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So-journeying: creating sacred space in education

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SO-JOURNEYING: CREATING SACRED SPACE IN EDUCATION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of Curriculum and Instruction

by

Tayari kwa Salaam
B.A., Southern University at New Orleans, 1993
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1997
December, 2003
To
my African and African American ancestors,
particularly African and African American women.

To
Aline Nia Duminy St. Julien,
my mother.

To
Kiini Ibura Salaam,
writer/artist extra ordinaire.
Acknowledgments

Libation is a traditional practice in many African societies done at the beginning and at the end of significant events. Libation is about giving homage and honor to those who came before, those who laid the foundation for the lives of those living. For me, libation is also about initiating a collective experience in recognition of the interrelationship of all involved in that moment. My acknowledgments are a libation of words, a libation of appreciation.

I thank the COLLECTIVE SPIRIT of All-That-Exists (Earth, Wind, Fire, Air, the material world—inorganic, organic, plant, animal, human—and the rest of the Cosmos); all that lived/was/became (the past); all that is living/be-ing/becoming (the present); all that will live/be/become (the future); the past/present/future of now and each and every moment.

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ALL THIS ENERGY AND SPIRIT WAS WITH ME THROUGHOUT THIS PROCESS.

GETTING A DOCTORATE IS VERY MUCH AN *I~WE* PROCESS,

THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COLLECTIVE,

AND I AM THANKFUL FOR MY *I~WE.*
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Abstract

This research questions current taken-for-granted meanings given to school, education, teaching and curriculum from an African/African American perspective. This inquiry is based on my experiences as an African American woman curriculum theorist committed to the education of African American youth. Drawing on the lifework of Sojourner Truth, a nineteenth century African American woman abolitionist and human rights activist, this work seeks to explore aspects of both African/African American-centered education and curriculum theory as a means of informing understandings of school, education, teaching and curriculum. My research question is: How does Sojourner Truth inform curriculum theory?

This inquiry is a self-exploration and self-evaluation from African/African American-centered education through curriculum theory inspired by the call of Sojourner Truth. Referencing literature relative to Sojourner Truth, African/African American-centered education and curriculum theory, this dissertation makes connections between Truth’s lived experiences and its relevance to African/African American-centered education and curriculum theory. Based on Sojourner Truth’s African/African American world view as well as my own, I developed call-and-response in the context of I~We as my methodology which honors the communion, community, and communication of All-That-Exists. Using this as well as autobiographical methods, I explored an African world view, African/African American-centered education, curriculum theory as well as spirituality in education.
The results of this inquiry suggest:  1) The role of spirituality in education needs to be reexamined so that the spirit of life can become the focus of school, education, teaching, and curriculum.  2) An African/African American world view of life is a guide, source, and resource for school, education, teaching, and curriculum; 3) To challenge limited, static contemporary approaches to learning, so-journeying is an authentic, organic process of and approach to learning which reflects learning as lifelong and rooted in life; 4) Following the belief that human beings are spiritual beings having a human experience, education necessitates creating sacred space.
Chapter One

The Call of Sojourner Truth

“I come from another field . . .”

As an African American woman community activist, I see myself as part of, what I call, a visionary tradition for humanity. Since our ancestors’ forced entry into the United States, many African Americans have employed a diverse range of efforts to fight for human rights. Attempts to document the efforts of African Americans who have and continue to address the social and societal inequalities of the United States fall flat when written as a linear, indivisible her/his-story. Petra Munro (1998) asserts that her/his-story is a “confluence of processes so interconnected that it cannot be reduced to a unitary storyline” (p. 263). When the efforts of many African and African American ancestors converge, a “confluence of processes” emerges creating a visionary tradition for humanity. I acknowledge, appreciate, and honor those African Americans in whose path I now walk.

When growing up, my mother played her part in this tradition by embracing her “Blackness” at a time when many African Americans were rejecting it. I remember my mother coming into our newly-built, “huge” kitchen with its red tile floor, her hair cut short and “natural.” I thought my mother had lost her mind. What I did not know then

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1 Fitch and Mandzuik (1997), p. 123. The speech in which this declaration was made is also found in Lerner (1973), pp. 568-70; Campbell (1989), pp. 252-54; and in Stetson and David (1994), pp. 214-15.

2 “Social” is between and among individuals while “societal” is between and among institutions.

3 Throughout my dissertation, I write different forms of the word “history.” My aim is to disrupt the notion that the narrative called “history” is, as Petra Munro (1998) has said so well, “unitary, male, heterosexual, [and] white” (p. 265).
was that my mother was resisting centuries of denigration, cultural distortion, and negative images of people of African descent. Years later, I not only wore an “Afro” hairstyle but also adopted a lifestyle reflective of my African/African American cultural heritage.\footnote{I use “African/African American” to appreciate and acknowledge how my culture, her/his-story, and experiences are both African and African American.}

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, I became a cultural nationalist. Cultural nationalism, was a political outlook based on the belief that we African Americans, due to a history of oppression and repression, had lost a sense of who we were and our purpose for living. The harshness of racism and systematic inequality created a mentality of self-hate, a cycle of poverty, and little hope for a future among African Americans. As one of our mottoes expressed, “Chains on our bodies. Now chains on our brains.”

We cultural nationalists believed that culture was the most effective means for teaching our people to take an active role in shaping our lives and determining our future. We attempted to transform our individual and collective lives by creating a cultural reality and lifestyle based on what we determined as traditional African values, beliefs, and practices. We dressed in what we considered traditional African attire, changed our “slave names” to African ones, and spoke as much Kiswahili\footnote{\emph{The World Factbook 2002} of the Central Intelligence Agency notes, “Kiswahili (Swahili) is the mother tongue of the Bantu people living in Zanzibar and nearby coastal Tanzania; although Kiswahili is Bantu in structure and origin, its vocabulary draws on a variety of sources, including Arabic and English, and it has become the lingua franca of central and eastern Africa” (p. 503).} as possible. Our ultimate goal was to build a nation of healthy, strong, intelligent, self-determining African Americans.
Before I became a cultural nationalist, I was a new parent faced with the question of how to educate my children. I remember my mother educating us with her pedagogy of “tuff love” making sure my sisters, brothers, and I would live life as fully as possible. Three of her adages come to mind. “The greatest gift you could give me is self-sufficiency.” We are all independent, loving, caring women and men actively involved in making our communities better places than when we found them.6 “To thine own self be true” taught honesty. “Things done by halves are never done right” taught us to strive for our best in our daily living as well as in all our accomplishments. We learned discipline through a daily routine and were motivated to live up to her expectations with love, games, and rewards. My mother’s approach to education will always be my grounding for school, education, teaching, and curriculum.

With my mother’s pedagogy as my reference, I had a sense of the kind of education I wanted for my children. Deciding that public school education was inadequate, especially for African American youth, I was caught in a quandary as to what to do for my young ones’ education. My brother-in-law had returned from New York City sharing what he experienced at an “independent Black institution.”7 Initiated and maintained by African American parents and other committed African American adults, the school was dedicated to the needs of African American youth. My brother-in-law and I joined with other concerned parents to initiate and maintain Dokpwe Work/Study Center, our own independent Black institution in New Orleans, Louisiana.

6 The concept of making one’s community better than when one found it is taken from Kuumba (Creativity), the sixth principle of the Nguzo Saba (Seven Principles). See Karenga (1998), p. 62.

7 “Independent Black institution” is a designation decided upon in 1970 by a group of African American teachers and community activists. See Chapter Four for a history of the independent Black school movement.
After two years, I and other parents initiated a second independent Black school, Ahidiana Work/Study Center. Over the next sixteen years from 1970 to 1986, I developed curriculum for, taught in, and administrated these two independent Black schools. I began to see myself as both teacher and activist contributing to the defense and development of African American people through education of African American youth.

After a decade and a half as a teacher/activist in independent Black schools, emotional and psychological pressures in my personal life began to intrude on my professional life. My seventeen-year marriage broke up. I became a “displaced homemaker.” I had to learn how to be a single mother. The organization which birthed me politically and professionally disintegrated. Returning to school, I graduated magna cum laude with a bachelor of arts degree in elementary education. I was diagnosed with a benign meningioma and had brain surgery. Under the weight of these challenges, I became clinically depressed. When I came out of my depression, I was healed emotionally, but I had lost my way. Not knowing what to do, I eventually decided to enter graduate school in the fall of 1995.

Before beginning my graduate studies, I had confidently contributed to the “field” of education for thirty years. With certainty and ease, I led workshops and lectured, both locally and nationally, on issues of education and African American youth, the defense and development of Black women, and the African American family. Standing in my accomplishments as an educator, I took the truth/s that I held dear from African/African American-centered education and attempted to re-vision those truth/s

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8 For curricular foci and teaching at our schools, see a description and discussion of African/African American-centered education in Chapters Four and Five.
through curriculum theory. Attempting to synthesize these two fields left me in a state of perturbation. Both African/African American-centered education and curriculum theory encouraged particular educational approaches which seemed irreconcilable. Though I was surrounded by a myriad of possibilities, I felt stuck in a quagmire of confusion, anxiety, and doubt. Although I had boundless ideas and expertise, I could not source them. Allowing myself to be intimidated, I believed the theorizing I had already done in my own world did not count in the world of academia. Tried as I might, I was not able to make the kinds of connections that would enable me to voice what I had to contribute to the “field” of curriculum theory.

The curriculum theory courses I studied and the professors who taught them contradicted what I knew and understood to be true. Rather than seeing identity as limited to one subjectivity, I learned that identity is made up of many subjectivities in perpetual flux. Through curriculum theory, I learned that experience is intrinsic to education. I was challenged to reevaluate my conceptions about school, education, teaching, and curriculum. My time away from home in an unfamiliar world reaffirmed who I was and who I was not. As I began to be clearer about who I was, I started to see complementary connections between who I am personally and what I do professionally. In the process of self-exploration and self-evaluation through curriculum theory—courses, teaching, conference presentations—questions surfaced about African/African American-centered education.\(^9\) While I was not ready to reject African/African American-centered education, the new ideas and concepts I was learning as a curriculum theory student offered me a new expansive view of education. I was no

\(^9\) “African/African American-centered education” centers on both that which is African and that which is African American in the culture, her/his-story, and experiences of African Americans.
longer at home in the “field” of African/African American-centered education nor comfortable in the “field” of curriculum theory. I needed to find a balance between what I still valued in African/African American-centered education and my new beliefs from curriculum theory.

**The Call of Sojourner Truth**

Toward the end of my course work in curriculum theory, at the beginning of what became my doctoral dance of researching, reading, theorizing, and “writing/righting” (Munro, 1998, p. 265), Sojourner Truth came to me. I was unaware of her significance to my growth and development as a teacher/activist and curriculum theorist until I read an interview with one of Truth’s biographers, Nell Irvin Painter. She revealed how Sojourner Truth “came to [her] as a voice” (Cupples et al., 1995, p. 5). At that moment, I realized that Truth had called me as well. In the course “Engendering Curriculum History,” I began to respond to Truth’s call by researching, reading, and writing about her. Over time, I found the balance I needed through studying Sojourner Truth’s life.

Sojourner Truth originally attracted me because she is anomalous. Since she was not “a Southern plantation slave” (Painter, 1998, p. xii), her story as an enslaved African does not fit what is currently accepted as known about enslavement. A northern rather than southern, a rural rather than urban enslaved African American woman, Truth lived in a world that was not predominantly populated by Africans and African Americans. In contrast, enslaved Africans and African Americans in southern United States lived in larger groups than those enslaved in the North. Because only a few families owned enslaved Africans where she grew up, Truth’s experiences as an enslaved woman were distinct (Painter, 1996). Truth’s success as a preacher and
lecturer negates the notion that a lack of formal education or poverty prevents one from presenting ideas perspicuously. Often being the only Black woman among White women and the only woman among Black men, Truth challenged the concept that “all the women are White, all the Blacks are men.”

My interest in Sojourner Truth blossomed as I discovered particular parallels between Truth and myself. Like Truth, I am an African American mother of five who renamed myself and who uses personally interpreted spirituality to guide my social activism. Like Truth, I love to sing and grew up hearing my mother sing as she carried out her household duties. In their book *Sojourner Truth As Orator: Wit, Story, and Song*, Suzanne Pullon Fitch and Roseann Mandzuik (1997) describe how Truth used singing to performatively present her ideas to audiences. She knew the power of song, of metaphor, and of real world imagery. As an embodied teacher, Truth used all that she had at her disposal—her stature, her physique, her voice, her body, her experience—to pass on her message. I too embody presentations using song, narrative, and performance to engage audiences. Tapping into my feelings of affinity and admiration for Truth, Fitch and Mandzuick capture Truth’s performative power:

> In her unadorned dress and turban, with her strong voice and haunting singing, Truth challenged audiences to consider the worth of herself and her experiences. She asked them to broaden their perspectives, to mend their ways, and to be God’s servants in order to ensure justice and equality. She was not afraid to speak forthrightly and to answer a heckler with a stern admonition or to profess her faith and values through the performance of a song. In all, her narratives and

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10 From the title of the classic 1982 volume on Black women’s studies edited by Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith.

11 My use of “embbody” is specific. To embody is to involve the body, that is, as many of the five senses as possible as well as physical expressions of the body such as singing, movement, and audience participation.
her personal character blended seamlessly, such that Truth herself understood the correspondence and its persuasive force. (p. 83)

Because of our various personal similarities and our shared “African/African-American culture” (Myers, 1987, p. 74), her-story, and lived experiences, I resonate with Truth.

In Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend, Carleton Mabee and Susan Mabee Newhouse (1993) make note of how Truth defied what many in society consider limitations by mining her spirituality for self-transformation and the transformation of others. I was struck by Truth’s refusal to allow her inability to read and write in a literate society to stop her from expressing her thinking, her poverty to limit her possibilities, and her subjectivities to be a barrier to relating to others different from herself. Mabee and Newhouse reveal:

Drawing on her faith in God, Truth acted courageously against the folly and injustice of her time. Despite her poverty and illiteracy, despite being black in a predominantly white society, despite customary pressure at the time for women to remain passive, she significantly shaped both her own life and the struggle for human rights. She became in her time and ours an inspiration to women, to blacks, to the poor, and to the religious. (p. ix)

Sojourner Truth’s wisdom words and awesome actions energized me on multiple levels. Truth’s fearlessness in the face of a foreign world spoke directly to my struggles as a graduate student. Leaving my African American community in New Orleans to attend graduate school at Louisiana State University, I found myself in the world of academia, a world very different from my own. I became a minority, “black in a predominantly white society.” I was confronted by new ideas that were foreign to who I

\[12\] Some African Americans, like Myers, choose to hyphenate African American, while others do not. I am among those African Americans who do not.

\[13\] Because I am speaking of the narrative which two African American women share (Sojourner Truth and myself), I write “her-story.”
was and what I knew. I had to learn how to execute the challenging task of thinking and writing critically, an experience for which I had no reference. I was expected to speak from my own voice, and I had no clue as to what that meant. Truth’s capability (will and ability) to interact with those different from herself gave me courage at a time when my self-confidence was waning.

Sojourner Truth not only calls to me because she refused to allow social and societal norms to stop her; she also used her differences to act in the world. In “Sojourner Truth in Life and Memory: Writing the Biography of an American Exotic,” Nell Irvin Painter (1990) points to how Truth called upon all her lived experiences to become both a spirited, stirring preacher and an impassioned proponent for those socially, politically, and economically excluded:

She had been an enslaved worker, an experience she called upon regularly to authenticate her views; she was an inspired, moving preacher with a style that combined the power of her African heritage and the rhetoric of the Second Great Awakening evangelism; and she was a forceful advocate for the rights of blacks (enslaved and emancipated) and women (black and white). (p. 8)

After immersing myself in Sojourner Truth’s words and deeds, I began to use her as a model for personal and professional development. Sojourner Truth’s enslavement did not limit her personal transcendence, her inability to read and write to stop her social activism, and her lack of formal education and her poverty to prevent her from interacting with those who were literate and wealthy. Taking a cue from Truth’s self-determination and tenacity, I decided my oppression nor my lack of experience with critical thinking and writing to stop me from putting my thoughts on paper. With Sojourner Truth as my touchstone, I began to believe that my thinking is valid and meaningful, that I can theorize, that I can put my thoughts on paper. When I
researched, read, and wrote about Sojourner Truth, I wrote a twenty-page paper and, for the first time, I found still more to say. Truth’s life experiences taught me that what I have to say is worth listening to in my own world and in the world of academia. Sojourner Truth became my beacon for continuing to study in higher education by helping me see the value of my own experiences in the “field” of curriculum theory. As my catalyst, Truth not only motivates me to write my ideas, but also gives me the willingness and the strength to publish them. Because of Truth and her lifework,\(^\text{14}\) I found my voice.

Sojourner Truth not only inspires me personally, she also motivates me as a social activist. Her audacious fortitude for justice and equality beckoned me to speak and act in ways which empower self and others to create just, equitable, peaceful communities. Un schooled, poor and an African American woman, Truth could have been excluded from the existing society of her day.\(^\text{15}\) Rather than being shut out and ignored, she became a formidable force in the struggle for human rights. Sojourner Truth’s self-transformation from an enslaved worker into a sojourner for truth encourages me to re-commit to my own self-transformation and the transformation of others.

Sojourner Truth was a perennial learner and consummate teacher. Her phenomenal pedagogy holds many instructive gifts for me as a learner, teacher, and curriculum theorist. Most instructive was Truth’s commitment to remain a seeker of who

\(^{14}\) “Lifework” is taken from the book title *Glorying in Tribulation: The Lifework of Sojourner Truth* by Stetson and David (1994). “Lifework” is a fluid, flexible word which creates an interplay of multiple meanings. One possible meaning is one’s life is one’s work. Another is a dictionary definition, “the entire or principal work of one’s lifetime.”

\(^{15}\) I thank Hilton Kelly for the term “unschooled.” He is one of my peer readers with whom I had several conversations (calls and responses).
she was in relation to self and to others. The more I read about Truth, the more I realized the importance of learning through living. Her lived experiences were her guide, her source, and her resource for her life lessons. As guide, Truth’s lived experiences influenced her specific course of action as she learned through living. As resource, Truth’s lived experiences were a wellspring of supply, support, and information for her growth and development. As source, Truth’s lived experiences acted as a generative force for the dynamic, ever-present, perpetual process of her own education. The way Sojourner Truth lived her life revealed an authentic, organic approach to learning.

Truth was adept at determining where she was, what path to take, and how to make her way in the world. She was willing to change based on her life lessons and embraced change as a welcomed outcome of learning. Truth assertively responded to the ebb and flow of her life refusing to aggressively force her will and wishes upon it. She was a living sign of what Jean Toomer meant when he said, “Perhaps . . . our lot on earth is to seek and to search. Now and again we find enough to enable us to carry on” (qtd. in Mullane, 1995, p. 428). Like Sojourner Truth, I am willing to seek and to search responding to my life confidently and boldly while learning from living my own experiences.

As a teacher, Sojourner Truth made use of her wit, wisdom, and eloquence. At will, while constantly observing her listeners, Truth would decide which teaching technique or combination of techniques would hold and continue to hold her audience’s attention. Singing was one practice Truth always used when teaching—singing as a distraction from unwanted behavior or to introduce a controversial or sensitive message.
Aware of how her look and tone of voice affected her audiences, Truth employed “embodied rhetoric” (Painter, 1996, p. 140)—the use of her body to accentuate her words. In “Ecce Homo, Ain’t (Ar’n’t) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others: The Human in a Post-Humanist Landscape,” Donna Haraway (1992) claims, “The language of Sojourner Truth’s body was as electrifying as the language of her speech” (p. 92).

Truth was an expert in “reading” her listeners. She employed a range of speech styles to get and keep her audience’s attention (Fitch and Mandzuik, 1997)—“guttural [Afro-]Dutch accent from her early childhood, the broken English of white illiterates, black dialect (but not, she [Truth] insisted, Southern black dialect), and standard English” (Mabee and Newhouse, 1993, p. 64). Truth was able to select a language she knew was familiar to her listeners. Astute and perceptive, Truth made sure she was easily understood and remained ordinary in her expressions (Fitch and Mandzuik, 1997).

Sojourner Truth was skilled at communicating her message no matter how controversial or sensitive its issue. She recognized the necessity of sometimes looking foolish in order to get her message across. Humor was her mainstay (Fitch and Mandzuik, 1997). Humor softened hostility, caused laughter, and allowed time for thought. Truth also depended on narrative forms to carry her message. She was particularly adroit when it came to the Bible, a text many read, studied, and even memorized (Painter, 1996). Truth’s inability to read did not stop her from knowing the Bible so well that at a moment’s notice she could reference it in support of her thinking. Fitch and Mandzuik (1997) state:

Truth’s personal style was marked by an intertwining of small anecdotes, tales from her personal experiences, familiar biblical references, and homespun,
commonsense arguments. These basic aspects of her rhetoric combined to form a substantial, persuasive framework. (p. 51)

Truth taught me that getting a message across is the goal of teaching and requires any number to teaching techniques and strategies—singing, story, humor, looking foolish, tone of voice, use of my stature and physique, body movements.

While Sojourner Truth shares commonality with other African American women, she is distinct in her relevance to me. What distinguishes Truth from other African American women who inspire and motivate me is her capability (will and ability) to speak to multiple facets of who I am and what I believe. Truth inspires and motivates me personally and professionally as learner, teacher, African American woman, social activist, and curriculum theorist. Sojourner Truth’s life successes taught me to move beyond my circumstances and conditions to achieve whatever goal I set for myself. Truth’s approach to learning enabled me to see each moment of every day rich with possibilities for self-exploration and self-evaluation. Most influential of all is that Sojourner Truth is an archetype for “real humanism,” that is, “accepting one’s own humanity in the particular form in which it expresses itself and then initiating and sustaining exchanges with others in the context of our common humanity” (Karenga, 1998, p. 54).

Dissertation Overview

For me, Sojourner Truth and her life are a dynamic, ever expanding, multiple wellspring for curriculum theorizing. In response to the call of Sojourner Truth, I found myself expanding my thinking about school as well as education, teaching, and curriculum. By enlarging their restrictive meanings to more dynamic, interactive, and spirited ones, I began to think about school, education, teaching, and curriculum in new
ways. Rather than thinking of education as school within four walls and curriculum as fixed content for teachers to follow, I began to conceive, create, and conjure up my own ways of looking at school, education, teaching, and curriculum. I asked new questions. What would it mean to live life in schools? How do we bring life into schools? What would it mean if we think of education and school beyond boundaries? What does this mean for curriculum? What curriculum would best reflect and serve living life in schools? What adjustments would teachers need to make? How do we curriculum theorists “come from another field” in our understandings of school, education, teaching, and curriculum? Based on these ponderings, I decided on my dissertation focus and the following research question: How does the life of Sojourner Truth inform curriculum theory?

My dissertation is a journey of self-exploration and self-evaluation from African/African American-centered education through curriculum theory inspired by the call of Sojourner Truth. In response, I conceived, created, and conjured up a process of and an approach to learning as well as my vision for creating sacred space in education. Sojourner Truth was a touchstone throughout this journey. In appreciation, acknowledgment, and in honor of her, I entitle my dissertation So-journeying: Creating Sacred Space in Education.

In Chapter Two, “Sojourner Truth: Kaleidoscope of Brilliant Fragments,” I introduce and discuss Sojourner Truth and her lifework. I reveal the difficulty of rendering the life of a woman who defies a linear, sequential, simple storyline. I then tell the story of Truth kaleidoscopically in order to reflect the fragmentary, partial, complex

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16 For a discussion of what I mean by “life,” see Chapter Six.
quality of her life. I begin Truth’s life story with her African/African American grounding, a significant characteristic seldom noted by biographers. I then relate her days in enslavement and how she freed herself in her own unique way. Through narrative, I show Truth’s affinity with truth and her search for real Christianity. I end with a portrayal of Truth as a kaleidoscope of some of her brilliant fragments.

In Chapter Three, “Call-and-Response in the Context of I~We,” I introduce I~We and call-and-response as two African/African American paradigmatic practices and how these practices are based in an African world view. After describing and discussing both, I point out how these two common cultural practices have multiple applications. In the realm of academia, one application of call-and-response in the context of I~We is educational research. I explain how I used call-and-response in the context of I~We as my methodology, its benefits and how it enabled me to work through my research.

In Chapter Four, “My Journey With African/African American-Centered Education,” I begin by describing various ways in which Sojourner Truth valued and validated her African origins and heritage. I introduce and outline an African world view which is the source of African/African American heritage as well as of African/African American-centered education. I detail an account of the independent Black school movement which over time developed curricula for African/African American-centered education. Based on my sixteen-year experience developing curriculum in two independent Black schools, I discuss four foci of African/African American-centered educational curriculum with the voices of Maulana Karenga, Mwalimu Shujaa, Carol Lee

17 For my discussion of “African world view,” see Chapter Four.
(Safisha Madhubuti), Kofi Lomotey, Beverly Gordon, and Joyce King. I then disclose how I began to personally question myself prompting me to question African/African American-centered education.

In Chapter Five, “My Journey as an African American Woman Curriculum Theorist,” I begin by pointing out how Sojourner Truth’s use of her “difference” to acquire new knowledge paralleled my own journey as an African American woman curriculum theorist. I describe and discuss my personal transformation through curriculum theory and how that transformation expanded who I am professionally. I compare three curricular concepts of John Dewey’s educational philosophy to my own experiences in African/African American-centered education. After commenting on the lack of representation of African Americans, particularly African American women, in curriculum theory, I review William Watkins’ essay on Black curricular orientations. I express the significance of locating and including Sojourner Truth in my graduate study and research as well as review how Sojourner Truth provides a pathway for other women to theorize.

Chapter Six, “Affirmation of Life: Spirituality in Education,” is dedicated to one of the major missings in curriculum theory and education in general—spirituality. I begin by acknowledging the powerful and consistent force spirituality was in Truth’s life and describe the active, practical, and personal role religion played in Truth’s lifework. I offer my belief that the power Sojourner Truth accessed through spirituality is available to all of us. Pointing out how schools all too frequently ignore the spiritual in education, I explain how most of my formal education, from elementary to college in Catholic schools, focused on religion and not spirituality. I review two essays—one by Dwayne
Huebner and the other by Angela Lydon—which offer comprehensive conceptions of education and spirituality. Based on an African/African American world view, I offer my own vision for spirituality in education—a way of living life as affirmation.

In Chapter Seven, “So-journeying: Creating Sacred Space in Education,” I introduce and discuss so-journeying, an authentic, organic process and approach to learning. I reflect on my dissertation as a journey and explain how so-journeying enabled me to learn through living while navigating and negotiating the uncertain, unknown, contradictory messiness of life and, as a result, discovering and deciphering truth/s. I then make my call for creating sacred space in education.

A Circuitous, Polysemous Gumbo Ya Ya

During one of her speeches at the First Annual Meeting of the American Equal Rights Association in New York City on May 9, 1867, Sojourner Truth declared "I come from another field." I too “come from another field.” I came to curriculum theory from a practical community-based perspective. Rather than undergoing formal educational instruction and then apply it, I built my understanding of education through daily practice. Because of my experiential background in education, I take a personal approach to curriculum theorizing and educational practices.

As noted by Nayo Watkins, community activist and poet, my dissertation is reflective of circular thinking. Watkins saw connections between and among pieces in my work and felt “that if you [placed] them on a line they may not seem to have connection but in [a] circle they create energy which feed each other and connect to each other” (Phone conversation, 16 August 2001). Rather than flowing in a point-by-point sequential, linear fashion, the connections between my dissertation chapters are
circuitous and polysemous. The chapters reflect the complex, messiness of my dissertation journey. I theorize from what Charles Frye (1983-1984) asserts is “a multi-leveled or hieroglyphic thinking which informs African-American culture” (pp. 33-34). Readers may be challenged to leave behind their familiarity with singular-themed, literal texts and be willing to practice a more intuitive, personal, imaginative reading approach.

In my dissertation, I use Sojourner Truth as one voice in a chorus of theorists, scholars, artists, historians. I embrace, involve, and draw on multiple voices (including my own) to source and resource multiple perspectives, spirit, and energy. Each voice participates in my “gumbo ya ya.” In Jambalaya: the Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals, Luisah Teish (1985) explains:

Gumbo ya ya is a creole term that means “Everybody talks at once.” It is a stream of consciousness . . . The person speaking comments on the subject at hand, any stories from the past and future probabilities that are seemingly relevant to the subject, the immediate environment, and their own inner process, all within the same unpunctuated paragraph. While the principle person is speaking, all other participants (who cannot truly be called “listeners”) are preparing what they’re going to say next (which cannot truly be called a “response”). The next person acquires “the floor” simply by cutting in and speaking louder than the present speaker. The new “floor master” is allowed a sentence or two then gumbo ya ya starts up again. (p. 139-140, emphasis added.)

Gumbo ya ya goes on in my head as soon as there is a “subject at hand.” A voice will comment on and share snippets of thoughts or friendly reminders of “past and future probabilities that are seemingly relevant to the subject, the immediate environment, and their own inner process.” This dissertation is a gumbo ya ya reflecting my journey from African/African American-centered education through curriculum theory toward a future of creating sacred space in education. Each dissertation chapter is a mix of my own perspectives and learned concepts along with the thinking of theorists, scholars, artists,
historians. Though I am the *so-journer* of this dissertation, the multiple voices of others are perpetually present in my mind “preparing what they’re going to say next.” Sometimes I agree while at other times I do not. Sometimes one voice catches my attention while others are quiet allowing that voice to come forward. My *gumbo ya ya* is a multi-layered, poly-voiced chorus reflecting the multiplicity and complexity of my dissertation journey.
Chapter Two

Sojourner Truth: Kaleidoscope of Brilliant Fragments

“Truth’s multiple meanings cannot be reconciled.”
“She floats.”

In this chapter, I introduce and discuss Sojourner Truth and her lifework. I reveal the difficulty of rendering the life of a woman who defies a linear, sequential, simple storyline. I then tell the story of Truth kaleidoscopically in order to reflect the fragmentary, partial, complex quality of her life. I begin Truth’s life story with her African/African American grounding, a significant characteristic seldom noted by biographers. I then relate her days in enslavement and how she freed herself in her own unique way. Through narrative, I show Truth’s affinity with truth and her search for real Christianity. I end with a portrayal of Truth as a kaleidoscope of some of her brilliant fragments and the catalyst for me beginning my dissertation journey.

Sojourner Truth: A Conundrum

A nineteenth century African American woman abolitionist and human rights activist, Sojourner Truth has been and continues to be a conundrum for her biographers. Formerly enslaved in upstate New York, Truth remains a remarkable figure who, for Berenice Lowe (1956), “defied description” (p. 131). The attractiveness of Truth’s life to biographers is that her story is multiple, messy, and fluid while her life is marked by ambiguity, difference, and paradox. In Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol, biographer Nell Irvin Painter (1996) reveals, “Truth’s multiple meanings cannot be reconciled” (p.129). In “Doers of the Word” African-American Women Speakers and

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Writers in the North (1830-1880), Carla Peterson (1995) calls Sojourner Truth “an overdetermined historical figure,” that is, our knowledge about Truth is “always already interpreted by others from their situated and partial perspectives” (p. 24).

What we know about Truth is partial. We know she was born at the turn of the nineteenth century, but we don’t know when. We know Truth lived through most of the nineteenth century, but we know little about what she did, particularly during the years right before she renamed herself and became an itinerant evangelist. Moreover, the little we do know about Truth comes to us through the newspapers and journals of her day as well as second hand, mediated through others in the “Narratives of Sojourner Truth.”19 Truth comes to us fragmentary and circuitous creating, what Painter (1990) calls, “her ambiguous personal presence” (p.13).

Sojourner Truth as Myth

Sojourner Truth can become whoever and whatever one wants her to be. Much has been written about Sojourner Truth and many of these works mythologize her. One reason is how resources and other research material make it possible to mythologize Truth. As biographers Carleton Mabee and Susan Mabee Newhouse (1993) note in the introduction of Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend, resources are limited. Mabee and Newhouse also state that past writings about Truth have no citations and some writers have used creative license without informing readers of this fact. Painter (1996) points out how there are only fragments available to find what happened and what Truth herself might have said. Because Truth was an enslaved African, birth dates and family history are nonexistent or inaccurate.

19 Painter’s (1994) plural representation reflects the many and multiple editions of the Narrative of Sojourner Truth.
Another cause of the mythology of Sojourner Truth is that there are several editions of her *Narrative*. Though the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* may seem to be one of the best sources about her life history, it is not. Some twenty years had passed since her enslavement when Truth told her story to Olive Gilbert, “abolitionist-feminist” (Mabee and Newhouse, 1993, p. 52) in 1850. Truth and Gilbert both lived at Northampton in Massachusetts at that time. The *Narrative* was intended to help Truth raise income and not necessarily to be a cited text. Frances Titus, “Battle Creek neighbor and friend” (Painter, 1996, p. 142), edited the *Narrative* in 1875, 1878, and 1884 (Mabee and Newhouse, 1993). Titus added the “Book of Life” in 1875 and the Memorial Chapter in a later edition in 1884 (Painter, 1996). Truth depended on Gilbert and Titus as amanuenses to record what she said. The *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* is, therefore, an account by all three women.

Legends taken as “fact” also contribute to Sojourner Truth’s mystery. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “Libyan Sibyl,” Frances Dana Gage’s “Ar’n’t I a Woman?” and Elizabeth Cady Stanton-Susan B. Anthony’s Sojourner Truth have all been taken as “fact.” To be sure, Sojourner Truth knew these prominent women of her day. Stowe was a successful fiction writer whom Truth decided to visit in hopes that Stowe would give Truth a promotional review of her *Narrative*. In 1851, Truth did speak in Akron at the Ohio Woman’s Rights Convention which Frances Dana Gage chaired. Truth was also a suffragist as were Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in the women’s suffrage movement during the 1860s. Cross-referencing what Stanton and Anthony wrote about Truth with newspaper accounts and letters by Truth, her friends, and

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20 An amanuensis is someone employed to write from dictation.
associates as well as the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* reveal partial portrayals of Sojourner Truth and her contributions to social justice. Also, Truth was alleged to have been active in the Underground Railroad. She did know and even worked with some of the people involved in the Railroad, but Mabee and Newhouse (1993) maintain that Truth did not play any role in its operation.

The sociocultural, sociohistorical, and sociopolitical context in which Sojourner Truth lived influenced how she became a person she was not. According to Painter (1996), the public was ignorant of and confusion about the African American woman. As time passed, Painter (1996) perceptively notes, Truth was attractive to certain White audiences because she seemed to be an oddity, “a truth-telling entertainer” (p. 147) and “an adorable exotic” (p. 181). In avoidance of Truth’s message, more attention was given to her persona and Truth became a fiction. Mabee and Newhouse (1993) state, “Many Americans were more willing to see Truth as passive than active, African than American, lofty rather than down to earth. Many were willing to see her brooding and secret rather than as aggressive and willing to threaten the established order” (p. 115).

Our contemporary understandings of Sojourner Truth have likewise been affected by her/historical memory lapse and denial as well as by privileged his-stories. Painter (1996) asks us to consider how pseudo “facts”—the mythic South as the land of enslavement; northern enslavement not as horrible as southern enslavement; and the “slave South” versus the “free North—are part of a more current psychosis we need to face when we look at the her/his-story of this country. Sojourner Truth, a former enslaved African, is caught in our psychosis. Privileged his-stories exclude a range of sociocultural, sociohistorical, and sociopolitical forces that have resulted from and have
been motivated by social action (Painter, 1996). Truth’s motivation—her religion and her religious beliefs—is an example of this exclusion. Privileged his-stories are also rooted in racism and sexism. Why is it that recorded his-story has Truth as the only African American woman preaching at that time? As many as eighty African American women were preaching during the same time as Truth (Painter, 1996). In addition, privileged his-stories have hidden women’s involvement in social change.

Sojourner Truth, consciously and sometimes unwittingly, participated in the creation of her myth. Because she did not read or write, she had to depend on others to read to her or write about her. When Frances Titus worked on the *Narrative*, Truth simply turned over materials she had collected (Mabee and Newhouse, 1993) and she was unable to read what Titus finally wrote. In some instances, Truth did not mind some degree of myth-making, for she found myths added to her mystery and popularity. Besides, for Truth, claims Mabee and Newhouse, moral truth took precedence over “factual” truth. Painter (1996) suggests that when Truth was compared to a number of literary female figures, she might not have questioned the comparisons because it afforded her publicity. The combination of Truth functioning outside of the expected and her continual “re-fashioning” (Painter, 1996, p. 141) of who she said she was, made it almost impossible to portray her. Another factor that augments Sojourner Truth as myth is that she lived a long time and, as Painter (1996) writes, seemed to be forever old and forever dying. Each time she was believed dead and another memorial written, she would be seen again, moving about, accomplishing her life mission.

Sojourner Truth has been re-mythologization over the years. Neglecting to research Truth’s life and times, writers unconsciously use the myth of Truth as “fact”
and, thus, institutionalize her fiction. Mabee and Newhouse (1993) offer examples of writers who have told Truth’s life story from various perspectives for a variety of purposes. The executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the late 1940s misrepresented the relationship between Sojourner Truth and President Lincoln. Mabee and Newhouse (1993) reveal:

In the late 1940s, executive secretary Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) insisted extravagantly that Truth returned to the White House “time and time again” to urge Lincoln to enlist free blacks and that “her arguments, combined with the manpower needs of the Union Army, eventually won over Lincoln and Congress.” (p. 125)

Truth’s actions to desegregate public transportation in Washington, D.C. have also been misrepresented by some contemporary journalists. A final example of the process of re-mythologization is found in the following Mabee and Newhouse passage:

Several twentieth-century writers have claimed that Truth, in promoting the settlement of blacks in the West, asked for the creation of a black “state.” The earliest of these writers, according to available evidence, was Herbert Aptheker, a radical historian, who in his 1951 “documentary” history of American blacks wrote, ironically without documentation, that by 1890 “the concept of a Negro state had been projected by Negroes, including Martin Delany and Sojourner Truth, for many years.” After Aptheker, several writers also claimed that Truth advocated a black “state.” (p. 167)

Because of the mystery, the multiplicity, and the power that is Sojourner Truth, everyone wants to claim her as one of their own.

One other explanation for the inevitability of myths is each individual’s culture, her/his-story, and experiences. I made this discovery as I read two versions of Sojourner Truth’s life. One was written by Carleton Mabee with the assistance of his daughter Susan Mabee Newhouse (1993) and the other written by Nell Irvin Painter (1996). Mabee is male; Painter is female. Mabee may be White (I don’t know for sure) and Painter is Black. Mabee is more analytical in his approach, somewhat detached,
yet more non-linear and includes more voices in his account. Painter is more narrative in her approach, emotionally involved, yet more linear and includes fewer voices in her account. Both authors make use of Sojourner’s *Narrative*, but Mabee cites quotes while Painter cites incidents. Mabee backs up what he finds in the *Narrative* with other sources; Painter does not. Each takes a different position on the use of dialect. Both Mabee and Painter are concerned about the problematics of myth-making, but it is Mabee who states why myths may be detrimental. “Perhaps some of the myths about Truth have served positive functions, up to a point” says Mabee. “But they have also contributed, I believe, to distortions about American history, particularly about the history of blacks and women” (p. x).

I have come to realized that I too mythologize Sojourner Truth for my own needs and interests based on my culture, her/his-story and experiences. I am part of the public who suffers from a psychological and political psychosis which makes us susceptible to myths. I too am a victim of her/historical memory lapse and denial conditioned by privileged his-stories which also enable myth-making. My own societal/social differences as well as my unique and individual experiences shape how I see life and what I say and do. Mythologization plays a major role in my portrayal of Tayari’s Truth.

**Rendering the Life of Sojourner Truth**

Writing is an elusive process. The complexity of a life does not easily translate into words. When written, the dynamism and multidimensionality of a life pales. Any attempt to render a life fails to capture that life. Writing is further complicated by the fact that the context and culture of the writer is inseparable from writing. Though a writer
may intend to avoid her/his personal perspective, it is impossible to escape one’s subjectivities, social and societal conditioning as well as other aspects of context and culture.

The challenge of telling a balanced story of Sojourner Truth’s life is even more complex because Sojourner Truth is a tangle of legend, symbol, and lived experiences. As I write, I find myself responding to Sojourner Truth the legend or to Sojourner Truth the symbol or both, yet aiming for a re-telling which, so aptly described by curriculum theorist Pamela Autrey, “includes the missings and admits the fragmentary nature of what we know.”21 Faced with the impossibility of separating perspectives, I believe Sojourner Truth has meaning as a mix of fiction, prototype, and lived experiences.

To appropriate Painter’s (1996) phrasing, Sojourner Truth is a kaleidoscope of brilliant fragments. In Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women, Jacqueline Jones Royster (2000) expresses the difficult challenge of rendering the complex story of African American women who necessitate a kaleidoscopic view and approach. The interconnectedness of Truth’s fragments and the equal significance each one carries make it imperative to value the constellation, juxtaposition, and medley of all her fragments. Therefore, I find it impossible to tell her story in a linear, chronological fashion. My own previous attempt at writing the life of Sojourner Truth has resulted in a story that lacks the complexity and dynamism that she is:

Sojourner Truth was a nineteenth century African American woman abolitionist and human rights activist. She was born Isabelle Baumfree around 1797 in

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21 Written peer-editing comment given June 2003.
upstate New York and died in 1883. The first thirty years of her life were spent in enslavement. Her parents were unmixed Africans (Painter, 1990; Mabee and Newhouse, 1993; Peterson, 1995) only two generations removed from those Africans who were forcibly brought to the United States in 1619 as indentured servants. Carla Peterson (1995) states, “[I]t was most certainly they [Truth’s parents] who were responsible for imparting to Isabella those elements of African culture that are evident in her speech patterns, belief system, and behavior” (p. 25). From birth to adolescence, Truth was grounded in Afro-Dutch culture, in African cosmological, pantheistic conceptions of God, and in her lived experiences of oppression in enslavement. She experienced puberty, “marriage,” motherhood, and literally grew to adulthood during enslavement. A year before the state of New York legally abolished enslavement, Truth walked away from her fifth and final slave master.

Around thirty years old, Truth began her life of “freedom” as a domestic motivated by a strong sense of truth and justice. A highlight of this time period is that she successfully went to court to recover her five-year-old son from perpetual enslavement in the South. Another is a conversion experience which prompted Truth to become a Methodist. Their style of worship complemented her African/African American paradigmatic beliefs and practices. According to Mabee and Newhouse (1993), “Methodists emphasized direct, personal experiences of God; they witnessed and preached extempore, in the vernacular, and liked to sing” (p. 23).
Around the age of thirty-two, Truth moved to New York City where she joined several churches and religious sects in search of community and a need to satisfy her beliefs and practices. At first, she joined two established churches, one predominately White Methodist and the other male-dominated African Methodist Episcopal. Stetson and David (1994) reveal how racial difference in the former and gender difference in the latter became an issue for Truth. As a domestic, she worked for individuals who were deeply religious and committed “to eradicating corruption in the world” (Painter, 1996, p. 41). Truth joined in their unorthodox prayer meetings as well as their social reform efforts. After living fourteen years in New York City, Truth became despondent. At forty-six years old, Truth changed her name and became an itinerant evangelist.

Though Sojourner Truth never learned to read or write, she was adroit in communicating her message of social justice to any audience whatever its makeup. Truth’s message of social justice was not simply a political platform, but also her life philosophy, a philosophy which perpetually grew and developed out of her lived experiences guided by her spirituality. Evangelism, temperance, the rights of Black women and men, women’s rights, suffrage, desegregation, and the problems of the poor all attracted Truth’s attention. She lived her life in search of a community of individuals who believed in the transformation of self, others, and society as a whole. Truth believed in a community of individuals who were different in many ways and who offered their unique perspective to the group. “When she had a choice,” says Nell Irvin Painter (1996), “she preferred being one among many to one among a few” (p. 112).
I resist such a linear, sequential telling in favor of a more fragmentary, complicated story. Each fragment that makes up Sojourner Truth’s life has vital value singly, in juxtaposition to one or more other fragments, and in concert with multiple fragments taken as a whole. I have selected a collection of episodes which together make up my rendering of Sojourner Truth’s life. Though the following life episodes unfold in the order of time, a chronological approach is secondary to my focus on thematic strands. These fragments speak the loudest in who I believe Sojourner Truth is.

**African/African American Grounding of Sojourner Truth**

At the moment of her birth, Sojourner Truth embarked on her own unique journey. Truth was born around 1797 as an enslaved African in upstate New York. In the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, Olive Gilbert (Painter, 1998) states, “Sojourner does not know in what year she was born” (p. 9). In *Journey Toward Freedom: The Story of Sojourner Truth*, biographer Jacqueline Bernard (1967) reports, “No one ever recorded a slave’s exact birth date” (p. 3). Peter Bergman (1969), in *The Chronological History of the Negro in America*, documents that Africans were legally enslaved by ruling Dutch settlers in 1694. Truth’s ancestors were among those Africans. In *Glorying in Tribulation: The Lifework of Sojourner Truth*, Erlene Stetson and Linda David (1994) disclose how Truth fell victim to a New York state law passed in 1706 that stated children born to enslaved parents would also be enslaved. Sojourner Truth’s parents were unmixed Africans (Painter, 1990; Mabee and Newhouse, 1993; Peterson, 1995).

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[22] Sojourner Truth valuing and validating her African origins and heritage is significant. While many biographers do not mention Truth’s African origins and heritage, Painter, Mabee and Newhouse as well as Peterson are among those biographers who acknowledge this characteristic.
only two generations removed from those Africans who were forcibly brought to the United States in 1619 as indentured servants (Bergman, 1969). 23

In addition to her parents, different ethnic and religious groups populated the area where Truth was born—Mohawks, 24 the original inhabitants of the area as well as Dutch settlers from Europe, Quakers, Methodists and Dutch reformers—each professing their religious values and beliefs (Painter, 1996). Truth was born in Ulster County, some eighty miles north of New York City. Bernard (1967) and Painter (1996) describe the terrain as a hilly, rocky, tree-covered mountainous area with icy streams and rapidly flowing rivers. Winters were usually longer than summers. Painter (1996) further notes that at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, when Truth was born, travel was difficult. Railroads were nonexistent and a fledgling New York economy could not afford to construct decent roadways.

One circumstance I see as vitally significant in Sojourner Truth’s life was her Afro-Dutch culture, a culture which emerged as the result of enslaved Africans in New York living among slave owners whose families were some of the ruling Dutch. “This Afro-Dutch world,” says Painter (1996), “was distinct, first culturally, then economically, from the slave-holding South” (p. 8). Truth and her family spoke Dutch as their first language called Low Dutch. Gilbert (Painter, 1998) writes of Low Dutch as a “class of people” (p. 9) and a language while in Sojourner Truth: The Courageous Former Slave

23 My use of “Africa” as a monolith contradicts the fact that Africa is made up of several thousand different ethnic groups each with its own common culture, language, religion, and her/his-story. Since time does not permit me to find out Sojourner Truth’s and her ancestors’ ethnic or cultural group, I am forced to write “Africa.”

24 Mabee and Newhouse (1993) state, “[E]arly in Isabella’s career as a public speaker, a legend sprang up that there was a Mohawk Indian among her ancestors” (p. 1). In Truth’s Narrative, Stetson and David (1994) found a suggestion that Truth may have had Mohawk ancestry.
Whose Eloquence Helped Promote Human Equality, biographer Susan Taylor-Boyd (1990) states, “Low Dutch [is] a dialect spoken by the working-class Dutch people” (p. 8). Young Truth learned African values, beliefs, and practices in Low Dutch through her parents, especially her mother. Carla Peterson (1995) states, “[I]t was most certainly they [Truth’s parents] who were responsible for imparting to Isabella those elements of African culture that are evident in her speech patterns, belief system, and behavior” (p. 25).

A communal manifestation of Afro-Dutch culture was Pinkster (also spelled Pinxster), the Dutch word for Pentecost, described by Stetson and David (1994) as “the great Africanized festival that had accreted around the Dutch Christian celebration of Pentecost” (p. 48). Painter (1998) reports, “Pinkster, Dutch for ‘Pentecost,’ was a celebration of the Holy Spirit seven weeks after Easter. In the early nineteenth century, Pinkster was Afro-New Yorkers’ main holiday” (p. 48). Young Truth joined with other enslaved Africans in this seven-day long celebration which, according to Peterson (1995), “merged Pentecostal rituals with African forms of entertainment” (p. 45).

Bernard (1967) describes Pinkster in this way:

At Pinxster time, the god of the slave owner seemed very far away . . . Congo gods came to summon dancers. Congo dancers sent feet kicking up the dust from the road until the lowest leaves turned gray with it. Congo songs burst from throats whose owners did not know what words they sang—any more than Ma-Ma Bett had understood the songs she had sung . . . Congo drums beat on and on, all day and all night. (p. 43)

With clapping, drumming, chanting, and dancing, “those from Africa instructed the American-born” (Painter, 1996, p. 28). Stetson and David (1994) add that Pinkster was

25 Gilbert (Painter, 1998) records, “She [Truth] knows it by none but the Dutch name, Pingster, as she calls it” (p. 43).
not only a time for “American-born blacks [to] use the occasion to emulate and learn from African-born blacks,” but was also created by enslaved Africans to ensure the passing on of African values and to engender unity among themselves (p. 48).  

In *Sojourner Truth, A Self-Made Woman*, Victoria Ortiz (1974) reveals that Truth was taught through stories and songs. As one of many responses to the horrors and inhumanity of enslavement, songs and singing played a vital role in Truth’s life as in the lives of other enslaved Africans. In *Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals*, Arthur C. Jones (1993) offers, “Enslaved Africans established as a first priority the use of songs as a means of combating the potentially destructive internal psychological damage that could be inflicted by the experience of prolonged enslavement” (p. 10). In *Sojourner Truth: Ain’t I a Woman?* Patricia McKissack and Fredrick McKissack (1992) infer that through stories, songs and, I add, love, Truth’s mother taught her “how to cope with her life as it was” (p. 10). The songs Truth’s mother sang were the same songs Truth’s grandmother sang to her mother when she was young, songs from Africa with unrecognizable, but comforting words. In the words of Jacqueline Bernard (1967):

> Belle remembered her mother as a lithe, tall woman, singing softly in a deep throaty voice as she moved about her work—strange, lovely songs to soothe a crying baby or to make work go faster. Ma-Ma said they were the songs sung by her mother, who came from a faraway land called Africa. Ma-Ma herself did not know what the words of the songs meant, but that made no difference” (p. 8).

Early in her life, Truth learned about God in an African cosmological, pantheistic context. Her first understandings about God came from her mother. Taylor-Boyd (1990) says, “From her mother, Belle learned the faith that would give her the strength and courage needed for her battles” (p. 6). Peterson (1995) includes “beliefs in the

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26 For more extensive description of and discussion about Pinkster, see Stetson and David, pp. 48-50.
presence of God in the moon and stars” among the “Africanisms handed down . . . to Truth” by her mother (p. 206). And she learned this knowledge in Low Dutch. Referring to Truth’s mother, Gilbert (Painter, 1998) reports, “Her teachings were delivered in Low Dutch, her only language” (p. 12).

Truth learned of an omnipresent, omnipotent God “living in the sky,” a God to turn to when faced with enslavement’s tribulations. Stetson and David (1994) state, “African traditions shaped Isabella’s sacred world view, which was dominated not by concepts and symbols, but by sacred place and sacred personage” (p. 32). Gilbert (Painter, 1998) relates that Truth was told when you ask God for help, “He will always hear and help you” (p. 12).

Truth’s mother used nature in, what Stetson and David (1994) call, a “pantheistic context,” suggesting a belief in the forces and laws of the cosmos as analogous to God (p. 33). Like all her other brothers and sisters, young Truth was taught to look to the moon and the stars in that same sky where God lived as a way to remember everyone in their family and linking them as one. “Thus, in her way,” Gilbert (Painter, 1998) states of Truth’s mother, “did she endeavor to show them [Truth and her sisters and brothers] their Heavenly Father, as the only being who could protect them in their perilous condition; at the same time, she would strengthen and brighten the chain of family affection” (p. 12).27 Truth possessed, claims Peterson (1995), an “African perspective that holds that no distinction exists between spiritual and material worlds, but that animate and inanimate objects, spirit and matter, are bound together in one system ordered by God” (p. 45).

The *Maafa* (Horrific Disaster)*28*

One hardship Truth personally experienced while young was her family’s and other enslaved Africans’ inhuman living conditions which guaranteed poor health and early death. Gilbert (Painter, 1998) writes Sojourner Truth’s recollection of where she, her family, and other enslaved Africans lived:

She carries in her mind, to this day, a vivid picture of this dismal chamber; its only lights consisting of a few panes of glass, through which she thinks the sun never shone, but with thrice reflected rays; and the space between the loose boards of the floor, and the uneven earth below, was often filled with mud and water, the uncomfortable splashings of which were as annoying as its noxious vapors must have been chilling and fatal to health. She shudders, even now, as she goes back in memory, and revisits this cellar, and sees its inmates, of both sexes and all ages, sleeping on those damp boards, like the horse, with a little straw and a blanket; and she wonders not at the rheumatisms, and fever-sores, and palsies, that distorted the limbs and racked the bodies of those fellow-slaves in after-life. (p. 10)

Another hardship of enslavement that deeply affected Truth, as well as other enslaved Africans, was the gnawing grief due to family separation, which Painter (1998) calls, “the psychological vulnerability of disconnection” (p. xiii). Painter cites five mentions of parental grief in the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. Truth heard her mother repeatedly tell the story of how two of her children were brutally taken from her. Truth felt her mother’s heart-wrenching anguish, a parent who was not only separated from her children, but who witnessed their kidnap to, what Gilbert (Painter, 1998) named, “this soul-killing system” (p. 25). When Truth was born, her mother had given birth to

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28 *Maafa* is a Kiswahili word used by several African American scholars to name that great tragedy “which resulted in the overwhelming de-population of the African continent and the forced enslavement of African men, women, and children in the Americas and Caribbean over a period of nearly 500 years, from 1442 to 1888” (New Orleans Maafa Committee, 2000). Two scholars and professors who make use of *Maafa* are Dona Marimba Richards (1989) and later as Marimba Ani (1994) as well as Nah Dove (1998).
ten to twelve children and had lost all of her other children to death or enslavement. McKissack and McKissack (1992) express the hopeless, helpless condition of parents who were enslaved. “Slavery cast a long shadow over slave parents and their children. They [enslaved parents] had no control over their [children’s] lives, so children were often taken and sold from their families, and parents couldn’t protect them” (p. 10).

During an 1879 interview in the Memorial Chapter of her Narrative, Sojourner Truth stated that she had five masters (Painter, 1998). When Truth was sold, she had already had two slave masters. With her grounding in Afro-Dutch culture, her African cosmological, pantheistic conceptions of God, and her lived experiences of oppression in enslavement, young Truth was sold by auction right along with the rest of her deceased slave master’s property. When she was sold, Truth was nine years old, at the beginning of adolescence.

According to Stetson and David (1994), Truth viewed her third slave master, a storekeeper who moved from Massachusetts to settle among the Dutch, as “cruel and sadistic” (p. 33). He bought Truth because he thought that owning a “slave” would stop the surrounding community from seeing him as a stranger simply starting a store (Bernard, 1967). In the Narrative of Sojourner Truth, Gilbert (Painter, 1998) records Truth characterizing her time with her third master and his wife by saying “with emphasis, Now the war begun.” The inhumanity Truth experienced was marked by disdainful disregard and cruel conflict. Gilbert reports, “She suffered ‘terribly—terribly,’

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29 Just like Truth did not know her birth date due to a lack of record-keeping, the number of children her mother had is also unknown. Biographers offer different numbers ranging from ten to twelve children.

30 I place quotation marks around the word “slave” because this overused term is part of a history of denial that does not capture the horror and trauma of that gross violation of humanity. The use of the word “slave” as well as “slavery” also hides that human beings enslaved other human beings.
with the cold. During the winter her feet were badly frozen, for want of proper covering.”

Truth also told Gilbert that she was given “plenty to eat, and also a plenty of whippings” (p. 18). After noting that Truth was often whipped with no explanation, Bernard, McKissack and McKissack as well as Painter speculate and conjecture as to why young Truth was beaten so frequently. “Miscommunication,” says Painter (1998), “led to whippings” (p. viii). Conflict always arose when Afro Dutch-speaking Truth was given instructions by her English-speaking slave owners. Some of her beatings, Bernard (1967) as well as McKissack and McKissack (1992) believe, were venting sessions during which her third master relieved his frustrations. One beating was particularly brutal leaving Truth with scars for life. Gilbert (Painter, 1998) reveals the incident as told by Truth in her Narrative:

One Sunday morning, in particular, she was told to go to the barn; on going there, she found her master with a bundle of rods, prepared with embers, and bound together with cords. When he had tied her hands together before her, he gave her the most cruel whipping she was ever tortured with. He whipped her till the flesh was deeply lacerated, and the blood streamed from her wounds—the scars remain to the present day, to testify to the fact. (p. 18)

Young Truth decided to follow what she already knew—her mother’s teachings. She turned to “the Great God in the Sky” (McKissack and McKissack, 1992, p. 22) and asked for help. “Across two fields,” says Bernard (1967), “and behind a screen of white birches,” she prayed (p. 21). “Going to him,” relates Gilbert (Painter, 1998), “‘and telling him all—and asking Him if He thought it was right,’ and begging him to protect and shield her from her persecutors” (p. 18). Both Gilbert records and Bernard says that after months of praying, Truth became discouraged and decided to beg God to send her father. Suggesting an African approach to prayer, Bernard (1967) reveals, “Her voice rose and fell in the way she had so often heard Ma-Ma’s voice rise and fall, as Belle
repeated over and over her prayer to God” (p. 22). When Truth’s father did come, young Truth believed wholeheartedly, says Bernard, that the reason her father had come was because of the power of her prayers to God. Painter (1998) suggests that his arrival was related to the spiritualism Truth shared with Gilbert which, I believe, paralleled Truth’s African/African American beliefs concerning the cooperative, collaborative, and complementary nature of material and spiritual realms. Young Truth asked her father to help find her another slave master. Gilbert (Painter, 1998) discloses that enslaved Africans had a system of helping each other find less cruel slave owners:

In this way the slaves often assisted each other, by ascertaining who are kind to their slaves, comparatively; and then using their influence to get such an one to hire or buy their friends; and masters, often from policy, as well as from latent humanity, allow those they are about to sell or let, to choose their own places, if the persons they happen to select for masters are considered safe pay. (p.19)

Truth’s father more than likely participated in this practice, for not long after his meeting with his daughter, Truth had a new slave master. Truth said, according to Ortiz (1974), that this was “a direct answer to a desperate prayer” (p. 25). Stetson and David (1994) assert, “No other story in the Narrative captures more fully the qualities of strength of will, optimism, and seemingly ineradicable trust in tomorrow that so characterized the adult Truth” (p. 34).

The time young Truth spent with her fourth slave master was quite different from her previous one. Less provincial, Truth’s new slave master was a fisherman who owned a tavern and a farm. Young Truth experienced less brutality and picked up the habits of cursing, smoking, and drinking as she lived what Gilbert (Painter, 1998) describes as “a wild, out-of-door kind of life” (p. 19). Though she had work to do, she also had time to, in Truth’s words as recorded by Gilbert, “browse around” (p. 19).
“Her dark eyes,” writes McKissack and McKissack (1992), “observed everything around her with a clarity that made her seem much older than her years” (p. 21). In addition, this same freedom must have allowed Truth to openly practice her own African/African American culture. According to Bernard (1967), young Truth “had started to wear a madras bandanna . . . on a young Negro girl, a bandanna was a sign of womanhood” (p. 29). Only having had the experience of enslavement for comparison, Bernard surmises that young Truth may have wondered if freedom might be like the life she was living with her fourth slave owner. Because her fourth slave owner “suffered a financial setback,” says Stetson and David (1994), Truth was sold to her fifth and final slave master (p. 35).31

Truth was around thirteen years old and spent the next sixteen years of her life with her fifth master, “longer than with her parents” (Painter, 1996, p. 14). Now, as a young teenager, she had the body of a woman with the mind of a child. Truth literally grew to adulthood living through puberty, “marriage,” and motherhood while enslaved with her fifth slave master.

Truth begins her recollections of her time with her fifth slave master with a story about a significant occurrence which happened when she was assigned to work in the kitchen. Gilbert (Painter, 1998), Truth’s amanuensis, not grasping its importance, calls it “one comparatively trifling incident.” However, Gilbert does express that Truth’s telling of this episode was intended to communicate, “how God shields the innocent, and causes them to triumph over their enemies, and also how she stood between her

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31 Bernard (1967) agrees that Truth’s sale was due to a financial setback while Taylor-Boyd (1990) as well as McKissack and McKissack (1992) suggest the amount of money offered to buy Truth was irresistible. Gilbert (Painter, 1998) and Painter (1996) make no mention of a reason.
master and mistress” (p. 20). This occurrence reflects one of Truth’s encounters with truth which became a central theme in her life. The event involved four women—Truth, her slave master’s daughter and his wife as well as an indentured servant—all White except for Truth, all caught in a whirlwind of deceit and lack of solidarity, totally unaware of their own unique positions in a system of patriarchy. The potatoes Truth prepared each morning for breakfast turned up dirtied with ashes. The slave master’s wife threatened to beat Truth if it continued to happen and reported the reoccurrence to her husband as an example of Truth’s poor work habits. In the end, Truth was vindicated when the master’s daughter revealed that the culprit was the indentured servant. Completely vulnerable and helpless, Truth was traumatized. Nevertheless, she came to know one of her first lessons about the power of truth and justice.

Separated from her mother at around nine years old, Truth had not learned the nuances of her mother’s teachings. With little adult guidance and attention, Truth did the best she could to fend for herself in the brutal, incomprehensible world of enslavement. “There was no adult in [Truth’s] life with whom she could confide,” says McKissack and McKissack (1972), “so she made decisions and solved problems based on incorrect and incomplete information. Naturally, she made mistakes and formed opinions and beliefs that were woefully inaccurate” (p. 27). In the Narrative of Sojourner Truth, Gilbert (Painter, 1998) reports, “At this time she looked upon her master as a God; and believed that he knew of and could see her at all times, even as God himself” (pp. 22-23). Believing her master could read her thoughts, Truth chose to confess her errors to him. She also, in Gilbert’s words, decided “that slavery was right and honorable” (p. 23).
Without consideration of context, Truth also chose to follow what her mother taught her: lying and stealing were wrong; obedience was right; and hard work was important. Truth’s hard work prompted her slave owner to compare her to a man. In her 1879 interview in the Memorial Chapter of her Narrative, Truth confirmed, “I used to manage as much as the strongest man” (Painter, 1998, p. 242). Taking this comment as a compliment, Truth worked even harder denying herself rest by working to exhaustion and disregarding sleep by working through the night. Such behavior was not only detrimental to her health and well-being, but her choices isolated her from her peers. Many of them, records Gilbert (Painter, 1998), called Truth “a white folks’ nigger” (p. 22).

To transcend the harshness of living through, what Painter (1996) calls, the “psychological and physical consequences” (p. 19) of the oppressive condition of enslavement, Truth sourced her African cosmological, pantheistic conception of God. Alone and weary, Truth turned to her God, a choice that always alleviated her anxiety and gave her solace. She created a “praying ground,” says Bernard (1967), a private place “far enough from the house to be out of earshot, but close enough for her to reach it quickly” (p. 41). Ortiz (1974) uses the phrase “isolated corner of a field” (p. 35) while McKissack and McKissack (1992) write about Truth’s “secluded spot” (p. 32). In this secret, sacred space, Truth talked to her God and sang the songs she heard her mother sing releasing the pain, stress, and tension of her life. “When she wanted to meet

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32 Taylor-Boyd (1990) notes, “People of this time, even Sojourner Truth in her speeches, commonly referred to blacks or African-Americans as ‘niggers’” (p. 10). For more of Taylor-Boyd’s discussion of terms referring to “race,” see her glossary.

33 I speculate that Truth sang at these times based on her culture, her/his-story and experience as an African American, and as a daughter who grew up listening to her mother sing.
God,” says Stetson and David (1994), “she went to where she thought he might be and talked out loud to him” (p. 12). According to Mabee and Newhouse (1993), “She believed that God would not hear her unless she spoke to Him aloud, and the louder she spoke the more likely He was to hear her” (p. 5). Painter (1996) compares this practice to “outdoor shrines of black southerners” and to “a West African river cult” (p. 24).³⁴

**Freedom On Her Own Terms**

When Truth was around twenty years old, New York State passed a law to legally free all enslaved Africans within its borders in ten years. The possibility of freedom stirred within her arousing an awareness she had never experienced until that moment. As the years passed, a different kind of change started to take hold of Truth. “As Freedom Day approached,” says Bernard (1967), “[the once] obedient slave was rapidly changing. A new Belle was taking shape” (p. 54). Similarly, McKissack and McKissack (1992) state, “If people had bothered to notice, there was a change in Belle. The very idea of freedom put a bounce in her step. She even sang while she worked, always keeping her sights on Freedom Day” (p. 34).³⁵

When Truth’s slave master decided to reward her and promised to free her a year early if she worked extra hard, the possibility of being free sooner than she had expected triggered a transformation in Truth. She had lived all twenty-eight years of her life in the *Maafa*, yet, in that moment, in Truth’s mind, she was free. So when her slave


³⁵ Ortiz (1974) also states that there was a change in Truth, but links it to Truth’s slave master’s broken promise. See p. 29.
master broke his promise, when he did not honor his word, Truth responded as a free woman not as an enslaved one. Truth decided to leave enslavement and take her freedom into her own hands.

Truth’s first days as a “free” former enslaved African American woman must have been an upheaval filled with a mélange of thoughts and feelings. Her body, mind, and spirit must have been in a swirl of emotions. When emotions rose up in her, what did she do? Did she conceal her feelings? Or did she want to? The same thoughts must have played over and over in her mind: what to do about her family, how to tell them about her decision, when and how to depart. What was it like for Truth to live those final days and months on the same ground where she had been enslaved?

Stetson and David (1994) suggest a partial answer to this question:

It is an arresting picture, the strong black woman not quite thirty years old, seated in a farm house in the cooling New York autumn of 1826, spinning wool to be used in the domestic manufacture of homespun, like many a New York matron before her. There she sits, the perfect (revolutionary) housewife, spinning, planning her escape. (p. 43)

By the time fall season was over, Truth had spun one hundred pounds of wool. “She continued with her master,” writes Gilbert (Painter, 1998), “till the wool was spun, and the heaviest of the ‘fall’s work’ closed up” (p. 27). Reflecting her clarity and confidence, Truth walked away, rather than ran away, to escape enslavement. After consulting with God, Truth departed in the early dawn leaving her family except for her baby born earlier that same year.

36 I frame the word “free” because I believe freedom is partial. That is, we can free ourselves from conditions and circumstances of life but we cannot be totally “free” in life.
**Truth on Her Side**

Though Truth had some interaction with Quakers, she now depended on them as she began her new life as a “free” former enslaved African American woman. Quakers had a her/his-story of opposing enslavement. So Truth went to a Quaker whom she had met some time ago, a man who told her she should not be enslaved. In poor health, he recommended two other places. Deciding to go to the first, Truth was warmly welcomed by the Van Wagenens who invited her to live with and work for them.

Expecting her slave master would come to take her back to his farm, Truth decided to remain close by. When he did arrive, he claimed that she ran away. Truth clarified her action and said she walked away. When he told her to come back, Truth responded with a definite “no.” When he said he would take her child, she answered with another assertive “no.” Truth was actualizing her newfound freedom. Observing the exchange between Truth and her former slave owner, Van Wagenen offered to buy the balance of her services and her child. With twenty-five dollars, Truth’s fifth slave master left and she became officially free. Truth was given her own room, ate at the family table, and was treated with respect.

During her stay at the Van Wagenens, Truth encountered her second life experience in which truth was a central force in the final outcome of events. Truth found out that her son was illegally sold out of state. Appalled and driven by a mother’s love, Truth had to step completely outside of all she knew to get her son back. Imagine an

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37 According to Bergman (1969), the Quakers wrote the first protest against enslavement in 1688, passed colonial legislation to ban its inhumane trade in 1711, and took action against “slave-owning members” in 1757. Quakers were blamed, in 1796, for “slave unrest” in Charlotte, Charleston, New York City, Savannah, Baltimore, and Elizabeth, New Jersey. In 1827, Bergman reports, around the time Truth walked away from Dumont’s farm, “North Carolina decided that Quakers could not hold slaves on the grounds that a Quaker’s owning a slave was tantamount to emancipation, and since state law allowed emancipation only for meritorious service, such ownership was invalid” (p. 128).
uneducated, poor, former enslaved African American woman moving here and there following strange men with legal authority who said they would free her son. Through it all, truth was on her side. When frustration set in, Truth turned to her God for help. In the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, Gilbert (Painter, 1998) writes:

The sense of nothingness, in the eyes of those with whom she [Truth] contended for her rights, sometimes fell on her like a heavy weight, which nothing but her unwavering confidence in an arm which she believed to be stronger than all others combined could have raised from her sinking spirit. ‘Oh! how little I did feel,’ she repeated, with a powerful emphasis. ‘Neither would you wonder, if you could have seen me, in my ignorance and destitution, trotting about the streets, meanly clad, bare-headed, and bare-footed! Oh, God only could have made such people hear me; and he did it in answer to my prayers.’ (pp. 47-48)

When Truth needed concrete help or material assistance, she turned once again to Quakers in the area. In the end, Truth had successfully fought and won her case through the courts. In the Memorial Chapter of her *Narrative*, Sojourner Truth mentioned, “I had one child sold into slavery in Alabama, but he was recovered, it not being lawful” (Painter, 1998, p. 242). Ortiz (1974) believes that Truth did not realize “what an extraordinary thing she had just accomplished. Relying primarily on her own determination, she, a black woman, had taken a white man to court and had won her case against him. In 1828 that was almost unheard of” (p. 33). McKissack and McKissack (1992) assert that Truth “was one of the first black women in the country to win a court case” (p. 48). Mabee and Newhouse (1993) state, “It was astonishing that a poor black woman just out of slavery, and especially one who, as she herself later said, had been brought up ‘as ignorant as a horse,’ would take any case to court” (p. 18). Painter (1996) says that going to court to rescue her son was “something normally far outside the experience of poor women like Isabella” (p. 34).  

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38 For a most enlightening and critical rendering and analysis of Truth’s recovery of her son by
Real Christianity

The conversion experience of Sojourner Truth is a prime example of the difficulty of rendering her life story. Biographers claim that since Truth spoke of her conversion experience years later, she may have followed conventions of religious conversions she learned about over time. According to Painter (1996), Truth “was, like countless evangelicals before her, reenacting Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus” (p. 30). Stetson and David (1994) claim, “Truth’s conversion experience, which took place around 1827, manifested visionary conventions that were familiar to other early nineteenth-century black Methodist women.” Mabee and Newhouse (1993) surmise, “It is difficult to believe that Isabella’s conversion could have conformed so closely to the accepted form of Christian evangelical conversion in her time, if indeed it came before she had been exposed in some manner to evangelical experience” (p. 22).

I view this conversion experience as a marking for Truth’s initiation into Christianity. Since African cosmology and Christianity shared sufficient similarities, many enslaved Africans and former enslaved Africans created, conceived, and conjured up an “Africanized Christianity” (Jones, 1993, p. 70). Truth was attracted to “the democratic, enthusiastic strand of Methodism,” (Painter, 1996, p. 27) because they valued “direct, personal experience of God; they witnessed and preached extempore, in vernacular, and liked to sing” (Mabee and Newhouse, 1993, p. 23). Of particular appeal to Truth was their focus on the Holy Spirit and their celebration of the Pentecost, matching the celebration of Pinkster (Painter, 1996). Truth’s first experience with a Methodist meeting was at a church in her vicinity. As she listened and observed from legal process, see Stetson and David (1994), pp. 44-46.
outside the church, what she related to most was the participants’ testimonials about the power of Jesus and their singing.

As time passed, Truth began to yearn for the comradery of the enslaved African Americans she had come to know and the cultural life she shared with them. Though her current life was peaceful and she was afforded fair treatment, Truth wanted to go to the upcoming Pinkster celebration.³⁹ Homesick for her previous life, missing her family and friends, longing to be among other Africans celebrating Pinkster, Truth had an other-than-ordinary, transformative experience expanding and enriching her understandings of God and of herself. Painter (1996) points out:

The assurance of her sanctification and God’s constant support released Isabella from the crippling conviction that she was nothing. She discovered a new means of power, what pentecostals call the power of the Spirit, that redressed the balance between someone poor and black and female and her rich white masters. (p. 30)

Deciding to join the Methodist church was the beginning of Truth “opening herself to new ways of looking at herself and the world” (Mabee and Newhouse, 1993, p. 23). Truth knew that many former enslaved Africans were joining many other emigrants and immigrants to live and work in New York City, a city full of opportunities and possibilities. Through the Methodist church, Truth met a woman from New York City who was a Christian evangelist and schoolteacher. Whether motivated by job opportunities with better pay as well as education for her son, by a desire to learn about life by broadening her experiences, or both, Truth decided to move to New York City with the support of the Christian evangelist schoolteacher.

³⁹ For a most enlightening critical analysis of Truth pining for her past life and the meaning of Pinkster to “enslaved Africans and their descendants in the New York area” (p. 49), see Stetson and David (1994), p. 48-51.
Only a few years out of enslavement in rural country, Truth’s initiation to the New York City of her day—an urban sprawl teeming with people, sights, and sounds—must have been disturbing and disrupting yet gratifying. Truth learned to be comfortable in New York City simply by experiencing it day by day. She even became accustomed to hearing and speaking only English. She often took walks, aimlessly moving in and through neighborhoods, observing, paying attention to what people said and what they did, carrying on conversations in stores and other businesses. Truth also learned about abject poverty, destitution, and crime. She decided that the crowded, squalid living conditions of some parts of New York City were much worse than the ones she experienced in enslavement. For Truth, it was incomprehensible that free people would live that way. Many free Blacks, including those former enslaved, also lived in the city. Sojourner Truth’s days in New York City expanded her understandings of people, how they lived, what was important to them, yet she continued to be confused about the conditions under which the masses of urban poor people lived.

Truth’s beginning in New York City was immersed in Methodism and Christian evangelism exposing her to never-before explored experiences and opening a whole realm of possibilities unavailable to her until that moment. Truth joined two different Methodist churches. The first church was majority White and held segregated services. Dissatisfied, she became a member of a second church which was majority Black but male-dominated limiting women’s authority and participation. Truth remained at the latter church though not as satisfied as she liked to be. Stetson and David (1994) reveal:

But neither the experience of organized religion in the white Methodist nor in the male-dominated African Methodist Episcopal churches satisfied Isabella, who
shared that dissatisfaction with many imaginative enquiring women of the period who were straining against the obsolescent status relationships and rigid gender roles that were legitimated by male church authority. Within the church a hierarchical deference to male ministers made the efforts of an unauthorized woman who “wanted to be doing” unwelcome. Isabella arrived in New York City at a time when people felt as she did. They had anarchic dreams. (p. 65)

When it came to religion, going to church was not enough. Truth believed that both the continual renewal of her personal commitment to God and the conversion of others was how religion had meaning and purpose. Religion was active rather than passive, was participatory not exclusionary.

The teacher who invited Truth to New York was a member of a group of women evangelists. Truth joined them in their evangelical efforts. Stetson and David (1994) describe this group as “an intense circle of reform-minded white women . . . who were turning the activist impulse within evangelism toward social reform” (p. 66). At one of their group meetings, Truth was disturbed by the members’ groans, their uncontrolled, unruly speech, their cries and shrieks as well as their bodily movements and contortions. She determined that this type of evangelism did not renew the members’ commitment to God nor did it win new converts.

Truth began volunteering at a refuge for homeless girls who had turned to prostitution to survive. Their religious meetings were more aligned with Truth’s expectations and food, clothing as well as shelter were part of meeting the young women’s needs. Sojourner Truth was part of “a pioneering undertaking in urban social control, the first anti-prostitution campaign in the country” (Stetson and David, 1994, p. 67).

The director of this refuge and Truth discovered that they shared common religious experiences and beliefs. Both received revelations from God. Both believed
in the teachings of Holy Spirit, and both found these teachings internally and interpreted them personally. Based on their interpretation of the wording in Gilbert Vale’s *Fanaticism*, Stetson and David (1994) suggest that before Truth’s interaction with this employer, she “had been emotionally (and physically) liberating without challenging her understanding.” After meeting this employer, Truth, in the words of Gilbert Vale, “became an inquirer” (p. 68). Truth began to follow this employer’s daily practices—restraint in dress, food, and furniture. One common practice was fasting. However, her employer was fanatical in his beliefs and practices. Truth had not yet learned about outlooks and behaviors marked by enthusiasm and intense uncritical devotion. For the first time, Truth encountered fanatical spirituality.

Around this time, Truth met another individual who claimed to be a prophet. While working as a live-in domestic, Truth opened her employer’s door to a stranger. Also fanatical in his beliefs and practices, this prophet and Truth’s employer had similar beliefs. Both men received revelations from God. Each decided his identity based on those disclosures and joined together to form what they called “the Kingdom.” Fifteen to twenty individuals in all, “the community consisted of people with different generations, classes, races, and sexes” (Painter, 1996, p. 53). In line with early Christianity, every individual was considered equal and shared everything in common including work based on physical ability. With sincere honesty and vulnerable innocence, Truth chose to become a part of this group.

As time transpired, the envisioned lifestyle of the Kingdom became more theory than practice. A hierarchy developed along with “outrageous occurrences” (Ortiz, 1974, 40 For number of persons in this community, see Mabee and Newhouse (1993), p. 31.
p. 39) between and among its members. As the hierarchy developed, so did Truth’s workload even though she contributed money and furniture to the Kingdom. The only Black in the community, her presence was an ambiguous one (Painter, 1996). Truth was not only Black but also poor, two subjectivities that positioned her at the bottom of the Kingdom’s unspoken social order. As the only Black, reports Gilbert (Painter, 1998), Truth was often “scarcely regarded as being present” (p. 62); thus, “enabl[ing] her to witness events and conversations hidden to others” (Peterson, 1995, p. 29). From an outsider/insider location, Truth made her own judgements. As the only Black woman among Whites, she was given all the chores, re-surfacing memories of and feelings from enslavement. Like other members, Truth lost her meager savings and few belongings. Though others had much more money and possessions than she, they had the means to regain their loss. Unlike the other members, she was wrongfully accused of being involved in the commune’s debauchery and unexpected death of one of its members. Truth withstood character attack while she took her accusers to court and won her slander suit, yet another encounter with truth. Out of this experience, Truth learned that her God was not the same God others spoke of and prayed to and that her own interpretations—not someone else’s—were relevant to her life. The time Truth spent in this religious commune showed her that slave masters were not only found on farms and plantations and not everyone who spoke of love gave respect. No longer would she follow someone based on blind faith.

The Emergence of Sojourner Truth

Because her life was a continuous evolution in response to her lived experiences, it is difficult to say when Sojourner Truth emerged. After collecting the kaleidoscopic fragments of Truth’s life, a compelling portrait develops of “a dynamic woman with strength, integrity, poise, and wit” (McKissack and McKissack, 1992, pp. 162-63). Much of her power rested in “the very practical inspiration she brought to her struggles for ... people’s rights” (Taylor-Boyd, 1990, p. 31). Truth’s religious philosophy enabled her to move outside the realm of what was familiar and conventional. As a spiritual woman, she was able to be among those she criticized as well as those with whom she disagreed. Despite her differences, she worked among social reformers, the majority of whom were White, middle class, formally educated women and men. Truth was often the only African American female actively involved in the radical movements of her day. Being a former enslaved African, unable to read or write, poor, and itinerant added to the exceptionality of her position.

Truth’s continued belief in intentional communities was a reflection of her willingness to experiment with formations attempting to actualize untried projects that may or may not have affected individual and/or collective social transformation. Truth volunteered untiringly during the Civil War even though she was against violence. Her anti-war position did not stop her from being involved. Mabee and Newhouse (1993) state that Truth “encouraged black enlistment” (p. 91) as well as “collected food for them [Black soldiers] . . . and delivered it in person to the soldiers in their camp” (p. 92). Basic human need and care took precedence over all other considerations (Mabee and Newhouse, 1993).
Truth’s expansive religious philosophy also enabled her to be in situations that seemed foolish or futile. Truth criticized churches yet was invited to speak in them, and she criticized preachers yet was associated with many of them (Mabee and Newhouse, 1993). When she began to associate with the Spiritualists, Truth questioned the significance they placed on séances and the world of the dead, yet her relations with them persisted. She seemed to be able to look beyond labels and see people for who they were.

The embodiment of being Black, woman, poor, a formerly enslaved African, a drinker, a smoker as well as a non-reader and non-writer (Painter, 1996), Truth’s causes were many. Her “powerful personality, her strong-minded opinions and no-nonsense behavior” (Taylor-Boyd, 1990, p. 31) were assets to her activism in the realms of evangelism, temperance, Black uplift, women’s rights, suffrage, desegregation, and the problems of the poor.

Because she saw religion as a tool for collective power and freedom (Mabee and Newhouse, 1993), Truth broadened the scope of every cause she engaged in. Truth expanded evangelism to include the elimination of evil in self and society and the welcoming of all individuals regardless of class, gender, “race,” religion, or any other social or human difference. Temperance was about overindulgence in general, not just coffee, tea, alcohol and tobacco. Black uplift was nestled in a wider field of social reform, not limited to race politics. Women’s rights were not restricted to White, middle class, educated women but were the rights for all women.

42 I frame the word “race” because it is a social construction without a comparable term which is not socially constructed. Gender is also a social construction with a comparable term, sex, which is not socially constructed.
For Truth, suffrage meant more than voting (Painter, 1996). Suffrage was the means to an equitable, just, free society and to its maintenance. Suffrage could affect the problems of the poor, women’s rights, Black uplift, and temperance. Through the vote, poverty could be eradicated, African Americans and women could acquire their rights, and alcohol and tobacco could be outlawed. Truth, like many women’s rights activists, saw the connection between temperance and women’s rights. She amplified and intersected the struggles for women’s and Blacks’ rights by reminding social reformists that enslaved Africans were also women and that women were also Black (Smith, 1993). Truth argued for the rights of both African Americans and women without priority. When Truth organized for and worked with the poor, she also contemplated on how poverty might be permanently eradicated (Painter, 1996).

Towards the end of her life, Sojourner Truth’s expertise in evangelical, radical social reform sharpened. Truth used her heightened powers and sharpened skills to blur the lines between and among social reform issues. In “Sojourner Truth: Archetypal Black Feminist,” Gloria Joseph (1990) claims, “Rarely is there any mention of the philosophical constructs and revolutionary concepts underlying her [Truth’s] words and deeds. .... Few historians have described her as a person of great mental and spiritual depth” (pp. 36 and 37). Yet the anomalous, ambiguous, complicated contradictions of Sojourner Truth’s life are rich with lessons, anecdotes, myths, and morals. Her fluidity and flexibility open new paths for rumination, imagination, and creation. In her mental, spiritual, and philosophical depth, I discovered a wellspring of inspiration and information for curriculum theorizing. In responding to Sojourner Truth’s call, I discovered call-and-response as a methodology. In the next chapter, I describe and discuss the many facets of call-and-response.
Chapter Three

Call-and-Response in the Context of I~We

“This information comes from the community that lives it, not from an academy that observes it. We go into this process . . . with a whole lot of folk energy.”

In this chapter, I introduce I~We and call-and-response as two African/African American paradigmatic practices and how these practices are based in an African world view. After describing and discussing both, I point out how these two common cultural practices have multiple applications. In the realm of academia, one application of call-and-response in the context of I~We is educational research. I explain how I used call-and-response in the context of I~We as my methodology, its benefits and how it enabled me to work through my research.

Sojourner Truth was called to speak and to act for her own self-empowerment and for the empowerment of others. Her response was a life committed to social justice. Today, Truth’s life calls to many. Those who respond to Truth’s call are motivated to transform themselves and the world they live in. This interplay between Sojourner Truth and those who respond to her call is reflective of an African/African American world view—a world view which is not only singular but also multifarious, seemingly indomitable yet receptive. African Americans are both African and American bringing that which is African to that which is American and vice versa. The many beliefs and practices which make up an African/African American paradigm are moving forces in the lives of African

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43 Kimberley Richards, phone conversation, August 2001.
Americans. “Everywhere that African people live, certain ideas remain intact, no matter how camouflaged,” says Luisah Teish (1985) in *Jambalaya: The Natural Woman’s Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals*. These ideas are often instinctively, though unconsciously, utilized and consistently influence and shape how African Americans interpret events and conditions and respond to situations. Teish explains, “The African continues to regard children as wealth, to revel in the spirit of music and dance, to recognize the holiness of food, and to believe in the importance of proper burial, respecting the elders, ancestors, and the forces of nature” (p. 111).

Relying on my African/African American world view, I conceptualize a methodology based on two practices—*I~We* and call-and-response. Both are reflections of an African/African American view of the cosmos, described by Geneva Smitherman (1977), in *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*, as “an interacting, interdependent, balanced force field” (p. 108). That is, *All-That-Exists* is engaged in dynamic movement, acting and reacting to create harmony and balance that is fragile and transitory. *I~We* and call-and-response are active and interactive, characteristically complementary and dynamic. Like the interactive, interdependent cosmos, both *I~We* and call-and-response relate reciprocally, conditioned by the other, activating and energizing.

**The Dynamism of *I~We***

The value of the collective and how each individual functions within and in response to the collective is a common cultural practice among and between Africans and African Americans. As stated by John Mbiti (1969), in *African
Religions and Philosophy, this African/African American world view belief and practice is captured in the statement: “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” (p. 152). In Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community, and Culture, Maulana Karenga (1998) juxtaposes this African/African American paradigmatic statement to the Cartesian statement “I think, therefore I am” (p. 39). In the latter the focus is on the individual as singular, solitary, and unitary while in the former the emphasis is on the individual in relation to others and, by extension, to All-That-Exists. As Linda James Myers (1988) states in Understanding an Afrocentric World View: Introduction to an Optimal Psychology, “The individual cannot exist alone. .... We is the individual and collective manifestation of all that is” (p. 20). In “On Writing My Love Child,” Denise Taliaferro (1999) calls this “the I/We of Black perspectives” or “the I/We of Black voices” (p. 46). Thrilled by Taliaferro’s conceptualization, I gladly made use of it. Then after a phone conversation with Ruby Sales, I reflected upon “I/We” as dynamic, interactive, and living in spirit. Instead of a slash between the “I” and the “We,” I drew a back-and-forth arrow along with back-and-forth curved arrows above and below the two pronouns. Though a closer rendering than “I/We,” it was cumbersome. My graphic artist daughter Asante Salaam suggested that I come up with one symbol to communicate what the multiple arrows meant. I decided the curly dash would suffice. So, I build upon Taliaferro’s “I/We” and conceptualize this African/African American world view belief and practice as I~We. 44 In my imagination, I~We is like an atom in

44 I thank Ruby Sales for her help with this concept and Asante Salaam for her help with this representation.
physics with its moving elements or like an organism in biology with living cells. The individual and the collective are active and interactive, ever connected, ever moving in multidirectional interconnections and interactions.

**I~We Is About the Individual and the Community**

*I~We* is the individual “I” and the group “We” interrelated and interdependent in such a way that the individual needs the group and the group needs the individual. Smitherman (1977) maintains, “This interactive system embodies communality rather than individuality. Emphasis is on group cohesiveness, cooperation, and the collective common good” (p. 109). In “How to Think Black: A Symposium on Toni Cade Bambara’s *The Salt Eaters*,” Charlyn Harper (1983-1984) describes community from an African/African American perspective. She points out the inextricable link between the individual and the community as well as the reciprocal relationship both share:

The human being in African philosophy was further defined in terms of a social group. Each individual was a constituent of a community, a constituent of a corporate reality, for it was the community that defined who each individual was. But even with this emphasis on collectivism, African people acknowledged that each human being was unique because each human being was endowed by the creator with special talent and with special gifts. Individual growth and development was always balanced against the survival of, or what would help the community to grow. Every human being in an African reality and African thought was a multi-dimensional, dynamically developing organism whose whole personality was involved in the process of [her/his] becoming, [her/his] involvement in [her/his] social world, [her/his] involvement in [her/his] community, [her/his] involvement in [her/his] world at all levels. Each person, in African thinking, both transcended the whole and was an essential part of the whole. (pp. 37-38)

As an African American, I see myself as an individual in the context of others and the rest of *All-That-Exists*. I am not an isolated individual separated from others,
my environment, the rest of the world, and the cosmos. I am interrelated with
and interdependent on All-That-Exists. Linda James Myers (1988) calls this “the
principle of veridicality.” She explains, “I do not exist alone, but out of the
interaction and properties of the collective. I am created by the collective; and I,
in turn, create it” (p. 21). In other words, I am in community and approach every
aspect of my life in the context of community with my community acting a
sounding board and support.

**Call-and-Response Alive in African American Life**

Call-and-response is one of several “retained traditional African elements
. . . adapt[ed] to the New World environment” (p. 32), says Patricia L. Hill, et al.
(1998) in *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of African American
Literary Tradition*. Even though African Americans faced enslavement and
continue to face, what my colleague and *sistuh/friend* Carol Bebelle calls, an
“arsenal of oppression,” remnants of an African world view endures. Reflective
of what Geneva Smitherman (1977) calls “the traditional African world view”
(p. 74), African American practices of call-and-response are linked to
African/African American paradigmatic concepts. For example, since little
separation exists between the material and the spiritual in an African/African
American framework, call-and-response can be found almost anywhere “on a
sacred-secular continuum” (Smitherman, p. 103) in Black life. Smitherman
asserts, “Calling-responding; stating and counterstating; acting and reacting;
testing your performance as you go—it is such a natural, habitual dynamic in
black communication that blacks do it quite unconsciously” (p. 118).
Call-and-response runs deep in our African American culture, her/his-story, and experiences. I remember, as a child, in the days of segregation going to the movies and hearing members of the audience create a call-and-response between themselves and the film as well as among those willing and able to verbally participate in the exchange. Though my part was limited to laughter and other nonverbal responses, fifty percent of my movie-going experience was that expected, spontaneous talk. I loved it and miss it. Growing up Catholic and Creole denied me the opportunity to experience the call-and-response of many all-black congregations where members, the minister, and the choir ritualize call-and-response to create a spiritual, other than physical, experience.45

As a cultural nationalist attending conferences and other large community-based gatherings, I did get a sense of this metaphysical, spiritual experience created by and through that seemingly natural impulse to call and respond between audience and speaker as well as between and among individuals in the audience. At one particular conference, Sweet Honey in the Rock, an African American women a capella group, reached deeper and deeper within themselves skillfully creating an interplay between themselves and us, their audience. We followed their lead. Sweet Honey continued singing. We continued responding. In response to our enthusiasm, Sweet Honey intensified their singing. The space, Sweet Honey, and we the audience seemed to levitate. Everything—time, space, the total group—created spirit and ‘got the spirit.’

45 Korean Sung Gyung Kim (2001) visited four black churches—Baptist, Pentecostal, African Methodist, and Seventh Day Adventist—and wrote about his experiences. Of particular value is Kim’s outsider perspective, his references, and his personal honesty.
In her autobiography *I Put a Spell on You*, singer-pianist Nina Simone (1993) speaks of call-and-response in her life. As a musical child prodigy, Nina Simone played weekly from ages four to twelve for church services, choir practices, and prayer meetings. At this early age, Simone learned “how to shape music in response to an audience and then how to shape the mood of the audience in response to [her] music” (p. 19). Years later, Simone was able “to cast a spell over an audience .... as if there was a power source somewhere that we all plugged into, and the bigger the audience the easier it was—as if each person supplied a certain amount of the power” (p. 93).

Writer, editor, teacher, filmmaker, media activist, Toni Cade Bambara (1996) relates growing up learning “how to speak and leave spaces to let people in so that you get a call-and-response” (p. 215). In her story “The Education of a Storyteller,” Bambara is a child excited to tell Miss Dorothy, her adopted grandmother, about something she knows—Einstein’s theory of relativity. Her grandmother expects to participate in the telling and asks for “a signal when it’s my turn to join in the chorus” (p. 217). But young Bambara explains that her telling does not lend itself to call-and-response. Allowing this difference, Miss Dorothy makes other requests young Bambara is unable to fulfill. Looking back, Bambara sees her grandmother as someone who “steeped [her] in the tradition of Afrocentric aesthetic regulations” (pp. 249-50).

**Call-and-Response: A Story**

I image call-and-response as older than time, as ancient as the origins of the universe. As such, I speculate and conjecture about the beginnings of call-
and-response through story. My story is based on my belief that call-and-response has its source in the traditions of the ancient civilizations of Africa.\textsuperscript{46} I also believe that \textit{All-That-Exists}—inorganic, organic, plant, animal, human, and the rest of the cosmos—is interconnected and interdependent. I imagine that during early times this living, lively relationship was sacred, spoken of in word, sung about in song, lived by in daily actions and that little difference was made between conceptions of God and the bond shared by that which was not God.

Hear my story of the origin of call-and-response:

In the beginning of time, there was God unseen. To become seen, God made an utterance, the first utterance. That first call was the hot, moist breath of God out into the cosmos. Hot became Fire. Moisture became Water. Breath became Air. Cosmos became Earth. In response, the first response, these four essential elements came together to create life. From that moment on call-and-response has been a rhythmic repetition of the first call and the first response—the multiplication and manifestation of spirit in how life is to \textit{be}. There is a call. There is a response. Then, there is the multiplication and manifestation of that call-and-response. The rhythm of life is "two becoming one."\textsuperscript{47}

\textbf{What is Call-and-Response?}

Call-and-response is the rhythm of life happening all the time between and among \textit{All-That-Exists}. Calling and responding is continually present, dynamic in

\textsuperscript{46} For more on various ancient civilizations of Africa, see Karenga and Carruthers (1986); ben-Jochannan and Clarke (1991); Siuda-Legan (1994); and Monges (1997).

\textsuperscript{47} Myers (1983-1984), p. 41. I thank Morris F. X. Jeff, Jr. for helping to inspire this story.
spirit, flowing between and among entities in myriad ways, never fixed, never settled, marked by a readiness to adapt to constantly changing conditions and contexts. Call-and-response, therefore, reflects connection to life, a repeated and recursive repetition of the first call and the first response. The perpetual, active, proactive and interactive, fluid, flexible give-and-take of call-and-response can be seen all around us, such as, the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide between and among plants, animals, and humans.

Since “the traditional African world view emphasizes the synthesis of dualities to achieve balance and harmony” in self and with others in community, in the world and the rest of the cosmos, All-That-Exists functions within “an overall formulaic structure” (Smitherman, 1977, p. 103) which thrives on individual expressions of be-ing and becoming.\(^{48}\) The propensity for balance and harmony through complementary unions of what seems oppositional is a perpetual call to All-That-Exists. The perpetual response is that All-That-Exists aims for balance and harmony through unities of what appears to be antithetical. When I imagine All-That-Exists incessantly calling and responding, I sense a tremendous energy, a dynamism which welcomes and demands every call and every response. “We are talking, then, about an interactive network,” says Smitherman, “in which the fundamental requirement is active participation of all individuals” (p. 108).

Ella Jenkins is an African American woman who made ample use of call-and-response in her career as a folksinger. The descriptive notes of her record

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\(^{48}\) My concept of be-ing, becoming and be-ing/becoming is discussed in Chapter Six.
album, *Call-and-Response: Rhythmic Group Singing*, reveals why Jenkins (1957) valued call-and-response. She found call-and-response effective in urging her audiences “to sing and want to sing for pure enjoyment.” Since Jenkins valued her listeners’ participation, call-and-response enabled people to follow intuitively and effortlessly. Whether vocal inflections or body movements, everyone participated in the experience creating and sustaining a comfortably established group feeling. Call-and-response “causes the group to be attentive, to wonder what is to come next, and be willing to cooperate with the leader.”

In “Call and Response as Critical Method: African-American Oral Traditions and *Beloved*,” Maggie Sale (1992) sees call-and-response as “always operative, but sometimes masked” (p. 42). In addition, Sale states that call-and-response flourishes and relies on the performance of an audience. Grounding her theory in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Sale uses combinations of the terms “teller” and “listener” as well as “writer” and “reader” to articulate her understandings of call-and-response. For Sale, call-and-response “depends upon the interaction between the perspectives and needs of the teller(s) and listener(s)” (p. 46). In other words, teller(s) and listener(s) have perspectives and needs which influence the nature of the interaction between them. Recognizing “the power and problematics of perspective,” Sale believes call-and-response “demands that new meanings be created for each particular moment . . . suggest[ing] that importance lies not only in what is said, but also in how it is said” (p. 42). Call-and-response, then, becomes a means to imagine and create contradictory calls and responses “which exist simultaneously, yet
complementarily.” In this light, the interactive dialogue and dialogic interaction of call-and-response authorizes each caller to tell truth(s) found in their “individual (hi)stories” (p. 42). Truth(s), then, are dependent upon active negotiation and common consent between and among teller(s) and listener(s).

In “‘Doing the Call and Response’: The Fate of Dialogue in Contemporary African-American Poetry,” Nicky Marsh (2000) examines the dialogue in the poetry of June Jordan, Rita Dove, and Harryette Mullen, three present-day African American woman poets. Marsh reveals that Harryette Mullen describes audiences as “doing the call and response” (p. 67). In other words, Mullen sees readers as actively and mutually involved in what she writes, a reciprocal relationship where Mullen as the individual and readers as the collective are both valued and are both vital. According to Marsh, Mullen is fully aware of “the very real tension that exist[s] between formal properties and aims of her writing, and the cultural demands and context of her readership.” With this awareness, Mullen maintains a give-and-take between herself and her reader/s while at the same time centering what she writes in “a reading context” which bases itself upon disclosing rather than disguising “interrogation[s] of the construction[s] of categories of voice and identity upon which it relies” (p. 69).

Devon Boan (1998) in “Call-and-Response: Parallel ‘Slave Narrative’ in August Wilson’s The Piano Lesson” analyzes Wilson’s use of call-and-response in his theatrical play. According to Boan, August Wilson created an interaction, a dialogic interaction, between and among the personalities in the drama as well as those witnessing it unfold. Boan sees the call as an allegorical “slave narrative
that has been carved into the body of the piano” (p. 264) and the response as a metaphorical one emerging from the lives of the play’s characters. Multiple calls and multiple responses arise from the people living the play and the audience listening to and watching the play. As both interact with the overarching call of the play, characters and audience create a poly-focal response. Boan explains:

[T]he interaction in *The Piano Lesson* is . . . structured like the classic call-and-response; the two narratives are linear—evolutionary rather than integrated—and so, in the manner of traditional call-and-response, the direction of the interaction is not toward resolution or even progress, but toward an appropriate response to the call. The result is an ever-changing series of recreations of the myth, in which the narrative gets repeated in a different version every time, each with its own veracity. (p. 264)

Thus, *The Piano Lesson* is a call-and-response in which all voices are welcomed and honored and each call and each response is true.

In “An Interview: Searching for the Mother Tongue”, Toni Cade Bambara revealed to Kalamu ya Salaam (1980) that she made three calls to community organizers and cultural workers in her novel *The Salt Eaters*. When I read *The Salt Eaters*, I found no explicit calls but rather Bambara (1980) making her calls through the dynamics of the people and events of three institutions in Claybourne, the imagined space and place where Black people rule in her story. In the interview, Bambara described to Salaam (1980) what she conceived, created, and conjured up in her effort to call to whoever reads *The Salt Eaters*. Bambara reveals:

Everything in the book, the way it’s structured, the avoidance of a linear thing in favor of a kind of jazz suite, the numerous characters, . . . everything becomes a kind of metaphor for the whole. We have to put it all together. It deals with all the senses and also different kinds of ways to meditate, different kinds of ways to tap the center. (p. 50)
We, human beings, are very much part of this rhythm of life found in call-and-response. Though often viewed as a common cultural expression among African Americans, call-and-response permeates how everyone and everything interact with self, others, and the rest of the cosmos contributing to a simultaneous “individual expression and group empathy” (Hill et al., 1998, p. 14), an I~We-ness.

**Call-and-Response in the Context of I~We**

In our moment-to-moment living, we live in a flow of calls and responses. We are simultaneously calling as well as responding, plurally cooperating with and contributing to, what Diane Reeves’ (1999) calls, “the wonders of the universe.” Each call and each response lives in the context of a moment. Each moment has experiences—words, deeds, actions, expressions—which inherently trigger other experiences. I view these experiences as calls and/or responses. To respond to a call is to give respect to the caller as well as affirm where dey comin from, and reflects commitment, sometimes courage, as well as concern for self, others, one’s community, the rest of the world and cosmos. The power of call-and-response lies in its possibilities for exchange and interaction, that is, participatory involvement which demands a give-and-take between or among entities. Any combination(s) of self/selves, other(s), community(ies), environment(s), and the rest of the cosmos can participate in call-and-response. “The process requires that one must give if one is to receive,” Smitherman

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49 Taken from “Mista” on her compact disc entitled *Bridges*. 

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(1977), “and receiving is actively acknowledging another” (p. 108). Once a call is heard, the ultimate response is to act.

However, since the ethic of call-and-response precedes the thinking process, that is, since call-and-response is always active whether we think about it or not, consciousness is required for the acknowledgment and reciprocity of call-and-response to exist between and among human beings. For example, several semesters ago, mah sistuh/friend spontaneously gave me a gift. When I fell into my usual habit of not accepting what is given to me and refused to take it, she told me I was not completing the circle. “The circle?” I asked. She explained that she began a circle of giving and my receiving her gift would complete the circle. Mah sistuh/friend was calling me to respond to her giving, to her love and appreciation of me as her sistuh/friend. Though I was aware of her love and appreciation, I did not acknowledge my awareness when I declined to accept her gift. I was not conscious enough to hear her call. The moment I accepted her gift, I responded to her call, acknowledging and affirming our relationship as well as reciprocating with commitment and concern. Call-and-response is acknowledgment and reciprocity when the individuals involved are conscious of self, others, and the rest of the cosmos.

My Methodology Begins

Over the course of my seven years in graduate school, I maintained periodic communications with my community to keep them abreast of my experiences as a graduate student. I never expected nor desired a response from my community. However, when I sent out the first draft of my dissertation
overview, I needed and wanted feedback. Because my dissertation is culturally, her/historically, and experientially African and African American in both form and content, I needed and wanted to know what other African Americans thought about my work. I wanted to know if what I had written made sense to those with whom I shared similar viewpoints and visions. I needed and wanted their input and to have conversations about what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it. I had already learned the value of peer support and peer editing. The process of working through thinking with my peers (other graduate students) was also vital. I realized that I needed to work through my thinking with those who understood who I am and where I’m comin from. I realized I needed to hear specific feedback (response to a call) from mah folk (my We). From the beginning, I was clear that I saw my work as an I–We process, that is, Tayari, the I, and my community, the We, participating in conceiving, creating, and conjuring up ideas. At the top of my overview, I wrote:

Any and all suggestions, questions, criticisms, concerns are strongly welcomed. I see my work as an I/We process, that is, Tayari, the I, and y’all, the We, are participating in conceiving, creating, and conjuring up these ideas. (“I/We” was conceptualized by my sistuh/friend Denise Taliaferro, Ph.D. and I gladly make use of it.)

I looked over the names of family, friends, and community activists to whom I had already sent my overview. I selected those individuals in New Orleans and in various places across the United States who I believed would offer me constructive criticism, input, and encouragement. I made a list of those individuals with their names, addresses, phone numbers, and e-mails. I called each person by phone to make sure they had received a copy of my one-page
overview and asked if they would have a conversation with me about what I wanted to communicate in my dissertation. Here is the overview I sent to my community:

Dissertation Overview

My dissertation, entitled *Responding to Sojourner Truth’s Call: Life Is a School Less You a Fool*, is a call-and-response focusing on what I call “so-journeying truth(s).” For me, Sojourner Truth’s call is the Abbey Lincoln lyrical line to Theolonius Monk’s composition: Life is a school less you a fool. I am writing my response with the help of bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Toni Morrison, June Jordan, Barbara Omolade, Jacqueline Jones Royster as well as lesser known (but just as powerful) African American women.

Divided into four parts, my dissertation has four calls and three responses. Each part has two chapters, one Sojourner Truth’s call and the other my response. Three calls explore one of the three features of Sojourner Truth’s call to live life as a school. The fourth is my call for curriculum connexions\(^50\) with an invitation to the reader(s) to respond.

Part I
Focus: Identity formations and formulations
Metaphors: kaleidoscope and fractal
Proverb, quote, statement: Identity is kaleidoscopic, fractal, and in perpetual flux.
Chapter: Sojourner Truth’s Call
Chapter: Tayari’s Response (oppression, perturbation)

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\(^{50}\) I came across this British spelling of “connections” when I first started studying curriculum theory. I prefer this spelling because it suggests that curriculum is never fixed and is always in motion. For me, curriculum’s perpetual query is: What’s next?
Part II  
Focus: Personally interpreted spirituality  
Metaphors: the cosmos and the sun (Nana Anoa Nantambu)  
Proverb, quote, statement: “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.” — Teilhard de Chardin (S. R. Covey, 1994, p. 319)  
Chapter: Sojourner Truth’s Call  
Chapter: Tayari’s Response  

Part III  
Focus: Critical interactive relational self-knowledge  
Metaphors: the cosmos and home [Chinosole (1990): “home as the locus of self-definition and power”]  
Proverb, quote, statement: “Perhaps . . . our lot on earth is to seek and to search. Now and again we find enough to enable us to carry on. I now doubt that any of us will completely find and be found in this life.” — Jean Toomer (D. Mullane, 1995, p. 428)  
Chapter: Sojourner Truth’s Call  
Chapter: Tayari’s Response  

Part IV  
Focus: Curriculum connexions  
Metaphors: quilt and jazz  
Proverb, quote, statement: We are not perfect and will make mistakes, but every mistake can either be a lesson or a letdown. It is important that we learn from our mistakes and realize that regardless of the odds we face, struggle will make us strong.” (Bottom of personal stationery)  
Chapter: Tayari’s Call  
Chapter: Reader’s(s’) Response  

Though most were willing, several were hesitant. I used my experience with interviewing from oral history to find out the source of their reluctance by actively listening. Many were reluctant because they did not believe they had anything to contribute to me or my work. I assured them that from my perspective together we possessed what it would take to have a fruitful exchange. From the end of June to the end of November 2001, I contacted forty individuals and conversed with thirty of them. Approximately half of our conversations were tape-recorded. By way of telephone conversations, I spoke
with approximately thirty people to hear their responses and to dialogue about my thinking.

Most of the individuals knew me personally through community-based activities and my experience with interviewing enabled me to create trust and comfort with each person. In addition, all but three were African American and all but nine were women. That is, the majority were African American women. Most of my conversations were done by phone while two were done in person. At first, I simply took notes because I was in New Orleans and the tape recorder was in Baton Rouge. When I returned to Baton Rouge, I invested in a jack to connect my telephone and the tape recorder to enable me to record by phone. Before beginning, I reminded each person of the purpose of our exchange and said that I would be taking notes or tape-recording. For each conversation, I recorded the name of the individual and the date of the call.

Since I had said so much in my overview, I wanted to hear from people first. Without thinking, I used interviewing skills I learned in oral history approaching each person with love, respect, and interest. Each exchange began with settling in and getting comfortable by catching up or listening to current involvements or, if a recommended individual, getting to know each other. Then I turned to the purpose of the exchange—feedback on what I had written. I stated that I wanted to hear whatever thoughts or comments came to mind when she or he read the overview. I also explained that I did have some specific questions afterwards if those questions were not answered during our conversation. When I learned that the exchange was much more productive when each person was
looking at a copy of my overview, I found a way to check to make sure that each person had her/his copy before getting too far into our conversation.

At first, feedback came from those who were moved to do so voluntarily. When I decided to select individuals, the range of responses was multiple. Some people just started talking while others needed prompting. A few resisted, believing they had little to offer. Some were thrilled and immediately began to give their feedback. Some needed to hear me talk about what I had written before they responded. Some were clearly confused and gave feedback once we had a conversation about what they did not understand. Some talked about my ideas while others recommended readings. Some had encouraging, supportive words with little conversation or suggestions. Some were motivated to express their own ideas and told stories of their own experiences. Some gave me names and contact information for other individuals who would and could help me work through my thinking. Throughout the process, I used my training with oral history to converse with each individual.

The Response

Many respondents immediately recognized call-and-response as a central element of African and African American tradition. They expressed excitement that I had created a methodology around such an ancient and dynamic element of African and African American culture. Melinda Bartley, professor of education, stated: “My initial response was it is one of the most innovative approaches to research. Unique. Really have not seen this format before and I thought it was interesting because ... that’s part of the tradition and I know it from the church.”
Bartley went on to define my overview as she saw it:

You put these pieces, these contrasts, these interpretations, comparisons together in the form of how do we now teach this and prepare teaching materials in order to help learners understand how to find themselves in the universe based on certain truths .... You are setting up a process that can be used to apply to a number of different disciplines and using this particular model to adapt the curriculum for almost any subject.

Bartley asserted that my dissertation has “philosophical implications of thinking through who am I and how do I fit.” (Phone conversation, 27 July 2001)

Denise Taliaferro, a curriculum theorist and professor of education, made an effort to state what she saw as a central concern of my dissertation. Taliaferro said, “The question I’m hearing in terms of curriculum theorizing is can our idea [of curriculum] be more like or look like life.” (Phone conversation, 8 August 2001)

My colleague and sistuh/friend Carol Bebelle positioned call-and-response as “oral learning ....  People learn more [with call-and-response],” Carol explained. “They get the implied relationships between the things inside of the lesson and they understand the implications for the lesson ....  It’s an authentic cultural behavior we relate very well to.” She went on to validate the difficulties of my journey through graduate study and to congratulate me for staying the course and creating a dissertation “with the Tayari mark.” Carol astutely pointed out that in collecting feedback from my community, I was not only practicing call-and-response as a methodology to complete my dissertation research, but I was also creating a call out to the members of my community to consider curriculum theory:
We all went to school with you. We were moved to have to consider things we would never had... Who else would we have talked about this stuff with? This metaphoric approach, you became a metaphor for keeping us all in school. It is your style of being an educator which is all inclusive, everything is a teachable moment, a learning opportunity. (Phone conversation, 25 July 2001)

Among the many respondents who questioned my intentions and assertions, teacher, curriculum designer, and sistuh/friend Ethelyn Hamilton Frezel asked, “How does this relate to education and dealing with students or with developing curriculum?” Ettie discussed elements of the overview she disagreed with while communicating what elements she could relate to. We talked about the nature of identity and a teacher’s role in the shaping of a child’s identity. “I think that one of the things that education does is it is an indoctrination,” said Ettie, “and I think part of the process is to mold a person’s identity into a certain form that would be acceptable by the greater society. Often time teaching is done in an oppressive way.” (Phone conversation, 1 August 2001)

Similarly, writer Lynn Pitts wanted to know my intentions for the finished whole. “Do you see it as being a guide for people who develop curriculum for education?” she asked. “How does the spirit of your dissertation ... [apply] itself to teachers and teaching? ... What do you want [your dissertation] to be ... for people who read it?” (Phone conversation, 26 August 2001)

Curriculum theorist and community activist Al Alcazar saw my work as forging identities in the context of curriculum. Alcazar said, “Each of us goes through some history of I-ness and some history of We-ness or They-ness and somewhere along the line you’re going to have to forge an identity, an I, that is
really a combination of the I and the We and doing it in the context of curriculum.”

(Phone conversation, 7 August 2001)

Other respondents amen-ed my experiences and shared their own struggles and successes with graduate study. Kimberley Richards, after sharing several possible resources with me, talked about her insistence on bringing her community with her through her graduate student experience. She said, “We go into this process as African women with a whole lot of folk energy.” She discussed the difficulties and gratification involved in building a dissertation on “information that comes from the community that lives it, not [information] that comes from an academy that observes it.” (Phone conversation, 22 August 2001)

Scholar and educator Safisha Madhubuti (Carol Lee) expressed appreciation for me discussing . . .

enduring questions relating to education and positing . . . them in a framework [in which] black culturally-oriented folks have thought about these questions.... I think that’s very much missing from the mainstream literature on whatever. It doesn’t matter what topic it is in education, one would assume for the way you tend to see it here that black people never had anything to say or did any studies or anything that related to these issues.

Safisha celebrated the creativity of my efforts, but at the same time, as an academic, she strongly cautioned me to consider the committee and to be certain I construct a work that fits the requirements of a dissertation. She recommended that I “think about the dissertation as a beginning rather than an end,” while maintaining that “the Ph.D. should always be about pushing the boundaries of what is.” (Phone conversation, 6 October 2001)
Longtime community activist Ruby Sales questioned my use of the word “powerful” to describe African American women. For Sales, African American women possess a spiritual and moral vision which is inclusive of everyone and everything in life, not just what is physical or material, not just the privileged few. In this sense, she sees African American women as “prophetic.” (Phone conversation, 24 November 2001)

Surprisingly, these conversations were more informative than I had expected. I had been talking with people for almost two months and was unaware of coming up with a process that could become my methodology.

Colleague and sistuh/friend Ethelyn Hamilton Frezel commented:

I think the way you are going about doing your dissertation is a dissertation in itself. Most people don’t try to get fifty different people’s opinions on something and you get that many different views. So, I think the fact that you are getting so many different people and those people have so many varied experiences, that’s just a dissertation in itself. (Phone conversation, 1 August 2001)

I remember how this remark came to mind again as if it had percolated in my dreams. I called my daughter Kiini Ibura Salaam, writer and copy editor, to talk about how I might be developing a methodology for my work and what to name it. After explaining the process I used, Kiini Salaam (2000) shared how she had unknowingly used a similar approach when she wrote her “Navigating to No” essay for Essence magazine.

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51 I thank Ettie Hamilton Frezel for her insight.

52 Kiini Ibura Salaam, writer/artist extra ordinaire, acted as my steadfast support throughout the ups and downs of writing my dissertation. We had an agreement that I could call her at anytime whenever I felt the need. I thank her for her critical role in helping me continue on.
I wrote the article originally in response to what a friend told me happened to her. It was a very streamline article. Then some years later I had the experience. A year or so [after my experience], I decided I wanted to pick up the article again. When I did, I decided to start interviewing women. I interviewed them and I started getting feedback and I started talking about my own experience and I realize that I needed to put myself into the article. Hearing these other women’s experiences gave me a certain level of comfort with what had happened to me and I was able to not blame myself necessarily and still hold myself accountable, but also understand that this is a larger issue going on outside myself in the world. So, with that conversation, I was able to write the piece and get it published. Then, after I published it, I start getting all this feedback from the community of women who were basically amening and understanding and thanking me for what I said and also some men. [This response] gave me a certain level of audacity about the issue and shamelessness and fearlessness on another level. So, I then went out and went on television and talked about it, and on the radio and talked about it. (8 August 2001, phone conversation. Words slightly edited.)

The parallels were affirming: having an issue of personal interest, dialoguing with peers who are part of your own community, the critical role of feedback and conversation, expanding the original circle to include others who are also connected to the particular issue. Looking over what Kiini said helped me see that I did in fact have a methodology. Together, we named the process I~We.

As I reflected, I realized that I~We captured the community aspect of my methodology, but not a sense of process. After a conversation with my major advisor, I named my methodology call-and-response in the context of I~We. Feedback was a response to a call while conversations, dialogues, exchanges were calls and responses, both between individuals of my community and me.

My methodology bridges two worlds—my African/African American paradigm and, what I call, the spirit of oral history. Based on an African/African American world view, my methodology is a process which combines call-and-response with I~We. Though the process has no beginning or end, I choose to
start with my issue of personal interest which was/is inspired by multiple calls and responses I heard and hear from my community in the context of the wide world and the rest of the cosmos. Since the form and content of my issue is expressed in and from an African/African American perspective, I presented it to a select group of African Americans in my community and asked (gave a call) for their feedback (response to a call).

However, the spirit of oral history facilitated the process of call-and-response in the context of I~We. I use the phrase “spirit of oral history” rather than “oral history” because I made use of aspects of oral history to include multiple voices with varied views; to emphasize the temporal, fluid, messiness of life; and to capture the authenticity of the community I come from. Since my qualitative research hours were in oral history, I had learned how to use a professional tape recorder, how to carry out a successful interview, and how to transcribe interviews. With response notes and ninety pages of transcriptions, I read and coded the exchanges based on the chapters and themes in my dissertation overview. Instead of facing a blank page, I found pieces of written oral expressions based on exchanges about my ideas in transcriptions of conversations.

The Importance of Call-and-Response in the Context of I~We

First and foremost, I start in my own cultural context so that I can use my own cultural understandings to make sense of self, others, and the rest of the cosmos. I also need my own community to help me make sense of what I theorize from an African/African American perspective. Furthermore, though I
see myself as a citizen of the world, my lifework is dedicated to the defense and development of African Americans here in the United States. As Cynthia Dillard said, “Doing research in a community and claiming that community as a site for research also requires that you claim a cultural space through which that data can actually be interpreted” (Phone conversation, August 2001). My research is valuable when these needs and my commitment are affirmed.

Call-and-response in the context of I~We enables me to clarify what I am thinking by affording me the opportunity to over and over again give voice to my theories. Inevitably, in almost every exchange I had for this work, I was asked to explain what I meant or to describe what I was doing. Each time I responded, I repeatedly expressed and explained what I was thinking. In the end, my thoughts became more lucid due to the feedback (response to a call) and the exchange (call and response). Through interactive dialogue (call-and-response), I came to a clearer understanding of my dissertation themes and my thinking.

Call-and-response in the context of I~We gives me confidence in my own intelligence and deepens my connection to my community. Elated yet tenuous throughout my dissertation dance of researching, reading, and writing/righting, I was energized whenever I received encouragement, input, and criticism (always constructive) from my community about my work. In those moments when I was so immersed in work and felt confused, tired, and inadequate, I called on someone who I knew would help me move beyond whatever barrier blocked my
path to *carry on*.\(^{53}\) Most often, the back and forth flow of feedback on my writing would clear my mind and I would be able to center once again on my work. One respondent, community activist and poet Nayo Watkins, offered the observation that our (African American) thinking is more circular than linear and she saw my methodology reflective of circular thinking. She continued to say that she saw connections between and among pieces in my work and felt “that if you [placed] them on a line they may not seem to have connection but in [a] circle they create energy which feed each other and connect each other” (Phone conversation, 16 August 2001).

As I reflected on the multiple responses I received from my community, I realized that my thinking was affirmed and validated by each individual, even those who believed they had little to offer to an exchange. I was praised for grounding my methodology and curriculum theorizing in African and African American thought. I was told that my work is valuable for all learners and has potential for a variety of curricular uses. My community affirmed and validated my belief in the need to bring life into school, education, teaching, and curriculum. Greatest of all was that seeds were planted for me to continue on the path I began—committed to and drawing on an African/African American perspective, speaking from my own understandings and experiences as an African American woman teacher/activist, and believing in my vision inspired by Sojourner Truth. By affirming and validating my vision of bringing life into school,

\(^{53}\) “*Carry on*” is a common Ebonics expression. I am also reminded of an early 1980's poem, “The Tradition” written by Assata Shakur where she repeats the lines “Carry it on now / Carry it on / Carry it on now / Carry it on / Carry on the tradition.”
education, teaching, and curriculum, my community gave me the energy and spirit I needed to continue on my dissertation journey. The call-and-response of my community helped me realize that the first area for me to sojourn was my experiences with African/African American-centered education.
Chapter Four

My Journey With African/African American-Centered Education

Until the lion writes his [sic] own story,
the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.  

In this chapter, I begin by describing various ways in which Sojourner Truth valued and validated her African origins and heritage. I introduce and outline an African world view which is the source of African/African American heritage as well as of African/African American-centered education. I detail an account of the independent Black school movement which over time developed curricula for African/African American-centered education. Based on my sixteen-year experience developing curriculum in two independent Black schools, I discuss four foci of African/African American-centered educational curriculum with the voices of Maulana Karenga, Mwalimu Shujaa, Carol Lee (Safisha Madhubuti), Kofi Lomotey, Beverly Gordon, and Joyce King. I then disclose how I began to personally question myself prompting me to question African/African American-centered education. With African/African American-centered education as my foundation, I reached a level of expertise in education. Exploring my her/his-story in independent Black schools grounded my dissertation journey.

Sojourner Truth and Her African Origins

Sojourner Truth lived her life reflective of her African origins. Truth was born around 1797, only two generations removed from those Africans who were forcibly brought to the United States in 1619 as indentured servants (Bergman, 1969). In
addition, Truth’s parents were unmixed Africans and raised their daughter with African cultural values and beliefs (Peterson, 1995) through stories, songs, and love (Ortiz, 1974). The songs Truth’s mother sang were the same songs Truth’s grandmother sang to her mother when she was young, songs from Africa with unrecognizable, but comforting words (Bernard, 1967). Truth’s mother also used a common enslaved African expression, “black dispatch,” to express her intuitive knowledge of some forthcoming moment or event (Bernard, p. 9). Olive Gilbert (Painter, 1998) reports in the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* that Truth kept her baby safe in a basket which she hung from a nearby tree while she worked in the fields, a custom which could be “simply a mother’s inventiveness, a Native American practicality, or a useful syncretistic African adaptation to an American reality” (Stetson and David, 1994, p. 36). In her old age, Truth was observed carrying a basket of fruit on her head and danced the “Juba” for a friend’s children (Stetson and David, 1994). The first is a practical custom followed by many in African societies; the second “an African American dance, accompanied by singing, clapping, patting the hands on thighs, and patting feet on ground” (Mabee and Newhouse, 1993, pp. 229-30). Sojourner Truth grew up celebrating Pinkster that seven-day celebration which reflected African origins.

Her initial understandings of God and the preeminence of orality through the vital value of song, also reflections of her African and African American origins, came from Truth’s mother as “sources of cultural power” (Peterson, 1995, p. 206). Truth learned to talk to God directly and to see God in material objects. Singing became second nature to Truth as she sang often for comfort, spiritual uplift, or simply for the joy of singing.

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55 For more information about “Juba,” see Beverly J. Robinson (1990), pp. 214-17.
Truth’s mother also taught her daughter to turn to God when it seemed there was no one else to turn to. When she suffered the forced cruelties of her slave masters, Truth remembered her mother’s directives, went into the woods, created a “prayer ground” (Bernard, 1967, p. 41) and poured her heart out in word and song to her God. “From her mother, [Truth] learned the faith that would give her the strength and courage needed for her battles” (Taylor-Boyd, 1990, p. 6). Truth valued her African roots as well as validated her African culture, her/his-story, and experiences throughout her life.

As they were to Sojourner Truth, my African culture, her/his-story, and experiences are important to me. I value and validate my African heritage in my life and through my work in African/African American-centered education. The fundamental beliefs and practices of African/African American culture, her/his-story, and experiences as well as in African/African American-centered education are found in an African world view.

An African World View

An African world view is an inseparable multi-layered, dynamic complex of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and cosmology. This all-at-once, overlapping, active and interactive, intricate aggregation of beliefs and concepts defy definition and description. Rather than an exhaustive, complete delineation, only a partial, inadequate explanation is possible. In the literature I reviewed, I noticed a marked difference between how two African Americans born in the United States and a continental African born in Malawi define and describe an African world view. African Americans feature select principles and beliefs while the Malawian paints a broad, fluid picture. In my
view, each complements the other and, when viewed together, create a more comprehensive representation.

“The Network of Life”

Harvey Sindima (1989), a theologian from Malawi, offers his interpretations of an African world view in “The Community of Life.” Sindima begins and ends his interpretations of an African world view in life and the possibilities of life. Inseparable from life are nature and human beings symbiotically interrelated and interdependent.

Sindima states:

The African world is concerned with fullness of life, since it is in its fullness that life’s meaning is realized. Fullness of life is realized when human potential and possibilities are allowed to reach their maximum, i.e., personhood. However, the question of human life cannot be understood apart from nature to which it is bonded. In so many ways, nature plays an important role in the process of human growth. Nature provides all that is necessary for a person to grow. This means nature and persons are intimately inter-related, woven by creation into one texture or fabric of life. (p. 544)

Sindima explains that in an African world view human beings continue creation through nature. When human beings interact with nature, “people discover their being inseparably bonded to creation or all life.” Life in an African world view is marked by abundance and possibilities. Sindima states, “The African universe is one full of life; life transcending itself through fecundity. In its abundant creativity, life continues to cross frontiers and break forth into new dimensions, always re-creating itself, thereby presenting humankind with ever new possibilities.” Using the phrase “self-transcending life,” Sindima expresses how in an African world view life is both material and spiritual. Emphasizing the sacred due to life’s “divine origin,” that is, “life is given by God,” he reveals how in an African world view the spiritual is the context for all of life and living (p. 544).
In an African world view, the concept of person and community are part of, what Sindima calls, “the network of life.” With this understanding, Sindima claims, “People belong to each other, being bonded in one common life. Hence, consciousness is not consciousness of self but always consciousness of the flow of life in the community and world” (p. 546). Community, says Sindima, is about living and sharing with others as well as with nature in communion and communication. He describes how the workings of living and sharing create community. He states:

Living in communication allows stories or life experiences of others to become one’s own. Sharing of life experiences affirms people and prepares them for understanding each other. To understand is to be open to the life experience of others, to be influenced by the world of others and this is fundamental in living together in community. (p. 548)

“Multidimensional”

In “How to Think Black: A Symposium on Toni Cade Bambara’s The Salt Eaters,” Charlyn Harper (1983-1984) centers on what she calls “deep structural consciousness.” According to Harper, this level of consciousness for African Americans is sourced in “traditional African ontology, the study of what is; . . . traditional African epistemology, the study of how we know what is; . . . traditional African axiology, how we value what is; and . . . traditional African cosmology, the study of the structure of the universe or that understanding of universal relationships” (p. 35).

Beginning with African cosmology, Harper explains that cosmological beliefs in an African world view rests in “an indivisible and inexhaustible relationship between God, mankind, and the cosmos.” The understanding of this relationship, says Harper, can be found in all facets of the community: “the social, the political, the educational, the moral, the psychological dimensions of African life” (p. 35). Symbols, rituals, and myths
are used to affirm the importance of this belief in African culture, an epistemological expression giving material form to that which is spiritual. Harper asserts:

African symbols, rituals, and myths were pregnant with meaning. They served as models for behaving, models for living, as well as models of thought, and models of understanding reality. These particular cultural forms conveyed not only what African people thought was real or perceived to be real, but they also shaped African reality to conform to an understanding of that particular God, man, cosmos relationship. Thus, African symbols, rituals, and myths served a very vital function in African thinking. They constituted not only an epistemological form but also served as an ontological statement. In other words, they reinforced the community’s corporate reality, the physical reality, as well as the spiritual and mental reality. (p. 36)

Harper then introduces and discusses what she calls “a complementarity of differences,” an African paradigmatic principle which conceives differences as expressions of the same reality. Pointing to “heat-cold, . . . male-female, . . . light-dark, . . . one . . . many, . . . east-west” as examples, Harper explains how these reflect the African world view belief that “Everything was dual; everything has two aspects.” Rather than seeing differences as oppositional, says Harper, differences are complements of the same phenomenon expressing a more holistic understanding of that entity. She interprets the concept of the “living-dead” as a reflection of the two-ness found in life and death. “In traditional African philosophy,” states Harper, “as long as there was somebody who could call you by name, then you were alive in the community” (p. 36). It is totally logical in an African reality for something to be and not be simultaneously.

The next African world view principle Harper introduces and discusses is the belief that reality is marked by order and disorder. She states, “Reality is cyclical and goes through phases of creation, revolt, and resurrection or restoration. Creation is characterized by order, completeness, and duality. Revolt is characterized by disorder,
sterility, and singularity.” Harper gives special attention to the third phase of this cycle. She explains how in traditional African philosophy balance and perfection are viewed in the context of order and disorder. Perfection is seen as deceptive, unimportant to human beings, and completely invisible, for only “the supreme being” is perfect. Human beings maintaining balance in an orderly/disorderly world, says Harper, is seen as a replication of the perfection of the supreme being. Harper reveals, “Our purpose of being is a question of repair and restoration, a question of creating order out of disorder, a question of constantly becoming. Our reality is, therefore, infinite” (p. 37).

In an African paradigm, every human being is defined as an individual in the context of a collective. As individuals, Harper points out, each human being grows and develops through “a process of making what is unconscious and innate . . . conscious.” This belief is grounded in the principle that each of us is born with “the fullest of human potentials.” In an African world view, claims Harper, an individual ”is not necessarily born ready-made.” Each of us lives through a process of “bringing out that stuff that is already [within]” (p. 37). At the same time, every human being is also defined by community, for it is in the collective that each individual realizes her/his own uniqueness and her/his own capabilities. Thus, a balance exists between individual growth and development and the continued life of one’s community. Harper explains this African paradigmatic principle:

Every human being in African reality and African thought was a multi-dimensional, dynamically developing organism whose whole personality was involved in the process of [her/]his becoming, [her/]his involvement in [her/]his social world, [her/]his involvement in [her/]his community, [her/]his involvement in [her/]his world at all levels. Each person, in African thinking, both transcended the whole and was an essential part of the whole. (p. 38)
The final principle Harper introduces pertains to an aspect of African epistemology: how do African people come to know. Harper references Vernon Dixon who professes, “African people know what they know by immersing themselves in experience.” Harper ends her remarks by making clear that to separate the ontology, epistemology, axiology, and cosmology of an African world view “is to create a false dichotomy” (p. 38).

“Two Becoming One”

Also in “How to Think Black: A Symposium on Toni Cade Bambara’s The Salt Eaters,” Linda James Myers (1983-1984), an African American psychologist, developed “an Afro-centric conceptual system” rooted in an African world. She believes that her conceptual system is a desirable, satisfactory approach to living because it parallels the aim of an African world view—the achievement of “everlasting peace and happiness” for each individual (p. 39).

An African world view principle Myers focuses on is the ontological belief that reality is simultaneously spiritual and material. “What that ultimately plays out to mean,” explains Myers, “is that everything is one thing. Everything is unified, interrelated, interdependent, interconnected, integrated. Everything is spirit manifest” (pp. 39-40). Based on this principle, Myers reveals how knowing in an African world view occurs both physically and metaphysically. That is, knowledge in an African reality involves what can be known through our five senses as well as through extrasensory capabilities. Myers states further: “Intuitively, you can know that by defining reality as spiritual and material at once, you have bought into a system that sees itself as infinite and unlimited” (p. 43).
Myers then points out an epistemological principle which grows out of this ontological belief of seeing reality as both spiritual and material. In an African world view, “self-knowledge is the basis of all knowledge.” Since “everything is spirit manifest” in an African reality, each human being is a manifestation of spirit. As such, knowledge about self is to be found “through symbolic imagery and rhythm.” Myers puts it this way:

From our ontological position, that, indeed, everything is one thing, we can say that, epistemologically, all knowledge is self-knowledge, the one thing being Self. .... Rather than seeing subject/object, all becomes subject. Therefore, we know increasingly by knowing more and more about ourselves, ultimately about infinite spirit. (p. 40).

Myers then turns briefly to the axiology of an African world view. She states that, in an African world view, value is placed on “interpersonal relationships among people” rather than on “the acquisition of objects” (p. 41).

Another principle of an African world view is what Myers identifies as “diunital logic”, the logic of “two becoming one” (p. 41). The aim of this reasoning is a unity which reflects the qualities of both opposites while simultaneously transcending their seemingly antagonistic characteristics. Diunital logic moves beyond polarity, rigidity, and absolute thinking.

Myers also points to the way advocates of an African world view accomplish tasks. She coined the term “ntuology” to describe an approach to process based in an African world view. For Myers, an African paradigmatic view of process lives in the belief: “All sets are interrelated through human and spiritual networks.” A process accomplished through “human and spiritual networks” is compatible with an African world view’s aim for each individual—everlasting peace and happiness as well as “total union with infinite spirit” (p. 41).
Identity and self-worth in an African world view, claims Myers, is also spirit based. In terms of identity, Myers states, “We become God-manifesting. That is who we are. That is what everyone and everything is.” Our self-worth, in an African world view, claims Myers, is “intrinsic in being” simply because we exist (p. 42). In other words, our identity and self worth do not change over time based on external criteria. In an African world view, who we are and our worthiness remain a given.

Several years later, in Understanding an Afrocentric World View: An Introduction to an Optimal Psychology, Linda James Myers (1988) expands on her interpretations of an African world view. Myers states:

Central to the traditional African world view is the conception that everything is a unified, interdependent, and integrated whole. There is an order inherent in the unity of this holistic orientation that can be seen at all levels of nature, and provides the impetus for an integrated reality . . . The supreme reality that is the essence of humankind and nature binds and orders the universe. .... All of existence forms a multi-dimensional channel . . . (p. 47)

In such a world, everything shares “the substance of the whole” and the whole shares “the substances of each of its parts” (p. 12). All-That-Exists follows principles of correspondence (as above, so below), complementarity (unity of opposites), and unity (two becoming one).

Myers concludes her book with a table of the major principles of both “the predominant American and traditional African world views” (p. 3). She juxtaposes each principle of each world view as a mirror opposite of the other. Myers’s table seems to pit one world view against the other contradicting the African paradigmatic belief in a union of opposites and both/and conclusions. The table reduces the all-at-once, overlapping, active and interactive, intricate aggregation of beliefs and concepts of an African world view into a linear list of separate, absolute, simplistic beliefs and concepts.
Though the scope, depth, and complexity of an African world view are only hinted at here, the concepts I reveal through Sindima, Harper, and Myers do reflect the depth of an African world view. During the late 1960s in response to the failures of desegregation to meet the educational needs of African American youth, a group of African American teachers and community activists sourced an African world view for independent Black schools’ curricula. I now turn to an account of the independent Black school movement.

The Independent Black School Movement

In “Cultural Work: Planting New Trees With New Seeds,” writer, professor, and publisher Haki R. Madhubuti (1995) reveals his twenty-five year involvement in the independent Black school movement. He states, “This movement grew out of the Black empowerment struggles and initiatives of the sixties and had developed African-centered schools around the country” (p. 4). Madhubuti also points out, “The fight to educate African-Americans is a little told history in this age of integration. .... This fight was never a battle to sit next to white children in a classroom. It was and still is a struggle for an equal and level playing field in all areas of human endeavor” (p. 3).

In “School Desegregation, the Politics of Culture, and the Council of Independent Black Institutions,” Mwalimu Shujaa and Hannibal Afrik (1996) contribute to that needed her/his-story of African American education at the onset of desegregation. Shujaa, professor and executive officer of the Council of Independent Institutions, and Afrik, “activist, writer, administrator and educator in the movement for independent African-centered education for more than twenty years” (p. xix), were part of the story they tell. Shujaa and Afrik describe the Council of Independent Black Institutions:
The Council of Independent Black Institutions (CIBI) was founded in 1972 as a national organization to unify a far-flung, rapidly developing movement of Pan-Africanist-oriented independent schools in the United States. CIBI’s founding represented the implementation of ideas from a different ideological stream than that which guided integrationist strategies that swept African American communities during the period leading up to and following the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. (p. 254)

Shujaa and Afrik begin their account in the late 1960s with “the community control of public schools movement” in large urban areas such as New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston, and Washington, D. C. Desegregation in these cities “highlighted both the educational and political failure of big city school districts and the unwillingness of the whites who controlled those districts to concede power.” In response, African Americans sought “to control the public schools their children attended” (p. 254).

Shujaa and Afrik explain how these African Americans were met with resistance not only from politicians and school officials but also from African American teachers. They point out one ramification of desegregation was the heightening of class divisions among African Americans. Shujaa and Afrik state:

> Claims by African Americans to the right to control the public schools their children attended were met by organized opposition from politicians and schooling professionals. Clearly, the opposition to community control was led by whites; however, when some African American teachers became convinced that their professional interests were threatened by community control, the movement to seize control of public schools was defeated. This led some African Americans in the community control movement to take the position that the *Brown* decision not only had contributed little to African American political power over schooling, it had actually created conditions that deepened class contradictions among African Americans. (pp. 254-55)

Shujaa and Afrik quote one teacher involved in the New York City community control movement to say, “The creation of a schism between the Negro professional and black masses is the last remaining weapon of the Establishment in its efforts to maintain white supremacy.” With this development, says Shujaa and Afrik, African Americans learned
another lesson about “the politics of education and the dynamics of power.” In response, activists in the community control movement initiated “independent Black schools.” African Americans who were part of “the emerging independent Black school movement” were also among those African Americans who reacted to broader social and societal power dynamics. Shujaa and Afrik reveal, “The echoing cry of ‘Black Power’ became the vital spirit of the emerging independent Black school movement” (p. 255).

In 1970, during a conference held in East Palo Alto, California, existing independent Black schools joined together to decide on guidelines for evaluation and “to facilitate communication.” The schools named themselves “Independent Black Institutions” and generated six principles of an independent Black institution (p. 256). Shujaa and Afrik explain:

These concepts reflect the awareness that existed of the relationship between culture and worldview. The movement to control African American education was taking shape around the development of institutions that would rest on values meant to sustain positive development among African people. Reflected in these concepts is an understanding of the need to deconstruct ways of thinking born out of racist hegemony and an optimism about the possibilities of personal transformation toward becoming “new African” women and men. (pp. 256-57)

Another feature of this conference’s proceedings was “the inclusion of the Nguzo Saba (Seven Principles of Blackness).” Shujaa and Afrik believe, “Additional evidence of how well the role culture in power relationships was understood is the conference report’s inclusion of the Nguzo Saba (Seven Principles of Blackness), developed by Maulana Karenga in 1965, at the head of the list of goals identified for a proposed nationwide system of IBIs” (p. 257).
In the fall of that same year at “the first Congress of African People” which was “the fifth Black Power Conference,” Shujaa and Afrik note a shift in African American identity among the conference organizers. African identity was seen “in historical and cultural contexts that are distinct from and unlimited by the boundaries of the United States.” Conference organizers, claim Shujaa and Afrik, acknowledged and recognized “the continuity between the condition of African people in the United States and the national struggles against colonialism waged by African people on the continent and in the Caribbean.” Shujaa and Afrik go on to explain how there were eleven conference workshops with one focusing on education and that this workshop had ten working sessions. One of those working sessions focused on “Independent Black Educational Institutions.” Shujaa and Afrik quote one of two reports on this working session describing what this group aimed to accomplish: “develop plans for establishing a parallel school system incorporating all legally, physically, and psychologically independent schools at every educational level into a national Pan African School System” (p. 257). According to Shujaa and Afrik, participants in the education working session represented two different strategies for executing this plan. One approach was through the continued efforts of the community to control public schools, and the other was through initiating new independent Black institutions and improving existing ones.

Two years after this conference, in 1972, the same organization that conceived the idea of community control of schools, the New York African-American Teachers Association, called a meeting which “planted the seed for a national black education system.” Shujaa and Afrik report:

From the earnest discussions of those 28 people representing 14 independent schools across the country came a mandate to form an organization whose
purpose would be to produce a uniform pattern of educational achievement. Moreover, this organization would be devoted to liberating political objectives and dedicated to excellence. (p. 258)

The participants at the meeting, report Shujaa and Afrik, were “divided . . . between public school reform and building independent institutions” (p. 258). Participants from the latter camp, “frustrated by the group’s inability to develop a consensus around a plan of action” caucused and conceived Council of Independent Black Institutions. Shujaa and Afrik quote one participant who described what he believed CIBI aimed to accomplish. The participant said, “Our concern was to share information, materials, and curriculum and to have a material unity” (p. 259).

Shujaa and Afrik place the Council of Independent Black Institutions and its member schools in the her/his-story of African American people in which African Americans who have been initiating their own schools in the United States since the 1790s. They see two reasons why CIBI and the movement that spawned independent Black schools as “historically significant to African people throughout the world.” First, Shujaa and Afrik view the establishment of independent schools within the realm of “institution building as a strategy for cultural liberation.” They link institution building to “‘liberation zones’ or ‘free spaces’ where the process of education would be insulated from the cultural assault of Western hegemony.” The second her/historical significance is “a shift in cultural orientation of curriculum.” For Shujaa and Afrik, “The efforts undertaken by the schools that formed CIBI to deconstruct European views of the world while reclaiming, recovering, and reconstructing an African world view and, most important, to codify this process in their curricula are invaluable contributions” (p. 260).  

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56 See also Shariba Rivers and Kofi Lomotey (1998) who also describe and discuss, what they call, “independent African-centered schools” (p. 343).
In the early 1970s, when I and other concerned African American parents and adults began developing Ahidiana Work/Study Center, an independent Black school in New Orleans, our efforts were part of a national movement here in the United States among African Americans to independently educate African American youth. Maulana Karenga and his organization were actively building an independent Black school and community in Los Angeles. Safisha Madhubuti (Carol Lee) and her organization were developing an independent Black school in Chicago. Kofi Lomotey was participating in the development of independent Black schools as he moved around the United States.

Our school, Ahidiana Work Study Center, was one component of a larger organization called Ahidiana. Ahidiana was comprised of a group of African American women and men committed to a Pan-African cultural nationalist community. We called our school a work/study center because we believed in a continual process of practice (work) informing theory (study) and theory informing practice. I was one of two members who was responsible for the daily workings of our school. Rejecting formal education, we teachers were self-taught. We administrated, developed curriculum and educational materials, taught, and raised funds utilizing our own instincts and convictions of what we thought African American youth needed.

In addition to our school, Ahidiana maintained a bookstore and a printing press, disseminating material that reflected African and African American thought. We organized annual community events such as Kwanzaa and Black woman’s conferences. Our organization often took the lead in taking action against police

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57 Our organization consciously use “Black woman” because we viewed these conferences as focusing on the Black woman, not Black women.
brutality and other injustices which oppressed and exploited African Americans in New Orleans.

As we worked to transform our community, we also worked to transform ourselves. Every Sunday morning, we gathered together to exercise, to study, to meet about our projects and programs, to clean our school and prepare food in advance for the upcoming school week. We also bought food collectively and did collective childcare on Saturdays. We were living our lives as activists on both a personal and political level. Naming what we were doing was less important than getting the work done.

Since independent Black schools make use of an African world view to develop and design their curricula as well as to guide behavior based on its beliefs and principles, the education at these schools is identified as African-centered or Afrocentric. To appreciate and acknowledge both our African and African American culture, her/his-story, and experiences, I name my approach African/African American-centered education.

**African/African American-Centered Education**

An African world view is the guide, source and resource for African/African American-centered education. Dedicated to the spiritual, social, political, emotional, communal, and academic development of African American youth, the curriculum of an African/African American-centered education is rooted in four common foci: culture, her/his-story, values, and identity. These four foci are based in an African world view of what is (ontology), how we know what is (epistemology), how we value what is
(axiology) as well as how we view the structure and relationships of the universe (Harper, 1983-1984).

Common in African American life is diversity in the essence. That is, while there is a definable essence which identifies that which is African American, African Americans express that essence in a wide variety of ways. Mirroring this reality, we African American educators who are committed to teaching African American youth from an African/African American perspective vary in our teaching practices as well as in how we name what we are doing. In 1980, African American scholar Molefi Asante published *Afrocentricity: A Theory of Social Change* defining and describing what he interpreted as African American philosophy, beliefs, and practices centered in an African world view (Shujaa, 1995b). Afrocentricity interprets the essence of African/African American-centered education from the perspective of an individual African American scholar. Moreover, Afrocentricity neither names nor defines the diverse range of independent education for African American youth. Some African/African American-centered educators are Afrocentrists, but the majority of African/African American-centered educational theory has been developed by people committed to African/African American-centered education years before Asante coined the term “Afrocentricity.”

One of the first thinkers to start looking at African and African American culture to create, conceive, and conjure up a guiding philosophy for life was Maulana Karenga. Author, social theorist, ethical philosopher and activist-scholar, Karenga offers what I consider foundational beliefs and principles of African/African American-centered education in his definition of Afrocentricity. Carol Lee, scholar on cultural contexts for
literary instruction and founder of a 20-year-old independent Black school; Kofi
Lomotey, scholar on urban school leadership and leading administrator of the Council of
Independent Black Institutions; and Mwalimu Shujaa, founder of two African-centered
independent schools and author of scholarly articles on the social and cultural tensions
that impact education, have all practiced, developed, and studied education to address
the needs of African American youth from the beginning of the independent Black
schools movement. Together, Lee, Lomotey and Shujaa contribute critical literature that
focuses on the role culture plays in African/African American-centered education.
Educational scholar and curriculum professor, Beverly Gordon blends curriculum theory
and history, teacher education, and African American epistemology. Gordon does
exciting research documenting and exploring the power and importance of
African/African American her/his-story in educating African American youth. African
American scholar Joyce King focuses her research and publications on critical and
multicultural teaching, African American education, global education, and Afrocentric
teaching methods. In a perceptive article, King documents how values are central to
African/African American-centered education. Mwalimu Shujaa projects into a future
where African/African American-centered education has the possibility of making a
positive impact on the social landscape of the United States.

Curricular Foci of African/African American-Centered Education

From 1970 - 1998, I developed and taught African/African American-centered
curricula. Along with the voices of my colleagues, I share a retrospective of those
foundational beliefs and principles which I believe shaped African/African American-
centered curricula. In *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture*,
Maulana Karenga (1998) captures the essential principles and beliefs which guide the educational practices of African/African American-centered educators in his definition of Afrocentricity. Karenga states:

_Afrocentricity is a quality of thought and practice which is rooted in the cultural image and human interests of African people_. To say that a perspective or approach is in an African cultural image is to say it's rooted in an African value system and world view, especially in the historical and cultural sense. And to say that an approach or perspective is in the human interests of African people is to say it is supportive of the just claims Africans have and share with other humans, i.e., freedom from want, toil and domination, and freedom to fully realize themselves in their human and African fullness. Afrocentricity does not seek to deny or deform others' her/his-story and humanity, but to affirm, rescue and reconstruct its own after the Holocaust of Enslavement and various other forms of oppression. Afrocentricity at its cultural best is an ongoing quest for a historical and cultural anchor, a foundation on which we raise our cultural future, ground our cultural production and measure their authenticity and value. Moreover, Afrocentricity is an on-going critical reconstruction directed toward restoring lost and missing parts of our historical self-formation or development as a people. It is further a self-conscious posing of the African experience, both classical and general, as an instructive and useful paradigm for human liberation and a higher level of human life. Afrocentricity, as the core and fundamental quality of our self-determination, reaffirms our right and responsibility to exist as a people, to speak our own special truth to the world and to make our own contribution to the forward flow of human history. (p. 51-52)

**Culture in African/African American-Centered Education**

African/African American-centered education is committed to creating, maintaining, developing, and presenting African/African American cultural images to African American youth. Culturally relevant practices and images are essential to asserting the “authenticity and value” of an African world view and African/African American realities. In their essay “How Shall We Sing Our Sacred Song in a Strange Land? The Dilemma of Double Consciousness and the Complexities of African-Centered Pedagogy,” Carol Lee, Kofi Lomotey, and Mwalimu Shujaa (1990) address the concern of how to educate African Americans here in the United States. “The
conceptual foundation of Western education,” say Lee, Lomotey and Shujaa, “reveals assumptions about humanity that offer no recognition of the differences among human beings” (p. 45). More often than not, African American youth do not see their cultural realities acknowledged and affirmed in educational situations. The absence of recognizable cultural images suggests to young African American minds that their cultural perspectives are lacking in value and relevance. To counter this sense of cultural insignificance, African/African American-centered education uses culture to “raise our cultural future, ground our cultural production and measure their authenticity and value” (Karenga, 1998, p. 52).

At Ahidiana Work/Study Center, African/African American culture guided all our activities and was the background for our pedagogy. We communicated the importance of culture through the song “Color, Culture, and Consciousness.” To define culture, we sang, “Culture is the way we do the things we do / We sing our songs and work juju / But we can do more than just sing and dance / We are the builders of civilizations / The original woman and man.” While asserting the significance of building civilizations and originating humanity, we taught our students how to relate the concept of culture to themselves. The value of culture lies in how one understands self in relationship to everything else. In demonstrating how Africans, African Americans, and African American youth practice culture through song, dance, work, and creation, we offered our students a sense of self and a sense of purpose. In guiding students to consider a way of life based on their understandings of how culture affects them, we taught students that life has meaning.
One of the ways culture lived in our school was through songs and chants. We began and ended each day with a song. In the morning, we chanted: “Praise the red, the black and the green / The bruthuhs n the sistuhs are bein redeemed/ Why don’t ya open up yo eyes n see / We on our way to bein free.” Throughout the day as we moved from activity to activity, we taught our students to march while chanting, “Be a strong African. Give good example. Develop body. Develop mind. Develop soul. Develop consciousness.” We ended the day singing “Work for Our People.” Singing rooted our students in one of the central expressions of African/African American culture. In both African and African American traditions, music and song are a way of life. By using these cultural cues to pass on beliefs and information, we gave power and value to our students’ cultural perspectives.

Culture was also found in our use of symbols, a longstanding cultural practice among many African peoples. We used symbols to teach abstract concepts. We had a series of symbols for the numbers one through ten, for the Nguzo Saba/Seven Principles, for the five levels of existence, and for student evaluation. When an abstract concept was introduced, the symbol for that concept would be part of the lesson. For instance, the symbol for the first principle of the Nguzo Saba/Seven Principles, Umoja/Unity, is a snake turning into itself. The snake is in a circle with its tail in its mouth as if eating itself. We talked about the symbol by asking questions: What do you see? What does this mean to you? We related the words that students said to the abstract concept. Symbols were a means to refer to students’ ancestry as well as concretize the lessons using basic words, phrases, and descriptions. Through symbols,
we tapped into African/African American cultural power while simultaneously expressing abstract concepts in a way students could understand.

Some proponents of multiculture criticize advocates of African/African American-centered education as promoting monoculture. Some multiculturalists believe if there is no diversity present in every educational situation, then there is a negative impact on the learning environment. Lee, Lomotey and Shujaa (1990) disagree. They assert:

An African-centered pedagogy must include a conceptualization of American society as a culturally diverse entity within which ethnic solidarity is required in order to negotiate, acquire, and maintain power. An African-centered pedagogy should promote intra-ethnic solidarity among African-Americans while at the same time providing strategies for coalitions with other groups with similar needs and interests. American society is not a melting pot, but rather a mosaic of diversity. (p. 48)

Lee, Lomotey and Shujaa reveal a perspective on culture which centers on African Americans while simultaneously uniting with other groups in the United States who share “similar needs and interests.” At the same time, they insist that African/African American culture does not mean monoculture. Rather than denying the existence and significance of other cultures, advocates of African/African-centered education hold that African/African American culture is just as relevant as any other culture. African/African American culture is instructive in teaching African American youth “to fully realize themselves in their human and African fullness” (Karenga, 1998, p. 51).

**Her/His-story in African/African American-Centered Education**

While African/African American-centered education uses culture as a tool to develop African American youth, it simultaneously employs culture to “restore lost and missing parts of [African American’s] historical self-formation or development as a people” (Karenga, 1998, p. 51). Beverly Gordon researches the liberatory possibilities
of African American cultural knowledge. In “Toward Emancipation in Citizenship Education: The Case of African American Cultural Knowledge,” Gordon (1993) points to a diverse selection of learners from all over the world: “Maori children of New Zealand;” “poor working class children in England;” “Brazilian peasants;” “minority and poor children in Oakland, California” (p. 264). She noticed how teachers used the cultural knowledge of these learners to create pedagogical strategies that were emancipatory. Comparing these educational examples to the needs of African American learners, Gordon asserts:

African-American cultural knowledge itself can be uniquely emancipatory for African-Americans—because it is born out of the African-American community’s historic common struggle and resistance against various oppressive effects of capitalism and racism which have kept them in a subordinate position in American society. (p. 265)

In addressing the specific her/his-story of African Americans, “a self-conscious posing of the African experience” becomes “an instructive and useful paradigm for human liberation” (Karenga, 1998, p.52).

Pulling African Americans to the center of her/his-story and instructing them on how their ancestors contributed to the world offered students “a historical and cultural anchor” (Karenga, 1998, p. 52) from which to learn and grow. Within our curriculum at Ahidiana Work/Study Center, we used African Americans whenever we gave examples, wanted to talk about a particular person or, in a teachable moment, needed to bring up someone who made a difference. Including African Americans in our curriculum enabled young African American students to relate to what we were talking about and made them feel like they were part of the construction and development of the modern world. In linking African Americans to her/his-story, we communicated to students that
African Americans are part of her/his-story, though often not written into documented his-story. Integrating African American her/his-story into the curriculum enhanced African American students’ understanding of themselves and others.

We did not limit our inclusion of African American her/his-story-makers to any one field. We introduced a range of great African American women and men who made a difference in the world through science, education, music, medicine, literature, and social change. In an effort to position these African American her/his-story-makers akin to students, we posted pictures of great African American women and men on the walls of our school. By providing visual images of these women and men, students saw Black people as her/his-story-makers. As a component of her/his-story class, we did, what we called, the Great African American March. With Noel Pointer’s composition he named after the Roots television series for background music, we used large color posters of her/his-story-makers as visual aids. Students marched to the center of our classroom and shouted out the name of their great African American. Like the African cultural practice of calling on the spirit of our ancestor/s when libation is poured, I believed that this activity brought the spirits of those great African Americans among us.

We also linked each child to her/his-story. As often as possible we told our young people that any great person they knew or any adult they loved and respected was once young just like them. I asked questions to help them envision and speak of themselves as her/his-story-makers. We called our students her/his-story-makers pointing out that every moment one is making her/his-story as long as one is doing something that is beneficial for self and for others. With the statement “What you do
today makes her/his-story tomorrow,” we emphasized the importance of students doing well in school and being cooperative and loving at home.

**Values and Identity in African/African American-Centered Education**

Central to African/African American-centered education is “an African value system and world view” (Karenga, 1998, p. 51). African/African American-centered education promotes values which guide beliefs and behavior of students and their families as well as teachers themselves. In “The Purpose of Schooling for African American Children: Including Cultural Knowledge,” Joyce King (1994) speaks of values in her discussion about African/African American cultural knowledge. Her research revealed that “Black culture is more communal, emotional, person-oriented and flexible” (p. 33). Using value systems that are aligned with African American students’ world view “affirms, rescues, and reconstructs” African/African American her/his-story and humanity (Karenga, 1998, p. 52). Educating African American youth with African/African American values not only reaffirms them on individual and communal levels, it also infuses them with responsibility and accountability. Promoting African/African American values to African American children can be a reconstructive force directing African American youth to “a higher level of human life” (Karenga, p. 52).

processes. Shujaa believes that a critical awareness of these processes “is fundamental to the transmission, maintenance, and development of an African-centered cultural orientation and identity” (p. 14).

Mainstream schooling has a tendency to deny and deform African American identity by ignoring or justifying the *Maafa* and resulting inequalities and injustices, while simultaneously denigrating and devaluing African and African/African American culture, her/his-story, and identity. Instructing African American youth in the development of an African/African American identity counters the her/historical denial of who Africans and African Americans are as peoples and how we look at the world (culture). Focusing on communal identity combats the her/historical loss of African and African American family life and the resulting psychological damage that began with the *Maafa* and continues to today (her/his-story). In face of the mainstream denial of all that’s true, beautiful, and important to Africans and African Americans, identity is an essential tool in reclaiming ourselves and self-determining our future. With a sense of identity, one stands firmly in the world with no need to dominate or subordinate self or anyone else. With a sense of identity, there is a balanced sense of self.

At Ahidiana, we focused on self-esteem activities to build a sense of identity. Every school year each student created her/his own identity book. The identity book was a collection of student-created pages with each page representing one unique characteristic of who each student was. Each page was part of interactive, hands-on self-esteem lessons in which each student had time to focus on her/his own name, identity, address, phone number, age, height, weight, favorite color, and animal. By valuing time spent examining, defining, and describing self, we invested in the student’s
self-confidence and self-worth. There is an indescribable transformation that occurs when one commits to focused self-study. The identity books taught students that they were important. As they got to know themselves, they identified ways in which they were the same as well as different from others.

In developing the identity books, we took an interdisciplinary approach. Students went home with worksheets on which their parent/s or guardian/s were asked why were they given their name and what were their name’s particular meanings. This encouraged students to hear stories about themselves and hear how their parents found them to be significant. Students glued the elements of their identity books to the pages. Handling the pieces encouraged fine motor skills, and students made choices about where to place the materials. The identity page involved gluing a cutout of the United States inside a cutout of Africa and then gluing both above the statement: I am a strong African American.\(^\text{58}\) The interdisciplinary approach allowed students to get to know themselves in various ways. We measured students’ heights with tape measures and had them step on a scale to weigh them. These activities demonstrated that there were many ways students could quantify and define themselves. Additionally, the identity book was an opportunity to teach students the vital value of knowing one’s address and phone number in case of an emergency.

Another activity which built self-esteem was teaching students to performatively present poems. Many of the poems I selected were written for African American youth with themes which spoke to and reinforced the heritage (culture, her/his-story, lived experiences) of African Americans. I was attracted to poems that were rhythmic and

\(^{58}\) This statement reflects the simplistic, singular understanding I had about identity, a limitation I have since moved beyond as an African American woman curriculum theorist.
spirited communicating that unique energy expressed in African and African American culture. To help students learn the words, I created body movements to complement concepts found in each line of the poem. After students knew the words and the motions, I taught them to enunciate each word, project their voices, and use expression to relate the dynamics found in the poem. After each recitation, individual students gained unexpected pride in who they were and a deeper appreciation of their heritage. When they went home and shared what they learned, parent/s or guardian/s were so impressed that students’ self-esteem was elevated once again. When we presented our poems publicly to family members or at community events, students’ self-confidence multiplied giving them a strong sense of value and worth.

Shujaa (1995a) capsulizes how he sees, what he calls, “our cultural nation” fitting in “a new world order”:

The critical task confronting us is broadening our understanding of the role that the strategic differentiation of education and schooling can play in the success of African-American resistance to political and cultural domination and in guiding the development of our cultural nation in a new world order in which egalitarian relationships between cultures replace exploitative hierarchies. (p.33)

Ideally the difference African/African American-centered education can make is strengthening African American youth while offering the larger society more powerful and self-realized human beings and world citizens. African/African American-centered education’s ultimate intention is to develop African American youth by “reaffirm[ing] their right and responsibility to exist as a people, ... speak[ing] our own special truth to the world and ... mak[ing] our own contribution to the forward flow of human history” (Karenga, 1998, p. 52).
Changes

While I was a teacher in our organization’s school, I was also actively involved in other programs and projects our organization sponsored in the New Orleans area. One program was the annual Black woman’s conferences. The women in our organization took leading roles in organizing the conference and heading various conference workshops. Each year women participants would be moved by the conference proceedings and become inspired to start an organization for Black women. After the fourth Black woman’s conference, women participants succeeded in starting the Black Women’s Group (BWG).

The BWG was the beginning of me questioning and re-thinking who I was and what I was doing with my life. The BWG gave special attention to the concept of leadership interpreting it in a very fluid way. We not only looked at leadership in terms of political or organizational offices, we also looked at leadership in terms of roles and responsibilities. We explored how we would be leaders as mothers, as friends, as daughters, and in other roles or responsibilities in our lives. Closely linked to leadership was the concept of following. We believed that a good leader is also a good follower. Reflecting complementarity of differences in an African world view, we looked at leading and following as two sides of the same coin. As leaders, we remembered the qualities of being a follower. As followers, we remembered the qualities of being a leader. We appreciated what it meant to be a leader and what it meant to be a follower. I began to consider how I was a leader/follower in every aspect of my life. I noticed there was a difference between my leadership as a mother, daughter, sister, friend and my
leadership in our organization. Though I felt a difference, I could not describe that difference.

My understandings of leadership were also challenged by the way the BWG carried out its meetings. As a support group and not an organization, BWG’s meetings were run through a rotation of leadership. I was accustomed to a set patterned leadership that was aggressive, committed to efficiency, accomplishing goals, and accepting the participation of a few. Every BWG meeting reflected the leadership of the woman who volunteered to organize the next meeting. Meetings felt like social gatherings which ran on aimlessly sometimes accomplishing goals, sometimes not. I remember being physically upset a couple of times. It was a great learning experience to begin to ease my attachment to the way things “should” be and become more open-minded in how I looked at myself as a leader/follower in my life.

Through the assistance and input of Patricia Alake Rosezelle, community activist from Chicago and invited guest speaker from the Fourth Annual Black Woman’s Conference, we members of the Black Women’s Group discovered that a major interference to our leading/following as Black women was, what Re-evaluation Co-counseling calls, “internalized oppression.” We analyzed the definitions of racism, sexism, adultism formulated by Reevaluation Co-Counseling, a paradigm and system of thought different from my own.59 We had regular meetings and retreats as well as sponsored a few workshop series on the workings of oppression in our personal lives. We learned how to peer counsel each other taking turns actively listening to what stops us from being intelligent, joyful, and loving in the present.

59 For information about Reevaluation Co-Counseling, see www.rc.org.
I was (and still am) deeply affected by the BWG. For the first time, I had the opportunity to explore what it meant to be personally oppressed as an African American woman. In our organization when we studied and analyzed racism, sexism, and capitalism, I was oblivious to how those forms of oppression impacted me and my life. Never before had I been granted time and attention to personally focus on myself. I began to get an inkling of a whole realm of my being that I did not know existed.

This personal newness and self-exploration spilled over into my questioning what I was accomplishing professionally as a teacher/activist. I wanted the youth in our school to know who they were beyond the limits of culture, her/his-story, and values. I thought about the hurts they suffered and considered how I might help free them from their pain. I wondered to what degree each young person knew for sure that s/he is a warm, loving, brilliant individual. I had begun to know myself beyond the limitations of culture, her/his-story, and values. I was aware of the damage past hurts had in my life and struggled to be free of them through co-counseling sessions. I was learning to see myself as warm, loving, and brilliant.

When Ahidiana disbanded, ten years after its inception, and after teaching two years in our school we re-named The Work/Study Center, I found myself with a number of critiques of my own practice in African/African American-centered education. While I celebrated the academic, social, and personal successes of our students, I identified a number of realms where I felt uncomfortable with my pedagogy. When I started teaching, I viewed Africa as a utopian monolith. Rather than relate to it as a huge continent full of many contemporary societies in countries both modern and traditional, I romanticized a mythic Africa that existed only in my own creation. Unconscious of my
restrictive, rigid interpretations of African/African American heritage (culture, her/his-story, lived experiences), I gave more credence to traditional African her/his-story and culture ignoring that part of African American her/his-story that began the moment my African ancestors were inhumanely stolen from their homelands. I was so centered on African her/his-story and culture, I failed to position African Americans in the United States. I will never forget the moment during one of my classes when I asked students to point to where we lived on our world map. Cognizant only of the African in the education we offered them, they pointed to the continent of Africa.

My concept of identity was as flat, single, and absolute as my idealization of Africa. With no idea of multiple subjectivities, I looked only at my ethnic, cultural, and racial subjectivity. I viewed all people of African descent, regardless of geographical location, as African. To distinguish my own specific group from other African peoples, I would say “Africans born in the United States.” When I decided that the American in/of African American was just as significant as the African in/of African American, I began to describe myself as African American. I was also blind to who I was as an African American woman. Though in our meetings we talked about the importance of women and were more conscious of the role of women than many cultural nationalist organizations, I made no connection between this understanding and myself.

I remember our common practice of using “we” to express ideas or to describe our many programs and events. I remember how I was confused about this indiscriminate use of “we” when there were often disagreements among us in our meetings and in our encounters with our community. In retrospect, I can now say that the indiscriminate use of “we” was a universalizing practice ignoring and disregarding
differences that existed between and among our membership as well as between ourselves and our community. Still valuing the word “we,” I am more conscious of how and when I use it.

During those years, I remembered how we were so focused on creating what we believed would make a difference in our own lives and in our community, we had tunnel vision. We unintentionally isolated ourselves giving all we had to our school, our bookstore, our publications, and our annual community events such as Kwanzaa and Black woman’s conferences. By the end of Ahidiana’s life span, my interest in developing curriculum rooted in “our unique African way of being human in the world” (Karenga, 2002) had not wavered. However, I did begin to question whether there was a better way to provide an African/African American-centered education.

In 1988 when I needed income, my sistuh/friend Carol Bebelle asked, “What are you good at?” As I reflected on this question, I realized I was most skilled as a teacher/activist with young African American youth. Together, we conceived, created, and conjured up VITAL Cultural Arts & Education Summer Program, a seven-week program utilizing an African/African American-centered, interdisciplinary, hands-on approach with sessions taught by veteran teachers in math, science, literacy, art, culture, heritage, self-esteem and workshops taught by professional artists in dance, music, drama, and the visual arts. Field trips, library visits, and swimming were also part of the VITAL experience. The program culminated with a Closing Celebration which featured an exhibit of participants’ work and a performance of skits, songs, poems, and dances participants learned during VITAL.
What was most amazing about VITAL was that I was doing what I was committed to—educating African American youth—with a group of people who did not have, what we called in Ahidiana, “common thought.” In Ahidiana, we distinguished the workings of an organization, an alliance, and a coalition. Most of my experience with young children was done within an organization. That meant that I was doing it with a group of people who had common views and values. But VITAL turned out to be a way of carrying out viable education for African American youth with a group of people who came together because they loved working with children, had some sense of community, and had expertise in a particular area of education.

By the time we got to the fifth year of VITAL, something began to happen that I never experienced before. The individuals that were part of VITAL began to get a sense of what VITAL would do. It was not about the individual teachers, artists, and teaching assistants anymore. The group began to function as a team and make decisions based on what made sense for VITAL as an entity.

The idea that an organization could organically solidify through a dedicated team and the spirit of African American-centered education excited me. VITAL reinforced me as an educator because it demonstrated that I was creative, committed, and experienced enough to come up with ideas of how to make a difference in the world. Outside the safety of an organization, I was still able to create a viable, effective, powerful educational experience. VITAL became a workshop for me to experiment with some of the questions I started to have around African/African American-centered education. Over the ten years of VITAL’s existence, we used many of the curricular concepts created in Ahidiana Work/Study Center, but we also took some other creative
steps that called into question some of Ahidiana Work/Study Center’s activities and practices.

As VITAL was growing and developing, my personal life was unraveling. After seventeen-years of marriage, my partner/comrade/lover and I separated. Around the same time, Ahidiana, the organization which maintained our school and birthed me politically and professionally, disintegrated. Suddenly, I became a “displaced homemaker” with my only work experience at Ahidiana. I struggled to parent my young ones alone. For the first time, I had to find income to provide for my family and myself. Without a college degree, I was not able to work in the public sector. Financial need drove me to return to school after almost twenty years. While still in college, I was diagnosed with a benign meningioma for a second time. Squeezed between semesters, I once again underwent brain surgery. Several semesters later, I graduated magna cum laude with a bachelor of arts degree in elementary education. Under the weight of these challenging occurrences, I became clinically depressed. What I did not realize was that my clinical depression was a wake-up call, an opportunity for me to reflect on where I was in my life. When I came out of my depression, I was healed emotionally, but I had lost my way. Unsure as to what to do next, I enrolled in graduate school in the fall of 1995 not knowing I was headed for a much needed personal hiatus. Once again, my personal crisis pushed me into formal professional development. In the next chapter, I detail my experiences as an African American woman curriculum theorist.
Chapter Five

My Journey as an African American Woman Curriculum Theorist

“I am conscious of echoes and I am in the presence of other voices.”

In this chapter, I begin by pointing out how Sojourner Truth’s use of her “difference” to acquire new knowledge paralleled my own journey as an African American woman curriculum theorist. I describe and discuss my personal transformation through curriculum theory and how that transformation expanded who I am professionally. I compare three curricular concepts of John Dewey’s educational philosophy to my own experiences in African/African American-centered education. After commenting on the lack of representation of African Americans, particularly African American women, in curriculum theory, I review William Watkins’ essay on Black curricular orientations. I express the significance of locating and including Sojourner Truth in my graduate study and research as well as review how Sojourner Truth provides a pathway for other women to theorize.

Difference As a Source of Strength

Donna Haraway (1992) situates Sojourner Truth’s legacy beyond the universal, beyond originality, beyond current notions of humanity. She places Truth in an unknown, uncommon realm in which singularity and multiplicity foster new ways of relating to self and the world. Sojourner Truth “seized her body and speech to turn ‘difference’ into [an instrument for acquiring knowledge] placing the painful realities and practices of de-construction, dis-identification, and dis-memberment in service of a newly articulated humanity” (p. 93). Haraway asks us to see Truth “as the Afro-Dutch-

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English New World itinerant preacher whose disruptive and risk-taking practice led her ‘to leave the house of bondage,’ to leave the subject-making (and humanist) dynamics of master and slave, and seek new names in a dangerous world.” Referencing Chicana theorist and poet Gloria Anzaldúa, Haraway sees Truth as a *mestiza* who spoke “unrecognizable hyphenated languages [and] liv[ed] in the borderlands of history and consciousness where crossings are never safe and names never original” (p. 98).

Haraway’s characterization of Truth as a disruptive risk-taker is especially instructive to me. In curriculum theory, I often felt, in Haraway’s words, de-constructed, dis-identified, and dis-membered. Haraway’s references to “bondage” and “unsafe crossings” calls to mind my difficult dance as a student of curriculum theory. Truth’s use of her “difference” to acquire new knowledge parallels how I left behind a personal bondage of judgement, intolerance, and resistance to become open to new knowledge despite the alienation I felt in curriculum theory. I was confronted by new ideas that were foreign to who I was and what I knew. At first, I would sit in seminars hearing words which had no meaning. Several semesters passed before I began to understand the conversation that is curriculum theory. In time, I gained theoretical understanding but had little practical use for what I was learning.

I was committed to my perception of curriculum theory as an academic exercise with no relevance or application to my life. I came to realize that my criticism and judgement was and still is, what Maxine Greene (1988) characterizes as, “an obstacle, or [my] particular ‘wall’” (p. 54). As long as I continued seeing curriculum theory as only a wall, I could not gain the benefits of curriculum theory. When I realized that curriculum theory had given me relevant and applicable concepts, I began to see it as a
window shedding light on who I am and letting in fresh ideas to see myself, others, my environment, the world, and the cosmos in a new way. Curriculum theory has meaning for me when I approach it as wall/window.

**Curriculum Theory As Window**

To define curriculum theory is to limit it. I join William Pinar, William Reynolds, Patrick Slattery, and Peter Taubman (1995) in *Understanding Curriculum*, who believe “paint[ing] a portrait of what the field is like” (p. 3) is a more fitting representation. Curriculum theory includes “a cacophony of individuals’ voices” (Pinar et al., 1995, p. 5) each with her/his own language, understandings, commitments, and vision for curriculum. I agree with Pinar et al. when they speak of curriculum theory as “a collective enterprise, of all of us working together, despite serious differences in outlook and methods of working” (p. 5). For me, curriculum theory values critical thinking, a questioning of one’s own situation and the society in which one lives. Along with Pinar et al., I value curriculum theory’s interpretation of curriculum as “a highly symbolic concept” (p. 847) inclusive of every dimension of every individual’s situation reflecting how the field involves a broad range of themes and interests. In curriculum theory, “Curriculum ceases to be a thing, and it is more than a process. It becomes a verb, an action, a social practice, a private meaning, and a public hope. Curriculum is not just the site of our labor, it becomes the product of our labor, changing as we are changed by it” (Pinar et al., p. 848). I generally agree with this sense of curriculum put forward by Pinar et al. in *Understanding Curriculum*.

Before graduate school, my experience with “thinking” was part of a process of organizing a program, project, or event with others of like mind. As a curriculum
theorist, I am learning other ways of “thinking” which enable me to “write/right” (Munro, 1998, p. 265). As I learn to write/right, I am also learning how to problematize, that is, discover and decipher the complicated contradictions of each situation without making universal, set answers. Problematizing is guided by the understanding that there are answers or solutions but only for each unique, specific situation. Problematizing necessitates questions which usually lead to other questions. The questioning process of problematizing challenged my belief in the absolute of right and wrong as well as my habit of making my own value judgements without honoring the value judgements of others. Though challenging at first, I am learning how to treasure doubt and anxiety because it is out of doubt and anxiety that I question, I am uncomfortable, and I move from where I am.

William Doll, Jr. (1993) calls this stage of doubt and anxiety “perturbation.” Perturbation is a state of confusion, a lack of clarity, created by a desire as well as an interest to understand and, therefore, know. In Post-Modern Perspective on Curriculum, Doll sees perturbation essential to self-organization, but only when certain conditions exist. “Perturbation will trigger self-organization,” asserts Doll, “when the environment is rich enough and open enough for multiple uses, interpretations, and perspectives to come into play” (p. 164). I have come to recognize perturbation as a given in the process of learning and as a sign of my grappling (coming to grips with) and wrestling (engaging in deep thought with determined struggle) with my thinking. Perturbation is entree to a lesson.

61 Dr. William Doll, Jr. has given me many gifts to grow on. “Grapple” and “wrestle” are two of them.
When I enrolled as a graduate student at LSU, I had great difficulty reading as well as speaking about our assigned readings from what seemed like a small library of books and journal essays pertaining to curriculum theory. Every curriculum theory professor expected each student in their courses to write a thirty-page, journal-ready essay. Hard as I tried, I did not remember what I read, had little to say in class, and my final papers were less than twenty pages long. Despite my continued efforts, semester after semester went by with what seemed like little improvement. I began to feel like something was wrong with me and worried if I could continue in graduate school. Then, I read Ellen Langer’s (1997) *The Power of Mindful Learning*, a book required in a course about concept-mapping. Langer’s research revealed that “seven pervasive myths, or mindsets . . . undermine the process of learning” (p. 2) and that their effects are crippling in any number of situations. I was a victim of the mindsets Langer described. As if in physical therapy, I took her theories to heart and started to overcome my fixed state of mind. In time, I learned that reading critically, speaking in my own voice, and writing/righting were complementary processes which enabled the enhancement of the others. When I began to read critically, beginning to speak in my own voice soon followed. Now, I am using my strengths in reading critically and in speaking my own voice to bolster my writing/righting.

I have also learned that life is experienced personally as well as individually and that I can only speak for myself from my own point of view.62 I autobiographically write/right based on autobiographical reading and realize that I am and will always be in

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62 “Individual” and “personal” have nuanced meanings. Though both concern the self, “individual” is about self in relation to others and the rest of the cosmos while “personal” is about self in relation to self.
perpetual flux, unsettled and unknown. In *Autobiography, Politics and Sexuality*, William Pinar (1994) maintains, “Autobiography is an architecture of self, a self we create and embody as we read, write, speak and listen. .... It is a self we cannot be confident we know, because it is always in motion and in time, defined in part by where it is not, when it is not, what it is not” (p. 220). I believe the only place one can speak from is one’s own place because each individual has her/his own lived experiences. “Autobiography,” says Pinar, “has embedded within it political, economic, sexual, and intellectual dimensions of lived experience” (p. 130). At the same time, I see myself as an individual in the context of others. My autobiography is marked by community and “it is work with others that is a medium through which [I] work with [myself]” (p. 53). Moreover, “self-understanding furthers understanding of others” (p. 56).

Some semesters ago, one of our professors invited us, curriculum theory graduate students, over to her home to meet her mentor, colleague, and friend curriculum theorist Maxine Greene. As Greene spoke with us, I was taken by her profound commitment to self-empowerment through the empowerment of others. I remember her going around the room to each of us, looking us in the eye, wanting to know who we were and what role we saw ourselves playing in the field of education. One unforgettable declaration she made that day was: “I am not yet.” Moved by this notion, I came across it again in the introduction of the edited book, *The Passionate Mind of Maxine Greene*: ‘I Am . . . Not Yet’. Also moved by Maxine Greene and her idea of not-yetness, editor William Pinar (1998) shares:

As she draws near to what feels like the end of the speech, she pauses and looks at us. ‘Who am I?’ she poses, partly to us, partly to herself. She answers: ‘I am who I am not yet.’ ‘Not yet’ . . . the phrase still hangs in the air around me.
Maxine Greene is... not yet. Her own sense of incompleteness, of what is not yet but can be, inspires us to work for a future we can only imagine now. (p. 1)

My life today is a continuous (ongoing), perpetual (forever) not-yetness; an embodied, emerging, evolving, expanding becoming; an opportunity to question and learn again and again in the midst of the ambiguous, unknown, contradictory, messiness of life. I want to see, hear, smell, taste, touch/feel life. My life journey is filled with many surprise experiences and unexpected revelations, all contributing to and influencing who I be and who I am becoming. Rather than a nice, neat package of predictable events, my life journey is a mix of doubt and confidence, clarity and ambiguity, tension and serenity, contradiction and congruity.

Professional Expansion Through Curriculum Theory

My personal transformation through curriculum theory expands who I am professionally—an African American woman teacher/activist who advocates African/African American-centered education. My almost twenty-year teaching experience was guided by my instincts and my own lived experiences. Practice more than theory was my guide, source and resource in making decisions about school, education, teaching, and curriculum. Curriculum theory helped me see with new eyes, hear with new ears, and sense more deeply who I am and what I believe. Curriculum theory gave me language for what I felt and saw but could not express in words. I found new terms to describe myself, my experience and my own reality. Through studying curriculum theory, I am learning to think more critically and, as a result, I am expanding my practice and learning which practices are viable. Through studying curriculum theory, I discover what is not happening in educational settings where I am the

63 See Petra Munro (1998), in particular, p. 283.
responsible teacher and am able to conceive, create, and conjure up ways to transform those learning environments. Though curriculum theory has expanded my understandings about school, education, teaching, and curriculum in many ways, three curricular concepts are of particular significance to my belief and practices in African/African American-centered education.

**Home, School, and the Child's Education**

My educational philosophy and teaching pedagogy professed the belief that the home and the school are partners in the education of young people. At our school, Ahidiana Work/Study Center, we were cognizant of the importance of the home and our shared responsibility to raise their children/our students. From the moment our students arrived, we related to each child as a person from her/his own particular home environment. Before beginning our classes in the morning, we checked with each student asking how s/he was feeling and did s/he sleep well the previous night. We checked students’ personal hygiene conversing with each one about keeping her/his nails cut and clean, ears washed, hair combed, and the cleanliness and neatness of her/his uniform. In classes, we often referenced home life for examples or asked students to talk about what they did at home with their families. Educational materials were everyday materials from home like clothes pins, buttons, nuts and bolts, dried beans, yarn, macaroni, popsicle sticks, jumbo paper clips, diaper safety pins, marbles, ribbon. These familiar objects eased the learning process and gave students the opportunity to relate to these objects in another way. We used color boxes to teach the basic nine colors. Each box contained a variety of objects of the one single color. Objects might be a pencil, a fruit, a tiny box, a shoe string, a scrap of fabric, a small
plastic cup, a lid, a baby doll shoe. Visuals on educational posters were drawn by teachers and also reflected common everyday objects as well.

John Dewey was also sensitive to the disconnection between what the child learned in school and what the child learned at home. In *The School and Society*, John Dewey (1900, 1990) describes the contradiction the child lives when the school does not recognize that the child is always learning and comes to school with the knowledge s/he learned outside of school.

From the standpoint of the child, the great waste in the school comes from [her/his] inability to utilize the experiences [s/he] gets outside the school in any complete and free way within the school itself; while, on the other hand, he [sic] is unable to apply in daily life what [s/he] is learning at school. That is the isolation of the school—its isolation from life. When the child gets into the schoolroom [s/he] has to put out of [her/his] mind a large part of the ideas, interests, and activities that predominate in [her/his] home and neighborhood. So the school, being unable to utilize this everyday experience, sets painfully to work, on another tack and by a variety of means, to arouse in the child an interest in school studies. (p. 75)

For Dewey, each school was “an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society” (p. 29). Our school was in a house in an African American working class community. Though we worked and studied in each room, we maintained a sense of home by calling each other “sister” or “brother” and “mama” or “baba” reflecting the African/African American belief in and practice of an extended family. Similar to home life, our full-meal lunches were cooked and prepared in our school’s kitchen. Older students daily rotated responsibility to act as servers. Reflecting unity among us and to show love, respect, and concern for each individual student, we began and ended our meals and snacks together. After eating, we joined together to clean the tables, sweep the floors, empty the trash cans. Students not only learned academics, they also learned behaviors which transformed their relationships to
their home. We taught what we called protocols, step-by-step procedures for basic everyday activities: how to wash hands, how to brush teeth, how to eat at the table, how to leave the table, how to move as a group.

**The Child Is the Center**

In *The Child and Curriculum*, Dewey (1902, 1990) states, “The child is the starting-point, the center, and the end. [Her/His] development, [her/his] growth, is the ideal. It alone furnishes the standard. To the growth of the child all studies are subservient; they are instruments valued as they serve the needs of growth” (p. 187).

At our school, the classrooms reflected the significance of the child in our teaching. Each classroom was multi-leveled with shelves built for the students’ height. There were times of day when students taught themselves. Following independent tasks, students gathered their own pre-prepared materials and completed tasks at their own pace. Tasks varied in content and activity. Some involved reading and writing while other involved physical movement and manipulation. Completing the tasks required students to work on tables, on the floor, or to simply stand. Our classroom setup and teaching approach ensured that students remained central to and active in their own learning.64

Before attending graduate school, I had begun to learn how my behavior contradicted my belief in the significance of the child. Re-evaluation Co-counseling taught me how we as adults oppress and exploit young people by our physical size, our tone of voice, and our more extensive lived experiences. I began to practice behaviors

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64 Some of our child-centered ideas and activities in our curriculum drew from an educational philosophy and teaching approach called Workshop Way. For information about Workshop Way, see www.workshopway.com.
which countered my adultism in my interactions with students (and all young people). I move down to their eye level by squatting, kneeling, or sitting next to them. I try to watch the tone of my voice, but am still challenged by this practice. I greet young people with joy and excitement letting them know that they are the most important persons in the world. I strike up a conversation keeping the focus on the child and her/his interests listening for teachable moments to help us both grow and develop. However, my teaching practices needed to respect and honor young people’s role in learning. I was an authoritative disciplinarian focused on what I wanted to teach disregarding what and how students needed to learn.

Though my previous sense of the significance of the child in education and teaching was strong, this belief was deepened and expanded by John Dewey’s understanding of and commitment to the child as the center of curriculum. With this deeper understanding, I see myself as a facilitator rather than an authority. As facilitator, I must learn to follow students’ lead rather than students following mine. I need to ‘get out of the way’ of students’ learning and heighten my sensitivity to their needs in the learning process. I need to be an expert on each individual student and find the best ways for each individual student to learn and, thus, grow and develop. When I have doubt, unsure of what to say or what to do, an exploratory conversation between a student or among students and myself may reveal an appropriate alternative. I must be honest and caring letting students know when I make a mistake and apologize with sincerity. At key moments in the day after an activity or a lesson, I need to find ways to have students assess what was good, what could have been different, what did they learn, and what did they expect to learn.
Experience and Experiencing

The concept of relating school to home validated practices I already had in place as a teacher/activist. The concept of the child as the center of curriculum expanded my understanding of the importance of education centered on the child. However, while these concepts confirmed and expanded what I already understood, experience and its role in education was a totally new reality for me.

In *Experience and Education*, John Dewey (1938, 1963) theorizes about the vital role experience plays in education. He asserts, “Education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience—which is always the actual life-experience of some individual” (p. 89). After studying Dewey’s concept of experience, I became aware of how our individual lives are filled with a myriad of ordinary, everyday experiences, experiences which can be resources for our behaviors and practices. I began to see how each experience is unique to each individual and those personal experiences are opportunities to excavate and extract possibilities for growth and development.

In his essay “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” Dewey describes experience, equating it to “undergoing,” that is, active negotiation and mediation in the environment. He views experience as a process of experiments in which risk and adventure are necessities. Dewey states:

Experience is primarily a process of undergoing: a process of standing something; of suffering and passion, of affection, in the literal sense of these words. The organism has to endure, to undergo, the consequence of its own actions. .... Experience, in other words, is a matter of *simultaneous* doings and sufferings. Our undergoings are experiments in varying the course of events; our
active tryings are trials and tests of ourselves. .... Nothing can eliminate all risk, all adventure. (MW 10: 8 and 9, emphasis in original)\textsuperscript{65}

Additionally, experience involves both the experience itself and the process of experiencing. Dewey (and William James) understand this as the “double-barreled” nature of experience (McDermott, 1976, p. 8; McDermott, 1986, pp. 119-20; Westbrook, 1991, pp. 324-25 & 345). In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey explains:

[Experience] includes *what* men do and suffer, *what* they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also *how* men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine—in short, processes of *experiencing*. .... It is “double-barreled” in that it recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality. (LW 1: 18, emphasis in original)

Thus, experience and experiencing are both *what* is experienced and *how* that experience is had. When these two elements of experience and experiencing are not accounted for, experience and experiencing lack their full potential. By separating these two interrelated, interdependent components, experience and experiencing are understood as lifeless abstractions signifying simply a personal, inner, cognitive occurrence (Westbrook, 1991). Yet, experience and experiencing are dynamic actualities involving the individual, the collective or communal, the environmental, the cosmic, as well as the process of knowing and the process of *be-ing/becoming*. My use of “experience and experiencing” relates to the simultaneous interaction of the *what* and the *how* of every experience. The wording “experience and experiencing” is my way of reminding the reader and myself of the “double-barrel” nature of experience.

\textsuperscript{65} Citations marked “MW” or “LW” are taken from *John Dewey: the Collected Works, 1882-1953* edited by Jo Ann Boydston in 1980 and 1981 respectively. Boydston organized Dewey’s writings in three volume sets. Early Works (1882-1898) has five volumes. Middle Works (1899-1924) has fifteen volumes. Later Works (1925-1953) has seventeen volumes. I appreciate Boydston’s commitment to and the phenomenal accomplishment of bringing together the writings of John Dewey in a user-friendly, accessible resource.
Although Dewey’s philosophy of experience has power for me, I do have a point of departure. In conceptualizing experience and experiencing, Dewey focuses on past, present, and future sequentially as well as singly. He insists that experience and experiencing both carry something from prior experiences as well as alter the nature of future ones. Dewey (1938, 1963) states:

Different situations succeed one another. But because of the principle of continuity something is carried over from the earlier to the later ones. As an individual passes from one situation to another, [her/his] world, [her/his] environment, expands or contracts. [S/He] does not find [her/him]self living in another world but in a different part or aspect of one and the same world. What [s/he] has learned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow. The process goes on as long as life and learning continue. (p. 44)

I see Dewey privileging the past in the process of experience and experiencing.

For me, the three moments of time—past, present and future—are present in each experience. One or a combination of past, present, or future may take precedence over the other/s making multiple possibilities available. Rather than fragmenting experience between past, present, and future, I see experience and experiencing as an unalterable whole taking place in the past, present, future of now. Experience and experiencing is always in the present. Each experience is rooted in the moment and it is the moment that is marked by past, present, and future.

While curriculum theory provided me with concepts and experiences for growth and development, there were many “missings” that left me feeling unacknowledged, excluded, and invalidated. One of the loudest missings was the lack of representation of African Americans.
Black Curriculum Orientations

In his essay “Black Curriculum Orientations: A Preliminary Inquiry” African American curriculum theorist William Watkins (1993) addresses curricular questions in the context of “the historical curriculum experience(s) of Black America” (p. 321). Watkins believes that a history of “socially oppressive and politically repressive circumstances” (p. 322) experienced by African Americans here in the United States directly correlates with a range of responses in education and, therefore, curriculum. What has evolved, maintains Watkins, are “Black curriculum orientations” (p. 323).

According to Watkins, the Black curriculum orientation during enslavement was functionalism, “curriculum shaped by the necessity of survival.” Functionalism provided basic education with the aim of “preparation for life.” Watkins says that functionalism was similar to “colonial education.” He describes functionalist curriculum as basic, mainly oral, and included folklore with “imitation, recitation, memorization, and demonstration” as its learning methods. Watkins points out how enslavement shaped and influenced not only three centuries of “the colonial sociopolitical development of the southern United States,” but also “the informal curriculum of early southern Black education.” Functionalism in “‘sabbath’ schools, normal schools, and all varieties of rural self-help schools” continued to be these schools’ curriculum orientation after “informal Black education became more formal” (p. 324).

Accommodationism, the second Black curriculum orientation Watkins names, was marked by “the emerging late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century racially segregated, industrial nation.” Watkins asserts, “Of all the Black curriculum orientations, accommodationism was the one most clearly associated with an imposed
political and racial agenda” (p. 324). He claims that “northern corporatists” were behind accommodationism to serve their own political, economic, and social interests: “re-annexing the South in an orderly way, minimizing the political and financial power of the southern planters, sociopolitically containing the newly freed slaves, and guaranteeing that the intellectual and cultural values of the country were consistent with their own.” Watkins links Booker T. Washington to accommodationism and cites one writer who claimed that Washington promised that Blacks would be compliant. “Offering agricultural education, vocational training, and character building as centerpieces,” says Watkins, “this orientation is sharply distinguished from the liberal, progressive, and more militant outlooks” (p.325).

Watkins then gives attention to Dr. Thomas Jesse Jones, a Welsh immigrant who became an ordained minister and who “emerged as one of the most powerful figures in Black education” (p.325). Watkins shows how Jones played a central role in developing “accommodationist curricula [which] provided more than mere school subjects; it also laid the socio-intellectual foundations for a ‘backward’ race” (p.326). He carefully analyzes how Jones’s white supremacist beliefs were encoded in all his work as a “curriculum theoretician and ideologist.” Watkins reports that DuBois called Jones “that evil genius of the Negro race” (p.327).

The third Black curriculum orientation Watkins introduces and discusses is liberal education. Linked to “the prospects of education in the expanding democracy,” says Watkins, liberal education was promoted by a second group of philanthropists who were committed to “social amelioration and developing human potential” (p.327). According to Watkins, these missionary philanthropists followed in the footsteps of “Christian
abolitionism of the pre-Civil War period” as well as “the Freedmen’s Bureau, the YMCA, YWCA, and assorted socially conscious church denominations” and saw education as a means to a “harmonious society.” This is the group, reports Watkins, who made up the various missionary societies which established many of the “historically Black colleges” in existence today. Watkins points out that though advocates of a liberal education curriculum orientation “borrowed from the traditions of humanism,” they were affected by “the racial and paternalistic attitudes of their times.” However, those who believed in liberal education did not give credence to “racial subservience” as did their counterparts who believed in accommodationist education. Liberal education, says Watkins, came from the premise “that slavery, not race, impeded Black education” and that “Blacks learned by the same modality as Whites” (p. 328).

Watkins speaks of “Black liberal education,” an implication that there must have been African Americans who took another approach to liberal education. A Black liberal education curriculum, explains Watkins, “was designed to develop the students’ analytical and critical faculties, and to help students become worldly, tolerant, and capable of significant societal participation.” Watkins claims that Black liberal education valued leadership (p. 328). According to Watkins, advocates of Black liberal education aimed to cultivate a leadership dedicated to “the ideals of the liberal democratic state; those ideals encompassed gradual change, electoral politics, and planned societal transformation” (pp. 328-29). Watkins links W. E. B. DuBois to this educational orientation.

Watkins then turns to the Black nationalist outlook, a category which includes several Black curriculum orientations. Claiming early beginnings of this viewpoint in the
Watkins places “Pan Africanist, cultural nationalist, and separatist views” under the umbrella of Black nationalist outlook. Common among these strains, says Watkins, are “notions of ‘separatism,’ ethnic consciousness, and ‘cultural revitalization’” (p. 329).

The first Black nationalist outlook Watkins describes and discusses is Pan Africanism. “Pan Africanism,” claims Watkins, “seeks to raise Africa and promote the interests of African people regardless of location. It links the fortunes of Africa with her scattered people.” Some Pan Africanists believe in emigrating to a location on the continent of Africa. Watkins places Marcus Garvey among these Pan Africanists. Other Pan Africanists, states Watkins, believe “the movement for African revitalization and identification could be supported from the diaspora where Black people have toiled and taken root” (p. 329).

The next Black nationalist outlook Watkins introduces is cultural nationalism. According to Watkins, cultural nationalists value culture as “the binding force for a people’s cohesion, stability, and progress” (p. 329). After pointing out that cultural nationalism is about a century old, Watkins sees “contemporary cultural nationalists” blaming “colonization and oppression” for the loss of African Americans’ “names, languages, celebrations, religions, and cultural legacies” (p. 329-30). In a footnote, Watkins recommends the writings of Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), in particular From Plan to Planet (1973), as indicative of cultural nationalism.

The final Black nationalist outlook Watkins presents is Black separatism. According to Watkins, Black separatists reject assimilation and “call for the building of a parallel society” (p. 330). The vision of Black separatists is a structure within the United
States which meets the economic, political, and cultural needs of African Americans.


Watkins speaks of the kind of curriculum the various strains of a Black nationalist outlook would agree upon. Watkins states:

School curriculum is important to Black Nationalists because it provides a vehicle through which Black values can be imparted to young learners, who are expected to go forth and contribute to the building of Black civilization. Segregated schools, private schools, Black Muslim schools, urban storefront schools, and after-school programs have served to transmit Black values. (p. 330)

Calling Black nationalist orientations “the most extreme reaction to American racism,” Watkins reiterates the lack of hope its advocates have for integration (p. 330).

Watkins believes that Black nationalist outlooks paved the way for “the contemporary Afrocentric idea.” According to Watson, “traditional African culture” guides Afrocentrism and “the placement of ‘African ideals’ at the center of historical, social, communicative, and pedagogical dialogue.” Afrocentrism, claims Watkins, is focused on “the recapturing and regeneration of a once great continent and people.” He points out how Afrocentrics dismiss European and American approaches to research “as the only legitimate models of inquiry.” Watkins states that an Afrocentric approach to study “seeks interpretation, expression, and understanding without preoccupation with verification” (p. 331).

A common agreement among Afrocentrics, says Watkins, is “that U. S. public schooling and curriculum have failed African Americans by not providing the appropriate cultural foundations for learners” (p. 331). Watkins points to the work of Asa Hilliard, “a proponent of infusing African themes into school curriculum” and lists the six areas
Hilliard found missing in public education (p. 331). A second complaint Watkins points to among advocates of Afrocentricism is how public schools’ curricula make use of “negative pathological labels” to describe and define African American students’ behaviors and formulate educational policies based on those judgments. For Afrocentrics, says Watkins, “African ways of knowing, African method and content” need validation (p. 332, emphasis in original).

Watkins names social reconstructionism as his final Black curriculum orientation. Comparing Afrocentrism and social reconstruction, Watkins claims that Afrocentrism does not “challenge the contemporary or historic economic arrangements of society” while social reconstructionism “questions the capitalist order as a facilitator and generator of racism.” Stating that social reconstructionists were among the most radical of the curriculum movements in the early twentieth century, Watkins names George Counts, Sidney Hook, and Harold Rugg as significant among them. Social reconstructionists link change in schools to change in society because, says Watkins, “they viewed schools and curriculum as an instrument to challenge and eventually change unjust economic, political, and social arrangements.” With a history in progressive education, maintains Watkins, social reconstructionists emphasized “democratic socialist reform and improved race relations,” a stark contrast “from the eugenicist and White racist views of many curricularists and educational theorists” of their day (p. 332).

Watkins then makes a case for the connection between social reconstructionism and Black education among curriculum theorists. He claims that though this connection is “widely discussed and described in the mainstream literature,” little attention is given
to the linkages between the two. Watkins states, "It was the progressive education movement, and the more radical Social Reconstructionist movement that grew out of it that provided a theoretical and practical context to influence Black Reconstructionist education." Watkins maintains that "the politically conscious Black intelligentsia, civil rights leaders, and labor activists" were attracted to progressive era reconstructionism's stance for "a collectivist, egalitarian, reformed society." Watkins also shows how "Black socialists, communists, and outspoken critics in the 1930s and 1940s" are a forgotten group who contributed theories to Black Reconstructionist education (p. 333). He names A. Philip Randolph and Angelo Hearndon, two Black communists, and Alain Locke, Black social thinker, as contributors to Black Reconstructionist education.

After explaining that "formal ties between Social Reconstructionists and radical Black educator activists were few," Watkins focuses on W. E. B. DuBois as an example of a Black educator activist who was part of ideological affiliations of his day. Calling DuBois "the preeminent twentieth-century Black educator," Watkins views him as a particularly unique Black Social Reconstructionist. He suggests that DuBois's educational background at Harvard and in Europe and his friendships with "avant-garde socialist thinkers" are partial explanations. "DuBois consistently supported progressive political and educational objectives," reveals Watkins. "In the social area, he was comfortable with economic and political reform, trade unionism, and democratic welfarism" (p. 333).

Watkins' work on Black curriculum orientations raises questions not previously considered in the field of education. Seldom are African Americans the focus of educational research and curriculum theorizing. Watkins' correlation of Black
curriculum orientations to the varied responses African Americans in the United States have given to a history of oppression and repression is revealing and insightful. Beginning with functionalism as the Black curriculum orientation during enslavement and ending with Black Social Reconstructionism in the 1930s and 1940s, Watkins creates a space in research that was nonexistent.

**Engendering Curriculum**

Although Watkins’ research is groundbreaking, he unconsciously disregards African American women and their standpoints exemplifying a missing I find in curriculum theory as a whole. In his essay “Black Curriculum Orientation: A Preliminary Inquiry,” Watkins fails to include known women and lesser known women (and men) who were participants in Black education. The women are found in one comment about “the Grimke sisters of South Carolina and the Burrwell sisters of Virginia” as well as a quote from Sarah Grimke (p. 323).

Why women are rarely found in her/historical explanations may be answered by what Petra Munro and Seyla Benhabib call “neutrality.” In Munro’s (1998) analysis of “the natural progression of curriculum history” (p. 271), it was neutrality which made the work of women hidden, as if they did not take part in the development of schools, curriculum, and their communities. Similarly, Munro points to how the discourse of progressivism and that of social reconstructionist theories had a “gender-neutral analysis” (p. 282) which hid and misrepresented women contemporaries of John Dewey. Paralleling Munro, Benhabib (1994) also sees neutrality as an obstacle to inclusion and uses the phrase “gender blind” rather than “gender neutral.” Benhabib is disturbed by the exclusion of women and their ways of knowing as “a political omission
and a moral blind spot [which] constitutes an epistemological deficit as well” (p. 13).

In “Engendering Curriculum History,” Petra Munro (1998) believes that curriculum history erases and subjugates those who do not fit its “unitary, male, heterosexual, white” (p. 265) storyline. Munro calls for “engendering curriculum history” (p. 284) by examining the ways the story of curriculum history includes some and excludes others. She poses three epistemological questions which can help guide us in engendering curriculum: What can be known? How do we come to know? Who can be a knower?

Women Theorizing Through Sojourner Truth

Locating and including Sojourner Truth in my graduate study and research addresses African American women’s absence in curriculum theory and provides a pathway for my own theorizing. Truth’s presence is a catalyst for myself and other women theorists to critique and combat the “political omission” and “epistemological deficit” of women’s absence from written records of academia. Her unique interpretations and her involvements in a wide variety of social and societal change easily places Sojourner Truth in writings centering on almost any issue or concern. Truth and her lifework adds texture to theoretical conversations in a range of research fields including the her-story of African American women, abolition, and feminisms.

Sojourner Truth can be found in almost any discussion of, what I call, the I~We story of African American women66 and its recovery. In We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century, Dorothy Sterling (1984) offers snippets of

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66 I see African American women and their heritage (culture, her-story, experiences) rooted in the African/African American paradigmatic belief and practice I~We. See Chapter 3 for my explanation of this belief and practice.
information about Truth as one of the African American “women with a special mission” (p. 150). Sterling reveals how Truth courageously faced crowds roused to anger against her social justice messages. Throughout her book, Sterling highlights Truth’s activism in desegregation, with the Federal government’s Freedmen’s Village and Freedmen’s Hospital to meet the needs of newly freed enslaved African Americans, her personal “effort to resettle freed people in the North” and “her campaign to obtain public lands in the West” (p. 256).

In “‘Lifting As We Climb’,” Fath Davis Ruffins (1994) selects Sojourner Truth as an example of the invisibility of women, in particular Black women, in her/his-story. Ruffins compares Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass as two of “the most emblematic examples of enslaved people who freed first themselves and then an entire people” yet “the process of preserving their memories has occurred in radically different ways” (p. 377). Ruffins points out how Douglass is remembered today because of a her-story of commitment to his preservation from 1895 to 1963 by individual Black women as well as Black women organizations. In contrast, though Truth is remembered and regularly represented “in paintings, novels, and even one play,” says Ruffins, Truth’s mementoes have not been preserved and no major institution has committed to her preservation (p. 378).

Two authors place Sojourner Truth in the midst of their analysis of African American women’s complex approach to abolition. In Women & Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture, Jean Fagan Yellin (1989) reveals that Sojourner Truth, along with Harriet Jacobs, understood that the definition of woman was a “cultural construct . . . to justify [African American women’s] oppression” enabling
them to disrupt the fiction disguising patriarchal restrictions latent in the term “woman” (p. 78). Yellin also states that Truth uncovered the racism which continues to afflict social change in this country when Truth likened those White female feminists to White male enslavers because they ignored her experiences as a Black woman.

In *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828-1860*, Shirley Yee (1992) points out that, among Black women abolitionists, Sojourner Truth was the only one who had actually been enslaved. At the beginning of her book, Yee speaks of Sojourner Truth expressing her uneasiness about a law allowing African American men to vote and not women. Truth as well as other African American women were placed in a paradoxical predicament of taking a position based on their “race” or based on their gender. By Truth professing her anxiety, maintains Yee, Truth situated herself in the midst of “contradictions and ironies inherent in black women’s participation in a struggle that, though it offered a rare opportunity for men and women of both races to work together for a common cause, also replicated the racial and sexual tensions of the larger society” (p. 1).

Sojourner Truth is an archetype for feminisms, the myriad theoretical stances on the political, economic, and social equality of women and men. Truth promoted intersections of “race” and gender as well as had specific ideas about gender. Truth took the position that both Black women and White women were oppressed by patriarchy. Black women were overtly oppressed while White women were oppressed in less obvious ways.

In the realm of women’s studies, Aida Hurtado (1989) includes Sojourner Truth in her analysis of oppression and its effects on White women and women of Color.
Hurtado believes that women’s relationship to White men greatly influences if they are seduced by the myth of privilege or reject it. She points out that African American women like Sojourner Truth “were at birth owned by white men” (p. 841, emphasis in original) and that Truth made clear that women of Color and White women in this society, in no uncertain terms, share the same position to White men. On one hand, White women are seduced “from birth,” Hurtado contends, “to be lovers, mothers, and partners (however unequal) of white men because of the economic and social benefits attached to these roles. Upper- and middle-class white women are supposed to be biological bearers of those members of the next generation who will inherit positions of power in society” (p. 842) On the other hand, for women of Color, states Hurtado, marginalization begins at birth and defines their life choices. Hurtado hears Sojourner Truth’s call today for women to see and understand that, because of patriarchy, all women are oppressed.

When Christine Stansell (1999) begins to discuss the early 1850s, in her essay “Woman in Nineteenth-Century America,” one of the first women she looks at is Sojourner Truth. Stansell sees the context of this moment in time marked by “a nascent sense of likeness with women in different life situations” (p. 422). Situating Sojourner Truth and her “impressive speech . . . ‘Ar’n’t I a woman?’” in this context, Stansell claims, “The resonance of Truth’s speech . . . shows the elasticity of the universalizing structures, ideas about ‘the sex’ which could be stretched, albeit not without difficulty” (p. 424).

In “Remembering Sojourner Truth: Black Feminism,” Beverly Guy-Sheftall (1986) focuses on Black feminism and its her/historical roots in the lives of African American
female and male feminists. For Guy-Sheftall, Sojourner Truth was one of the originators of what would become Black feminism when she made her “Ain’t I a Woman” speech in 1851. Guy-Sheftall states:

Black feminism, though certainly not a monolithic ideology, predates the 1970's. In other words, there is a long and persistent tradition of feminist thought among intellectuals, activists, writers, educators, and other members of the black community. The black feminist movement which emerged in the mid-1970's is a continuation of a trend that began over a century and a half ago. It is both refreshing and enlightening in this most depressing of times to have a historical perspective on an issue which has been with us since slavery. (p. 54)

Guy-Sheftall explains that both “diversity of thought” and “points of agreement” are givens “among black feminists, male and female” (p. 54) all of which spins on Black women simultaneously experiencing both racism and sexism in a racist and sexist society.

**African American Women and Curriculum Theory**

As an African American woman curriculum theorist, I respond to Sojourner Truth’s call in the field of education, more specifically, in the realm of curriculum theory. As I searched and researched, connections between African American women and curriculum theory were scant, if not, nonexistent. Curriculum theory needs to include the voices of African American women in general and in particular those who dispute as well as resist what is established and who refuse to accept what is considered socially and societally true. Fath Davis Ruffins (1994) names these African American women “extraordinary ‘wild women’ who populate the cultural landscape of the African American past.” According to Ruffins, “wild women” defy, contradict, and call into question accepted norms in this society, such as “bourgeois categories of race, class, and gender” and “conventional rhetoric about family, nation, and race” (p. 392). I agree
with Ruffins and her call for the inclusion of wild women and “their critiques of gender and power, race and class in American society” (p. 394). The powerfully prophetic and prophetically powerful voices of African American women add a unique perspective to the enduring questions of education by discussing them in a framework that is African/African American culturally, her/historically, and experientially.

When I think of African American women, I think of know-how, a way of looking at life intuitively, a way of relating to self and the world that creates ‘a way out of no way.’ African American women are “endarkened,” that is, situated in a unique position where culturally constructed race, class, and gender socializations cross with “historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistances for African American women” (Dillard, 2000, p. 662). What we African American women think, say, and do is a vital contribution to how to live in peace and harmony in the face of this society’s systems of oppression. I hear and see African American women conceiving, creating, and conjuring up critical theories of how to be self, of how to be with others, of how to be in community, of how to be in the wide world and the rest of the cosmos clearing spaces and places where everyone’s diversity and essence can be affirmed.

Just like I need mah sistuh/friends to help me live/be/become, I need African American women to help me say what “seems right to me” (Lorde, 1994, p. 37). I agree with Cynthia Dillard (1994) when she asserts, “It feels right to me to name, to speak, to share the words and worlds of my African [American] sisters, even at the risk of having these understandings misunderstood or of making folks uncomfortable” (p. 10). As an

African American woman, I am part of the call-and-response between and among African American women. As an African American woman curriculum theorist, I see this work as a contribution to the field of education. As Cynthia Dillard explained to me personally during a phone conversation:

If you can’t start in your own cultural context and you can’t use your own cultural understandings to make sense of the research, then it’s a problem. .... Doing research in a community and claiming that community as a site for research also requires that you claim a cultural space through which that data can actually be interpreted. (Phone conversation, August 2001)

For me, curriculum theory is a paradoxical space. While holding many new concepts and ideas which free my thinking personally and professionally, curriculum theory simultaneously remains a foreign, unwelcoming domain in which to search for recognizable and applicable truth/s. Unexpectedly, curriculum theory created new markers on my path as I continued on my dissertation journey. I turn to spirituality in education, a truth which speaks to me as an African American woman curriculum theorist who believes in African/African American-centered education.
Chapter Six

Affirmation of Life: Spirituality in Education

“We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.”

This chapter is dedicated to one of the major missings in curriculum theory and education in general—spirituality. I begin by acknowledging the powerful and consistent force spirituality was in Truth’s life and describe the active, practical, and personal role religion played in Truth’s lifework. I offer my belief that the power Sojourner Truth accessed through spirituality is available to all of us. Pointing out how schools all too frequently ignore the spiritual in education, I explain how most of my formal education, from elementary to college in Catholic schools, focused on religion and not spirituality. I review two essays—one by Dwayne Huebner and the other by Angela Lydon—which offer comprehensive conceptions of education and spirituality. Based on an African/African American world view, I offer my own vision for spirituality in education—a way of living life as affirmation.

Spirituality and Sojourner Truth

A powerful and consistent force in Truth’s life was her spirituality. Truth was among those enslaved Africans who only knew the United States as the place of their birth, “separated permanently from their homeland” (Jones, 1993, p. 64). Unable to specifically recall and remember “a serious and fundamentally spiritual celebration of life in which people in the community affirm regularly their relationship with the forces to which they owe their existence” (Jones, 1993, p. 3), enslaved Africans gradually created

68 Teilhard de Chardin (qtd. in Covey, 1994, p. 319).
Most enslaved Africans believed in a communion of *All-That-Exists* and in an intimate connection between the material and spiritual worlds. Enslaved Africans expressed their beliefs through the various cultures and religions they encountered in their new world. Painter (1996) states:

> [Sojourner Truth’s] religious sensibility was syncretic—which is the very essence of African-American culture—and also very much in flux. Her religious foundation was that of the country people in New York and New England, a blend of beliefs and habits from animist West Africa and pagan Europe, the Calvinist Dutch Reformed Church and the Arminian Methodists. (p. 25)

Sojourner Truth, as did many African Americans, used her spirituality to rise above “the Black Holocaust” (S. E. Anderson, 1995) with all its physical and psychological abuse. Spirituality was the force Truth called upon to become one of the most intelligent, cogent preachers of her day. Through her spirituality, Truth learned the power of transcendence, the ability to rise above what is seemingly impossible, and with that power, she also learned the power to thrive. Painter (1996) describes Truth as a woman who embodied transcendence through the “Spirit” by living beyond the limits of ordinary experience. Painter explains:

> In sanctification, [Truth has] located a power that has made possible survival and autonomous action when all other means fail. More than anything else she did or said in her life, [Sojourner Truth had the] ability to act with the support of a powerful supernatural force and to mine its extraordinary resources. (pp. 30-31)

The context of Sojourner Truth’s spirituality was rooted in both an “African world view and the Judeo-Christian ethic” (Joseph, 1990, p. 38). God was of her own making, a God who transformed as she did. Truth saw God as personal, accessible, compassionate, and just, actively engaged in day to day occurrences. Her spirituality told her that justice was inevitable because God was involved (Mabee and Newhouse,
Truth was forever the optimist, idealtically so, centering her life and her beliefs on the “Spirit” (Painter, 1996, p. 27). Enthusiastically evangelical, she was convinced that prayer was powerful. Truth spent her life in search of religions and religious experiences that correlated with her spirituality, opening herself to those doctrines that did. Equality, inclusion, humility, simplicity, and fairness were all part of Truth’s creed. Her spirituality was diverse yet comprehensive, unconventional, and emphasized individual moral judgement. Truth was known to say, God “is a great ocean of love, and we live and move in Him as the fishes in the sea” (Mabee and Newhouse, 1993, p. 246).

When it came to spirituality, going to church was not enough. Evangelism remained a vital part of Sojourner Truth’s spiritual life. Truth believed that both the continual renewal of her personal commitment to God and the conversion of others was how religion had meaning and purpose. Religion was active rather than passive, was participatory not exclusionary. Sojourner Truth was part of “an African American women’s moral tradition of seeing the world as infused with an importance that supersedes any one human being or group of human beings” (Collins, 1998, p. 245).

Sojourner Truth’s critical theories were such a contrast to both the establishment and the social reform of her day that it took what she called the “Spirit” to fortify her. Truth’s spirituality not only fortified her; her spirituality was her life philosophy. Through her religion, a religion rooted in her own personal interpretation, she saw what needed to be changed. Truth advocated what was considered controversial not because it was controversial, but because change was needed.
There was a direct link between Sojourner Truth’s theory and praxis. With her beliefs in God and spirituality as her theory, Truth’s praxis was her activism for social justice. It was action-oriented, demanded skill, and guided her in all she did. There was little difference between Truth’s spirituality and her philosophy of life. Her spirituality insisted that the betterment of self and humanity was dependent upon social and societal change. Personally, it was the “Spirit” that led her out of freedom, that gave meaning to her life, that maintained her strength. Through the authorization of God, Truth had entree to leadership, affirmation of her work, and continued guidance for her life. Her lifestyle was rooted in her religious fervor until her death. Patricia Hill Collins (1998) adds:

Sojourner Truth’s biography suggests a process in which thinking and feeling do not work at cross-purposes, but, rather, seem to energize one another. Her spirituality served as a vehicle that clearly moved her struggle for justice. It is almost as if Truth developed a deep love for justice and expressed her passionate commitment to it through her freedom struggles. (pp. 244-45)

Truth’s social activism was an outgrowth and reflection of her religious philosophy and approach. Human rights and equality easily made sense to Truth. Respect, justice, and love were birthrights of every human being regardless of difference.

Truth saw God/spirituality/truth as an interrelated, interdependent whole. During her bouts with truth/s, her God was there for her while she lived by truth/s and, through preaching and lecturing, transmitted truth/s. Her God was an active participant in her life. God/spirituality/truth gave rise to her values, beliefs, and practices reflecting a pragmatic, active, and participatory approach to her life.
Spirituality and Education

Sojourner Truth is a genuine embodiment of Teilhard de Chardin’s assertion, “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.” The power that Sojourner Truth accessed through spirituality is available to all of us. However, all too frequently, schools ignore the spiritual in education.

Most of my formal education, from elementary to college, was in Catholic schools where religion, not spirituality, was the focus. Rather than teach us the motivation of spirit, we were taught the trappings of religion. Our religious instruction did not invest in our internal spiritual lives. Instead, Catholic teachings in my school emphasized going to church every Sunday and on holy days of obligation. We recited and memorized prayers empty of meaning and completed stages of religious development by age rather than understanding. Catholic children “made first Holy Communion” by seven years old and Confirmation by twelve. We were told how to live our lives rather than allowing us to decide for ourselves our own beliefs and practices through discussion and questioning. Religion was about control through fear and guilt. The paternalism of the White priests and White nuns toward us African Americans did not seem to contradict the beliefs and practices of Catholicism.

The lack of spirituality is not only a problem for religious schools. Wendy Kohli (2002), self-described as a “critical educator and scholar-citizen” (p. 266), recognizes the need for the spiritual in education in general. In “Situated Knowing: Mind, Body and Soul,” Kohli states:

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69 Reginald Arthur (2000) quotes his celestial guide Armorein saying, “You are a spiritual being having a human experience” (p. 6).
I want to dig deep inside for the courage to speak about matters that we academics, with all our training and intellectualism, generally dismiss: *Spiritual* matters— matters of the heart, matters of love, matters of human connection, matters of emotional and spiritual transformation. (p. 271)

This dismissal of the spiritual in education was addressed in “The Loyola Spirituality Conference” in New Orleans, Louisiana, in the fall of 1993. Stepping out boldly onto a road less traveled, the one-day conference and its thirty participants dedicated themselves to discovering the possibilities of infusing education with spirituality. Making up a special issue of *Journal for Curriculum Theorizing*, essays from the conference represent a diversity of views reflecting the multiple ways spirituality and education can be approached. Two of those essays—“Education and Spirituality” and “An Ecozoic Cosmology of Curriculum and Spirituality”—offer comprehensive conceptions of spirituality and education and are of particular relevance here.

In his essay “Education and Spirituality,” Dwayne Huebner (1995), considered one of the fathers of curriculum theory, innovatively explores the possibilities of the spiritual. Huebner expresses his concern about the challenge language presents to any discussion focused on the transformation of education. “Our very locations and practices,” says Huebner, “are framed by the language tools and images we would like to overcome” (p. 13). Since Huebner is aware of the challenge of language and is committed to “a different view of people [and] of our educational spaces and resources” (p. 14), he makes use of the words “image” and “landscape” in his vision for education and spirituality. Huebner explains:

I use the word image in the sense of a view of a landscape. I assume that there is an educational landscape that may be envisioned (or imagined) in many ways. Different images of the same landscape enable us to see different possibilities, different relationships, and perhaps enable us to imagine new phenomena in that educational landscape. (p. 16)
In his theorizing about the spiritual, Huebner values imagination. He is concerned about the absence of imagination in the minds of educators limiting the possibilities of educational transformation. Re-imagining education and spirituality, for Huebner, is not about creating something totally new. Rather, re-imagining education is about “having a different view of people, of our educational spaces and resources, of what we do and what we say” (p. 14). Part of Huebner’s re-imagination of education and spirituality is how he views students and the intimate relationship we teachers share with them. Huebner asserts:

We live and work, talk and play, laugh and cry, love and hate with our friends and neighbors. Our students share with us the human condition. They are our neighbors, if not our friends. The language of teacher/student—specifically the language of teacher/learner—hides that neighborliness, and the student’s strangeness. We and our students are part and parcel of the same mysterious universe. (p. 15)

As Huebner ponders upon the mystery and magnificence of the universe, his imagination leads him to the concept of “moreness,” a presence marked by surprise. We encounter this “moreness,” says Huebner, when “we go beyond what we were and are and become something different, somehow new” or “when we smugly assume that we know what ‘it’ is all about and end up in the dark or on our behinds” (p. 16). As his spiritual connection to the world and to his life, “moreness” is Huebner’s reference point for transforming education. Huebner’s “moreness” would remove the blinders from teacher-dictated results and eradicate barriers between students and teachers. “Moreness” has the power to expand the dynamic between learners (students and teachers).
Huebner aims for welcoming images so that everyone in education, regardless of her/his time spent in the field, will feel part of his vision for education and spirituality.

Huebner says:

An image that lets the spiritual show needs to use most of the current categories of education. However, once inside that image, the educational landscape should appear differently, showing limitations in current educational practices and perhaps opening new options for action. (p. 17)

Huebner wants his images to affirm others while at the same time grant them “greater freedom and new awareness of their choices and limitations” (p. 16). He wants to make sure that his images give others space to be comfortable enough to consider and eventually to include “the spiritual” (p. 17) in their educational practices.

Huebner presents his images of an educational landscape in five dimensions which “permit the spiritual to show” (p. 17): the goal of education, the social/political structure of education, the content of education, teaching, and evaluation. I review aspects of his vision for the goal of education, the content of education, and teaching.

In his vision of education’s goal from a spiritual standpoint, Huebner begins by identifying “learning” as the “process whereby an individual moves from one state of being to another and develops new capacities or competencies” (p. 17). However, he immediately points out how the word “learning” interferes with imaginative thinking and claims that the term is a quick simplification of learning which takes place “in a near infinite world,” where “our possibilities are always more than we realize,” and that learning and life are “movement, change, or journey” (p. 17). Huebner returns to his concept of “moreness” to further explain:

The “moreness” in the world, the spirit, is a moreness that infuses each human being. Not only do we know more than we say, we “are” more than we “currently
are.” That is, the human being dwells in the transcendent, or more appropriately, the transcendent dwells in the human being. (pp. 17-18)

For Huebner, the educational implication of the transcendent in human life is that we are always becoming and that “we can always be more than we are” (p. 18). Huebner sees life as “a journey of constantly encountering the moreness and constantly letting aspects of us die that the new may be born within us.” Huebner defines education as “a way of attending to and caring for that journey” (p. 18).

Huebner places his imagings about the content of education squarely in the realm of spirituality. He maintains, “The religious journey, the process of being educated is always a consequence of encountering something that is strange and different, something that is not me. That which is ‘other’ and strange can be part of the I.” Throughout our lives, says Huebner, we encounter the “other,” at first external at birth and then increasingly internal as we become adults. He names “Spirit” as “the absolute ‘other’” always floating, drifting, lingering and which “overwhelms us in moments of awe, terror, tragedy, beauty and peace” (p. 22). Out of these imagings, Huebner re-thinks content, knowing, and knowledge. “Content is the ‘other,’” says Huebner. “Knowing is the process of being in relationship with that ‘other.’ Knowledge is an abstraction from that process” (p. 21).

Teaching, for Huebner, is a spiritual calling. Rather than “a way to make a living,” says he, teaching is “a way of making a life.” According to Huebner, a teacher is called by three voices: the students, the content, and the institution. With each voice having its own particular set of “demands,” claims Huebner, “teaching is inherently a conflicted way of living” (p. 27). Huebner imagines the teacher giving a different response to each call. “That part of the teaching life that is a response to the call of the
student results in the work of love; to the call of the content, the work of truth; to the call of the institution, the work of justice” (p. 28).

In his concluding remarks, Huebner raises two concerns of particular significance. One is teaching moral and spiritual values separate from the rest of the curriculum to satisfy the need for spirituality and education. For Huebner, this practice reflects a misunderstanding about spirituality. First, Huebner asserts, “Everything that is done in schools, and in preparation for school activity, is already infused with the spiritual. All activity in school has moral consequences” (p. 32). Huebner also maintains, “The problem of the schools is not that kids are not being taught moral and spiritual values, the problem is the schools are not places where the moral and spiritual life is lived with any kind of intentionality” (p. 32).

Huebner’s second concern pertains to teachers’ awareness of “the spiritual in education.” Huebner proposes that teachers need to “maintain some form of spiritual discipline.” He suggests that teachers can maintain their spiritual discipline by being part of a community of teachers who “radiate faith and hope and power” (p. 32). Huebner also suggests that each teacher needs to get in touch with her/his imagination, “developing an imagination that has room for the spiritual” (p. 33).

In “An Ecozoic Cosmology of Curriculum and Spirituality,” Angela Lydon (1995), professor and curriculum theorist, sees education and spirituality through her understandings of the cosmos and cosmology. Lydon opens up a new world as she explains how “cosmos” and “chaos” are one complementary movement. Lydon states:

The movement from chaos to cosmos, then, is not oppositional. Rather, it suggests the integrative context of all things continually emerging from no-thing. It becomes, as it were, the dance of Gaia, where the movement of the dancer
and the dance cannot be differentiated. Each spirals the other and yet is simultaneously the other. Both are contextually and interiorly one movement. (p. 67)

Lydon tells us that the complementary movement of cosmos and chaos were understood as givens in ancient cultures. In ancient times, reveals Lydon, “Words embodied events as creative action. There was no separation between word, event, and action.” Orality spoke life through “the spoken word (breath)” (p. 67).

Lydon discloses how orality lost its significance with the development of “written codes” (p. 67). What followed was a dramatic shift in human consciousness. Lydon explains:

Words no longer personified the creative power of the spoken act, nor did they enact the continuous revealment of events. The voices of the spoken word were lost in the silence of the written symbol. The explicitness of the written symbol structured a separation between known and knower, between word and world. The dynamic interactive energy generated by the spoken word was lost in the written symbol. (p. 68)

Lydon shows how the evolution of science and philosophy in Western thought, a ramification of this shift, became the establishment for a world view based on rationality, individuality, and progress. She also reveals how throughout Western scientific and philosophical evolution, “the organic view of life” (p. 68) and its attendant “spiritual truths and beliefs” (p. 70) were all but eliminated. For Lydon, schools and education in the United States today also reflect an emphasis on rationality and “scientific axioms of authority and control” (p. 71). Noting two approaches to education, Lydon maintains, “Both the traditional and the conceptual-empirical curriculum center learning on the abstract, rote, and conceptual. Knowledge acquisition is a controlled and ordered amassing of simple data in abstract, complicated ‘wholes’” (p. 72). Lydon worries that “connection, community, and a meaning-context, or the difference between knowledge
as content and knowing as act” are no where to be found in present day education.

For Lydon, education and spirituality begins and ends in story. “Story,” she says, “is our context and our home. Always narrative provokes new worlds of meaning” (p. 72). Equally significant to Lydon’s philosophy of education and spirituality is cosmology. Lydon believes:

Cosmology is always story. The story may be historical, scientific, mythical, or lyrical. Always it leads us into and out of; it confirms and affirms; it disallows and allows; it dislocates even as it reorientates; it voices silence and signs in words; it speaks in whispers even as it thunders; it retells journey from beginnings to endings. (p. 72)

Lydon sees the current complete ruin and desolation of different communities of organisms and their environments as “an unprecedented crisis” (p. 73). She blames approaches to living that disregard the interdependence of human beings and All-That-Exists. Lydon contends that “a functional cosmology grounded in history, science, and a sense of the sacred needs to be envisioned” (p. 73). Sourcing her belief in the power of story, Lydon posits that a re-thinking of cosmology can be found in “the narration of a new story” (p. 73). Through stories, new understandings and new meanings can transform who we are and how we relate and interact. Through stories, we learn how to see, hear, smell, taste, touch/feel life. Lydon further elaborates:

Meaning-filled stories reveal larger context; they transform and energize; they elicit new understandings and generate creative patterns of thinking and acting. Meaningful stories are the event of unconcealment. They awaken primordial expressiveness of being-in-the-world; they impassion revealment and seduce into discovery. They evoke a promise and a commitment. (p. 74)

Lydon calls her vision for education “Ecozoic,” that is, based in life giving particular attention to the interrelationships of all that lives and their environments. Lydon’s vision for education aims for “an awe-filled knowing of humanity’s place in the
universe,” a knowing that is “a way of looking, a way of seeing the world.” This knowing, this way of looking and seeing requires, what Lydon calls, “a universe-sentience perception”, a finely sensitive awareness of the universe. She sees four possible consequences of her vision of education:

   First, an entirely new worldview is fostered—one grounded in the inherent creativity of the universe. Secondly, subjectivity, differentiation, and interconnectedness, the basic principles of universe functioning, guide all undertakings. Thirdly, the physical-material and the psychic-spiritual realities of the universe as word, event, and action are acknowledged and espoused. Finally, the wonder and beauty of the Earth, our place of habitation, contextualize all relationships. (p. 74)

Lydon’s “universe education” is based in “inquiry” and “process” encompassing spirituality and curriculum as complementary “components” (p. 74). Lydon calls spirituality and curriculum “one movement in the dance of Gaia” where the universe is the focus rather than human life (p. 75). Lydon references the ancient past, in particular, “the cosmological narrative of origins” to discover that “the creativity that spawned the fireball, that created the elementary particles, and that erupted in the dancing stars and galaxies is still present today in us and in our creative potential.” This creativity and “the potential and actuation of universe creativity in human beings” centers “a cosmology of spirituality and curriculum.” In Lydon’s educational vision, “the immediate creative marvels of the universe” are found “through the grandeurs of diversity, the wonders of subjectivity, and the mysterious depths of interdependence” of Earth and human beings (p. 75). In this way, claims Lydon, all living things participate in the perpetual creativity of the cosmos. Lydon’s cosmology of spirituality and curriculum sources and cherishes this creativity. Lydon maintains:

   If humankind is to find and appreciate the creativity that resides in us, not outside us, and in the creativity that surrounds us then human beings need a spirituality
(and curriculum will erupt) that evokes AWE at the wonder and mystery that is all being. (p. 76)

Lydon believes that a fascination and reverence for the miracles and marvels of life necessitate “new ways of looking and seeing” (p. 77).

**Affirmation of Life**


In my vision, spirituality is not separate from every day life. For many, spirituality is seen as synonymous to religion and separate from a way of living life. For me, there are no boundaries to spirituality because living life itself is spiritual. Spirituality is participatory, interactive, and emotive. Missing from most understandings of spirituality are the affective aspects of life. Often, spirituality is limited to what is seen and found in material reality. Transcendence, as expressed in our African/African American experience, is rooted in spiritual reality. Rather than a chance experience or reserved only for moments of prayer, transcendence is an every day expression among African peoples.
In “Community of Life,” Harvey Sindima (1989), Malawian theologian, explains the central and critical role life plays in the African world. Sindima states:

Life orders the African world. This is to claim that the starting point in attempting to grasp the nature of the African world is to begin with the concept of life. It is the all-inclusive concept in African thought and society. Other ideas derive from it and it governs every action. Everything is life and life is everything, i.e., every thing or question ultimately concerns life. Life is the beginning and the end of all action. (p. 546)

Just as “life orders the . . . world,” so too does life order school, education, teaching, and curriculum. In creating, conceiving and conjuring up my theories about spirituality in education, I recall the Abbey Lincoln lyrical line to Thelonius Monk’s composition: Life is a school less you a fool.70 Invoking life as a school, I call upon the learning processes and growth cycles each individual undergoes while running the course of life. Thinking about school, education, teaching, and curriculum from an African/African American framework of life has enabled me to see these elements in more expansive, live, dynamic ways, that is, as interactive, transformative, and participatory. Life is a school, my vision for education, is an approach in which learning mirrors an African/African American world view of life. Since in an African/African American paradigm life and living life are spiritual, I do not use spirituality as a separate term. Every time I use the word life I invoke spirit. My vision for education affirms life and is, therefore, spiritual.

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70 See and listen to “Monkery’s the Blues” sung by the renown jazz vocalist Carmen McRae on her 1990 compact disc Carmen Sings Monk. “Monkery’s the Blues” is based on the jazz instrumental “Blue Monk” by the famous jazz composer and pianist Thelonious Monk with lyrics by renowned jazz vocalist and songwriter Abbey Lincoln.
School

While “school” encompasses all four elements of school, education, teaching, and curriculum, I also view school as the environment in which education, teaching, and curriculum take place. The ultimate environment for education is life. Life is a microcosm of the larger macrocosm of the cosmos. Linda James Myers (1988) speaks of “the controlling principle of the cosmos” and “the all-encompassing macrosystem of order” (p. 8). In the cosmos, a multitude of systems, expressions, and manifestations exist at once. This collection of complexities exists in balance, chaotic order, and complementary contradiction. In its infinite flexibility and fluidity, the universe’s controlling principle can be expressed in a multitude of ways.

Just as the four basic elements—fire, water, air and earth—are manifestations of the controlling principle of the cosmos, ambiguity, unfamiliarity, paradox, and chaos are the four earmarks of life. These earmarks are the ambience in which we live and learn. As human beings, we are forever faced with life’s iffy-ness, unsureness, chancy-ness. Despite our commitment to planning and our continuous reach for security and certainty, we live life not knowing what will happen next.

Life is contradictory by nature. What may appear calm and peaceful may actually be filled with disturbance and discord, and what is seemingly turbulent may be the source of tranquility. The contradictory nature of life spins on, what Charlyn Harper (1983-1984) calls, “a complementarity of differences,” the both/and-ness of what seems absolutely opposite (p. 36).\footnote{In The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity, Richard Bernstein (1993) makes uses of both/and logic in valuing aspects from both modernity and postmodernity. See pp. 201, 225-26, and 309-14.} There are no fixed realities or unalterable certainties.
In life, reality is constantly shifting.

Life is marked by changes that can range from slight and subtle to major and unmistakable. These changes are shiftings which signal imbalance, upset, or disturbance. Shiftings cause us to navigate and negotiate life. Navigating is a process of determining where we are, what path to take, and how to make our way in the world. We go through life aiming for balance while simultaneously knowing that balance is fleeting. Navigating necessitates negotiating, handling and managing as skillfully as possible the uncertain, unknown, contradictory messiness of life. Since life’s realm of ambiguity, unfamiliarity, paradox, and chaos are always dynamically present, we are constantly navigating and negotiating.

In the midst of navigating and negotiating, we are confronted by knowledge that challenges what we already know to be true. When what we come to know challenges what we already know, our thoughts and feelings reflect a loss in our capacity for collected thought or decisive action. We are thrown into confusion, what William Doll, Jr. (1993) calls “perturbation” (pp. 163-66). At the moment of perturbation, we enter into a liminal state between what was familiar and what is unfamiliar, between what was known and what is unknown. The vulnerability of a liminal state is a realm of possibilities in which we can conceive, create, and conjure up choices. We can either return to what was known in the past or we can be open-minded in the present moment, ready for any and all future possibilities.

**Education**

Education is the dynamic, ever-present, perpetual process of growth and development based in learning through living. Life carries the eternal, active, interactive
give-and-take of call-and-response. Life is responsive, fluid and flexible, filled with infinite possibilities. Though it is impossible to say exactly what creates and constructs a life, each moment has experiences—words, deeds, actions, expressions. I view experiences as calls and/or responses.

An experience is a call, an opportunity to grapple with life, to grow and develop one’s self-knowledge, and to explore possibilities. As experiences occur in life, we respond. How we respond is a function of who we be and simultaneously informs who we become. Every moment of every day we human beings are be-ing who we are and becoming who we will be. Like call-and-response, be-ing/becoming is a perpetual process of life.

Education—similar to the process and rhythm of life—is always active whether we think about it or not. The ebb and flow of living presents possibilities. Possibilities call and we respond. As we respond, we be/become. In the journey of be-ing/becoming, we grow and develop. Though physical growth and development are assured, personal, intellectual, and spiritual growth and development require learning through living. Though this may sound obvious, growth and development are too often taken for granted and the significance of learning through living is overlooked. As we live, we learn.

Education happens in the realm of who we are and what we know. The expansiveness of what we know is vast and undefinable. While in mainstream education, rational knowledge is privileged, I recognize three frequently ignored avenues through which we acquire knowledge. Embodied knowledge is what we have come to know through our senses and the rest of our body rooted in reflection. We
begin to amass embodied knowledge from infancy. Our bodies retain layers and layers of knowledge for completing everything from the most basic motor task to complex physical and mental feats. Our embodied knowledge is an irreplaceable complement to rational knowledge.

Experiential knowledge is what we come to know through our lived experiences. What we experience and how we experience influence who we are in relationship to ourselves, others, and our communities. As Gloria Wade-Gayles (1993) knows, “That which we are at any given time in our lives, we are because of whom we have known and what we have experienced” (p. 188). Education itself is both an experience and a process which draws upon each individual’s experiences.

Metaphysical knowledge is what we come to know through, what Charlyn Harper (1983-1984) calls, “our different levels of consciousness” (p. 34). The first level of consciousness is based on personal experiences while the second has to do with popular present-day ideas. In reference to the first and the second levels of consciousness, Harper states:

We have our own personal level of consciousness or awareness because we have had some unique individual experiences that influence how we perceive and interpret reality. There is also a level of popular consciousness where we are influenced by the present-day ideas and those go into influencing how we internalize, how we interpret what we see, hear, and feel. (p. 34)

While the first and second levels of consciousness pertain to individuals, the third and fourth reflect groups of people. “Historical or collective consciousness,” the third level, is a group of people’s “shared historical experience that transcends a physical history and begins to act as a deep structure of culture.” The fourth level, “deep culture consciousness,” is “a group of people’s answers to questions of ontology, answers to
questions of epistemology, answers to questions of axiology, and particularly, answers
to questions of cosmology" (Harper, 1983-1984, p. 34).

Our embodied, experiential, and metaphysical knowledges act as guide, resource, and source in education. As guide, these knowledges influence our specific course of action as we learn through living. As resource, they are a wellspring of supply, support, and information for our growth and development. As source, our embodied, experiential, and metaphysical knowledges act as a generative force for the dynamic, ever-present, perpetual process of education.

**Teaching**

The perpetual, ever-present process of education necessitates that learning is never ending. We are always learning. As such, teaching and learning are inseparable. The cyclical process of learning<—>teaching has no beginning and no end. As soon as we learn, we teach. As soon as we teach, we learn. When we honor the active and interactive nature of learning<—>teaching, education is more equitable, transformative, and participatory.

In an African world view, “community is placed at the very core of African life. Everything is fused with community” (Tedla, 1995, 1996, pp. 17-18). When this understanding of community is combined with education, learners<—>teachers are participants in the interactive “network of life” (Sindima, 1989, p. 546). Viewing others as ourselves transforms our perspective on learning<—>teaching. Learning<—>teaching is a manifestation of human relatedness.

The interactivity of learning<—>teaching lives in communication. Communication is “the act of sharing and living in the one common symbol—life.”
Through that sharing and living, people are able to “live in communion and communication with each other and nature.” Out of this communion and communication, we “share stories or life experiences” (Sindima, 1989, p. 548). According to Sindima, “Sharing life experiences affirms people and prepares them for understanding each other. To understand is to be open to the life experience of others [and] to be influenced by the world of others” (p. 548). When learning<--->teaching is anchored in community, education is exciting, joyful, and fun.

Curriculum

Similar to the cosmos, we are a multilayered, interconnected medley and constellation of subjectivities in perpetual flux. With a plethora of possibilities and scores of subjectivities contingently accessible, we live and learn, that is, we call and respond as we experience each moment of our lives. William Pinar (1994) reconceptualized curriculum as currere, “the running of the course.” He states, “The curriculum is not comprised of subjects, but of Subjects, of subjectivity. The running of the course is building of the self, the lived experience of subjectivity” (p. 220). Currere, a dynamic view of curriculum, fits the “nontranscendent (temporal, historical), contextual (socially constructed), nonuniversal (specific)” nature of life (Williams, 1991, p. 9). Curriculum as currere is always in process and centers on the education (growth and development) of individual human beings. How we relate to self, others, and our environment, how we express our ideas as well as our personal understandings and insights reflect each individual’s never-the-same, always-in-flux “curriculum.”

The gift of curriculum as *currere* is the discovery of truth/s. Ubiquitous, truth/s can be beacons through life’s uncertainty, strangeness, contrariness, and untidiness. Some truth/s may appear impenetrable, confusing or chaotic, frustrating or even ruthless while other truth/s may seem simple, comfortable and peaceful, accessible and attainable. Truth/s are marked by “partiality” (Hall, 1989, p. 908), that is, no truth is absolute, only part of what can be known. “Partial truths” are “constantly renegotiated” (Hall, 1989, p. 906). Reflecting the complementarity of differences in an African world view, truth/s are two-sided with both sides creating a complementary, complex unity. Educator, community activist, and scholar, who was also formerly enslaved, Anna Julia Cooper understood, “There is a feminine as well as a masculine side to truth; that these are related not as inferior or superior, not as better and worse, not as weaker or stronger, but as complements—complements in one necessary and symmetric whole” (qtd. in Lemert and Bhan, 1998, p. 78).

Each truth is uniquely responsive to each individual. Once we discover truth/s, we decipher them, that is, interpret their meaning for our own personal lives. In her memoir, Estella Conwill Majozo (1998) reveals:

Each [truth] has its own potential and requires a particular bearing, and each remains a wilderness until we *figure out* the demeanor that will enable us to *perform our creative capacity within that landscape*. And at the moment of that recognition we are out of the wilderness. (p. 25, emphasis added)

Deciphering truth/s begins in imagination. As soon as we “figure out” how to imaginatively negotiate “within that landscape” where truth/s dwell, we “perform our creative capacity” and instantly come to know truth/s.

Part of deciphering truth/s is, what Patricia Hill Collins (1998) calls, “contextualizing truth[s]” (p. 236). For Collins, there are no criteria for ascertaining the
value of truth/s and, therefore, “a seemingly normless relativity sets in whereby all truths are equal” (p. xix). Seeing power relations playing a significant role in what is considered to be truth/s, Collins asserts that “what constitutes truth/s changes markedly when context is taken into account” (p. 197). In her analysis of “Black feminist thought as discourse and practice in relation to other discourses and their practices,” Collins claims a simultaneous situating in and “moving through multiple contexts.” Accepted as noncontradictory, “this [is a] process [of] continually moving among discourses in contextualizing and generating truth/s.” Collins maintains, “Contextualizing truth via movement fosters a critical social theory unavailable to those who ground their truth/s in the centers of any one interpretive context” (p. 236).

Like Toni Cade Bambara (2001), I believe in the power of truth/s and its connection to spirit and joy. “We have rarely been encouraged and equipped,” says Bambara, “to appreciate the fact that the truth/s works, that it releases Spirit and that it is a joyous thing” (p. 16). Drawing on spirit for new visions for school, education, teaching, and curriculum creates affirmation of life, an ideal model for education reflecting an ideal model for living life.

For me, the spiritual is an essential and guiding force in education. As William Doll, Jr. (1995) asserts, “Life is spiritual and education should be one with life—too often our sense of teaching and learning excludes life itself” (p. 10). Affirmation of life as my approach to spirituality in education was the climax of my dissertation journey. In the next chapter, I review and discuss the implications, outcomes, and considerations of my dissertation journey.
Chapter Seven

So-journeying: Creating Sacred Space in Education

“Today is the name of possibility.
Today contains the traces of the past and the seeds of tomorrow.
Tomorrow is vision or illusion. We must choose vision.”73

In this chapter, I introduce and discuss so-journeying, an authentic, organic process of and approach to learning. I reflect on my dissertation as a journey and explain how so-journeying enabled me to learn through living while navigating and negotiating the uncertain, unknown, contradictory messiness of life and, as a result, discovering and deciphering truth/s. I then make my call for creating sacred space in education.

So-journeying

The particular way that Sojourner Truth learned through living inspired me to conceive, create and conjure up a process and approach to learning I call so-journeying. So-journeying is a process of learning through living while navigating and negotiating the uncertain, unknown, contradictory messiness of life and, as a result, discovering and deciphering truth/s. Each aspect of so-journeying—learning through living, navigating and negotiating, and discovering and deciphering truth/s—has its own unique purpose. Learning through living is gathering information gleaned from new knowledge, life lessons or lived experiences. Whether writing a dissertation, working through curricula, learning<—>teaching in a classroom, or living life, this gathering of information takes place in an ambience of ambiguity, unfamiliarity, paradox, and chaos. These four intrinsic, ever-present earmarks of life require us to create paths through

73 Clifton (1976), p. 53.
uncertainty, unknownness, contradiction, and disorder. Navigating and negotiating are the means to determine where we are and how to make our way in the world. Navigating and negotiating works with learning through living by directing the so-journer through life’s maze. When we learn through living as we navigate and negotiate life, we create avenues for the possibilities of discovering and deciphering truth/s. So-journeying seeks the unknown, embraces contradictions, thrives in uncertainty, and values the messiness of life. Complementary, interconnected, interdependent, the aspects of so-journeying work together in concert to create an authentic, organic process of and approach to learning.

The journey of my dissertation has been a sojourn of self-exploration and self-evaluation. I explored and evaluated my culture, her/his-story, and lived experiences by researching, reading, and writing. Without knowing the outcome, I threw myself into my dissertation journey. Through this explorative, evaluative process, I began to learn who I am and what I believe. I found myself navigating and negotiating the uncertain, unknown, contradictory, messiness of my journey. As I examined where I had been, I discovered and deciphered unexpected, hidden, unknown truth/s. In retrospect, I realized my dissertation journey paralleled the various junctures of self-exploration and self-evaluation we human beings undergo throughout life. How we go through these junctures is a process of and approach to learning.

As I reflect on my dissertation journey, I realize that so-journeying is a dynamic process which can be used in a wide variety of life experiences. As a dynamic process modeled on life, so-journeying charts new directions in learning. Since the full expanse of life is unknowable, learning through living is always new. By basing learning in living,
so-journeying makes learning exciting. As so-journers become familiar with the rhythm and process of learning, they gain grace—a relaxed acceptance and the capability (will and ability) to learn in the flow of life. Graceful learners welcome the discomfort and confusion of perturbation and remain open-minded when confronted by new knowledge. So-journeying teaches us that life’s unknown and unexpected possibilities allow us to use our acquired knowledge, gain clarity about that knowledge, and possess the grace to creatively make use of that knowledge. Circuitous and polysemous, so-journeying encourages us to recursively return to new cycles of learning.

So-journeying is both the process I went through writing my dissertation as well as an approach which can be used to chart new directions in learning. When writing my dissertation, I took the truth/s that I held dear from African/African American-centered education and attempted to re-vision those truth/s through curriculum theory. Aiming to synthesize these two “fields” left me in a state of perturbation. Though I had boundless ideas and expertise, I could not access them. I was faced with navigating and negotiating a quagmire of confusion, anxiety, and doubt. Though I felt stuck in this liminal state, I was surrounded by a myriad of possibilities. Through so-journeying, I learned how to accept and embrace the discomfort and confusion of perturbation. I was challenged to remain open-minded when confronted by the unknown and unexpected possibilities of my journey. In the process of writing my dissertation, I was learning through living while navigating and negotiating the ambiguity, unfamiliarity, paradox, and chaos of my journey.

As I lived through my dissertation journey, I learned that so-journeying is a way of learning marked by process and rhythm. Rather than sequential, flat, and linear, my
journey was cyclical and spiral-like, emerging, evolving, and expanding. As I continued on my journey, the perpetual rhythm of so-journeying generated opportunity after opportunity to learn from living. I returned again and again to navigate and negotiate and was continually gifted with truth/s. The circuitous and polysemous nature of so-journeying allowed me to embark upon a new learning cycle of my journey with each dissertation chapter. With each new chapter, I recursively returned to the beginning of a so-journeying cycle with new knowledge, more clarity about that knowledge, and the grace to creatively make use of that knowledge. At every juncture of my journey, I discovered and deciphered truth/s.

When I encountered Sojourner Truth, I began to see the possibilities of what I could contribute to curriculum theory. As I was reading about Sojourner Truth and her life, I was struck by her dynamic capability (will and ability) to use her limitations to take actions in her world. Under Truth’s tutelage, I learned to value the power of the theorizing I had already done before coming to graduate school. Using this awareness, I began to navigate and negotiate both the lessons of my past in African/African American-centered education and my newfound lessons in curriculum theory. Immersing myself in Sojourner Truth’s life granted me multiple truths. One is that my will and ability is more significant than my limitations. Another is that my thinking contributes to curriculum theory. Yet another is that my culture, her/his-story, lived experiences make what I have to contribute to curriculum theory unique.

When Sojourner Truth and I began our dance of call-and-response, I called out to my community sparking an exchange that brought into focus my journey of self-exploration and self-evaluation. The depth of my communications with my community
compelled me to explore call-and-response in the context of I~We as a methodology for my sojourn. Though different scholars, artists, historians, and theorists offered me some insight, I needed my community’s collective response to authenticate the approach, direction, and content of my dissertation. Opening communication with my community put me in communion with their life experiences. Our mutual exchange validated the significance of my role as theorist in my community. My community convinced me that because of my experiences I was uniquely prepared to communicate my thinking on school, education, curriculum, and teaching. Through call-and-response in the context of I~We, my community asserted that I was on a worthwhile path and encouraged me to continue on my sojourn toward clarifying and creating my educational views and vision.

My dissertation journey led me to explore my foundations as an educator in African/African American education. My attempts to describe my experiences in education revealed a segment of curriculum history that is under-documented. The her/his-story of the independent Black school movement as well as multiple accounts of any and all aspects of African/African American-centered schools, education, curriculum, and teaching need to be told by a diverse range of writers. The curricular theories and practices of African/African American-centered education would inform, re-construct, and re-vision our understandings of school, education, curriculum and teaching. Delving in the particulars of the schools I played an active role in, I discovered that my experience yielded valuable personal expertise. Wanting to find a more viable approach to African/African American-centered education led me to discover new views of school, education, curriculum, and teaching.
On the curriculum theory portion of my journey, I found myself in a paradoxical state. Though I resisted curriculum theory as a possible resource and source, it seeped into who I am and what I believe. In detailing how my journey through curriculum theory transformed me personally and then professionally, I noticed a complementary connection between the personal and the professional. Curriculum theory helped me see how I was blocking myself personally and as a result helped me to transform professionally. As a different paradigm, curriculum theory affirmed what I valued in my own paradigm, expanded what I already believed and opened doors to new information I had not known. Curriculum theory helped me see and understand what I am most committed to personally and professionally.

My dissertation journey aimed to find a more viable approach to education for African American youth. When I re-evaluated an African world view, I discovered that it was much more inclusive, life-centered, and based in the spiritual than I had previously understood. I also noticed that I was personally and professionally spiritual in my views and vision of life and of education. After reading other curriculum theorists’ visions of the spiritual in education, I saw how spirituality in education is a basis for a comprehensive model of school, education, curriculum, and teaching. Through my understandings of an African/African American world view, I was able to create, conceive and conjure up what makes an educational approach more viable.

The time I spent so-journeying my dissertation led me to observe that so-journeying is also an approach which can be used to chart new directions in learning. In constructing so-journeying as a learning approach, I noted how I learned through researching, reading, and writing, how I integrated new ways of navigating and
negotiating, and how I discovered and deciphered emerging truth/s. I realized that so-
journeying is filled with cues and guides that can be applied in many different learning
situations. Like life, so-journeying is characterized by flexibility, fluidity, balance, chaotic
order, and complementary contradiction. Understanding so-journeying is instructive in
showing us how to conceive, create, and conjure up rich learning environments.

I reach the end of my dissertation excited about the flexible, fluid possibilities of
so-journeying. Having utilized so-journeying as an approach to chart new directions in
my dissertation, I turn my attention to imagining how to use so-journeying to create
sacred space in education. Coming from African/African American-centered education
through curriculum theory toward creating sacred space, this imagining is a continuation
of my life journey. The words of Bernice Johnson Reagon’s (1986) song title and lyrical
line, “B’lieve I’ll run on . . ., see what the end’s gonna be” (pp. 78-82) express where I
stand with my vision of creating sacred space in education. Uncertain of the
configuration, parameters, nuances, or aspects, I run on to a future of creating sacred
space not knowing what the end’s gonna be. I take with me the truth/s I learned from
my dissertation journey. My hope is that you the reader will imagine with me, that
together we can envision our own ways of creating sacred space in education.

Creating Sacred Space in Education

Currently, school, education, teaching, and curriculum tend to be lifeless and
hold little relevance to the life experiences of learners. On the other hand, so-
journeying embraces life and values the life experiences of learners. Using so-
journeying as a process of and approach to learning requires a transformation of
learning environments. Just as it is important to create, conceive, and conjure up new
models of learning, such as *so-journeying*, it is vital to create new learning environments. In fact, *so-journeying* can only take place in a learning environment that is sacred space.

In my imagination, sacred space reflects the spirit of life found in *All-That-Exists*. The spirit of life is found between and among what is inorganic, organic, plant, animal, human, and the rest of the cosmos. The interdependent, interactive interplay between and among these entities and the rest of the cosmos is *affirmation of life*. In my mind, sacred space is not linked to some specific site or any physical location. In my vision of sacred space, *affirmation of life* is a given. In other words, when life is affirmed, sacred space is created.

When I create sacred space, I engage in a sacred endeavor which draws upon the principles of harmony and balance manifested in *All-That-Exists*. The principles of correspondence, complementarity, and unity maintain harmony and balance in *All-That-Exists* while providing learners (students and teachers) with guidelines for creating sacred space in education. The principle of correspondence (as above, so below) gives us the fundamental understanding that *All-That-Exists*, including space, is already sacred. The principle of complementarity (unity of opposites) ensures that the environment of sacred space welcomes multiplicity and includes difference as an expression of the collective. The principle of unity (two becoming one) maintains an interplay between learners (two or more) to create new sacred space (one). For me, creating sacred space replicates the propensity for harmony and balance found in *All-That-Exists*.
Approaching learning environments as sacred alters my perspectives of school, education, teaching, and curriculum. In considering how to create sacred space, I return to my original ponderings about school, education, teaching, and curriculum. When I imagine what it would mean for school to affirm life, I envision school as a sacred center that blends school, the home, the community, and society into one complex, interconnected, interactive, active whole. Rather than follow the model of school as a separate place where children go for the day, school, the home, the community, and society work together to support learners’ processes of being/becoming. Understanding that physical environment contributes to sacred space, critical attention would be given to everything in and about the school’s atmosphere. One consideration for the physical environment of school is reflecting a home environment as much as possible. Using the various elements of All-That-Exists as cues for creating sacred space ensures that learning environments are affirmations of life.

Creating sacred space also focuses on bringing sacredness into relationships which is central to affirmation of life. In my imagined sacred space, relationships reflect a spirit of connectedness and care. In school where sacred space is valued, people are the center with special emphasis on students. Interactions are marked by respect and equality where everyone’s voice is valued. Students’ families are always welcomed with home and school working as a team for the benefit of students. By bringing sacredness into school relationships, students learn to affirm life for themselves and others.

Fostering sacredness in education disrupts dogmatic, rote, spiritless methods in favor of a caring atmosphere in which learners<—>teachers affirm each other.
My vision of creating sacred space “embodies communality rather than individuality. Emphasis is on group cohesiveness, cooperation, and the collective common good” (Smitherman, 1977, p. 109). Guided by the mantra, “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1969, p. 152), creating sacred space is grounded in the belief that the individual and the collective are interrelated and interdependent in such a way that the individual needs the collective and the collective needs the individual. Drawing on my experiences with call-and-response, creating sacred space in education privileges communication between and among individuals in a collective. In such a milieu, all voices are welcomed and honored and each call and each response is true. The communal nature of sacred space creates an atmosphere in which learners—teachers openly listen to each other’s life experiences and are influenced by each other’s world (Sindima, 1989). Communion, communication, and care are vital to creating sacred space in education.

What would it mean if we imagine education and school in the context of sacred space? I imagine school reflecting the interdependent, interconnectedness of life. Education affirms life by moving school into the community and the community into school for educational experiences. Students, teachers, and family members may spend a week on a farm, at a business, or in a university learning together. Off-site locations could also be integrated as part of daily learning. Artists and dance studios as well as a theater could be housed in school. School which values sacred space provides social service centers to meet the needs of the community. I believe that creating sacred space recreates the interplay between the multiple arenas of life.
For me, the very act of teaching is creating sacred space in education. Creating sacred space directly engages learning<—>teaching. Teachers who create sacred space honor the dynamism of the interplay between individuals and the collective. Together teachers and students are learning communities who are active and interactive, ever connected, ever moving in multidirectional interconnections and interactions. At the same time, every individual (each teacher and each student) is a multi-dimensional, dynamically developing organism whose whole personality is involved in the process of her/his be-ing/becoming, in her/his social world, in her/his community, and in her/his world at all levels (Harper, 1983-1984). Teaching in sacred space requires sensitivity to the multiplicity of energies present between and among individuals and their learning communities.

What adjustments would teachers need to make to create sacred space in education? When I think of teaching in sacred space, teaching reflects the eternal, active, interactive give-and-take of call-and-response. Rather than limiting learning by student age, teaching in sacred space addresses the multiple ways students express an idea, reality, or live life. Reflecting flexibility, fluidity, balance, chaotic order, and complementary contradiction, teachers look to students and themselves for curricular cues. Aware of the varied rhythms and processes of learning through living, teachers who create sacred space honor and respect students’ right to choose and make decisions for themselves.

Teaching in sacred space requires embodiment. As we learn<—>teach, we utilize our bodies as well as our minds. We engage all we have at our disposal—body, stature, physique, voice, experience—to interact with others and the environment as we
accumulate knowledge. Embodied learning—teaching encompasses singing songs, using various tones of voice, involving hand and other body movements, reciting poems, and integrating hands-on activities to complement learning. Employing embodiment in teaching echoes affirmation of life.

What does creating sacred space in education mean for curriculum? Life would be the reference point for and the child would be the center of curriculum. Nature as well as the cosmos would be guide, source, and resource for learning through living. Hands-on, interdisciplinary activities would be a given in curriculum. Curriculum would be understood as currere, always in process, committed to each individual’s never-the-same, always-in-flux “curriculum.”

What curriculum would best reflect and serve affirmation of life? I imagine curriculum as students and teachers exploring and discovering life and its myriad interconnections. Learning begins with preliminary conversations about how curricular themes intersect with the life of each student, the teacher, the school, and the community. Resources—books, materials, and information as well as invited guests—are tools for excavation for learning truth/s. When curriculum affirms life, creation is an inseparable aspect of learning. Using what they learned and their imaginations, learners create expressions which capsulizes their learning experiences. Students’ creative expressions can be shared with each other, with their families and friends, or their larger community. In my imagination, curriculum privileges the value and significance of life connections to curricular themes.

In my imagination, creating sacred space in school, education, teaching and curriculum calls for a way of be-ing. When I teach, I aim to create a sacred space.
My role as teacher is to facilitate learning by orchestrating interactive, communal sharing through conversation. I am sensitive to moment-to-moment opportunities where we all, everyone present including myself, can learn. I am aware of the perpetual presence of every moment’s unexpectedness, unknownness, paradox, and messiness as well as our various multilayered, interconnected medley and constellation of subjectivities in perpetual flux. As I teach, I aim for fun, play, and ease welcoming everyone to join together to create a learning environment where each of us will be comfortable to participate in the process of learning<–>teaching. When I teach, I give up my authority so that students may teach as well as learn. We, students and teacher, are a community of learners. Creating sacred space is a commitment to education, teaching, and curriculum as expansive, interactive, transformative, and participatory.

Creating sacred space inspires us to look at our connectedness and our interwoven-ness between and among ourselves, others, and the world. In the realm of sacred space, learners attend to each other and remain perpetually present as well as open to new knowledge and unexpected possibilities. Petra Munro extrapolates from my theory that when we attend to each other, we actively listen and when we are open, we are vulnerable and nonjudgmental. Conjoint with recognizing our connectedness, Munro states, “To me, learning does not take place unless we listen, are open, and see our interconnectedness.” (Private conversation, June 2003) When I call for a transformation of education, school, teaching, and curriculum, I am also seeking new ways to characterize learning. Creating sacred space is my vision for that transformation. The vision of tomorrow is creating sacred space.
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Vita

Tayari kwa Salaam, born and raised in New Orleans, Louisiana, has extensive experience in cultural nationalism, educational development, community theater, cultural arts programming, and research travel, all reflecting her broad view of education. Salaam has been working in the field of community-based, cultural arts education for thirty years. She initiated the establishment of two independent Black schools in New Orleans and was head teacher and director of one of them for nine years. Salaam co-authored two children's books, developed curriculum as well as designed and created educational materials for reading, culture, and social studies. She conceived an educational summer program utilizing an African/African American-centered, interdisciplinary, hands-on approach with sessions taught by veteran teachers and workshops taught by professional artists. Salaam directed VITAL Workshop Series, workshops for youth exposure to artists and their artwork. She has also been involved in community theater as a performer, director, and drama festival judge. Salaam coordinated the multi-media theatrical production *Color My World* and has directed children's dramatic presentations of poetry and song. She has led workshops and lectured, both locally and nationally, on issues of education and African American youth, the defense and development of Black women, and the African American family.

Salaam has also traveled internationally. As a college student, in the summer of 1969, she lived in Ghana and traveled to Togo and the Cote d’ Ivoire. In 1977, Salaam traveled to the People's Republic of China on a tour she organized for independent Black school teachers and administrators. She has visited Jamaica, Haiti, and Barbados. In May 1987, Salaam traveled to Cuba as a member of the 18th Contingent
of the Venceremos Brigade. In the summer of 1989, she returned to Cuba on a cultural tour she co-coordinated through Southern Arts, Media, Education Connections Association, an educational travel and research organization.

Salaam graduated from Southern University at New Orleans with a bachelor of arts degree in elementary education in 1993. She received a master’s degree in curriculum and instruction from Louisiana State University in 1997, an education specialist degree in 2000, and will receive a doctorate in December 2003. Salaam plans to initiate an elementary school which prepares youth leaders for the 21st century and which responds to the school’s surrounding community.