, Links forefathers kept the slave name alive by calling themselves Jackson, identifying themselves with the plantation they came from.

"Everything I'm saying is written in books, but you know the saying, the best way to keep a secret from a black man is to put it in a book."

"Huh?"

"We don't read. At least we don't read it if massa ain't gave it to us in a schoolbook or advertised it in the media or told us about it. In slavery, we weren't permitted to read, and still

today we have mental barriers that stop us from picking up a book. For so long we've been forced to do and think a certain way, that now it has become engraved in our subconscious to do these things, believe in these ways. We're trained to loathe one another as well, until whatever semblance of self-esteem and unity we possessed is no longer existent.”

I was awestruck. What was this brother doing in prison? This cat—I mean this brother had a mean game. Reverend Ike couldn't shine this brother's shoes. If I had game like that, ain't no way I'd be in no prison. I ain't never heard anyone break it down like that. Even though I didn't quite understand all that he was laying down, I still felt a surge of pride and hope unlike anything I had ever felt before.

"Smith Bey? That was – that was heavy, man. I mean, I felt that right here." I touched my chest.

Speaking to him made me think of Smitty, the principal of the Downtown Atlanta alternative high school I had completed. If I had listened to Smitty, I just wonder where I'd be now. If only Smitty had made it make sense to me when I was in school. Making it make sense meant teaching me an African-centered version of the resilience and self-determination that Africana ancestors exhibited in spite of seemingly insurmountable oppressive forces that fought to keep Africana people dependent and reliant on others.

4.3 What am I going to do with a book

“If my left cheek twitches, I need you to hit spades,” I told Link.

My cellie Link and I were finishing rehearsing our card signals when Smith-Bey tapped on the grey metal door to our cell.

“Hello, Smith-Bey,” Link said.

“Can't get any lower,” Smith-Bey replied.

“Huh?”

“You said hello,” he addressed Link.

“And?” I replied.

“Hell is metaphysically the lowest place you can be,” Smith-Bey said.

“On that note, I’m outta here,” Link said while pushing past Smith-Bey to leave the cell.

“Hurry up, Al. We next up to take these chumps commissary. This money on the spades table ain’t going to wait on us man, so hurry up.”

Although my birth name was Elbert Frazier, most knew me as Al Frazier.

“In a minute, big dog.” I shook my head. “I mean Link,” I replied, thinking of what Smith-Bey had said yesterday about the words we used to greet one another.

Smith-Bey smiled as he extended his arm out.

I looked up at the forty something year old black man. A look of bewilderment plastered across my face as Smith-Bey held a thin, red, black, and green book out toward me.

“What am I supposed to with that?” I asked.

The six-foot plus fair skinned brother didn’t respond. He just held the book out toward me.

“Nah, Smith-Bey,” I shook my head no, “Bruh, I will pay you to give up the game. Reading ain’t my thing. I ain’t never read a book in my life and I’m not trying to now.”

“Okay young King. Tell me about the Dogon people,” he asked.

“Who?”

“Tell me about Amilcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, Toussant L’Overture, Queen Ya Asantewaa, Queen Nzinga, Martin Delaney, Harriet Tubman, Ella Baker, Marcus Garvey. Can you tell me who any of these people are?”

I smiled. "I heard of Marcus Garvey and Harriet Tubman," I said with pride.

"Tell me about them?" He asked.

"Marcus Garvey was a black leader back in the day and Harriet Tubman freed some slaves during slavery."

"Where did you learn this?" He asked.

"I don't know." I shrugged. "School, I guess."

He pushed the book into my chest. "That is why you need to read. You do not know anything about anyone I named and you should."

"Just tell me. I got a good memory. I don't need to read no book."

"I can't speak to you like the words in books can, young King. The ancestors I mentioned are just a few that fought oppression and helped moved humanity forward, and these ancestors and others can show you who you are and they can tell you what you need to do to be free," he said.

"Free? I ain't no slave," I said.

"I know you aren't," Smith-Bey said. "But you are enslaved by your beliefs. Your beliefs were primarily given to you by a people and systems that never meant for you to be free. Young King, you are in this prison because you don't know the ancestors I mentioned and others. If you really want the game as you call it, then you have to read."

That evening in my cell I pulled out the book Smith-Bey gave me. Visions for Black Men. I wanted more than anything to be able to speak as eloquently and articulate myself like Smith-Bey, and if reading this little eighty-nine page book would help get me to my goal than I would. I opened the book and the first page I opened it too in the introduction I saw the word "quantification." I asked Link what it meant. He didn't know. I put the book down and spent

hours thinking of how I could trick Smith-Bey into just holding class with me instead of me reading books. I don't understand why writers use words in books that most people don't know. Quantification, who even says that in regular conversation? There were dictionaries in the prison dorm but I was not trying to look words up, especially words that I had never even heard anyone use. Besides, I really did not want to start reading in the first place.

By morning I came up with a plan to get the game from Smith-Bey. I would act like I was really trying to read. I would ask for other books in hopes that he would talk to me and put me up on the game I needed to be able to command an audience like he does.

When the electronic cell doors opened, I slipped on my shower shoes and walked down to Smith-Beys cell. "Smith-Bey, you up?" I asked while knocking on his cell door.

"Peace, King" he said as I entered.

His cell looked like a hospital room. I mean it was clean. It was 7:00 in the morning and Smith-Beys bed was neatly made. His orange jumpsuit didn't have a crease in it although he had been lying on top of it reading a book when I came in.

"Smith-Bey, please help me understand why you always so clean. I mean we locked up, this ain't visitation day," I said.

"No King, you are locked up. I'm free."

My eyebrows creased like Gary Coleman's in the 80's sit-com Different Strokes.

Smith-Bey sat up and held the book he was reading up. "This book takes place in Thailand. I've never been so once you leave I'm going."

"Huh?" I asked.

"Trust me you will overstand once you become a reader," he said, "So what's on that young brilliant mind of yours King?"

“Bruh, I was damn near up ‘til sunrise trying to comprehend what Naim Akbar was talking about in this. No disrespect, but I need something else to begin reading,” I handed him the book he gave me yesterday, “I just can’t get into this.”

He nodded as if he was looking right through my bullshit. But he responded as if he believed me. He got up from his bottom bunk, slipped on his shower shoes before taking a step to his locker.

I just told him I couldn’t get into Visions For Black men and he pulls out a book twice the size.

“Try this one.” He handed me the book.

“They Came before Columbus,” I said repeating the title of the book that I knew I was not going to even open. Besides, the authors name was Ivan Van Sertima. Not even twenty-four hours ago, Smith-Bey had told me all about slave names. Ivan Van Sertima sure did not sound African. At least Naim Akbar sounded African, I thought before taking the book.

My cat and mouse act with James Smith-Bey lasted about four months – four months in which I did not read more than a page of any of the seven or eight books that Smith-Bey gave me to read. My act ended with me being transferred to a federal prison in Manchester, Kentucky better known as Klanchester Federal Corrections Institution to the overwhelming majority of Black inmates housed there.

If it weren’t for the fifteen to twenty foot electrical fences with coiled barbed wire on top, Klanchester could have been easily been mistaken for a college campus. Unlike the pen in Atlanta, Klanchester was really a clean and impressive prison that was carved out of an abandoned coal mine. Once I and the other men were shuffled into the intake area, a white guard hawked and spit a gob of tobacco that splattered on a number of Black inmates.

Me and another inmate bombed the guard with a barrage of bitch made cracka mother fuckas, and other choice curse words. Out of nowhere batons, booted feet, and fists reigned down on the line of handcuffed and shackled men in the line I was in. Even the two white inmates in our line got beatdown. That was my first of a few ass whippings I took from C.O.'s. While in prison. The few brothas that did fight back disappeared. I never saw them again. The only reason I didn't fight back was because my reflexes were too slow as I was partially paralyzed from a car accident I had suffered in 1990.

Later that afternoon, bruised and beaten I was assigned to share a cell with Jihad Bell, a thirty-something year old black male that had served ten years and had eight to go for a non-violent crack cocaine offense. Jihad was one of the most humble and peaceful brothas that I had ever met. When he was not working in the chow hall, he spent his time praying, reading the Quran, the bible, Africana history, and exercising. I could not believe my luck. What were the chances of me being assigned to a cell with another conscious well-spoken knowledgeable brotha that I could get the game from.

After introducing myself, Jihad asked what happened to my face and neck.

I said something like, "Them bitch-ass, cowardly racist crackers C.O.'s is what happened to my face and neck." I kicked my locker. "I swear to God, I'm gon' do that cracka that spit that shit over us."

"Have a seat, Akhee," Jihad said extending an arm to his neatly made bottom bunk.

When I did, he sat in the metal desk chair that was mounted to the concrete gray cell wall and asked, "If you off that man, what will that prove?"

"That I ain't no punk!"

“So, help me understand Akhee, so you say taking this man’s life will prove that you are not a punk?”

I nodded in the affirmative.

“Is that really justice?” he asked.

“Hell, yeah. That’s why punk ass police like him keep doing that shit because we keep allowing them to live,” I said.

“I’m not trying to get in your personal business, Akhee, but did you get charged and convicted of any kind of drug conspiracy?”

“Yeah,” I said wondering what that had to do with anything.

“Do you think it’s justice when at least two people, most likely cons that were offered a time reduction, can get on the stand and testify to alleged crimes and their testimony is enough to convict and that conviction carries a minimum of ten years under federal sentencing guidelines?”

“Hell nah,” I shook my head, thinking about Augustus Turner. He was a brotha around my age that had come up to Klanchester on the bus with me. I read parts of his trial transcript back in Atlanta. He was a college student that was convicted of conspiracy to traffic drugs, although the feds knew very well that his brother was the dealer and that Augustus had nothing to do with drugs.

“Do you agree with Dr. King in that an injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere?”

“I guess,” I said while thinking about this statement I had never heard.

“Okay, so tell me Akhee, is it just to take a human life for spitting tobacco on you?”

“What?” I looked at Jihad. “So, it’s alright for crackas to do whatever they want to us?”

He shook his head. “No, its not alright. But the crime should fit the time, I think. Doing unto others what they have done unto you just makes you what that they are.”

“So, what are we supposed to do?” I asked.

“Fight!” he said. “Just like their version of education has empowered them and disempowered us, we have to fight them with truth, with education. The best way to crush ignorance is with education.”

After our conversation I still didn't gravitate toward reading, but I did try to inhale every word that left Jihad's lips. I didn't want to keep asking questions, because no matter what he said, that fighting with education stuff didn't make sense. I didn't even read and I knew that education couldn't and would not stop no bullets, boots, bats, or batons from going up side my head.

Days later Jihad invited me to a gathering of inmates that were learning about Islam. This service was called a Taleem service. I had never in my life seen black men so humble and so genuinely concerned about each others social, mental, and physical welfare.

Weeks later, I made my claim of Shahada, which is formally accepting that there is no other God than God (Allah) and his messenger that delivered Quaranic revelation was the prophet Muhammad. I began learning Arabic and how to pray in Arabic, the universal language of Islam. Much of what these Muslim brothers were feeding me I devoured. I understood why, but I still did not understand how they could risk their lives for me and other brothas that they just met.

Weeks later, while I was coming off the quarter mile dirt track that the inmates had built I gravitated over to some animated brothas talking about this boss hustler that went by the street name Iceberg Slim.

One brotha had a tattered and torn five by seven inch paperback book in his hand. The title on the book read, *Pimp: Story of My Life*.

“Peep game folk,” the young con said as he proceeded to read a passage from the book, “I disappointed her with my cold overlay. I could see her wilt as I said in an icy voice. ‘Listen square-ass Bitch, I have never had a whore I couldn’t do without. I celebrate, Bitch, when a whore leaves me it gives some worthy bitch a chance to take her place and be a star. You scurvy Bitch, if I shit in your face, you gotta love it and open your mouth wide.’”

“Oh shit. Iceberg is a straight up USDA certified Gee,” someone said.

I had to agree. That passage was straight up gangsta. For the first time in my life I wanted to read. This was the language of the streets articulated so well and poetic by a player who rose from the inner city streets to be an inner city Gee, I thought.

Another con took a book out of his back pocket. “Iceberg is ice cold, but Donald Goines was the truth,” he held up the orange and white novel, *White Man’s Justice, Black Man’s Grief* before continuing, “Playa broke down the pretrial bail bond system and how a black man ain’t go no win with all fifty-two stacked against him.”

That evening I got my hands on the Donald Goines’s classic, *Black Girl Lost*. As soon as I read the first two lines, I was hooked like a dopefiend strung out on crack. Goines’ not only used the colorful language I was accustomed to hearing and using in the streets, but he made the words sound poetic as he described cultural self-determination, known in Urban Black America as hustling. In essence this type of narrative I could relate to.

Over the next couple months I read all seven of Iceberg Slims novels, all sixteen of Donald Goines Novels, and Claude Brown’s, *Manchild in the Promiseland*. I didn’t go anywhere without a book in my hand. I had just gotten my hands on Alex Haley’s, *The Autobiography of*

Malcolm X, when I was taken out of my cell, shackled and cuffed before taken down to a large holding cell with other inmates. I had no idea what was going on and the C.O's wouldn't say. They just put me and the others on a prison bus.

It seemed like days had passed, although it was only a half a day before I was getting off the bus back in Atlanta at the Pen. The next day, I was at the Richard Russell Federal building where I was brought in to testify against Leon Meeks and another guy that I did not know. I had gone to high school with Leon and we ran in some of the same circles but I had never done crime with him. That did not matter to the ADA who coached me on what to say. I had long ago agreed to snitch or tell on someone else who was into the street life. But, when I got on that stand, I told the courts that I didn't know these guys and had never had dealings with them. They were exonerated.

I was then transferred to Paulding County Jail in Northern Atlanta. Paulding County was known as "snitch central" to inmates and cons. I couldn't figure out why the Feds had sent me there. Luckily, I was only there for a couple weeks before I was sent back to Klanchester. A light went on in my head as the bus pulled back up to Klanchester. The feds were trying to scare me into cooperating or they were trying to get me killed. Klanchester was a medium-high facility. That meant you had cons serving life and cons serving twelve, twenty, thirty years with not much to lose by killing a "snitch." In prison a snitch was the lowest form of life other than a child molester or a rapist.

Fortunately, the Muslim community at Klanchester let it be known that if anyone bothered me all hell would reign down on the perpetrators. But, still my story had to be checked out, which it did. When my property was given to me all of my books were missing. The only

people that had access to my property were the C.O.'s that worked in R&D, receiving and distribution.

Another inmate had been moved into my old cell. Klanchester was so overcrowded now that I had to sleep in a television room turned into an eight-man dorm. I passed up on two cells when my turn came because I wanted to be in the cell with someone like Jihad, or Smith-Bey.

I had been back at Klanchester for a couple weeks and I was reading some Joseph Nazel books when an older brother in his fifty's suddenly lost his cellie to cancer. I asked the brother's permission to request to be moved into his cell. It cost me fifty dollars of commissary, but the brother agreed. Everybody called him Old School because of his long Richard Roundtree Shaft sideburns and his Jackson Five afro. But, Old School was deep. Like Jihad, he read extensively on black culture and world religion. He wasn't Muslim or Christian. He didn't believe in religion, but he did believe in God and humanity.

4.4 From Maleness to Manhood

I was tossing and turning on my top bunk.

"Damn, all that noise you making up there I can't get no rest," my cellie, Old School said.

I was fiending hard. I had a monkey on my back that wouldn't quit. The whole prison had been on twenty-four hour lockdown for two days and I had not had anything to read in three, four days. Now, with time at a damn near stand still, I was struggling with not having any crack. Crack is what I called books.

"What in the hell is wrong with you Youngster?" Old School asked.

"I'm about to die from boredom. When they going to let us out of here. Man, I need something gangster to read, so I can get away from these four walls."

I heard my cellie sit up in bed. Moments later, I heard him rattling around in his locker. “I got something for you,” he said.

“Come on, Old School, your life-philosophying old ass ain’t got nothing gangsta up in that locker. Quit playing.”

“Youngster, I got something more gangster than anything you have ever read. I put my life and everything I love on that.”

“Well check that shit on in Old School,” I said.

He reached up and handed me a book. Once I grabbed it, I let out a long sigh. I was so disappointed that I didn’t have words to fully express it. “Man, I done read this. This ain’t gangsta. The author is an L seven teaching down at Florida State.”

“Youngblood, you did not read this.”

“Man, I’m telling you...”

“I know what you are telling me and it’s a lie. Matter of fact it’s a damn lie,” he paused as if he were waiting for a fight. When I didn’t say anything he continued in a softer tone.

“Youngblood,” he got off his bed, stood and turned looking me dead in the eyes. “I ain’t never lied to you and I’m not about to start. And I don’t put my word on the line for no man. Now, I said Dr. Akbar and his writing is more gangster than anything you have ever read. So I suggest you lay your big ass down and get to reading.”

I stared at the book, not believing that I was holding *Visions for Black Men*, the same book that Smith-Bey had tried to get me to read a year ago.

I folded my blanket and stuck it under my pillow as I laid back to see what Old School was talking about. Once I began reading the book the words were interesting. I was a reader now, so my mind had little trouble focusing on the story. I now wanted to focus. Reading urban fiction

had sparked a love I did not know I had. Reading urban fiction also sparked my cognitive ability to rationalize the actions of others in relation to my conceptualization of right and wrong – a conceptualization that began to change the more I reflected on some of the urban fiction characters behavior that had mirrored some of my previous behavior in life. I began to imagine how I would feel if I was one of my previous victims family members. I began to care about what happened to other fictional characters in urban fictional stories. I began to care about others that I did not even know as I continued to read Urban lit. I had not thought about any of this until I began reading Naim Akbars, *Visions for Black Men*.

“The full title for this section should be: ‘From Maleness to Manhood: The transformation of the African-American Consciousness, or For Colored Boys Who Have Considered Homicide When Manhood Was Enough (Akbar, 1991).’” This was the very first sentence in the first chapter. I must have read this sentence ten times thinking what these words meant to me. I wondered if I would have continued reading if I would have opened the book to the first chapter and had read this sentence back when Smith-Bey first tried to get me to read. I doubt it. A year ago, I probably would not have thought about what the words together in that sentence meant. I would not have cared. Now that I was a reader, I saw and understood the power and magic of words. For me, words put together that described a familiar reality and conflicts in that reality made me want to know what was going to happen. It made me care. I envisioned myself as the Colored boy Dr. Akbar wrote of. I considered homicide many times in my then twenty-four years on this Earth. I seriously considered homicide as recent as a year ago before I had read this sentence. Without a doubt I would have attempted to kill a man for spitting tobacco on me and some other inmates if I weren’t shackled and cuffed at the time. Later on when asked if I thought that taking a man’s life was just punishment for what he had done to me.

I said yes it was because in my world it was popular and manly to use violence against others that disrespected you. Spitting on someone was one of the lowest forms of disrespect in my reality. My reality was based on my experiences. If I would have been able to attack this man and worst case kill him, I would have killed him and myself by virtue of being convicted of murdering an officer; all because my vision of what manhood is was stepped on by a man that likely hates the idea of what he was taught that I am. Just being a man was not enough. I believed that the C.O. spitting on me was a challenge to my manhood. And my reality dictated that his death would restore my manhood. I did not consider the fact that my manhood was never literally called into question.

I did not even think about the suffering I would cause the C.O.'s family. Was I taking him from his children? How would they be affected growing up without a father? I did not even think about the likelihood of me going to prison for taking a man's life because he spat on me. I did not think about how my mother, and my sisters and brothers would be affected by my actions. All I had thought about was what society had trained me to think. This white bigot had spit on me. Taking his life would be retribution for his disrespect.

Now that I am conscious of who I am, I am almost embarrassed that I was willing to end a life and potentially end mine because some confused and misguided human being projected chewing tobacco and spit on the prison issue clothing that I was wearing. Now that I had read and reflected on similar scenarios such as this in Urban literature, I realized that killing this man would destroy my life and that was ludicrous.

Now that I have read African-centered texts on cultural consciousness, I have come to the conclusion that if I had killed this man, it would not have stopped other white C.O.'s from perpetuating acts of racism on others and me. Now, having read books centered on African

cultural consciousness I realized that I did not hate that racist C.O. That spit on us. I did not know him. I came to the realization that I hated his actions. The mentality that would make a man spit on another because of the color of his skin is what I had wanted so desperately to kill. Now, I realize that to kill the actions the thought rational that makes someone want to spit on another human must be destroyed.

The second sentence in the first chapter was just as thought provoking as the first. It read, "We presume as a given that America has been, still is, and very probably will be for a long time to come, a striving, sturdy, racist society (Akbar, 1991).

Today, over twenty years since I read that second sentence, it means even more to me than it did then. Then, thanks to Donald Goines's realistic characterization of how America's pre-trial and court system affects Black men in his Urban novel *White Man's Justice Black Mans Grief*, I began to reflect on my own similar Black experiences and other Black males' experiences that were similar to the ones that Goines characters faced and dealt with in his novel that had to deal with Americas pre-trial and court system. As a result of Goines's novel, I began to care about others through our shared similar experiences of suffering at the hands of what I view as a racist justice system that disproportionately affects Black males negatively. I know Goines' novel was fiction but the stories were real because Goines' had a similar view of the same reality I understood at the time. Reflecting and realizing the systemic racism that Goines wrote about in the pre-trial and court system made me want to tell others in hopes that they will avoid the pitfalls that I as a Black man and so many others have befallen as a result of being an uneducated, economically poor Black man in the U.S.

The second sentence made me think of the '80's Federal Crack Law when The books author, referred to America as the sturdy, thriving, racist society that people have just accepted as

a given. I'm referring to the "Crack law" that had and still has a disproportionate amount of Black men serving long minimum mandatory federal prison sentences at a 100 to 1 disparity to cocaine related offenses.

"We presume as a given that America has been, still is, and very probably will be for a longtime to come, a striving, sturdy racist society, (Akbar, 1991)," Today, when I reflect on this second sentence of the first chapter of Akbars' book *Visions for Black Men*, I think about the striving racist American society that allows its Black males – children and adults to be wrongfully killed by law enforcement with no recompense.

Akbars' book *Visions for Black Men* is an African-centered critique of Black manhood that inspired self-reflection, self-valuation, and self-understanding like nothing I'd ever experienced. While reading this book, for the first time in my life I truly began to feel proud about being a Black man. While reading this book, for the first time I began to want look at who I was in reference to who all black people and all humans are in relation to each other. The way that Dr. Akbar analyzed the Black male psyche, behavior and actions was the first scientific measuring stick for Black male personal development that I wanted to embrace as my guide to becoming a man.

While reading this book I began to critically question my perceptions, beliefs, and the way I analyzed information because Naim Akbar presented ideas of what Black manhood is from a perspective that I saw myself in all aspects of life and history in. It was a perspective that totally made sense to me. His perspective of Black manhood made so much sense that when I finished the book and was able to gather myself I told my cellie that I was disappointed in myself. I told him that I could not believe that I had never looked at the world and black people in ways that Dr. Akbar characterized us as.

Today, I understand this way as looking at Blackness from an African-center. I realize now that I had always looked at and defined myself by what White America stereotyped black men in the media and the schools as. That is as slaves to what greater white American society portrays us as in the media and the public schools and institutions of America. For instance when I tuned into news coverage involving poor or middle class Black men in America it was mostly negative. So, for me I easily identified with negative behavior because it was the predominant behavior I saw. In schools the most glaring thing I was taught about Black history is that my ancestors were victims and that my salvation, the salvation for all Blacks was only possible through accepting the ways and culture of the same people and systems that enslaved my ancestors.

After reading the last page, I realized that age did not determine whether I was a man. I realized that I was a twenty-four year old boy in a grown man's body. I was still a child because I had always thought that the world owed me something. I had rarely thought of others before I thought of myself. Instead of taking personal responsibility for most of my actions, I made excuses as to why I perpetuated actions that caused death and decline in my community.

For example, after I was sentenced my fiancé at the time asked me if I really thought that God would bless someone like me. I immediately took offense and didn't allow her to finish. I said something like, "Woman you do not even have a clue how many brothas I gave jobs to. Brothas who weren't going to school, brothas who couldn't get a job in the white mans world because of their education or criminal background. Now, these brothas were getting money to take care of their families. Besides, I revolutionized the drug game. Before I came on the scene young studs were selling dime bags on street corners, braving inclement weather, drive bys, random harassment by the poh-poh and all types of nutball shit that came their way for as much

as twenty dollars of every hundred dollars of crack sold. I put my crew up in Motel 6's, Travelodges, and other motels in hoods all over the A, and while the most a runner trapping dope was paid twenty of a hundred, I paid thirty off a hundred. Everybody ate in my crew and when one of my dudes or one of they runners got jacked I put out five and ten thousand dollar bounties out on the robbers. Everybody that was down with my program was well fed and they knew that if some drama or gunplay went down against them that I was going to rein hell down on the perpetrators. Everybody know Al "Motha Fuckin'" Frazier don't play the radio. I handle mines like a man. Furthermore, I didn't put any cut on my coke when I sold it raw or cooked. Desperado dope dealers and fiends were messing folks up cutting coke with D-con, goody powder, soap, and baby laxatives. My coke was straight drop and my guys were getting paid like Citibank."

By the time I finished my tirade, my fiancé didn't say anything. I didn't realize how idiotic my reasoning was until years later in prison when I was reading *Visions for Black Men*. I did not realize that I had such a low sense of self until I reflected on how I often talked about myself in the third person when trying to convince myself and others that I was a strong black man, when in essence I was a misguided, weak child.

So, after finishing the book I said aloud, "I can't believe that I never questioned what seems so obvious. So much of what Dr. Akbar broke down was common sense."

"Common sense ain't so common youngster," Old School said. "If it were, Black folks wouldn't be dying and trying to conform to American systems that don't have our interest at heart. If common sense were common we wouldn't be in the mental condition and physical position that we as a people are in."

"That's real talk Old School."

“Hell, I know it is youngster. But you don’t know how real it is yet?”

“Well, make it make sense then, Old School.”

“In 1901, Black America made up one-tenth of one percent of the nations wealth. One-tenth of one percent! How far you think we moved from then until now Youngster?”

“I don’t have a clue.”

“Two years ago in 1992, Black folk in America made up one-tenth of one percent of the nations wealth. And, in 1901, we had more black owned banks then we do now. We got Oprah, Cosby, both MJ’s and we haven’t moved one-tenth of a percentage point.”

I could not see how that could be, but I knew Old School wouldn’t have said it if he hadn’t done his own research into wealth distribution. I carried on about how good the book was and how Dr. Akbar inspired me to think in ways and about dynamics that I had never even thought of to think about in reference to Black folks and Black men.

I carried on for a while about my past behavior and Black’s self-destructive behavioral patterns in Urban America before he interrupted me.

“Do you see how Dr. Akbar is more gangsta than any of the real and fictional characters you’ve read about thus far?”

“Nah, Old School, but I’m good. You got me. You tricked me into reading it, but I ain’t mad.”

“Hold on Youngster. First, I ain’t tricked you into doing shit.”

“But you said...”

“I know what the hell I said, they were my words Youngster. Now, I done let you go on for God knows how long about your new found Blackness. I’m glad you are beginning to find yourself, but you gotta take a breath and allow for more information to come into that hatrack of

yours. As long as you running your mouth you can't receive further understanding." He paused, "Are you listening Youngster?"

"I'm all ears."

"I need you to be all ears, mind, and soul. Now, I did not trick you, lets get that straight. Let me ask you something? That pimp, Iceberg Slim, you so high on. You think he was gangsta right?"

I didn't say anything because I didn't know how to answer that.

"Convincing women to sell pussy and giving most of their money from flatbacking to a man makes him gangsta? Exploiting women, black women that have children and mothers like you have youngster is your definition of a Gee? Let me ask you this Youngster. At one time you was in a wheelchair, right?"

"Yeah," I answered.

"I bet you was selling dope from your wheelchair."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"When you was in that chair, if somebody rolled down on you foul, I bet you could of and probably would have put a bullet in them. Am I right?"

"No doubt."

"So, any man with a good talk game can convince women with a low sense of self to sell they bodies and bring their money back to them. That makes them gangsta in your book right?"

Before I answered, he continued, "Any fool with a gun and strength enough to press the trigger when anotha fool comes and tries to take something from them are gangsta in your book? Killing one fool and condemning the other to prison or death is lauded as being gangsta. Hmph. You Youngsters got life twisted. Let me tell you what gangsta is Youngster. Gangsta is going to

school getting an education, while spending years studying people and systems that impede Black mobility. Gangsta is fighting against a system of oppression so ingrained in the fabric of America's institutions that most Black folks don't even see how they are being controlled and enslaved by these systems. Gangsta is fighting against a system that was designed to destroy you before you were even a twinkle in your daddy's eye. Gangsta is spending your life risking your life to try and educate Black folks about their history and culture with the aims to free them from being dependent on oppressive systems and people for their livelihood and understanding. At any moment any number of the American governments alphabet agencies can have Dr. Akbar assassinated with little effort and he knows this, but like so many other Black gangstas of the past, the liberation of Black people is more important than his individual physical existence. Brotha Malcolm X is another black gangsta that once said, 'If you are not ready to die for freedom then put that word out of your vocabulary.' Youngster, Malcolm died a man – a man that did not allow anything or anyone to deter him from fighting for freedom for his children, his wife, him self, and his people.”

Right then and there, at that moment I knew without a doubt that I was going to die fighting for Social justice for Black people.

5 CHAPTER V BLACK JESUS

5.1 Entertainment vs. education

“Ah man,” the inmate waved, “miss me with that cuz. You done read a book, now you wanna be Black Jesus. Cuz, be real with yourself. That Black stuff is just the way you passing time cuz. When you get out you gon' be right back out there slangin' dope or hope, either way you still gon' be killin' your people cause hope ain't nothing but dope fool.”

The year was 1995. I had been reading and studying African-centered books on culture and urban literature for over a year and like any great revelation, I wanted everyone to read what I had read. I wanted every black man and woman in America to feel connected to each other through the African-American shared experiences as I did. I wanted every African-American to feel the newfound love that I felt for Black people and the Black experience from Africa to the Americas like I had come to feel from reading about the resistance to enslavement and resilience that Black people have historically shown in spite of their enslavement. I thought that if the brothers inside prison would read what I was and had read; I just knew they would understand the ignorance of self that fuels acts of self hate such as wanting to steal from others and wanting to hurt others. I thought that learning African history from an African-centered perspective would fuel self-determination, self-discipline, and a self-love that would inspire them to care and perpetuate acts of love to their fellow man. It just felt so good to love my Black self and others who looked like me that I had not even met. But inspiring Black males to want to read for their liberation was much more difficult than I had thought.

It was early February 1995. A few cons were gathered in the weight lifting area discussing the upcoming October vote to reduce the 100 to 1 crack to cocaine sentencing disparity. Inmates were planning for their immediate release from prison after their sentences were reduced after the vote. Most had no doubt that the law was about to be changed. I on the other hand was skeptical.

Janet Reno had been confirmed as the first woman Attorney General a couple years ago and it was rumored that she was sympathetic to crack-cocaine offenders. She had been a U.S. Attorney down in Miami and rumors spread of how she would go against the federal sentencing guidelines and recommend lesser sentences for crack cocaine offenses.

I had just read Jawanza Kunjufus, *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy our Black Boys* series and as usual I was trying to get others to understand this conspiracy to destroy Black boys that I had read about. As usual there was always at least one inmate trying to shoot down the knowledge that I was trying to convey. Kunjufu labeled brothers like this one as passive conspirators. I called them slaves.

I was sitting next to the twenty year old gang member. I placed the dominoes in my hand face down on the cafeteria table and looked the young con in the eye before I spoke. "If you don't believe there's a conspiracy to destroy us, then explain how white folks that are ten percent of the worlds population have over seventy percent of the worlds wealth. Explain why Black folks in this country are said to be three fifths of a property in the constitution and we earn three-fifths of what white folks earn.

He interrupted, "How you know that what you reading..."

"Hold on bruh, I ain't finished," I interrupted him. "Tell me why did white folks feel the need to physically castrate black males before and during the Jim Crow Era. Explain why it was all African American males chosen for the "Tuskegee Experiment." Explain why the government used Cointelpro to infiltrate Black organizations like the Black Panthers, the Nation of Islam, and civil rights organizations during the 50's, 60's and 70's to create internal conflict with the goal of preventing a black messianic leader of rising to power.

The con stood up from the table while raising his voice. "Niggas always hollering conspiracy when they get hemmed up by the poh-poh. Only conspiracy I see cuz, is a bunch of niggas conspiring to blame white folks for they fuck ups. Niggas don't ever man up to they shit."

"Man up," I said standing up. Looking him in the eye and raising my voice I said, "If there ain't no conspiracy to destroy us then explain why African-American males who make up a

mere six percent of the American population represent thirty-five percent of special education children and fifty percent of America's prison inmate population.

“I ain't trying to explain none of that shit, cuz. Hell, how you know it's true. Just because a black man wrote it don't make it fact. I tell you this, cuz. I, me,” he patted his chest, “I'm in here because I slipped. I trusted another black man. Matter of fact I trusted several black men and they testified against me. So, ain't no white man put me in here. It was black men just like you and me cuz. When I was in the Pen in Atlanta, The C.O.'s, Black men treated me worse than these redneck hillbilly cracka cartoon cops here in Klanchester,” he waved a hand in front of my face before continuing, “So miss me with that Black Jesus-Farrakhan-mumbo jumbo shit.”

“Uncle Tom, ignorant motha fuckas like you should have never been born.” That's all I got out before the inmate threw a punch. A fight ensued and several of us ended up in solitary confinement.

Just like that, the message of love I was trying to send was thwarted by my temper. I don't think I was as upset at the brotha' I had fought as I was at myself. I was really angry because I couldn't find the words to use right then to inspire him and the others to want to go and read about themselves and their ancestor's historical experiences.

Over the next few months while serving time in twenty-three hour a day solitary confinement, I read Alex Haley's masterpiece, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Nathan McCall's semi-autobiography *Make Me Wanna Holler*, as well as titles by Dr. Yosef Ben Jochannon, Dr. John Henrik Clarke, and George James. But, it was El Hajj Malik Shabazz's life story that had the biggest impact on me. Reading about Malcolm and Nathan McCall was like viewing my life through their eyes. Like Malcolm, reading African-centered literature transformed me into a caring conscious man. Before finishing El Hajj Malik's narrative, I knew

without a doubt that I was going to use his life as a blueprint to live the rest of mine. El Hajj Malik Shabazz was and is one of the most courageous and staunchly loyal men that I have ever known. I say known because after reading his life story, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, I felt like I was being transformed by God in a similar way that he had.

I wasn't a foster child, nor was I train porter, but I thought and acted like Malcolm Little did as a boy and I was thinking and acting like Malcolm X once he became a man. Just as he had felt the need and had taken personal responsibility for uplifting Black consciousness in America, I too felt that same need.

When I got to a section in the book where Malcolm told his eighth grade teacher that he wanted to be a lawyer and the teacher told him that was unrealistic because he was Black; I thought about lessons in Kunjufu's, *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys*, particularly the second chapter entitled "The Fourth Grade failure Syndrome". I reflected on the author assertion that upon entering school Black males generally express positive feelings about themselves in the school situation and by the second grade black males express "negative imagery" of the teacher and the school environment. By the fifth grade the overall feelings expressed are that of cynicism. By seventh and eight grades the black male sees the classroom as competitive, and individualistic.

Kunjufu and Haley's work provoked me to reflect on aspects of my own school upbringing. I was in the fourth grade when I knew that I hated school. The fourth grade was also when I began to be a regular problem in the classroom.

My fourth grade teacher, Ms. Jablonski seemed to call my mother and send me to the office for disciplinary actions almost every week. I remembered being extremely bored and inattentive in Ms. Jablonski's fourth grade class. I also remember always being the first to finish

the multiple choice, true false, or math problem classwork. This is when I would daydream about or try and impress Anna Wolfe, the little brown haired white girl that always laughed at my antics. She was my first, grade school crush.

As a kid I wanted to be like Richard Roundtree's character John Shaft and I often practiced lines that Billy Dee Williams used in the movie Mahogany. I was the most dramatic student in class. So, when I got the opportunity to audition for a part in our fourth grade Peter Pan play, I was so excited that I memorized all of Peter Pan's lines in two days. I just knew I was going to turn Peter Pan into a John Shaft cool, Billy Dee Williams smooth savior. When it was my turn to audition, Ms. Jablonski gave me two lines from Lost Boy 1 to read. I was John Shaft, not some Lost Boy that didn't even have a name. When I told her that I already knew Peter Pan's lines, she told me that I wasn't right for Peter Pan. From that point on I hated her, the class, and the Garden City Elementary school that I attended.

It was also in Ms. Jablonski's fourth grade class where I was introduced to fiction. The book was Freckle Juice, by Judy Blume. Upon looking at the stringy, red-haired, freckle faced white kid that adorned the cover, first thing came to my mind was that "Black kids don't have freckles." Ms. Jablonski sent me to the office because I thought out loud. I can't tell you what that book was about because I made it a point not to even try and read it after Ms. Jablonski embarrassed me by sending me to the principal's office.

Ms. Jablonski liked to call on me to read because I didn't struggle with words like other kids. When she called on me to read passages from Freckle Juice, I purposely struggled with words or made up an excuse why I couldn't read. Back then I think I probably thought I was protesting at not being able to read for the part of Peter Pan.

I don't know at what point I actually came to hate school. What I do know is that I hated the fourth grade and every grade afterward. However, in 1995 almost twenty-years after Ms. Jablonski's fourth grade class I grew to love reading like I loved breathing. In retrospect I don't think I hated school. I hated the instruction.

Now, in 2016, I have discovered that the reason I loved reading so much is because I can see myself or I can envision familiar conflicts in the narratives. Now, it just feels so natural for me to read for pleasure, for understanding or just to escape my current reality.

In April, A few months after being locked down twenty-three hours a day in solitary confinement for fighting, I was transferred to the federal prison in Terre Haute, Indiana. The inmates called the penitentiary in Terre Haute gladiator school because of the exorbitant inmate on inmate, and C.O. on inmate violence. I became close with a young scholar on Black studies named Saladeen. Saladeen was this soft spoken very humble brother that always had a book in his hand. Saladeen taught me that if I clearly enunciate my words as I speak with feeling that people will not only listen, they will ensure that the atmosphere around me is conducive to hearing my passionately whispered thoughts. Unfortunately, I did not understand what he was trying to teach me until years later.

I never saw anyone ridicule him when he spoke on Africana culture, like I had been back at Manchester FCI. His voice did not carry so you really had to listen close to hear the soft-spoken, humble brother. Needless to say, it was dead quiet when he held court. Me, on the other hand, I drew controversy whenever I held court.

Everything changed for me one Summer, Thursday night. We were less than four months away from the historic Million Man March. We were less than five months away from the

November crack-cocaine law vote. Janet Reno, the so thought savior for crack-cocaine offenders in the federal system was due to address the nation in regards to the crack-cocaine law.

At the prison in Terre Haute, there were four television rooms that surrounded the indoor gym. I was not worried about getting a seat, because earlier in the day I had gotten my cellie, Big Stan to place my mug in a chair to reserve a seat in one of the television rooms. I just prayed that there wouldn't be any fights tonight over seats. I just knew the entire prison inmate population would be inside or standing outside the barred television rooms watching and listening to Janet Reno.

I don't remember what I had been doing, but I was about five minutes late as I rushed to the television room where Big Stan had saved me a seat. As I came into the gym, just as I thought, brothers were standing outside two of the television rooms looking through the barred window. They were laughing.

I wondered what the Attorney General had said that was so funny. When I walked into the television room I asked a brotha that was sitting next to my seat, what happened to the State of the Union Address?

"It's on in the back left," he pointed referring to the television room in back of the gym.

I got up and gave my seat away. I couldn't believe that all these brothas were watching "Martin" instead of the State of the Union Address. I hurriedly went to the television room next door. It was also standing room only. They were also watching the Martin Lawrence show.

I was so disappointed; I couldn't even express how I felt in words. Minutes later I went to the third television room. It was full but only one person was standing. The inmates were eating snacks while watching "Martin". I went to the fourth television room. As I approached I didn't hear any laughing. Once I got there I saw why. Floyd Mayweather Sr. an old white guy, and one

of Mr. Mayweather's buddies were the only ones tuned in to the State of the Union Address. I did not even walk in. Instead I walked to the middle circle of the basketball gym. I looked around at all four television rooms.

So many emotions ran through my body. I was so disappointed. I was convicted for a few kilos of powder cocaine, so I didn't have anything personally coming when and if the crack law changed, but I wanted so much for justice for the others that I couldn't even fathom the idea of watching the sitcom "Martin" when Janet Reno was supposed to address the crack to cocaine sentencing disparity. I couldn't even believe The Martin Lawrence show was being televised during the State of the Union Address. Entertainment was obviously more important than learning about their fate. As soon as that thought entered my mind, the answer began dropping into my consciousness.

I held my hands out in front of me before asking, "God, who am I?" The next thing that came to mind was the word "transformation." I then immediately thought back to the book, *Visions for Black Men*. "Transformation from boy to man," I said aloud while still standing in the middle of the basketball court thinking of the transformation section at the beginning of the book. Another line from the book popped into my head. "The thing that moves us from male to boy is discipline that frees the boy from being the slave of his male (Akbar, 1991, p. 12)."

I turned my attention to a couple young black males laughing while standing outside the window of one of the television rooms. I wanted to laugh too. The Martin Lawrence show was my favorite show, but it would come on next week. The State of the Union Address could potentially affect my life by affecting the lives of my Black brothas and sistas in ways that the show "Martin," will not, I thought.

The transformation section popped back into my mind. A line from this section read, "The boy takes his budding rationality and uses it to expand his consciousness." Before I started reading I only thought about what I had been taught or trained to think. I had never had enough information about Black history to question my beliefs and ideas. Before reading Urban and African-centered literature I had never thought to question the forces responsible for those beliefs and ideas about who I believed that I was.

But now that I was reading; now that I was conscious I saw an America that was aiming to lock Black boys up so they would never become the men that Dr. Akbar envisioned in his book *Visions for Black Men*. Now that I was reading African-Centered and Urban literature, I understood the origins of my and so many other Urban black males behavior that led us to the prison gates. These words in W.E.B. DuBois' book *Souls of Black Folk*, "Lock them up in the public school system where they are not taught how to navigate a world that yields Black males any true self-conscious – a world where Black males look at themselves through the eyes of a system that looks at them with 'amused contempt and pity.'" Lock them up so they never would become the men that Jawanza Kunjufu imagined in *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys*. Lock them up in prison so they would never become the Black men that Dr. Wilson spoke of in his book, *Black on Black Crime*.

"Consciousness," I said aloud while standing in that circle in the middle of the gym. I remembered that consciousness is awareness and awareness is the ability to see accurately what is. All these thoughts were going through my mind because I was now conscious. Next I recalled something else I had read that helped me to understand why I was thinking these thoughts. Being able to see accurately means that one must be properly oriented in space, time, and person, which

means that the prerequisite for consciousness is to have some accurate image of one's self and the world in which one finds himself.

I looked up at the ceiling and thought that God had put me here in this space, this prison at this time so I could accurately see and understand the problem – the same problem that Dubois spoke of almost a century ago when he asked the question of Black America, “How does it feel to be a problem.”

I remember thinking that it was depressing and lonely to be a problem. For maybe the first time in my life I wanted to, and was trying so hard to do something totally unselfish. I wanted to free these brothas from the self-hate that would cause them to want to watch “The Martin Lawrence Show” instead of listening to the Attorney General of the United States report on issues concerning their freedom. I wanted to free these brothas from a type of ignorance that caused them to blindly follow dictates set forth by people and systems that perpetuated ideas of their own demise. I was trying so hard to get them to accurately see their reality through my re-interpretation of the words that I was reading in Urban and African-centered literature.

Suddenly all the information I had acquired over the year and a half that I had been reading came together and I knew without a doubt how to get the brothas to see themselves through the eyes of history.

Most all my life I had used my words and my actions to manipulate people to do my bidding and I had been very successful until I went to prison as the “boy”, Dr. Akbar refers to in *Visions for Black men*. Although physically an adult, I remained a boy mentally while in prison until I learned enough about my ancestors to develop a greater understanding of why I and other Black people were at the mental, physical, and spiritual stage of existence that we are as a collective people. Understanding the social and historic movements of my ancestors elicited a

newfound respect for myself and other blacks. I had a newfound respect because I felt connected to others through black ancestors who fought and died resisting oppression in hopes that future generations would not have to.

Standing in that circle I came to the conclusion that it was good game that eventually made me want to read. Once I began reading about others who looked like me and shared my culture and conflicts arising from being a black male I did not want to stop because these stories took me back on a self-reflective journey where I evaluated who and how I loved and hurt others.

Once I started reading African-centered history and culture I realized that the reality that I thought was, was not. It was like coming to the realization that before becoming conscious I had been living inside a matrix created for my own self-destruction. – a self destruction that my actions helped to perpetuate.

Instead of going into any of the television rooms I went back to my cell. I had to write. My penmanship was the worst. I hated writing with a passion, but I hated not being able to get the brothas to see themselves through the eyes of African-centered narratives even more.

I felt that if I could inspire the brothas to read an African-centered narrative on how and why Martin Delany stood up against the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, they would understand Nelson Mandela's words, "Education is the best way to defeat your enemies."

5.2 Ain't that a "bitch"

I felt that if more brothas read African-centered narratives about Africana women such as Queen Nanny, the West-African woman who escaped from slavery in 17th century Jamaica and led attacks on the British, freeing almost 1,000 Africans; then more Black males would be cognizant of how disrespectful and oppressive they were to Black women.

While sitting on the metal desk chair in my cell with pencil in hand, I further began to reflect on my recent past. During adolescence, puberty, and as a young adult I remember referring to Black women as bitches and whores more often than I referred to them as girls, ladies, and women.

I think I used the word “bitch” more than I used any other word. I used the word “bitch” to describe women I liked. I used to describe women I despised. I used the word to describe difficult times, situations and conflicts. I used the word “bitch” as a verb and a noun. I used it as a verbal exclamation mark. I even referred to life as a “bitch” until I began reading and reflecting on Urban and African-centered literature.

I had no particular reasoning behind my use of the word as a noun, verb, or as a verbal exclamation mark. Like tradition, using the word “bitch” became a habit. It’s a word I heard every day, used almost every way.

Before looking at African culture through African-centered texts, I had never questioned whether my use of the word “bitch” was damaging to the psyche of Black women. Before reading African-centered and Urban literature I never questioned whether my use of the word would cause women to feel like they were less than human. I did not realize that words had so much power.

One occasion before I began reading, a sista asked me why I referred to women as “Dogs in heat.”

“I don’t know. It’s just a word,” I said. “Sometimes I call a woman a “bitch” because she did something to me or someone else that I considered foul. Sometimes I use the word “bitch” to describe a woman who I look up to.”

After becoming a critical reader of urban and African-centered literature I thought back on the explanation, I gave for using the word “bitch”. In retrospect I realize that my reasoning for using the word “bitch” to describe Black women was a form of self-hate that I was manifesting.

I descend from a Black woman. Black women died fighting for a world where future generations of Black people would not be mentally, physically, and spiritually raped without grave repercussions. Before reading I did not question my comparing a “female dog in heat” to a Black woman I looked up to while using that same word to hurt her. Before reflecting on my actions and beliefs as I read Urban fiction and before I read about the resiliency, strength, self-determination and unconditional love that Africana women have displayed throughout human history I did not think when it came to the feelings of Black women. I had been taught that black women were these pretty shiny things that once conquered they would serve me. Through society’s treatment of women I had been socialized to believe that it was my role as a man to use Black women the way I wanted as long as I cared and took care of them.

Once I began reflecting on my actions and beliefs as I read Urban fiction, I would feel a wave of regret when I would read about a black woman’s feelings and actions as a result of being used by a man just for sex. I would feel terrible, as I would think about how the women I had used must have felt. I felt shame as I would think about the sacrifices that Ida B. Wells, Septima Clark, Ella Baker and other Black women made for freedom for born and unborn Black men and women.

With “True education” as critical pedagogy was once referred to, I can not refer to another Black woman as a “bitch” without believing that I am the son of a “bitch.” Now that I have become a reader of African-centered literature, I am compelled to critically analyze my beliefs and actions through my own cultural lens.

Reading African-centered literature I came to understand that the patriarchal domination of women has gone on for thousands of years. From the Holy Bible to the modern day Urban fiction bestseller, men and women have oppressed women's movements and ideas when they conflicted with patriarchal domination. It was also through reading African-centered literature while reflecting on shared values I had with urban Black characters in urban literature that I came to the understanding that patriarchal domination is oppression and the oppression of anyone is the oppression of everyone in that group.

Maybe a few days or a week before I came up with the idea to write short stories, me and some cons were sitting at a table in the recreation room playing dominoes.

The con next to me slammed down the double five domino, "Twenty century fox, big legged ho's and cocaine rocks," he said talking trash while counting twenty points.

"When a bum gets lucky a player don't stand a chance," I responded.

"Al you sweet as bear meat. Hell, you sweeter than my funky bitch back home holding me down while I school you fools."

"I thought your wife was taking care of you," I said.

"She is fool, what bitch you think I'm talkin' about?"

"You refer to your wife, the mother of your children as a bitch?" I asked.

"Nah, nigga, I refer to her as "my bitch," and please believe I love that funky bitches' dirty draws," he said with love and admiration.

A brotha across the table interceded, "Enjoy that shit while it last my nigga. My bitch was a thoroughbred top notch stallion for the first two years I was down. Now, five years into my bid, the tramp bitch don't visit, she don't hardly write and I hear she got another hard leg up in my bed. You stay in hear long enough, the bitch gon' go bad like old milk."

Every “bitch” that came out of these brotha’s mouths made me cringe inside. I reflected on how not long ago when I had casually referred to women as bitches in normal conversation without thinking anything of my words.

I remember not saying anything further about the fellas use of the word “bitch,” because I could not think of how to articulate an argument creative enough to make them understand that using this word abundantly to describe a woman who shares your culture, and your historical struggle for freedom and self-definition was another form of self-hate that aids in the destruction of all Africana people. It was times like these that I should have gone back to my cell and reflected on the urban narratives that I had read that looked at Black women like animals.

5.3 Creating a demand for African-centered knowledge

So many times after speaking to some brothas about what I was reading, I had gone back to my cell where I would think of all these great things to say to the questions I couldn’t answer in a way where they would understand the message in the answer. Now, by writing I would not only be able to clearly articulate my thoughts, but I would answer using relative metaphorical stories of conflict, struggle, and redemption that they could see themselves in the middle of.

The same way I’d tricked and tried others most of my life, I would still do. But, this time I would trick them into wanting to learn. The public school system had taught me that in order to be a success in American society that you had to understand supply and demand. In the hood there was a demand for drugs, guns, car parts, food, and other things that I supplied to my community. The sitcom “Martin” illustrated the importance of entertainment to the urban Black male psyche.

Over the next four years in prison I wrote essays that became so popular that cons would make copies and send them home and to co-defendants and friends locked up in other

prisons. Now that I was writing, I often had brothas coming around me to command an audience to discuss one of my essays or an unrelated event that they had on their mind. One of the biggest compliments that I regularly got was when Black men said to me, “I never thought about it that way.” To me that meant they were thinking. Black men thinking made me smile as I thought about Black liberation and an egalitarian American society.

5.4 Jihad Shaheed to Uhuru

As my four and five page short story essays became popular among the inmate population I drew the ire of the prison administration. George Jackson had taught me in his book *Blood in My Eye*, that one of the most dangerous things to a system of oppression is an educated revolutionary black man. The more inmates that read and wanted to read my essays and listened to what I had to say drove me to learn more so I could have even more to write about.

My popularity from writing about freedom was beginning to get me in a lot of trouble with the prison administration. My first incident as a result of my writing happened at dinner. I was in the Chow hall discussing the origins of the word “picnic” when a C.O. shouted, “Frazier.”

I turned and looked up at the C.O. and he charged me with “reckless eyeballing” which was a prison crime that sent me back to solitary confinement or as inmates called it jail, or the hole.

I figured that it was just a matter of time before I was transferred to another prison. Inmates that become popular and develop a large following other than a gang following it is normal for the prison administration to fabricate misconduct charges against them in order to facilitate an involuntary transfer to another prison. I figured that the B.O.P., the bureau of prisons were afraid that if enough Black men were “awakened” that we would take over the prisons and free ourselves.

Within a couple of months, a few days before the 1995 Million Man March, I was transferred to the Atlanta Federal Prison Camp. A month after arriving at FPC Atlanta, elected officials voted to uphold the 100 to 1 crack to cocaine sentence disparity. The day after the vote the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary across the street and the Federal Prison Camp were locked down in order to prevent prison rioting that had already taken place in several federal prisons around the nation as a reaction to the crack-cocaine vote.

Around the middle of November 1995, while the penitentiary was still on twenty-four hour inmate lockdown, six foot plus, dark skinned, Warden Willie Scott led the prison riot team into the prison camps dorms. All inmates were ordered to lie on their beds with their shirts pulled over their heads while the guards on the prison riot team randomly beat and stomped them. A blind man was the first to be mercilessly beaten with batons and booted feet for not moving fast enough. The warden ordered riot team of C.O.'s even beat Mr. Toney a slightly built quiet black man in his seventies.

I had never felt like more of a coward. I felt like a coward because I did nothing to resist what was going on. I lied on my back hoping that I would not get assaulted while praying that if I did that God would give me the strength to strangle the life out of one of my booted and baton wielding assailants.

After the beatings that horrific night, camp inmates were taken to three or four different hospitals around the city. I suspected that the beatings were a show of power in case the camp inmates thought about rioting. But, we never found out what really provoked the warden to lead a riot team in to assault us.

The next day, over twenty inmates were randomly rounded up and taken to the hole. The inmates that were beaten were already in the hole or would be when they returned from being

treated. The phones, the mail, and visitation was cut off that morning. An inmate with a smuggled in cell phone called former congressman Pat Swindall who had been recently released from the prison camp.

Word got back to some of the inmates that Swindall was responsible for the brief local news coverage about the inmates who had been taken to several different hospitals, but nothing about the beatings.

A month later on Christmas Eve the camp inmates that were beaten and unjustly taken to the “hole” across the street at the penitentiary were allowed to come back to the camp. They just had to sign a waiver releasing the Federal Bureau of Prisons from any liability for any human rights violations. All but two signed.

I don't know what actually happened to the two that did not sign, but it was rumored that they were given riot charges before they were transferred to a higher-level prison in another state.

It was on that Christmas Eve that I decided to tell my story. I could not just let this abuse go untold and undocumented. I decided to write a book about my life and my experiences and I was going to make sure that the world new about what happened to us in 1995 at the Atlanta Federal Prison Camp.

Inmates all around the system were often treated like animals and this treatment often went unreported and when it was reported, little to nothing was done about it. In the case of the camp inmate beatings, the government appointed an amnesty council to investigate the incidents. Nothing positive came from the alleged investigation.

On April 13, 1998, exactly a year before I was due to be released I began writing my memoir. Every day I wrote at least seven pages. By November of that year I had sent over eleven

hundred hand written pages home to my mother. I named the book *Wake Up Everybody: The life of a player* because my goal was to use my story to empower those that were or had gone down a similar path that I had. I chose the subtitle “the life of a player” because before I began reading I considered myself a player in the game of life and I referred to the way I navigated through life as “game” and players played games.

Once I got out and went to a halfway house in Atlanta at the end of November 1998, I never worried about getting a job as many newly released cons did. A character in an Iceberg Slim urban novel known by the street name “White Folks” taught me how to get a job while Reginald Lewis’s story, *Why Should White Guys Have All The Fun* taught me to treat a job like it was a college course preparing me to do what I truly wanted to do and own what I truly wanted to own. The character known as “White Folks” in the Iceberg Slim urban tale *Long White Con* was a black man that looked Caucasian. He would present himself as an articulate Caucasian authoritative figure with something seemingly greater to offer than what he made his marks think he expected to gain from them. He played this “game” so the intended target would drop their guard and make it easier for White Folks to con them out of the goods or services he really coveted (Beck, 2012). Before White Folks made himself known to his target, he learned all he could about them so he could better emulate them while running his con on them.

Between getting shipped around to different prisons and serving time in solitary, I managed to earn a personal training certification that I planned to use to get a job training others while staying in shape myself. It also helped that I looked the part of a fit personal trainer.

My plan was to con the manager of the largest fitness facility in the Atlanta area into giving me a job where I could earn enough money to successfully publish *Wake Up Everybody*.

So, the first day that I was given a pass from the halfway house to go search for a job, I got a ride down to the Fulton County Library. There, I learned how to use the Internet. I pulled out a writing tablet and a pen. Next, I looked up and called fitness centers in New York until I found three that were no longer in operation. Next, I read and took notes on popular lines of gym equipment. Then I searched for the largest health club in Atlanta. It was Sportslife's 125,000 square foot facility off of Cobb Parkway. Sportslife was a chain of six fitness facilities; the one off of Cobb Parkway was over twice as large as the others. It boasted six indoor tennis courts, four indoor squash courts, an indoor junior olympic sized pool, an indoor basketball court, two group fitness studios, a spin studio along with a large workout floor with an indoor track and bar. Over the next few hours, I called around to different Sportslife clubs finding out information that I could not find online.

Next, I printed off a resume that I used as a template to fabricate my own. I figured that by the time Sportslife found out that I was a fraud, I will have proved myself too valuable to the company for them to fire me. In his book *Think and Grow Rich*, Dennis Kimbro wrote "A great occasion is worth to a man exactly what his preparation enables him to make of it." I took this statement to heart. The statement meant that I would have to find everything I could find out about the gym, gym equipment, group fitness, the gyms demographics, previous years revenue and anything else I could find out that I could use as fuel to entice the gym manager to hire me.

I also planned to come clean when they called me in to question the fraudulent resume. Once they realize all I had done to convince them to hire me, I hoped that my job performance would supersede my dishonesty.

Before leaving the library I phoned the Cobb Parkway Sportslife. I had disguised my voice and pretended to be the Southeastern Regional Director for TLC management, a company I

made up to get an appointment with the Sportslife General Manager, Mark Tachage to discuss buying one hundred gym memberships for the employees of TLC. I made an appointment for 11:00 on Thursday to ensure that Mark would be there when I came an hour earlier.

I did not even consider taking a traditional route of calling and asking if Sportslife was hiring or trying to schedule an appointment to talk to the general manager about a job. I was a Black man, fresh out of prison, a felon with no related job experience and no college education. If I was going to get this job, I knew that once I met him that I would have to immediately begin creating a mental picture with my words and gestures that would make him believe that I would be an asset to Sportslife, just like I convinced others in my past to commit crimes where I would benefit from.

For the next two days I rehearsed Sportslife's history and committed everything I had learned about the health and fitness industry to memory.

It was the Thursday following Thanksgiving in 1998. Smith-Bey had always said dress the part, play the part if you want to get the part, I thought back as I looked into the halfway house bathroom mirror while I finished tying the navy blue tie that completed my ensemble. I smiled thinking that Smith-Bey would have been proud if he could have seen me. I was cleaner than a prosperous, prosperity preacher on Easter Sunday.

An hour later, I walked up to Sportslife's front desk. I looked at the young lady's nametag. "Hello Amy, How are you this morning?" I spoke in my best "White Folks" voice.

"I'm fine. Thank you for asking," she said.

"I'm Al Frazier, I'm here to see Mark Tachage about the personal training management position." Before she could respond I continued in a lower conspiratorial tone. "How do you like it here? I'm seriously considering joining the Sportslife management team."

“Is Mr. Tachage expecting you?” she asked.

“I sure hope so. I flew in from New York.” I looked at my fake Rolex. “I have an interview at the Concourse health & fitness club at 11:30, so I’m not in a hurry, but I am on a time schedule Amy.” I lied in hopes of creating some urgency on her part.

Amy picked up the phone while I walked to the couch adjacent to the front desk. As soon as I sat down and put one leg over the other a White man the size of a racehorse jockey came around the desk. He matched the description that the sales person I spoke to yesterday gave me over the phone. “Mr. Tachage I’m Al Frazier. If I may say so from what I can see you have a phenomenal sports facility.”

“Can I help you?” he asked.

I handed him my resume, before I started walking toward the glass enclosure above the six indoor tennis courts. “How long have you been in the business, Mark?” I asked.

Before I’m sure he realized, he had told me all about his adventures in the health and fitness industry. I matched him story for story, none of mine one true. Mark was a huge Braves fan. I knew absolutely nothing about baseball, but by the time we finished talking and began walking around the ginormous sports club, he was convinced that I was a lifelong Braves fan. Mirror imaging was creating an atmosphere of familiarity with your victim. This is what I was doing by making Mark think we shared the same passions in sports among other things.

Over the next forty-five minutes while Mark and I walked around the gym I explained how I was going to increase the personal training revenue by thirty percent over the next six months. I also gave him plenty of tips on new cutting edge gym equipment, much of it I made up as I spoke. I ended up leaving a couple hours later after filling out new-hire paperwork and being introduced to the sales staff as the new assistant sales manager trainee.

I suspect that I didn't get the position I came for because the personal training manager already there was the top personal training manager in the company.

Almost two weeks had passed before I was called in to Marks office about my resume. When I asked if I was being let go, Mark said, "Hell no. You sold me and I'm hard to sell. Besides, the best bullshitters are the best sales people."

My second month with Sportslife I was the gym's top sales person. By the fourth month I was number one in sales in the six gym company and was the top salesperson every month for the two years I was with Sportslife.

I wasn't the best at sells because I was the most informed. I was number one because I had the memories of how Harriet Tubman, Martin Delaney, Amil Cabral, Marcus Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, Paul Robeson, Muhammed Ali, and Malcolm X had shined while overcoming seemingly insurmountable odds. These memories drove me. I used memories of the ancestor's personal acts of selfless self-determination as a driving force to earn enough money to publish *Wake Up Everybody* so I could continue the fight of liberating Africana peoples.

In June of 2000, I walked away from Sportslife where I was on pace to earn more than Mike Bolt, the vice president of the company. I was criticized by my family and friends for walking away from a job that I was earning over ten thousand dollars a month in commissions and salary.

My friends and family berated me for up and quitting a job that paid so well. I wasn't deterred the least bit. What they did not realize was that the consciousness of Black people was way more important to me than money. Besides, I had never had a problem making money.

I remember times as a boy hustling, when I stayed up all night eating Kroger birthday cake with one of my lieutenants at one of my six Atlanta area apartments. While eating cake and

talking shit we straightened and organized suitcases of money before running it through a counting machine.

As a boy money had driven me but as a man I was driven by love. I loved Black people so much that I was willing and eager to die if it meant saving Black boys and girls from a life of self-hate. My love of Black people started with me loving my own peanut butter-brown skin. Now that I was a man taking responsibility for my own thoughts and actions I had to finish stripping myself of my old ways and that meant my slave name.

Every scholar from Muhammad and Woodson to Jeffries and Browder had instilled in me the power in a name. Smith-Bey had been my first teacher on the subject and since then I wanted to change my name to something that describes the type of person I was striving to be and the type of person my character embodied. I wanted a name that connected me with the land of my ancestors.

My given name was Elbert Lee Frazier Junior. Most people called me Al Frazier. My father's name was Elbert Lee Frazier Senior, and my paternal grandfathers name was Elbert Frazier. They both had died violently, like they had lived.

The name Elbert Frazier seemed to me like a perpetuation of violence and ignorance. I say that because Elbert Frazier is a Western name that has nothing to do with who I was and who I strived to be. Elbert Lee Frazier Junior was a conniver, a taker, a miscreant. I on the other hand had evolved into being a giver, a protector, and a warrior for truth.

I chose the first name Jihad because it means striving and struggling to bring others in to the awareness of the oneness of God. Showing others the oneness of Gods love through my eyes is why I write and speak. I chose the middle name Shaheed because it means, "witness to the truth". I had experienced, perpetuated, and seen so much loss of life, and I had witnessed so

much love, beauty, and selflessness that I felt that I was a witness to more truths than many. I chose Uhuru for my last name because it is Swahili, the adopted universal language of the African and it means “freedom”. I see myself as a liberator and freedom to me is the most peaceful, peace of mind that one can have. To me, “Uhuru” represents my personal struggle that led to me reading and wanting to read Urban and African centered literature. “Uhuru” represents the freedom that I gained as a result of reading urban and African-centered Literature. “Uhuru” represents my fight for the liberation of all African oppressed peoples.

Now that my name change was legal I felt compelled to try and reach out to my spiritual father, Dr. Naim Akbar. I describe him as my spiritual father because the words he wrote in his book, *Visions for Black Men* are responsible for my spiritual transformation from coveting the street to loving human life. I called Florida State University where he taught. I was given an address where I could send him a copy of *Wake Up Everybody* and a letter telling him how his books impacted my life..

Right before I left Sportslife in June of 2000, my name change became legal and valid. Also, before I left Sportslife, I had researched and read up on Eric Jerome Dickey and E. Lynn Harris. They were the top black male writers then. I learned how they had struggled to get published. With this information I planned to do twice as much as they had when they began their journeys as Black male fiction authors. I used Eric’s and E. Lynn’s struggle as a sort of guide as to what to do and what to expect from big publishing houses.

I learned that Eric had left his hometown in Memphis, drove to Los Angeles to follow his dream of being published. I learned that he had slept in his car, took substitute-teaching jobs, and had done stand-up comedy while pursuing his dream of being a relevant author. I learned that E. Lynn and Eric had received a mountain of rejection letters from publishers before they were

published. I learned that E. Lynn got published after printing up books at Kinkos and selling them out of the trunk of his car. He sold enough of these books, which built a big enough buzz that publishers came after him.

Like E. Lynn, I had my manuscript edited and I did research on how to put a trade paperback book together and like E. Lynn I self-published my first book. In August of 2000 I had five thousand copies of *Wake Up Everybody: The life of a player* printed. Holding that first book in my hand sent a wave of emotions through my body. I felt relevant. I felt like I had accomplished something big in spite of having thrown away a garbage bag full of denial letters from publishers and agents.

I was never deterred and I never doubted my mission, although I did doubt my writing skills until I held that first book in my hand. Holding that first book in my hand I reflected on how back in prison, James Banks lit up while he spoke about an essay I wrote. He's said that the "*Black God*" essay was some of the realest truth that he had ever read.

I sold books outside of grocery stores, on street corners, in beauty shops. I sold books on the streets of New York, DC, Houston, Chicago, everywhere. I strategically did signings at stores and in malls that urban folks frequented most. I went to housing projects in every city I went to and hustled books.

My base price for my book was 14.95, but I sold my books for two, three, five, seven, and ten dollars. I even gave them away. I rarely turned down anyone that wanted to read what I had to say.

A few months after the release of *Wake up Everybody* I was a little down. I had really expected my book to take off in Atlanta. I was pontificating on the many Black folks that told me that they didn't read while I walked outside to the mailbox.

Some would say they had read all they needed to read while they were in school. A lot of older women would tell me that all they read was the bible. I even had some people look at the cover and turn their nose up before telling me that they only read Christian fiction. When I would explain that *Wake Up Everybody* was Christian fiction they would become indignant.

“There is nothing Christian about a man holding a gun in one hand and a book in the other,” one woman told me while describing what she saw on the cover of *Wake Up Everybody*.

“Ma’am, this is a story of redemption. This story is about a young boy who was lost; a boy who perpetuated acts against his people – Gods people because he couldn’t see the God in him and the God in others. It’s about his redemption.”

They lady walked off mumbling, “What does a man with a Muslim name like Jihad know about God?”

I thought about this lady and so many others like her that had judged my book and me without even reading one word between the cover while I stood in front of my mailbox. When I opened it, it was packed full with two weeks of mail. I had been so busy with marketing *Wake Up Everybody* that I had forgotten to check my mail. After walking over to my outside trash can I sorted through what I was going to keep and what I was throwing away when I saw a letter from Dr. Naim Akbar. I dropped everything else in the trash not thinking that I had not finished going through the mail. My heart skipped a beat as I stood over the trashcan in front of my condo.

“Wake Up Everybody is a penetrating tale of the walking death that characterizes young Black men and the process of transformation through re-education that can awaken them.” I read and re-read this line in Dr. Naim Akbar’s letter. I was so honored, proud and humbled by

Dr. Akbar's letter. I needed no other messages of encouragement. I'd received the endorsement of the man that first reawakened my Africana conscious.

I could not believe that Dr. Akbar had read my book, my lifestory and enjoyed it. I do not know of any time in my life that I had felt so honored up until that point. I stood over the trashcan crying like a baby. My tears were tears of joy. Dr. Akbar had liked my work. That was such an honor and still is. This letter motivated me to keep going in spite of detractors that wouldn't give *Wake up Everybody* a chance because of my name, the title, or what they blindly believed that my work was about.

In 2001, a couple months before the towers went down, I was doing a book signing in South Dekalb Mall in Decatur, Georgia when a lady came my direction.

I said, "Excuse me queen, my name is Jihad and your name is?"

"Lo," she said.

I threw my hands in the air before saying, "Damn! You got me. I knew it was you."

"Do I know you?" She had asked.

I sighed dramatically. "You don't remember do you?"

"Remember what?" She had asked.

I flipped through to a random page in my book and gave it to her. "This is my life story and you are in it."

"Where." She looked down at the pages.

"Just read a little bit and you will see what I am talking about."

She began reading. I walked over to someone else and ran a similar line. When I finished speaking to another sista' I turned and Lolita was sitting down at my booth engrossed in the pages of *Wake Up Everybody*. I smiled.

Two hours later, Lo was still in the same place when the bookstore proprietor came over to the middle of the mall where I was set up.

I was with another customer when I noticed Fanta, the bookstore owner hugging Lo. I looked at my watch and noticed that I had gone an hour and a half over the time I was supposed to end my signing. Popular and brilliant Black author, Lolita Files from Los Angeles was supposed to sign after me. I figured that since she didn't show the store owner allowed me to keep pulling mall shoppers over and trying to convince them to buy my book. About twenty minutes later I had almost sold out of books and was about to grab one of a small stack of books on the table near where Lolita was sitting.

She playfully slapped my hand. "These are mine and I need you to sign them."

"Thank you so much Queen. I so appreciate your love and support," I said. "So, you must kind of like what you are reading,"

"Like! Jihad this is amazing. Did you really live this life?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do you have an agent?" Lo asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Me." I picked up a book from her stack, so who do I sign this to?"

After marking her page, she gave me the book she had been reading. "Sign this to Lolita Files."

"Lolita Files! What? No!" I pointed. "You're Lolita Files? The Lolita Files?"

"Last time I got pulled over and handed my I.D. over I was Lolita Files," she joked.

“I’m so sorry, you the author that was signing after me. I didn’t know. I mean I didn’t know you were her.”

She laughed. “That’s okay Jihad. I know you did not know.”

She had me sign a book to her closest friends Eric Jerome Dickey, Victoria Christopher Murray, and others.

Although I had not read anything by Lolita Files and really did not know much about her you would have thought I was her biggest fan the way I had reacted upon finding out who she was. She was a published author and if I impressed her I figured she might help open a door for me to get published by a major publishing house.

Within days, Lolita and I agreed that she would be the agent representing my literary interests. Over the next year, Lolita and her best friend Victoria Christopher Murray had set up signings and speaking engagements for me all over California. In early 2002, I began touring southern to Northern California selling books and running my mouth about my life experiences.

My first radio interview was a 6AM morning show at Stevie Wonder’s KJLH studio. After introducing myself and telling the listening audience a little about my life and my transformation, the phone lines started buzzing. During the show, the lines did not stop buzzing. I took as many callers as time allowed. After the show, I had never felt so inspired to keep on writing and speaking. That very morning I started on another book, MVP, Murder Vengeance, Power. Over the next few months I was in demand all over the west coast.

By the time I got back home in late November, I had a letter from Tracy Sherrod. Tracy was Sister Soulja’s, and bell hook’s editor and literary agent. Tracy was big time and she wanted to represent me. I didn’t respond for over a month. I couldn’t leave Lolita and Victoria. If it weren’t for them Tracy would have never known who I was or so I thought. Finally, one day I

told Lolita about Tracy's interest in me and she advised me to go with her. I had tears in my eyes when Lolita told me that my story was way too important and that Tracy could get my story out there quicker than she could. All the time and money Lolita and Victoria had spent on me, and they were so eagerly willing to release me from our arrangement to sign with Tracy Sherrod spoke volumes about the heart and soul of these selfless women.

I signed with Tracy, and nine months later I still was not with a major publisher. Tracy had told me when I signed with her to be patient and that she was strategically planning for the right time for me to be signed to the right publishing house.

My savings were running out and I would have to go back to the fitness industry if I wasn't signed soon.

Late summer in 2002, I had met another rising Black author named Travis Hunter at a book signing he was having at a bookstore in the Atlanta suburb of Clarkston. A couple nights later he called to tell me how much he enjoyed *Wake Up Everybody*. That was the beginning of our real and lasting friendship.

A week later, Travis approached me with a two-book twenty-five thousand dollar offer from Carl Weber, a friend of his that started a new book line called Urban Books which is a division of Kensington Publishing company. According to Travis, Carl did not want to go through my agent. He explained to Travis, how Tracy didn't deserve to get paid off of a deal that she didn't find for me. Carl was already a hugely successful number one bestselling Black author. He offered me money and convinced me that my book was going to be huge. I wanted my story out so bad that I begged out of my contract with Tracy and I signed with Carl Weber and Urban Books.

The first thing he did was convince me to agree to change the name of *Wake Up Everybody* to *Streetlife*. Next, Carl explained that although the story was great that no one knew who I was and no one cared so book sales would be slow if it was published as non-fiction. He convinced me that since I wasn't famous publishing *Streetlife* as a fiction book would be much more successful than publishing it as non-fiction.

Within thirty days of me signing, my books title was changed to *Streetlife* and it was out and in stores. Later, I found out that Carl Weber had violated my contract with the premature release. *Streetlife* was re-released with a different cover eleven months later in October 2003. *Streetlife* quickly rose to the top of the charts. I was featured in magazines such as Hip-hop weekly, Vibe, and other hip-hop periodicals. I was a guest on Wendy Williams' New York radio show two or three times as well as other radio stations across the nation. I was speaking at Boys and Girls clubs across the country, schools, everywhere where people wanted to hear me.

I had my second book ready to go when Carl told me that he wanted me to write about Black women. He didn't want to publish *MVP* because it didn't have any major Black women characters. Carl had explained to me that over 90% of women read fiction and they read stories about them. That made me think of how the early Urban lit stories about black males affected me and it made me think of how *Visions for Black Men* about black males had affected and drawn me in so I understood.

Carl's assessment made me think back to a speaking engagement at a halfway house called the Fortune Society in New York where a couple of women that had just been released from prison had asked when I was going to write something for them.

I acquiesced and put my second manuscript, *MVP* on hold and wrote *Babygirl*. A book about a Black girl's struggles being orphaned as a preteen and raised on the inner city Atlanta streets. Carl had told me that any book with girl in the title would be a huge success. He was absolutely right. I think *Babygirl* is my worst book from a craft of writing standpoint, but out of the thirteen books that I have written and had published, it's my second biggest selling book. *Babygirl* was also in the top three on the Essence bestsellers list longer than any of my other titles. After my third book, *Riding Rhythm* I left Carl Weber and Urban Books due to irreconcilable differences and started Envisions Publishing Company with my best friend Maurice Gant, who I had met in prison. Together Maurice and I also started the Jihad Uhuru Wake up Everybody Foundation, which is a non-profit organization set up to empower Urban youth through reading African-centered literature.

5.5 Why go back to school now at 40

President Obama's rise to CEO of America could not have come at a better time for me.

When he was first elected I had just released my sixth book, *Preacherman Blues*.

Preacherman Blues was the first book I wrote for middle class Black America, specifically the black bourgeoisie as E. Franklin Frazier referred to Black Americas upper middle class elite in his book, *Black Bourgeoisie*. I targeted this population because this was the population that made me feel the worst.

I had lived in the Atlanta suburbs since high school in the early 80's and came back after prison. The Atlanta area is the only place in the nation that I felt unwelcome when I did book signings. It was the only place where Black people were more concerned about my name being Jihad than the content in my books. My home is the only place where I was made to feel like an outsider.

I have done book signings in San Antonio, Texas where there was only a seven percent Black population and I received nothing but admiration from Blacks, Latinos, and the White population that showed up. Everywhere I spoke and signed books I almost always sold out. Not in Atlanta, though. I was lucky if I sold three books in three hours at a busy mall.

I quit doing book signings in Atlanta around 2005 because I always finished feeling beat up by the Christian community. Unlike most places around the country where I signed the people in Atlanta seemed like the ATLiens that Outcast spoke about in their music. The people that I approached and those that approached me at signings in the Atlanta area were like Zombies for Christ. Once they saw my name at the bottom of the book they either kept walking or made some negative comments based on what they thought the word Jihad meant. Several passerbyers had asked me did my mother name me Jihad or they asked if I knew what my name meant. When I told them that it meant Striving and struggling to bring others into the awareness of the oneness of God, they often ignored me and proceeded to tell me that Jihad meant Muslim Holy war. I can not recall how many times I had wanted to scream, "Read my books, look up my name for yourself instead of listening to CNN and FOX!" Of course I never did.

Instead, I wrote *Preacherman Blues*, a story about two pastors that start the first Black mega church in Atlanta, one pastor, Bishop TJ Money who is inherently evil and one pastor Percival Cleotis Turner who is a good man that gets caught up in the fame of being a celebrity pastor. I wrote the book, which became a series of books, to get Black people to reflect on their own perceptions and beliefs. I was so tired of people telling me what their pastor said instead of what God said. I had a strong distaste for religious leaders that had gotten rich of the congregation while many of them were destitute, so I wrote about two rich prosperity preachers in *Preacherman Blues*.

The book and both sequels were semi-successful in Atlanta, but I still felt that I could make a much bigger impact on society. Before *Preacherman Blues*, I had sold over 80% of my books to brothers and sisters in prisons around America. My prison sales drastically dropped with *Preacherman Blues*, because the cover and title didn't suggest that the book was an urban story that they could see themselves or wanted to see themselves in.

Like every book I had written, the story was about conflict, struggle and redemption. Like all of my books America's poor underclass was represented and the story was filled with messages of hope and freedom. This is what I wanted the middle-class and upper middle class Blacks to experience. It was this same population that had demonized Urban literature although most of them had urban roots.

By mid 2009, I still felt like I could get through to so many more people that could and would support my efforts to re-educate the Urban nation with Urban and African-centered literature. The more I read, researched and wrote about Black love, liberation, struggle, and overcoming conflict was the more I tried to live my life with values of self-love, self-determination, and resistance to oppression. When I would speak I would tell groups how I had overcome my oppressive thought and now I just felt like it was time to be more of an example to America's Black underclass and middle class. Going to school and graduating with at least a 3.0 GPA would get the attention of the Black populations that I had failed to get thus far, I figured. It would also show young brothers that had gone a similar path that I had travelled that despite being a black male ex-felon that did not fare well in grade school that you could still go to college and excel at your studies if you have faith in yourself.

I originally chose to attend Georgia State University back in 2007 because one of my spiritual fathers, Asa Hilliard was a professor there. In prison I read Dr. Hilliard's book *The Maroon Within Us*. It was a book about African self-determination. But, by the time I actually applied to Georgia State University for the second time, Dr. Hilliard had passed on. After writing several letters, and assembling a mountain of information about my conviction, I received my acceptance letter around April of 2009.

My excitement was short lived as I failed to pass Georgia State University's Compass entrance exam. Although my excitement about attending Georgia State University was short lived, I was not going to be deterred from earning an African-American studies degree. The ancestor's experiences in Hilliards, *The Maroon Within Us*, came to mind when I was told that I had failed the admissions test. I remembered how they had fought, lived, loved, and died refusing to let anyone define them. I was going to do the same, I thought. Instead of just graduating with a 3.0, I would graduate with a 3.5 and I would go on to Harvard and earn my Ph.D. and graduate at the top of my class at America's number one University, and

then people would be able to see me and see that all I wanted to do was be an instrument for Black liberation were my thoughts after failing Georgia State University's standardized entrance exam.

I applied and was accepted to Atlanta Metropolitan College in June, 2009. Once I began in the Fall I was intimidated by all the students that were half my age, which was most of the student population.

It seemed like almost everyday I went to class, I spent time having private conversations with young male students about their sagging pants. I didn't say Black males because I had these conversations with white males too. The definition of Black males in my heart and soul had long ago evolved from color to consciousness. There were many white males that had grown up in Black America and had naturally adapted to Urban Black culture and they were targets of my love as well.

Once I started school, I was surprised how much I enjoyed the learning process. I was also surprised how studious and willing to help others that I was. Before I knew it, my first semester had ended and I had made all A's, while raising a young son, running a publishing company, and selling cars. I would tell others that juggling school and my other responsibilities was a struggle. It was, but it was a struggle that I enjoy.

I was so proud that I was in school that I told all of my friends and associates. Many of them were seasoned authors around my age. Many of them asked me why I had decided to go back to school at 40. I would tell them that I wanted to uplift our youth with teaching them their history. Several of them informed me that I would be taking a severe pay cut teaching. I would respond by telling them that I enjoy teaching more than I enjoy the things that money can buy. I meant every word.

Two years after starting school, I graduated Atlanta Metropolitan College with highest honors. I made one B in those two years. Dr. William Dorsey and the Dean, Dr. McGaha were my biggest influences while I was there.

Dr. Dorsey taught sociology and African-American studies. He reminded me of Arthur Strong, one of my black living super heroes that I was locked up with. Dr. Dorsey loved teaching

so much that he would often stay after class trying to explain something to me. I soaked up his words like a dry sponge. I often wondered how he got anything done on the days I was in class.

Dr. McGaha was new to the school when I enrolled. I didn't see how he got any work done because he seemed to be always walking around the campus interacting with students. He was also always clean. He reminded me of Smith-Bey in that aspect. I don't think Dr. McGaha had normal sweat glands. It would be Hell hot outside and he would be dressed to the nines in wearing a sharp suit with jacket and tie on, not a lick of sweat on his brow, at least that is the way I remembered him. Dr. McGaha walked his talk. He said he was going to expand the school he did. He said he was going to make the school a four-year college. He did. Dr. McGaha truly convinced me that he genuinely cares about the plight of the African-American student. He was just another Black hero that I wanted to emulate. He only asked one thing of me before I graduated and that was to come back there and teach.

I was planning to apply and attend Emory for my B.A. when Dr. Dorsey asked me to go look at Georgia State University. I really did not want to but I looked up to and respected Dr. Dorsey so I went and met with Dr. Akinyele Umoja the chair of the African-American Studies department at Georgia State. I googled Dr. Umoja and read up on him before our meeting. I was impressed specifically with his Black Nationalist background, but I was still dead set on Emory.

When I met Baba AK as many lovingly called Dr. Umoja, I thought of my dad who had passed away when I was fifteen. Besides being the same height, same build, and similar complexion Dr. Umoja and my dad really didn't look alike, but still upon meeting him, I thought about my dad. I think Dr. Umoja and I spoke for over an hour about the plight of Black America and so many other things. Once I left his office, Emory was a memory.

5.6 Where is your empirical evidence

When I started at Georgia State University in the Fall of 2012 I was nervous, anxious, and arrogant. I was nervous because I had no idea if my African-American studies professors at Georgia State would have a profound effect on the way I valued and respected humanity as Dr. McGaha and Dr. Dorsey had at Atlanta Metropolitan College. I was anxious because I had walked, talked, wrote, and thought African-American Studies ever since I read *Visions for Black Men* eighteen years ago.

I could hardly wait to get into my core classes to engage my professors in my specialty, “Black people”. I had read hundreds of books on the Black Experience and now I was anxious to learn even more. I was arrogant because University’s and schools had been paying me to come and speak about my life experiences and transformation for a decade. Culminated with my academic success I thought that my worldview was the impenetrable truth.

All my life I was an “A” student with a “C” mentality. In 1987 I just barely graduated with a “C” average from an alternative high school in Atlanta. Some twenty years later I graduated from Atlanta Metropolitan College with an “A” average.

The first week in my African-American Families class, the professor Dr. Makungu Akinyela. Or Dr. A as many students called him, was discussing “welfare rights” for African-American families. My family had been welfare recipients when I was a child and most kids I knew as a young child were on welfare so I could hardly wait to engage the professor and the class. When Dr. A said that community organizer Jonnie Tillmon interviewed 600 black women that were on welfare in the 1960’s and out of the 600, 599 of the women said that they would rather work to make a living than be on welfare I smirked and let out a giggle.

Dr. A turned in my direction. “Mr. Uhuru, do you have a question or comment?”

“Doc, I grew up in the projects and 599 out of 600 black folks wouldn’t agree on any one thing, especially about getting off welfare. I mean you have sistas that don’t see how they could make it if they had a job and were off welfare. The childcare expenses alone would eat up a lot of the money they earned working a nine to five.”

“What kind of empirical evidence do you have to support your claims Mr. Uhuru?” He asked.

“I don’t need no empirical evidence Doc. I lived this.”

“Soooo you just pulled that out your ass?”

“Huh?” I didn’t know how to answer that. He just spoke to me like my mother, or some elder in my family would have. I remember thinking that I couldn’t believe he just spoke to me like that.

Not to be outdone I finally found my voice. “I don’t care what Jonnie Tillmon wrote or said, I am telling you that 599 out of 600 Black women are not going to agree on any one thing, especially getting off of welfare.”

“Well until you have empirical evidence...”

I didn’t hear anything else. I was mad, embarrassed and I was going to prove him wrong. I think I was more upset at being talked down. That evening I went home and read what little I could find about Ms. Jonnie Tillmon. I read up on the author of the story about Jonnie Tillmon. I spent most of that evening trying to find information discrediting the author and or Jonnie Tillmon. As a matter of fact, as a result of my research I became a fan of Jonnie Tillmon and her efforts to combat the welfare system. This is was when I realized that I didn’t understand nearly as much as I thought I did.

The next day I apologized to Dr. A. For some reason over the next four years in undergrad and grad school I had taken over twice as many classes with Dr. Akinyela as I had anyone else. He wasn't even my favorite professor. Half the time I butted heads with him because he tactlessly always told me how he interpreted the discourse being discussed. When I did not agree with his interpretation of the discourse I could never adequately articulate my argument nearly as eloquently as he articulated his.

Dr. A and I had many discussions where in the beginning I disagreed with an assessment of a situation surrounding Black America and by the time class was over Dr. A's arguments would have me looking at the situation in ways that I had not imagined after reading about the situation. No matter how many times I ended up re-evaluating my interpretation of a situation because of an argument Dr. A. presented, I never ceased to challenge an interpretation of a person, place, or thing that I didn't agree with. Winning an argument with him before I graduated became my goal early on, but to do this I know I had to be ready with empirical evidence supporting a well thought of and articulated presentation. My definition of winning an argument with Dr. A. would be to present an argument that would inspire critical thought that would change his view of a situation. Now, on the last leg of my University life as a student I've come to the conclusion that I really do not want to win, what I really want is to have the impact on other students that he has had on me. I guess if I did win it would diminish the his Superman status with me.

Although he was at Superman status on my Greatness scale, I cursed Dr. A out in my mind more times than I can remember. I left his class angry more times than I can remember, but it was this type of emotion that drove me to want to understand better. The greatest lesson I received from Dr. Makungu Akinyela was around "context." He taught me that we can read the

same words in a text and get different understandings. If I know the words and misunderstand the message, that text can not help me or my community grow.

I had read hundreds of books on the Black experience, but much of what I read I did not have a full understanding because lots of times I didn't understand the correct way that the author was trying to contextualize their thoughts.

Another of my professors that I had while at Georgia State University was Dr. Sarita Davis. She is a modern day Wonder Woman in my eyes. I'm not just saying this because of all of the knee high Wonder Woman like boots she wore to class. I took all my major problems to her. In my mind all of my problems were major and required immediate attention. She was Wonder Woman because every time I left her office, got off the phone with her, or after she returned an email, I always felt better. Dr. Davis made me think that she really cared about me. She always returned emails the same day, often within a few minutes and she always seemed to know the right thing to say. I had and have no doubt in my mind that she took a personal interest in all of her students.

Dr. Michael Simanga is one of my absolute favorite people in the world. I became an easy expert on Black film after just taking one of his classes. I am a passion driven person and Dr. Simanga is the most passion expressive professor that I have encountered. He's also the most informed person on Film history that I have ever met. I was ashamed that I had never known about Paul Robeson before I studied him in Dr. Simanga's class. When students come to me and ask my advice on courses to take, I tell them any class that Dr. Simanga teaches. His class is one of the only classes where the students did not move if his class went beyond the prescribed class time.

I took Dr. Georgene Montgomery Bess's African-American Literature course in undergrad. I just knew that I was going to enjoy and breeze through this class since I loved reading so much. At first I was disappointed after reading the syllabus. Although all the texts on the syllabus were African-American titles, none of them were centered around Urban American modern culture. I could not imagine myself in the narratives. Once I began engaging the literature I was pleasantly surprised at how much I could see myself in all the stories. Now, that I had read so much, my horizons had been broadened. I, now could see myself as Toni Morrison's character "Stamp Paid" in her novel *Beloved*. Like "Stamp Paid, I changed my name to one that exemplifies who I am and like Stamp Paid, I often question the nature of the African communities' obligations to its members. In Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* I saw my childhood bestfriend as the character Shadrack. Like Shadrack, my best friend Corey is a veteran and has suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome as a result of war.

Dr. Bess helped me imagine myself in places and situations that directly fit into my urban world paradigm.

I was okay until Dr. Bess began talking about African God concepts. She really angered me when she put questions on a test referring to African Gods and colors that these Gods represented. I did not think African conceptualizations of God should be part of the discourse since it was not directly in the readings. I was so upset that I decided to debunk her God conceptualization. I began reading up on African Traditional Religions so I could present a valid argument for Dr. Bess to keep the Orishas out of the discourse.

Before the course ended, I had a whole different understanding of deity – one that put me at spiritual peace. I was so enamored with African Traditional Religions that I planned to make African Traditional Religion my area of study for grad school. I also came to understand that

remnants of African Traditional conceptions of God where in all the texts that the class read and discussed. It was through Dr. Bess and her African-American Literature class that I began to understand who I am in reference to mankind and the creator. Dr. Bess introducing me to African Spirituality inspired the idea and the concept for my last novel, *Dark Horse Assassin: Rise of the Messiah* and the next two novels in the trilogy about the second coming of the Black Messiah and his fight against evil to save mankind.

All of my professors at Georgia State University had such a positive impact on me that I made them heroines in my most indepth novel to date, *World War Gangster*.

Dr. Cora Presley, Dr. Patricia Dunham, Dr. Georgene Bess Montgomery, Dr. Patricia Dixon, Dr. Osizwe Raena Harwell, Dr. Sarita Davis, Dr. Maurice Hobson, Dr. Makungu Akinyela, Dr. Jonathan Gayles, Dr. Michael Simanga, Dr. William Dorsey and Dr. Akinyele Umoja are some of the worlds greatest minds with some huge hearts and I am honored to have studied under them. Thank you all for helping me to critically analyze, contextualize and understand my commitment to social justice for the African-American and all of humanity. Thank you for helping me to find myself.

6 CHAPTER VI THE EXODUS

6.1 I wonder if

As I sit here writing this last chapter I am wondering how my life would have turned out if I had been introduced to an urban Walter Dean Myers African-centered novel in Ms. Jablonski's fourth grade class instead of a Eurocentric Judy Blume novel.

I wonder if I would have put a gun to a mans head at thirteen and took his money and shoes if I would have read about Sonny being shot at thirteen in Claude Brown's *Urban* autobiography, *Manchild in the Promiseland*.

I wonder if I would have daydreamed in school and skipped class if Carter G. Woodson's *The Mis-education of the Negro* or W.E.B. Dubois's African-centered book *The Soul of Black Folks* would have been a part of the public school discourse.

I wonder if I would have ever picked up a crack sack to sell if I would have read about Porky getting off on making Black women have sex with dogs for crack in Donald Goine's urban novel *Dopefiend*.

I wonder if I would have treated black women as conquests, as merely objects for physical pleasure if I had read accounts about how White men had raped and beaten Black women for sport without recourse during two hundred and forty-six years of Chattel enslavement in the United States.

I wonder if I could have even used the word "Bitch" to describe a Black woman if I had read about Queen Nanny and how she escaped from slavery and helped others escape and form maroon communities in Jamaica in the 18th century.

I wonder if I could have called a black woman a "whore" if I would have read about the thousands of Black women that resisted in silence while being raped by their slavemasters. I wonder if I could even refer to a black woman as a "whore" if I had understood that many of these Black women suffered in silence because they did not want to take the chance of telling their husbands or menfolk on the plantation for fear of them going out and getting killed trying to avenge the assault.

I wonder if I would have wanted to be a drug dealer if I had read about how Reginald Lewis, a black man from Baltimore, Maryland had raised 22.5 million to purchase a sewing company and sold it at a 90-1 profit a few years later.

I wonder if I would have followed my childhood dreams of becoming an actor or Jet airplane pilot if I would have read how young Malcolm Little was dissuaded from following his dreams of being an attorney and how his life turned out in Alex Haley's, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

6.2 What happens to a dream deferred

Langston Hughes once asked what happens to a dream deferred. The famous African-American poet asked, "Does a dream dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore and then run. Does it stink like rotten meat or crust and sugar over like a syrupy sweet? Maybe it just sags like a heavy load. Or does it explode."

I don't know if anyone can honestly answer this question. I know I can not. I have long ago quit trying to pontificate on what happens to a dream deferred since I can not personally relive the past. For years, I stayed up late nights and early mornings lying on my prison bunk playing the "what if" game. I asked myself a million "what ifs".

What if I would have sent someone else in my place to buy the cocaine that sent me to federal prison? As I began reading Urban and African-centered literature, that "what if" became, "What if" I had gone to school like Amil Cabral had and got the game from my oppressor and had come back to the Black community and showed the hood how to take care of each other through agricultural means."

Although I can not take back all the wrong that I have done, I can and I do try to guide others like me, others that have developed or are developing a mentality that causes them to want to rob, steal, con, and destroy others in order to acquire objects for personal satisfaction.

I can not give back all that I have taken from mothers, fathers, uncles, nephews, nieces, cousins, friends, wives, and husbands, but I can and I am telling my story in hopes of being a

living guide of how the cycle of self-hate that so many Urban males have can be reversed to a cycle of self-love. Since being empowered through reading Urban and African-centered literature, I have committed my life to social justice and responsibility. It's a labor of love trying to prevent other Black males from fostering a mentality that pushes them to make some of the same mistakes that I made before reading Urban and African-centered literature.

6.3 Self-hate to self-love

In December, 1991 I was taking a young lady home one morning when she asked me to take her to see a psychic reader. I was about to make up some excuse about not having time when she told me she wouldn't be more than ten minutes and that this psychic's place was on the way to her apartment complex.

I pulled up to a small house on Candler Road in Decatur, Georgia. The sign on the side of the house read, Psychic reader. The sign said more, but I was too busy laughing.

"No you ain't spending some of the money I gave you for last night on a Miss Cleo," I said.

"She ain't no Miss Cleo," the young lady remarked, "I bet you ain't never had no reading."

"And I never will," I said thinking of how quick I was going to pull off and leave her as soon as she got out of my car. Hell, she had more than enough money to call a cab, I thought.

Before I knew it she jumped out.

"Quit playing girl," I shouted at her. She had the small leather bag I had my gun in.

"Come on in and get it," she said while playfully running to the front door of the so called psychic readers business.

I sat in the car for twenty minutes and she had not come out. I was getting nervous because I had drugs in my trunk and some girl I had not known for twenty-four hours was in a strange house with my gun.

Moments later I was at the door to get my gun. Before I knocked a young Hispanic looking girl around my age opened the door. After explaining to me that the girl I was with would be out shortly, the girl led me to an old brown leather recliner. The dark curtains were drawn. The house was solely lit by a lot of candles.

I do not know exactly why but I felt terrified. I just wanted to bolt and run. The only reason I did not run as fast as I could was because my gun was in another room with the girl I had spent the night with.

A minute later, a door opened and a short slim lady with long black hair walked out of the room. She put me in the mind of a gypsy with a white plastic cross around her neck.

I stood up to greet her. She took my hand and looked me in the eyes. "You have a long journey ahead of you. I need to tell you some things," she quietly said while holding my hand in both of hers.

I tried to pull my hand away. "I'm good ma'am. I'll come back," I lied. "I'm in a rush."

"No." She shook her head maintaining a tight grip on my hand. "Come."

"Maybe another time," I said, while noticing the girl I came with sitting behind me in the chair I had got out of.

The little old woman held my hand in a death grip while I tried to pull free.

"Within a few months, you will go away to prison for a very long time and you won't be free until you stop hating and start loving yourself.

Finally, I snatched my hand away and almost ran out of that house with the door closed. I didn't care about my gun or the girl I had left behind. This little woman had scared me.

While driving, I wondered if the girl I was with had told the little old lady that I sold dope. I did not think so. The little old woman looked at me as if she had known me my entire life. She spoke to me as if she really cared about me. She held onto my hand for dear life it seemed. Although I was shaken by her words, I wondered what she had meant by stop hating myself and start loving myself.

I was my favorite person. I had money, homes, cars, and women. Life was good. While All these thoughts skated through my mind, I still wondered why this little old lady had thought that I hated myself.

I will never forget this woman and her prophetic words, "You will go away to prison for a very long time and won't be free until you stop hating and started loving yourself."

While I was writing my autobiography, *Wake up Everybody: The life of a player* I thought back to that day almost seven years ago when that lady held my hand in a death grip while saying, "You won't be free until you stop hating yourself and begin loving yourself."

When she first said those words, I remember thinking that she had me pegged wrong. I really thought I loved myself then. But, while writing *Wake Up Everybody: The life of a player* in 1998 I reflected on my thought process then – a thought process that allowed me to want to sell illegal drugs in my community to my community. I didn't love myself. I loved the money I was getting. I loved what the money could buy me. I loved the way I was treated by those who knew I was getting money.

I was twenty years old back in 1989 when a young lady I was dating got an honest assessment of why I hustled and sold drugs.

“You smart Al, you got a brain. You ain’t got to sell dope. You can get it the right way,” she said.

“Babygirl, ain’t no right way for a Black man that a white man gon’ respect. I’m out here getting more money than any Black L7 slaving at the top of the corporate food chain. “

“You don’t think about your people that are robbing and killing to get your dope. You don’t think about the people that are slowly dying from the drugs you put out on the streets?” She asked.

“First, I take care of my people. I give them jobs, I make sure they eat and they family eat off the good dope I’m providing.”

“No, Al I am talking about your people. The Black folks you selling dope to,” she said.

“My people,” I said, “my people ain’t dope fiends. My people don’t smoke, toot, or shoot up coke,” I changed gears. “Babygirl why is that whenever a nigga doin’ good, Black folks always trying to make a nigga feel like he ain’t doing right by Black folk? Black folks need to take some responsibility for they own misery. Hell, I’m out here day and night on my grind making sure I eat and all my peoples that are down with me eat and folks like you always throwin’ shade on my gangsta.”

“Throwing shade?” She asked. “Negro, you is the shade. Matter fact you is the darkness motha fucka and your nose so far up yo ass that you cant even smell the stink.”

“You got me fucked up Babygirl. Don’t hate cause I saw an opportunity to rise up and took it. There’s a million motha’ fuckas out here slingin’ dope. If I stopped today, I promise there would be two to take my place. Most of these new jacks are out here cutting coke with baby laxatives, BC powder, and even rat poison. I ain’t that guy. I don’t put shit but baking

powder, water and some heat on my coke. So, when my dudes service these fiends at least they ain't gotta worry about side effects from the crazy shit niggas is cutting coke with.

“What you need to be doing is givin' a nigga credit for all the jobs I provide for Black folks. You don't even know how many Black folks are eating from the dope I got them slanging.”

The above dialogue was a conversation I had somewhere around 1989. A few years later not too long after I immersed myself into reading Urban and African-centered literature, I asked a Black C.O. that had witnessed and participated in the unprovoked random inmate beatings that took place in the Atlanta Federal Prison Camp in 1995 how he could mistreat his brotha's like this.

He said that his brothers did not sell drugs, rob, rape, and kill people.

I was so disgusted with myself when he said this because I remembered that conversation back in 1989 when I said that my brothers didn't snort, smoke, or shoot up cocaine. I realized that I had once harbored the same self-hate as this C.O.

So now in 2016, I overstand what that little Hispanic looking psychic reader meant when she said that I won't be free until I stop hating myself and start loving myself.

From the African-centered book *From The Browder File*, I learned that a person can not love what they do not know. As a result of the understanding I gained from reading Carter G. Woodson's, *The Mis-education of the Negro* and Elijah Muhammad's, *Message to the Blackman* I realized that almost everything I knew about being a black male was engineered and created by the same systems and society that took my ancestors from their homeland for the purpose of enslavement. When I read Nathan Mccall's Urban narrative, *Makes Me Wanna Holler* and Dr. Naim Akbars book, *Know Thyself*, I came to the realization that the human race is one big

family and that the African-American had been brainwashed into believing that they are less than human for the purpose of enslaving them. George James's African-centered text, *Stolen Legacy* and Cheikh Ante Diop's, *The Origins of Civilization* taught me that African peoples were proud, resilient, self-determined familial people. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Alex Haley, *Blood in My Eye* by George Jackson, and *Assata: The autobiography of Assata Shakur*, made me fall in love with myself and Black people and these books made me want to fight to teach Black people in America who they were and what and how they have influenced world culture.

This thesis could very well be titled *Moving From Self-hate to Self-love*, because that's the real story of my life. That is the story I am trying to bring into the lives of Black people that suffer from self-hate as I had.

In *Visions for Black Men* the author writes, "The thing that moves us from male to boy is discipline that frees the boy from being a slave to his male." He goes on to explain that learning to transform one's self is transformative energy. The author further states that the force that transforms the person from being a boy to becoming a man is knowledge. The boy then takes his budding rationality and uses it to expand his consciousness.

As I stated earlier, consciousness is the ability to see accurately what is. Seeing is much more than observing with the physical eye. Seeing is analyzing all the information seen, read, felt and heard about the subject and making a decision on how to act on that rationalized understanding. In *Visions For Black Men*, Naim Akbar states, "Being able to see accurately means that one must be properly oriented in space, time, and person, which means that the prerequisite for consciousness is to have some accurate image of one's self and the world in which one finds himself."

Now that I am filled with so much self-love for my Africana brothers and sisters I feel so much more at peace than I felt when I committed acts against them for my personal gain. What I did not realize then was that by harming my Africana brothers and sisters, I was harming myself because I am Africana.

Before reading I didn't understand and didn't care when I heard that Black people had died for me to be free. I remember thinking that this was ridiculous, because those Black people had no idea that I would be born. I was right. They did not have any idea that I was coming. What they did know though was that they would rather die than allow future unborn generations of Black people to come into the world as enslaved persons.

Like my ancestors, I would rather die than allow future generations of Black people to come into this world enslaved by self-hate.

I went through an exodus and was freed from not knowing who I was through reading and learning about my cultural history, which was much different from what I had been taught in the public school system. Now that I know myself I love myself so much that I am compelled to spread this love to my Africana brothers and sisters that suffer from self-hate and my brothers and sisters that have found themselves.

In his book *Visions for Black Men*, Dr. Akbar refers to the transformation process of going from a state of boyishness to a state of manhood as the Exodus. I refer to my transformation or Exodus as moving from self-hate to self-love. Self-hate is like being a captive or a slave and promoting acts of self-hate is perpetuating slavery. Self-love is freedom and peace of mind and spreading self-love is knocking down the cages that prevent others from having peace of mind and being.

I used to think that the little old Hispanic looking psychic reader did not know me when she grabbed my hand. But now I know she did know me. She didn't know the individual me, but she knew the mentality that I harbored. There is no doubt in my mind that this little old woman knew that I was going to be arrested three months later. There is no doubt in my mind that this woman somehow knew that I would serve seven years in prison. I wonder what else she would have told me if I had stayed and listened to what she had to say. I wonder if she knew that I was going to be transformed by reading Urban and African-centered literature.

By taking an introspective look into my life, beliefs, perceptions, and transformation I hope that the reader can see how important Urban and African-centered literature was in transforming me from being a community killer into being a community healer. It is my hope that all that read this thesis understands and uses Urban and African-centered literature to educate and empower Africana youth.

7 CHAPTER VII SUMMARY-FIGHT FOR LOVE

7.1 Reflections

I have written and had thirteen books published. None of them were nearly as mentally taxing as this. None of them made me feel the sense of accomplishment I feel now that I am finishing up this thesis. Now that I have finished my story I feel cleansed. I did not take the reader through a journey of my early criminal life because I did not want to take away from the message of moving from self-hate to self-love through reading Urban and African-centered literature. I also did not want to in anyway glamorize the life I lived before reading Urban and African-centered literature. It is my sincere hope that academicians will look at the Urban Black male and female differently than the middle class Black male and female. It is my sincerest hope that academicians will see the educational value in incorporating Urban fiction and African-

centered literature in the K-12 discourse. I realize that I do not have all the solutions to combat self-hate in the Africana community, but my life story is a great example of how one Black male broke the cycle of self-hate and started a cycle of self-love.

I used to think that my transformation began once I went to prison, but now I think my transformation began with that little old lady that warned me what was to come three months before I was arrested. That lady made me somewhat consciously aware that there may be a problem with the way I was living.

In chapter IV, the beginning of the autoethnography, I began with me thinking about what I had to say for myself when the judge asked me if I had anything to say at my sentencing hearing. I now realize that I did not have anything to say then because very little cognitive thought had gone into the decision making surrounding the actions that I had perpetuated that led me to the courtroom to be sentenced. My actions thus far were the result of how I thought about myself and my surroundings. The school system had trained me to think that my self-value was determined by how well I assimilated to white society's standards. So when that judge asked me if I had anything to say, I did not know what to say because I had failed to measure up to White society's standards of how I was supposed to socialize reality. Chapter IV was like a caterpillars cocoon. It was the space where my transformation from a male to a boy to finally a man took place.

When one watches a great movie, they often go tell friends and loved ones about the movie. I was the same way with good books. Chapter V begins with me coming out of my cocoon so to speak. I had just finished some great African-centered narrative and was trying to explain messages of self-love that I got from the book to a prison gang leader. The gang leader was able to ridicule and anger me because I could not articulate my thoughts on the subject I was

speaking about because I did not have a complete grasp of the subject. This began my journey into finding out how to articulate my thoughts and ideas about self-love in a way that would captivate my urban peers. Chapter V also allowed the reader to see me fully transformed from my caterpillar state of self-loathing to a soaring butterfly filled with self-love and eager to spread it. Chapter V also demonstrated how I navigated through society now that I had learned and understood the social movements, ideals, and beliefs of my ancestors.

Chapter VI is a reflective chapter where I looked back at certain actions of self-hate that I perpetuated as a boy. I pontificated on whether I would have committed these actions if I had been introduced to certain Urban and African-centered narratives where characters committed similar acts of self-hate against others. Chapter VI also looked back on an incident that foretold my journey from self-hate to self-love. It was also in chapter VI where I found out that my entire journey was and is about moving from self-hate to self-love and spreading the self-love in every place and space that I can. Chapter VI is where I realized that I am a much better community healer than a community killer.

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