

Sankofa in Action: Creating a Plan That Works: Healing the Causes of Violence to Stop the Violence

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On September 24, 2009, four teenage boys beat sixteen-year-old Derrion Albert to death. YouTube.com and news media videos, with a warning about the graphic violence, show groups of students fighting near Fenger High School. At one point, one of the boys knocks down Derrion with a “railroad tie, a rectangular piece of wood used as a base for railroad tracks” (Simon, 2010). When he tries to get up, another boy punches him in the face. Then another boy begins to beat him. Then another. One of them jumps on his head. The students, Derrion’s friends perhaps, are running or standing around, screaming and crying. Some are fighting, but at this point it is hard to tell which students are fighting as part of the rival groups or as bystanders defending themselves. One adult moves to help Derrion. A boy hits him in the face with a railroad tie, and he backs away. Cars take off hurriedly. Finally, after the beating has stopped, one adult and a group of students drag Derrion’s body off the street into an open building. The students are begging Derrion to move, to breathe. He dies two hours later.

Derrion Albert was a sixteen-year-old honor roll student with plans to attend college. His mother had moved back to Chicago a little more than a year prior to take care of her mother. Derrion loved the neighborhood and the school so much that she allowed him to stay with his grandmother to finish school. He was a church-goer. He loved to wrestle and go shopping. He was beaten to death within the vicinity of his school and in the presence of friends and adults. Students interviewed by the CNN Anderson Cooper show said that he was murdered because he helped a friend who was being beaten by one of the groups. They watched it happen. It could have easily been any one of them.

Confronting the Death of Derrion Albert

As an activist-scholar who is also an African-based priest and healing facilitator, the only way to *try* to make sense of this death was through a spiritual lens. Theorizing about how and why this death happened, and how to address it, means placing it within an African-based holistic framework that encompasses historical, social, and spiritual contexts. How does one make sense of a horrific event without seeming to rationalize it? Radical times necessitate even more radical methods; they necessitate entry into liminal and alternative spaces often avoided or ignored within these contexts. The question, then, is what would be the most appropriate way to approach the death of this young man?

After considering various African-based or -derived religions, perspective(s), practices, processes, or philosophies such as Ifa, Vodoun, Kwanzaa, and Sankofa, I chose to ground my proposed solution in Sankofa, most familiar to African Americans through the Ghanaian Adinkra images that communicate Akan wisdom. Sankofa is commonly understood as the process of fetching knowledge or wisdom from the past to be able to use it in the present or to influence the present. The term, its meaning, and practices can be found in movies such as *Sankofa* (Gerima, 1993), rites of passage groups (e.g., Sankofa for Kids), cultural events (e.g., Sankofa Marketplace), and schools (e.g., Sankofa Academy Charter School). Karenga (2001), the founder of Kwanzaa, defines Sankofa as a necessary process for Black Studies scholars to access paradigms of African thought.

Sankofa has been part of African-American culture in a variety of contexts for more than two decades. It has also proven to be an “authentic” African idea that links African Americans with a specific homeland and culture. Sankofa, therefore, offers an opportunity to help African Americans reconnect to a past both real and imagined, to learn about the history and culture of some of their ancestors, and to consider the ways in which the wisdom embedded in the Adinkra symbols can be transformed into a path for living and a way of being in the world with other sentient beings.

Although the Akan system and culture is not part of my own spiritual practice, I recognize, like Christel N. Temple (2009), that the Adinkra images and meanings, especially Sankofa, “[have] remarkably influenced the culture of the United States as a region of the African Diaspora” (127). In addition, as Temple points out, diverse African-American communities have separately selected Sankofa as a public practice to counter the adverse impact of certain aspects of Western culture (128).

Review of the Literature

I contend that Derrion Albert’s murder is a symptom of a larger problem in Black communities, one that transcends poverty, educational gaps, limited political power, shrinking financial opportunities, or ineffective public policies—one that is connected to slavery and subsequent oppressions. As a result, I reviewed literature related to the ways in which urban violence has been connected to slavery (and subsequently racism) and other historical events and the spiritual approaches that communities have used to deal with this violence.

My contentions are not new. For example, Joy Degruy Leary (2005), Denyse Hicks-Ray (2004), Naim Akbar (1996), Saidiya Hartman (2008), Wade Noble (2008), and Lisa Woolfork (2009) argue that it is necessary to understand how the history of slavery in the United States directly shapes and impacts current violence and pain in Black communities. According to Akbar, “in order to fully grasp the magnitude of our current problems, we must reopen the books on the events of slavery...we should [also] understand that slavery should be viewed as a starting point for understanding the African-American psyche, and not as an end point” (3). Hicks-Ray writes, “no discussion of African-American trauma could be considered complete unless it addresses the role of slavery” (4). Moreover, Hartman states, “in the United States, Black peoples’ insistence on reckoning with slavery in the face of national indifference, if not downright hostility, has been an effort to illuminate the crushing effects of racism in our lives” (165). To eliminate slavery from most discussions on violence in Black communities is to ignore the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual impact that the history of slavery continues to have on Black people throughout the world, particularly in the United States. Furthermore, neglecting to discuss slavery is to lose an opportunity to pay attention to the ways in which the multiple traumas of slavery have gone unaddressed and, therefore, unhealed.

Combating this violence requires strategies that are as old as the wound itself. However, there are limited studies of or attention given to the impact of African-based healing ideas or practices on African Americans (e.g., the community healing and grieving work conducted by Sobonfu Somé). Regarding Sankofa, for example, in my database search for sources that contained the term “Sankofa,” I found eighty-six references; however, an unduplicated count reduced this to twenty references. These were focused on reviews of the movie *Sankofa*, arts and education programs, or alternatives to psychological and sociological practices in Black communities. A general search for books yielded works of Black scholars such as Grayson (2000), Hilliard (1997), and Karenga (2001). Still, Temple writes that “*Sankofa* practice in the

Diaspora has not yet benefited from systematic study” (133) and “does not appear in the scholarship circulated among people of African descent in the United States” (144).

Other literature I surveyed focused on the occurrence of and possible social or psychological reasons for the violence and its effects on children and communities, or on strategies to combat the violence. For example, Graham (2002), Harvey and Hill (2004), Harvey and Rauch (1997), and Hill (1998) support the development and implementation of social work practices and rites of passage programs that are African- or African-American-centered to connect Black youth to their ancestral pasts. Their findings that culturally-based programs empower Black children and their families are supported by teachers and administrators of African-centered programs (e.g., J. S. Chick Elementary School in Kansas City, Betty Shabazz International Charter School, the Woodlawn Community School, a public school in Chicago, and the African-Centered Curriculum in Evanston, Illinois).

Literature that focuses on strategies to combat the violence more often than not concludes, as the works cited above, that cultural relevance is integral to the success of any program. In addition, African- or African-American-centered solutions include a holistic attention to the child and community and incorporate value systems, such as the *Nguzo Saba* (Tukufu, 1997), that have the potential to instill in young people a respect for human life and reverence for their ancestors. Such literature is part of a community of practices and programs that include work by Karenga (1989, 2007) and rites of passage programs such as the *Bridge Builders*. This literature stresses the importance of addressing the academic, cultural, and social needs of the students by paying attention to their African and African-American history and cultures. In the past few years, however, these programs and strategies have come under scrutiny by educators and scholars to determine whether or not they have made a significant difference in the social and academic lives of Black children (e.g., Butler-Derge, 2009). The spontaneity of Derrion Albert’s murder, the quick loss of control by students, the force of the fear that paralyzed the others, and the voyeuristic nature of his murder, indicate that these programs—no matter how many and how successful—are fighting a war that is growing faster and stronger than they can help students.

Paying attention to historical, cultural, and social contexts may not be enough. I believe that this violence is a spiritual wound, and that in order to begin healing it we must return to *one* of its points of origin—the Transatlantic Slave Trade—first to heal the spirits (living and ancestral) of those affected by the violence, which I consider a symptom of the illness. Let me be clear: I am no way suggesting that poverty, poor education, or other such circumstances that sometimes lead to this type of violence can be eliminated or healed so easily. These things, as well as the violence, are part of a system that has used race/racialization (and class) to create environments within which they can feed and thrive. However, continued existence of these issues highlights the fact that policies and programs to combat them have not been completely successful. In order to treat the wounded spirit, Black communities require spiritual strategies.

Additional literature focuses on spiritual approaches to violence in Black communities, including Bible-based community programs, African-American-centered Christian approaches, African-derived practices, or rites of passage programs that may combine Christian and African-based beliefs. However, Christian-based approaches can exclude African-based forms of ritual, cleansing, and ancestral interactions that can be found in West African practices such as *Vodoun* and *Ifa*. Historically, African-based practices have been maligned or connected to “the devil” due to the ways in which popular culture has constructed knowledge about these systems (e.g., movies such as *Angel Heart*, *The Believers*, and *The Skeleton Key*). To avoid these controversial

elements, programs should emphasize the knowledge or wisdom that can be integrated more easily into a Christian perspective, while incorporating selected African elements such as libation. This approach has made Kwanzaa and Sankofa successful in various communities.

Other literature on spiritual approaches includes a multicultural view, such as can be found in Mahdi, Christopher, and Meade (1996) in their ground-breaking anthology, *Crossroads: The Quest for Contemporary Rites of Passage*, and in *Suffer the Little Children: Urban Violence and Sacred Space* (Read and Wollaston, 2001). The former text offers a range of essays on the success of contemporary rites of passage and rituals, from traditions and cultures as varied as Buddhism, the Navajo, and the Dagara (Burkina Faso), to explore similar problematic issues (e.g., violence, teenage pregnancy) and their creative, alternative solutions within different social and cultural contexts. The latter text, a collection of essays that takes its cue from the Children's Cross erected by members of St. James Episcopal Cathedral in response to the hundreds of children killed in Chicago in 1993, addresses violence through several dialogues on ritual, memory, the body, and trauma. Most importantly, the essays as a whole point to the need for creating sacred space—of the body and the areas in which violence occurred—as part of a process of remembering and healing.

Although many of the approaches in the literature on religion, healing, ritual, and spirituality are holistic, they tend to focus on what I believe are the symptoms (e.g., violence) of the wound or the wound itself (e.g., the result of the violence) as opposed to the cause(s) of the wound. I am suggesting that attention first must be given to the spiritual origin(s) of the violence before addressing any of the other areas. This approach is more in line with the work of African authors and healers such as Malidoma Somé (1993) and Sobonfu Somé (1999), who rely on Dagara teachings to create community healing rituals. Two key components of Sobonfu Somé's work are grieving and ancestral reconnection. These two elements are part of a process I would like to call *Sankofa in Action*.

The remainder of this essay analyzes reactions to Derrion Albert's murder and proposes *Sankofa in Action* as a beginning response to such violence.

The Problem: Underneath Our Children's Rage Is Our History

Derrion Albert's murder is a symptom of a larger problem in Black communities that cannot be stopped by more social services, police, prisons, money, schools, or churches: our children, at younger and younger ages, are internalizing and expressing a rage that they can neither articulate nor transform, and for which adults lack the resources and tools to help them do so. As a result, some of our children are committing heinous acts of violence that begin as tantrums, brawls, and arguments. However, once these children engage in the conflict, they ignite and release feelings they have carried with them for a long time. "These are kids navigating a complex landscape of social problems, clinging to whatever sense of identity and esteem they can find. When violence erupts, it's often about them defending what little they have" (Ahmed, Mack, and Sweeney, 2009). According to *Chicago Tribune* reporters Ahmed, Mack, and Sweeney, some of the children involved in the fight were also those who were on the honor roll, working after school, and taking care of younger siblings while their parents worked. In other words, they were not "public enemy number one": inner-city youth, gang bangers, and drug dealers from single-family, female-headed households.

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, members of urban Black communities find themselves in a hard place. Progress in the political, economic, and educational arenas has not altered the material conditions and realities of many Black people living in large cities (or rural

areas). In addition, our children must negotiate living at the intersection of progress and poverty, while living on the edge of transformations that seem to be occurring in the larger society. James A. Tyner (2007) writes that during the Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s, “as urban areas were being destroyed by capitalist-motivated government programs, African American youths and households were identified as contributing factors to ‘urban decay’” (225). Nearly forty years later, members of Black communities, especially our children, find themselves in a similar situation (Hutchinson, 2009).

Underneath Our History: A Wound So Deep Not Even the Atlantic Could Fill It

“Why are [our children] so angry, so full of venom, that you would even consider doing something like that to another human being?” (Rose Braxton, “Family of beaten teen hope for healing after death,” 2009). We—all Black people—need to ask this question until we get to the core of our own inability or refusal to answer it. Because if Black adults could answer this question, we would find underneath it our own tightly packed fears and angers, some of the same emotions that our ancestors carried when they resisted enslavement and boarded, jumped over, and disembarked slave ships.

It is my belief that until we deal with this historical wounding (one of many that has traumatized us), all our responses will be tied to solutions that we think can make the American Dream work for us. Mekada Graham (2002) writes:

The “reality” of Black people is placed within the realities of others who have constructed their own theories and models of practice as the basis for solving people’s problems. Somehow, it is assumed that these will provide the principal remedies for Black oppression and for problems within Black families and communities (142).

With this in mind, I also believe that Black communities, especially our children, hold the key to understanding and transforming these traumas. I also know that getting the community to realize that they hold the key, and the door that it unlocks, requires working outside the box, sometimes against resistance from the community itself. In my experience, however, once this resistance to trying new approaches is overcome, a community often discovers an unending supply of wisdom from the elders and the very youth whom they perceive to be the source of their problems.

Responses to Derrion Albert’s Murder

Responses to this tragedy were diverse: increased police patrols, church vigils, and increased school security; postings to YouTube.com, blogs, and websites calling for Blacks to go back to Africa and racially charged outbursts about the dangers of living in Black neighborhoods and the senselessness of the crime. Other reactions include grief, disbelief, and shame. There is even an entry of the event on Wikipedia.org. All of this clearly indicates that Derrion Albert’s murder has become part of public memory and knowledge, as well as part of popular culture.

Representatives of the Nation of Islam and Christian churches called for prayer, but with the acknowledgement that the community needed to address this problem actively. Both President Obama and Mayor Daley expressed their horror, framing the murder within the larger contexts of national violence among children, gangs, dysfunctional families, and societal failures. A one-day summit, attended by the mayor, school officials, and White House officials,

was held at a downtown Chicago hotel to discuss what had happened. Not everyone, however, was pleased with official attempts to address the situation. This is seen most clearly on blogs written by community activists. Questions they raised include: 1) Why was the one-day summit held in a posh downtown hotel and not in the neighborhood? (Russo, 2009); and 2) How can parents who work long hours every day, but who still remain in poverty, help their children when they cannot be at home? (*Gayle King Radio Show*, 2009).

Although all of these responses brought attention to increasing youth violence in Chicago, the overall official response seemed to be that this incident and others like it are “a family problem” (Mayor Daley on the *Gayle King Radio Show*, 2009). In the interview with Gayle King, Mayor Daley said that families should ask for help if they need it. In addition, he noted that he was aware of the fact that “families have substance abuse problems, and that there are women who can’t take care of their children.... This has been going on for a long time.” However, at that time, he did not acknowledge the historical, social, political, or cultural contexts that had created and maintained these issues.

Initial responses from the community, however, demanded that the city and the White House *do something*. After several weeks, the conversation turned to what the community, with aid from the White House and the city of Chicago, could do to help their children. In addition, some bloggers offered specific solutions that included community organizations already engaged in providing healthy and constructive after-school and weekend alternatives to students (e.g., Kyles, 2009). Some city officials and community members also met with students to have an “honest” and “emotional” talk (“Cabinet officials, Chicagoans discuss ways to end teen violence,” 2009).

If You Keep Doing the Same Thing, You’ll Get the Same Thing

Talking is good, but how does Derrion Albert’s community, in fact any community, that has been traumatized by such an event continue? What do they do to begin healing this wound that has made their community and high school the symbol of everything wrong with the Chicago school system and inner city neighborhoods? From the students to the President of the United States, everyone agrees that youth violence is a national, social problem. In an anonymous letter to Mayor Daley, a Chicago teacher wrote that violence occurs every day in the Chicago Public Schools, and that “children are angry, confused, hurt. They don’t know how to deal with these emotions” (*Gayle King Radio Show*, 2009).

How does our society address these issues at the deep level that is needed? Do we create new policies? Some may respond, yes. In an interview at an annual meeting of the Social Policy Association, Pete Alcock, professor of social policy and administration at the Institute of Applied Social Studies in Great Britain, said:

Social policy promotes the welfare and well-being of members of society. [It is concerned with] how we make the lives of all the citizens of our society possible... to live safe, fulfilling lives. Policy also helps us study the appropriate means to deliver well-being, welfare, and security to members of our society (“What Is Social Policy,” 2007).

Alcock, however, continues by also arguing that though agencies and communities help develop policies, it is the informal communities of families that are the unsung area of policymaking. If, however, one’s community has been historically marginalized or asked to

implement policies that counter its wisdom, what happens then? Such a community would eventually want to rely on its own knowledge and experiences. Not only must we begin our policymaking with understanding the root of the emotions of the situation, but we must also include the wisdom these families and communities can offer as part of that policy development. Moreover, we cannot assume that our current definitions of the terms “social,” “family,” “society,” or “community” fits every group. Moreover, though I believe that Black communities need the financial and social resources that city, state, and federal funding can provide, I also believe that this funding should come after our communities have engaged in extensive healing work. Therefore, I contend that policies and programs should not begin only with attempts to stop the violence. Instead, they should include ways to help children articulate the emotions that spur the violence in order for all of us to understand what has and is happening to the emotional and spiritual health of our children.

A Transformative Process: *Sankofa in Action*

Healers from different traditions, my own included, believe that in order to help an individual or community heal, one must return to the point of origin, the past, to access the wisdom that can be found there. Rose Braxton said, “we need to get to our children” (“Family of beaten teen hope for healing after death,” 2009). To get to our children, we need to reach way back, all the way to the points of origin of our woundings as a people¹, using methods that *heal*, not those that rehabilitate, incarcerate, disempower, or kill.

How can we achieve this? Instead of a policy or program, I would like to suggest a process, *Sankofa in Action*, which takes into account Manning Marable’s definition of what it means to be critically self-aware:

The state of being critically self-aware involves a fundamental recognition that many common practices of daily life retard one’s development. As racialized populations reflect upon the accumulated concrete experiences of their own lives, the lives of others who share their situation, and even those who have died long ago, a process of discovery unfolds that begins to restructure how they understand the world and their place in it (Tyner quoting Marable, 2007, 222-23).

Sankofa in Action, therefore, would be a reflexive process through which Black communities could become critically self-aware in order to work towards loving, nourishing, and empowering themselves through one of many African-based ancestral practices. It responds to Rose Braxton’s mandate to “get to our children.” There are eight steps that I propose for Black communities as part of this process:

- 1) *Commit to the business of healing by first grieving.* The violence in the lives of Black people has been so normalized that sometimes we do not even know when or how to cry. And sometimes, we are all too aware that to begin crying means that we may never stop.
- 2) *Understand that healing does not always mean that our problems miraculously stop or that our circumstances suddenly change.* It does mean, however, that we come to know what is at the core of our wounds and diseases. When we can name whatever that is, we

¹ Although I privilege the slave trade and Middle Passage as points of origin for this wounding, they are not the only or original points of origin for many of us.

are better able to understand that what is being expressed is a symptom of the illness. We can root out the illness instead of treating the symptom.

- 3) *Agree that community healing is needed, and that this healing must include the broad range of healers available within our communities.* Priests from all faiths (including Catholic, Baptist, Anglican, Vodou, Ifa, Dagara²), educators, students, doctors, massage therapists, yoga instructors³, energy workers, mental health professionals, and artists (e.g., visual, performing, literary) must be part of this process. Black communities are not homogenous or a monolith. To begin healing such a deep wound, one that spans centuries, requires a holistic collaboration of forces that can bring all the wisdom of our ancestors from the past to the present.
- 4) *Create and conduct community rituals that will clear away the emotional and physical debris of the violence.* As with number 3, a collaboration between different groups is necessary. The step also helps communities engage in physical work together by cleaning a site of violence, determining what that site will become, and creating a new space (Read and Wollaston, 2001) at that site. This site provides a space for spiritual and religious leaders to work with the community.
- 5) *Contextualize the violence within the larger historical, political, social, and cultural realities that shape their lives without blaming anyone for its occurrence.* This is the perfect opportunity for elders and young people to share their lived experiences by talking about “back in the day” and “what’s going on.” It requires all members of the community to listen to one another’s stories. This step is also an opportunity for educators at all levels to share their research and knowledge.
- 6) *Privately and publicly acknowledge that we and our children are historically and spiritually wounded.* Understand that attention to these wounds has been pushed aside, forgotten, and denied because of the more immediate woundings from day-to-day living. This step calls on the training of mental and physical health practitioners to provide support as well as suggestions.
- 7) *Create programs.* These programs should teach our communities to recognize the intersectionality of their realities and experiences (as well as the intersectionality of race, gender, and age) and provide them with tools and strategies to avoid being trapped in the spaces where they meet. This step has the potential to bring together the experiences, practices, and research of everyone involved.
- 8) *Train members of the community to create and sustain more programs, preferably without government aid or assistance.* This will also require an openness to the different creative solutions that members of our community suggest.

Naturally, a community may find that a different order is required or that certain steps must be repeated. However, this particular order places the emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual actions and needs of the community first: grieving, agreeing to heal the community, creating a ritual to do so, contextualizing the violence, acknowledging the wounding, creating programs to address the violence, and training members of the community to create and sustain programs. Immediate attention is given to responding (grieving) to the symptom that has manifested (violence) instead of immediate attention to the core problem (historical and spiritual wounding). Although communities can readily identify with the former, they may take a much

² Sobonfu Somé conducts grief rituals specifically for Black communities.

³ The International Association of Black Yoga Instructors, for example, works to provide yoga to Black communities.

longer time to identify with the latter. Grief is often a debilitating emotion that produces other emotions such as anger and fear. Sometimes, an individual or community will need to cycle through all the emotions before being able to move to the next step in the healing process.

Throughout all levels of the process, *Sankofa in Action* requires participants to use the origins of their histories as the point of reflection and not their current material reality. I do not find it surprising, then, that many of the responses to Derrion Albert's murder (including those not discussed here) have been initiated by priests, ministers, healers, and artists. Historically and traditionally, these members of African and African-descended societies have been and are responsible for the spiritual and social well-being of their communities and for the preservation of the community's history. It was and is through them, and the family unit, that children learned and continue to learn about their place in and relationship to the worlds of the living and to their ancestors. The suggestion, therefore, that community action includes all members of the healing community is an important one and ensures that the link between past and present is maintained, and that a variety of tools are available to help people access, articulate, and creatively express what has happened in the community and what is happening to them as a result.

The processes of *Sankofa in Action* are subtle, almost invisible, but over time, they engender a type of self-possession, self-awareness, and compassion that allows an individual to see his or her connections and responsibilities to a community, without limitations of space and time, and with a fuller grasp of history. Similarly, a community begins to understand its place in and connections to the world. Imagine if all our children, from any neighborhood, knew that safe sites existed, and that within these spaces they could voice their concerns, hurts, dreams, and joys and have someone listen to and help them create a solution. Imagine if elders were regularly present within these spaces to listen to their children. Profound healing and transformation are revolutionary and have the potential to create sacred spaces. When fully engaged, processes like these described could help Black communities transform sites of trauma into sites of healing and safety. Read et al. (2001) make it clear that a community's intent and purposeful action at a site of trauma can transform it into a creative space full of potential to alter (without forgetting) the events that could happen there. To do so, however, requires a daily commitment to change the space, to refuse what it has become. On this point, Tyner (2007) quotes Henri Lefebvre:

A revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed, it has failed in that it has not changed life itself, but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions or political apparatuses. A social transformation, to be truly revolutionary in character, must manifest a creative capacity in its effects on daily life, on language and on space (230).

What would happen if our children called each other "King" instead of "dog," "Sundiata" instead of "nigger?" What if Black communities could be healed by "simple" ongoing processes of engaging with history, grieving, and celebrating as part of a holistic path of living?

Conclusion

Can a process such as *Sankofa in Action* change a space, incite revolution, and transform communities? Only if we understand that even revolutions are the result of many processes. They do not happen overnight. A community-organized, art-based project in response to Derrion Albert's murder suggests that something like *Sankofa in Action* is a beginning. Two weeks after Derrion Albert's death, a group of artist and educators gathered elders, ministers, artists, African-

based priests, community activists, educators, and students to engage in ritual, prayer, discussion, writing, and art in a public community space as a way to share feelings and reactions to what had happened to Derrion Albert and to discuss the escalation of youth violence in Chicago. In addition, the gathering invited participants to begin creating solutions that they felt could be implemented in their communities.

The project was generated with the express purpose of healing the deep and ancient wounds that lie beneath the violence our children use against each other—and that we use against them. As is true of various African-based practices, the goal of rituals and other practices is to create and maintain harmony within oneself, between members of the community, and between all living things. This includes honoring and respecting both the dead and the living. The arts-based gathering involved elders of the community (e.g., priests, healers, artists, teachers, and parents) as well as students affected by this most recent violence. Their response is part of a growing refusal by Black communities to accept the usual policies, practices, and programs that do not consider historical and spiritual traumas as part of their realities. The gathering was also symbolic of powerful changes in our communities that are forcing us to engage Sankofa in ways we never imagined. We must go back and take our children, and we must go back to face our histories, before our communities can fully heal. Each one of us must bring to the present what we learn on these journeys, and we must leave in the past what we no longer need or want.

Sankofa in Action is far from a perfect solution; however, it is a process that encourages the study of history, collaboration, responsibility, spiritual healing, activism, and reflexivity between and among community members. It can begin to eliminate the individualism, isolation, materialism, and struggles for power that happen in our community. Transformation will eventually mean more successes of the type that many of us define as the American Dream. In the process of achieving aspects of this dream (e.g., wealth, education, or political power), we may be reminded that our African ancestors considered children to be their greatest wealth and that the promises of the American Dream, the rights of citizenship, also include liberty, the pursuit of happiness, security, and the “right for our children to live” (Mayor Daley on the *Gayle King Radio Show*, 2009).

Ase, Ase, Ase-O!

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Reflection

Our assignment was to create a policy to address an issue in the Black community. However, policies may identify a problem's specific relationship to the past (World Federation of United Nations Associations), but they do not necessarily create a space within which the past and present can be simultaneously engaged and explored as a method of healing the very issue for which the policy was created to address. In the end, I was given the flexibility to offer a *process* that could embrace many dimensions, and one which a community could create itself.

In this paper, I discuss the murder of Derrion Albert in Chicago, Illinois, on September 24, 2009. As I struggled to respond to this young man's death, emotionally and theoretically, I realized that I could only *try* to make sense of this from a holistic spiritual context. I also knew that although youth violence pervades urban Black communities, a "one size fit all" and "business as usual" approach would not work, has not worked. From the moment a sister-friend shared with me her anguish over this event, Derrion's beating became personal and part of *my* community. And, from the moment I watched the video, having to stop it several times to understand how this murder happened and stopping others like it became one more obsession of mine.

Completing such a task gave me the opportunity to think creatively, to theorize about my dreams about changing and transforming the world. After all, what good are my degree and all my research if I cannot imagine the possibilities of using it for change? This paper, then, is also a process of learning how to turn the personal into scholarship without ever forgetting or silencing the community, the origin of and reasons for research in Black Studies.

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