

De-colonizing our lives

Divining a post-colonial therapy¹

by
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Introduction

I am a therapist of African descent, born in the United States. I consult primarily with families of African descent. I believe that the emotional, relationship and mental health concerns that families present to me in consultation can be best understood within the social, cultural and historical context of resistance against racial domination in the United States. Those families who come to see me are commonly struggling with questions and issues that have their roots in slavery and Jim Crow segregation³ as well as the current system of what I refer to as American racial colonialism.⁴ While it is now over thirty years since the end of Jim Crow, and many of our people are no longer *legally* discriminated against, Eurocentric thinking, metaphors and dominant narratives continue to define relationships among Africans in America and between African and European Americans.

At the same time, the effects of colonialism and ongoing white race privilege continue to influence the worldview, practices and motivations of Africans in America. Various African thinkers throughout the Diaspora have written about the experience of internalised colonialism or double consciousness (Dubois 1903/1989, Fanon 1967). One

of the key challenges for African therapists in the United States is to find ways of healing this double consciousness or internalised colonialism, ways that are grounded in the culture of our own people. As colonized people, our healing must come through self-determined action. The task for those of us from African traditions is therefore to take steps in generating and identifying culturally appropriate practices, processes and methods to heal our own. We are challenged to rescue, reconstruct, and define therapeutic metaphors based on our own cultural and historical experiences. This process is what I refer to as the development of a post-colonial therapy. I use this term fully aware that it does not adequately reflect the lived experience of many Africans, Asians, Latinos or other indigenous peoples either in the United States or in other parts of the world. Many people are still struggling with colonialism. It seems almost naive to speak of 'post-coloniality' from this perspective. Perhaps it would be more accurate to speak of an 'anti-colonial' therapy. This might more accurately capture the ideas of peoples at various stages of relationship with the colonial condition. Post-colonial is a term that I will use in this essay primarily for clarity to begin a dialogue with other therapists about the dynamics that define the work of African, Asian, Latin, and other

indigenous therapists as we strive to shape therapies from within our own cultural contexts. At the same time I hope to begin to explore those areas that are similar to, as well as different from, the poststructuralist/postmodern therapies.

My own practice is focused on defining an African centred therapy that honours the history, experience and cultural knowledge of the descendants of enslaved Africans in the Diaspora, and this paper seeks to map out some ground in this direction. First of all, it explores definitions of culture, for if we are to develop culturally appropriate practice, it seems crucial to have a clear notion of what we mean by culture itself. Secondly, this paper seeks to place the development of a post-colonial therapy for Africans in the United States within the broader context of the writing, politics and cultural practice of contemporary and historical Pan-African thought. Thirdly, this paper briefly considers some of the key experiences of life of African families in North America that need to be understood by any post-colonial therapeutic approach. Fourthly, this paper explores the relationship between post-colonial and poststructuralist approaches to therapy. And finally, this paper offers a number of key principles that I believe can shape the development of a post-colonial African centred therapy.

What is culture? Critical African centred theory and post-colonial therapy

In order to map out possible directions for post-colonial therapy, it seems important to examine first what it is that is meant by 'culture'. Some of the most relevant considerations relate to the work of African centred and Afrocentric writers and thinkers.

Africans in North America as well as in other areas of the Diaspora have for many years been at the forefront of developing, defining and defending African centred and Afrocentric world views as counter-hegemonic responses to the ongoing tide of Europeanization (often described as westernisation) of the world's cultures and perspectives. Such important thinkers as Maulana Karenga (2002), Molefi Asante (1991), Marimba Ani (1994), Asa Hilliard (1996), Ngugi Wa Thiongo (1986) and others have made important contributions in questioning Eurocentric thought and its effects on the day-to-day lives of African peoples.

They have articulated how current African life in the Diaspora and on the continent is dominated by European ethics and values that shape social policy, spiritual life, and

political and economic processes. They have also described how this impacts the day-to-day lives of Africans around the world. This is as true in the realm of the mental health and interpersonal relationships of Africans as in any other aspect of our lived experience. The emotional pain felt by Africans in family relationships, and day-to-day personal social interaction is proportional to the cultural impact of the dominant Eurocentric narratives that define how we ought to live our lives.

On these matters, and many others, I find unity with the Afrocentric liberation intellectuals mentioned above. Furthermore, I agree with Karenga (2002) that an important task of liberation for Africans is the rescue and reconstruction of African traditions, perspectives and worldview. Ani (1994) refers to this as the *Sankofa* process.

Some Afrocentric thinkers (Asante 1991, Karenga, 2002) have argued for the idea of returning to *classical* African cultures as our source of Afrocentric knowledge. The most often referred to *classical* culture being that of Kemit (ancient Egypt). There is little doubt among most African centred writers that Kemit, and the ideas, spirituality and worldview derived from it, are highly significant to world African culture. Nevertheless, this recognition of Kemit's significance does not support the notion of *classical* cultural paradigms as sources of knowledge. In other writings (Akinyela 1995) I have articulated my ideas about the development of Critical African centred critical theory in which I have raised theoretical concerns about attempts to codify the cultural past and to define so-called classical periods of African history. I argue that this practice is an imitation of Eurocentric models that define Ancient Greece as the classical paradigm for western culture.

While agreeing wholeheartedly with the basic Afrocentric argument of the need to create a major shift in the hegemonic Eurocentric epistemology, I believe that focusing on the idea of returning to so-called *classical* African cultures runs the risk of de-historicizing culture and knowledge and reducing the complexities of African culture. There is a danger in understanding culture and knowledge as something static and unchanging rather than as something that is constantly changing and socially constructed.

Culture is not a static set of customs, formulas, or traditions. To attempt to locate culture in specific customs, traditions and ways of thinking which are not allowed to change, may actually lead to the death of culture. I agree with Fanon (1963) when he writes, 'the desire to attach oneself to

tradition or bring abandoned traditions to life again does not only mean going against the current of history but also opposing one's own people' (p.224).

Fanon (1967) points out that efforts to codify traditions and place static value on reconstructing the past out of forgotten cultural practices that do not consider current conditions and realities is in conflict with an understanding of cultural knowledge as ever changing and dynamic. He writes:

Thus we see that the cultural problem as it sometimes exists in colonized countries runs the risk of giving rise to serious ambiguities ... Culture is becoming more and more cut off from the events of today ... It is true that the attitude of the native intellectual sometimes takes on the aspect of a cult or of a religion ... He sets a high value on the customs, traditions, and the appearances of his people, but his inevitable painful experience only seems to be a banal search for exoticism. (p.217)

Before I describe the ways in which Critical African centred theory offers alternative conceptualisations of culture, I need to make it clear that I believe that African cultural and spiritual traditions are a critical aspect of the ongoing liberation struggle of Africans around the world. I am not arguing for turning away from these traditions, far from it. I have witnessed and have great respect for the ways in which Indigenous peoples both here in the USA and in Australia are in the process of reclaiming cultural practices that have been disrupted by relatively recent acts of colonization (from 150-500 years) and putting these to use in current contexts. In similar ways, Africans in North America continue to make links with and relate to ongoing African cultures on the continent and to engage with the healing ways that continue to be practiced there. Later in this paper I will describe how I see this as a vital part of developing post-colonial therapies.

What I am hoping to articulate here is the problematic nature of relating to culture as if it is monolithic, as if it ever existed in a *pure*, classical sense and as if our task now is to reach back and bring the ancient traditions *unchanged* into our lives in the twenty-first century. Fanon (1967) described how problematic it is to conduct a static search for a reconstruction of a *glorious past* and to limit definitions of what *is* African to what *was* African. History also teaches us that calls for returns to traditional culture, when they are devoid of ethical interest in the well being of the common people, with attention paid to the real effects of social,

economic and political stratification on all members of a particular culture, can be used to justify exploitation and oppression. Indeed, a range of leaders in some African countries such as Mobutu in Zaire, Amin in Uganda, Burnham in Guyana, and the Duvaliers in Haiti have exploited and oppressed Africans all while supposedly promoting *traditional* African customs and cultures.

If then, the reifying of certain cultural traditions is fraught with hazards, what are other options for conceptualising culture? Critical African centred theory posits that cultural phenomena take their form in the dialectical tension that exists in the asymmetrical power relationships between groups and within groups. From this viewpoint, culture is constructed as the more powerful and the less powerful segments of society contend for positions of power and privilege between themselves. This means that any given culture is actually a complex of contentious and complimentary interactions between asymmetrical class, gender, religious, language, sexual and other social groups. Viewed from this perspective, culture is in a constant dialectical process of construction and reconstruction. This notion suggests that there is really no homogenous national culture so much as systems of contending social groups within national or ethnic communities. It is the contention and complementarity between these groups that continually produces and reproduces culture.

It is the tendency of culture to adapt from and adapt to outside influences as well as to influence other cultures. Culture is constructed in the constant process of dynamic change. The resulting material manifestations of cultural phenomena – for example the artistic, social, and political expressions of groups and individuals – are behaviours of resistance and survival that assist and motivate cultural actors to make sense of and give meaning to their collective existence. At best we can only identify cultural historical moments in any civilization's development, as opposed to identifying classical paradigms that define a culture for all time.

Black people in the United States have not been passive objects of a process of de-Africanisation on the one hand and helpless victims of Americanisation on the other. The idea of contention and complementarity suggests that Black people have been active subjects in the process of Africanising the European culture that they encountered, and reshaping their own African culture in relationship to the new cultural practices they found themselves relating to. Whatever

religious, linguistic, familial, or social-political form was thrust upon them has been appropriated, internalised and Africanised into a new collective ethos. There is no need to seek 'pure' classical African cultural forms to prove the Africanity of blacks in the United States. There have never been such unchanging forms of culture even on the continent of Africa.

Critical African centred theory posits the need for Africans to develop a collective liberatory consciousness as a necessary act against Eurocentric control of Africans. Both Malcolm X (Perry 1989) and Frantz Fanon (1963) focused on counter-hegemonic action as the source of liberatory consciousness. This is also the locus identified by Critical African centred theory and I believe this can serve as the basis for a post-colonial therapy for Africans living in North America. There are ways of honouring the traditions of Africa while allowing for creativity and change. There are ways of identifying resistance traditions within the culture. In doing so, African centred therapists can create a context for counter-hegemonic action within the therapy room and can offer alternative options for those who consult with us. Later in this paper I will describe some of the key principles that can inform such a therapy.

A question that many might ask at this point is 'how does this effort to define an African centred, post-colonial therapy for Africans in North America relate to the remainder of the Diaspora?' It is my belief that the project of developing a post-colonial therapy for Africans in North America is an important aspect of the broader Pan-African Project of decolonizing African hearts, minds, spirits and countries.

The Pan-African Project: Decolonizing African hearts, minds, spirits and countries

I have recently returned from a trip to Ghana in West Africa, a country that symbolises the Pan-African struggle against colonialism. Visiting Ghana placed me squarely in the path of African history. To visit the home of W.E. B. DuBois, who along with Marcus Garvey linked the struggles of African people in America to those on the continent, to walk around the memorial to President Nkrumah, the first president of a formerly colonized, now Independent African country, and to honour my ancestors by spending time in the slave dungeons on the Cape Coast (Amemasor 2002, this issue), all powerfully reconnected me as an African to the history of my Motherland.

It was an inspiring experience, and a sobering one. Visiting Africa also reminded me of the effects of colonialism on that continent. Colonialism still has its claws in Africa. As Fanon (1967) described, Africans on the continent, in the Americas, and elsewhere continue to have a struggle to see ourselves as culturally unique people and not just as poor imitations of Europeans. We still struggle against the imposition of the cultural images of Europe in our hearts and minds. In Ghana, in the back of almost every other taxicab there was a picture of a pale blond-haired blue-eyed Jesus staring out at me. This same image can be seen in many of the Churches and homes of Black people in the United States. It is a sad thing that in the midst of one of the most powerfully spiritual places in the world, the images of deity, of God for many Africans remain to this day European images.

There were also other poignant moments. For instance, on the night I was leaving Ghana an airport bureaucrat commented that she thought I looked much nicer in my passport photograph. The photograph was taken prior to my current dreadlocks. She preferred my hair trimmed short and neat in the conservative style acceptable to western culture, rather than in the long locks which for many people represent resistance against European aesthetics. These moments reminded me that the struggle to decolonize our minds is one shared by all people of African descent. It confirmed again for me that all of us Africans are on the same road, in the same struggle.

Overwhelmingly though, spending time in Ghana was inspiring because Ghana has always been central to the Pan-African vision. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, and throughout the twentieth century, Pan-Africanism linked people of African descent in the Diaspora (especially the Caribbean and North America) to those Africans on the continent. Writers such as Dubois from North America, Marcus Garvey from Jamaica, and George Padmore from Trinidad led the way in creating the initial Pan-African consciousness. Nkrumah was also a key figure. He studied at Howard University, an historically black university, where he interacted with other African intellectuals in North America, and then returned to Ghana to become a fighter for the liberation and the independence of his country. When Ghana became the first colonized African country to become independent, Nkrumah was its first indigenous President.

Pan-Africanism was a key motivating philosophy behind the independence of Ghana. Nkrumah clearly articulated that the Ghanaian people were struggling not only

for the independence of their country but for the independence and the freedom of all African people (Nkrumah 1965). Once Ghana established independence, Nkrumah ensured that the country became a center for worldwide Pan-African struggle. Ghana became a place that other key Pan-African leaders visited. DuBois, Padmore, and Fanon all spent time there and in many ways Ghana remains the spiritual center of Pan-Africanism.

Spending time immersed in these histories reminded me that the task of developing ways of healing for our people is located in this broader political tradition. A significant element of the Pan-African project is to decolonize African culture and the African mind (Ngugi 1986). This includes our approaches to healing. The Maafa⁴, the attempted destruction of Africa that took place through the enslavement and colonization of African people, had profound material as well as spiritual ramifications. Africa and Africans lost wealth, land and the means to support themselves as a result of this holocaust. A part of the healing of this harm will come through reparations (Robinson, 2000, Akinyela, 2002 this issue), through acts of redressing injustice. But African people's souls, spirits and minds have also been harmed. As therapists it is our responsibility to find ways to heal our people in these areas. This is the task for those of us who are exploring what it means to develop post-colonial therapies.

The Pan-African philosophy embraces the contributions of all people of African origin. Relating this to the therapeutic endeavour, this means that there are healing traditions on the African continent that can continue to be relevant and meaningful to all African people. Likewise, those of us living in the Diaspora have developed our own forms of healing and resistance that in turn can positively influence those on the continent. There is a two-way process required here. As Africans in North America and the Diaspora, we will continue to turn to Africa to engage with the cultural practices of the continent, and those on the continent will continue to turn to us in the Diaspora for ideas and forms of healing that we are in the process of developing.

Experience of New Afrikan families

African centred, post-colonial therapy in the United States will be based on the history and experiences of Africans in North America (New Afrikans)⁵. New Afrikan people share a particular history that includes the survival of

the transatlantic slave trade, slavery itself and Jim Crow segregation and currently ongoing racial colonization. We are also linked to a collective history of resistance movements – abolitionists, the civil rights movements and Pan-African and black nationalist movements. Throughout this history there are a range of ancestors and inspiring figures to whom we as New Afrikan people are connected and from whom we draw strength, such as Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Queen Mother Audley Moore, Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X and countless others. African centred post-colonial therapy for New Afrikan people will be located in this history and these traditions.

There is also a range of 'psychological' experiences common to New Afrikan people that are important to consider. Frantz Fanon (1967) articulated in some detail the psychology of oppressed peoples. In his short but inspiring lifetime, Fanon described that as the colonized person begins to master the language and ways of being of the colonizer, in the world of the colonizers the colonized imagines themselves becoming more and more free. As they master the language and culture of the colonizer, the colonized person hopes to be seen as more and more human by the colonizer. At the same time however, the colonized becomes more and more alienated from their own people. Others have also articulated this experience. W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) describes this phenomenon as a *double consciousness* in which all too commonly the colonized begins to judge their own behaviour, actions, looks, relationships by the standards of the colonizers. Fanon (1967) describes that for the colonized, there is always a third force by whom we judge relationships and ourselves. It is never simply that we compare ourselves with people whom we meet; we always also judge ourselves and our relationships through European norms and values. In this way, the norms of the colonizer are in the middle of our lives and relationships. This has profound effects on how we relate to one another.

Not only is the colonizer in our own minds, but for many New Afrikan people the effects of racial colonialism are also an everyday reality. Having an awareness of the effects of what we call everyday racism is critical to the development of a culturally appropriate therapy. It can be tiring for New Afrikan people to constantly face and deal with racist assumptions, actions, structures and practices. In this context, each small everyday cultural act becomes political. The different ways in which people deal with this in families can be a source of strain or tension, and having an awareness of

this realm of experience is critical in developing any culturally appropriate or post-colonial therapy for New Afrikan people.

Post-colonial therapy and poststructuralist therapeutic approaches/practices

The development of post-colonial therapeutic approaches will take place in relationship to other approaches to therapy and healing that are currently practiced in this country and in different parts of the world. There is much to be gained from thinking through the relationship between post-colonial and poststructuralist therapies. Just as the post-structuralist writers and therapists are determined to separate from the normative judgments of dominant western culture, so too are we post-colonial therapists, but from a different position, with a different history and a different trajectory. The work of poststructuralist therapists (White 2001) seeks to question the professional knowledges of the helping disciplines and instead to honour, acknowledge and build upon the healing knowledges of those who seek counselling. Their emphasis on metaphors of story and narrative is resonating with many different communities (Wingard and Lester 2000).

As we are struggling to free ourselves from Euro-centric assumptions and prescriptions for life, it makes sense that there is an overlap with the ways in which some post-structuralist European thinkers and therapists are re-conceptualising the world of therapy. It seems significant to engage with these poststructuralist practices while taking care to define for ourselves the commonalities and the points of departure. Where certain aspects of poststructuralist practice resonate strongly with us, let us ask why this is the case. Are there cultural, historical and social reasons? Which aspects of the poststructuralist approaches fit with our particular cultural project? How are the particular practices of healing linked to our own histories and ongoing practices of culture? How do we wish to engage with these practices in our own ways and our own contexts?

The following section focuses on four principles of poststructuralist therapies that I believe share common ground with an African centred post-colonial approach to therapy. I have tried also to show that these four principles when engaged with in a New Afrikan context take on a different shape and meaning, and will continue to do so as we go about the process of developing our own forms of healing.

Four principles are discussed here:

- Story telling & witnessing - creating meaning through call and response
- Interpretation of meaning - divining meaning
- A non-expert stance - resisting the imposition of meaning
- Alternative stories - building upon testimonies of hope

Story-telling & witnessing – creating meaning through call and response

The emphasis on *story* as a key metaphor that informs narrative therapy (Morgan 2000) is one that resonates strongly with African cultures both on the continent and in the Diaspora. The telling of stories is a very significant part of New Afrikan culture and there are particular story-telling practices that are extremely relevant to therapeutic endeavours. Perhaps most relevant is the recognition within African and New Afrikan cultures of the complementary roles played by the storyteller and the witnesses. It is acknowledged that the story is only complete when there is both a teller and a witness to the story. In fact, it is this *call and response* interaction between the storyteller and the witnesses that actually *makes* the story and gives it meaning. The story is created through the process of the call and response. The meaning of the story is created in the dialectic or relationship of call and response, of storyteller and witness. In the US, if you attend any black church you are likely to see this process in action. Those leading the ceremony are consistently joined by the witnesses who sing, call out and respond in a variety of ways to co-create the rhythm and the meaning of the stories that are being told. Just as post-structuralist or narrative approaches to therapy are based upon an acknowledgment that meaning and alternative stories are co-constructed in the process of therapeutic conversation (Morgan 2000), and actively engage in reflecting processes in order to facilitate this (White 2000), this metaphor of *call and response* can provide a framework for the role of the therapist within a post-colonial therapy for New Afrikans.

Interpretation of meaning - divining meaning

The interpretation of texts and meaning, or hermeneutics, is a significant aspect of postmodern approaches to therapy (Parry & Doan, 1994). This tradition acknowledges that rather than any one 'true' meaning existing

in relation to any situation, the meaning is crafted and created through processes of interpretation. In poststructuralist therapy, this creates space for therapists and those consulting them to collaborate on making new meaning from the events of their lives.

In West African culture, there is a messenger between humans and the gods called *Esu* or *Elegba* (Gates 1991). In West African culture, *Esu/Elegba* is the deity who mediates divinations. He is the one through whom we find/make meaning. In this African cultural practice, you divine to find out issues, problems, and to interpret the world. In the European tradition, the word hermeneutics is derived from the mythology of the Greek god *Hermes* who was also the messenger of the Gods. In the African tradition, this divination, or interpretation occurs through a dialogue, through a conversation, through the telling of stories and acknowledging that every story carries multiple meanings. In this way, a post-colonial therapy for New Afrikan people will involve inviting those who consult therapists into a divination of meaning. Indeed, the process of therapy is one of divination. This is not a situation in which the therapist is the expert diviner, but both therapist and those who have come to therapy are engaged in a joint process of divining meaning and creating alternative meanings in relation to the events and stories of people's lives. In this way, the question of meaning is vitally important in the therapeutic endeavour.

Esu/Elegba, is also the keeper of the crossroads which in a number of west African cultures are a sacred space (Thompson 1981). The crossroads represent the space between the spirit world and the material world. It's also a space in which decisions are made. In conceptualising therapy with New Afrikan families, this metaphor of crossroads has become important to me. When talking with families, and when meanings about events in their lives and relationships are being discussed/created, I am aware that in every conversation and relational interaction decisions are being made that will either invite a turn towards preferred meanings, or meanings that may lead them away from the directions in which they wish to head.

Thinking of a family as being at a crossroads, at a sacred place where decisions are being made, assists me in thinking through my role as a therapist. Just as *Esu/Elegba* is the keeper of the crossroads, as therapists we have particular responsibilities in co-creating the meanings that are formed in the conversations we share.

A non-expert stance: resisting the imposition of meaning and creating the context for freedom

Poststructuralist therapists have made a clear shift away from positioning themselves as experts in relation to the lives of those who consult them (White 1997). This is a significant departure from previous forms of family therapy and psychological approaches more generally. In developing post-colonial approaches to therapy, it is possible to link this work to what Paulo Freire wrote in relation to pedagogy (1990).

Freire described how any pedagogical experience can either be an experience of oppression or an experience of freedom. He then went on to explain the principles that underpin a pedagogy of freedom. In relation to therapy, an experience of oppression is one in which the therapist imposes *their* meaning, *their* interpretation, *their* 'cure' upon the person who has come for assistance. To assume that somehow as a therapist we can hold the secrets of the meaning of somebody else's life, and impose our interpretations on that life, can only serve to further colonize the minds and spirits of those seeking our help.

In order to create the experience of freedom in therapy it is my responsibility as a therapist to offer a place as free as possible from imposed interpretations, either my own or that of the dominant culture. As described earlier, due to the influence of colonization, all too often New Afrikan people live with Eurocentric judgments and values dominating their beliefs and dreams.

One of the key purposes of therapy is to create a space in which the members of the family can make their own meaning of events of their lives; in which they come to define their preferences for their relationships and lives; and where they can have the opportunity to be free of some of the prevalent Eurocentric judgments and values about their lives and themselves.

My expertise as a therapist is therefore not in being able to interpret or diagnose the lives of the families who consult me. It lies instead in being consciously aware of the ways in which the dominant Eurocentric culture can influence the lives of New Afrikan people and in creating a context in which families can come to their own understandings about their lives.

Alternative stories: Testify'n - building upon testimonies of hope

One of the significant contributions of narrative approaches to therapy has been the articulation of the significance of alternative stories and the methods by which these can become richly described and therefore more available (White & Epston 1990, Morgan 2000). Poststructuralist writers and anthropologists (Bruner 1986, Geertz 1986) have described the existence of multiple texts. There are the public texts (or dominant story) that are the stories that define individuals. These are the stories that *tell you* and that are supported by the broader power relations of the dominant culture. Then there are the counter-hegemonic texts or alternative stories from which you tell your own story.

In his book, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990), John Scott describes in some detail the 'infra-politics' of life for people in colonized situations. He describes the ways in which colonized people find means to resist and hold onto their humanity and dignity in spite of forces that are larger than them. These means of resistance are often pathologised by traditional therapy, and the people who practice them are labelled as *passive aggressive*, *resistant to change*, or any other number of terms that reinforce the blaming of people as victims. From the context of post-colonial therapy, when the therapist can become curious about these acts of resistance and the meanings people give to them, opportunities for reclaiming dignity and humanity may be provided. I am interested in the counter-hegemonic stories that become available when we are aware of the infra-politics of everyday life as means of reclaiming dignity rather than as signs of pathology.

In my work with people of African descent, the tracing and development of counter-hegemonic stories occurs in a particular cultural and historical context. The stories of resistance that are built upon are linked to and grounded in our people's traditions, cultural practices and history. Recognising this is important in the decolonizing process.

In the New Afrikan spiritual tradition, to tell your story of how you have overcome, is called *Testify'n*. When people begin to give their testimony, tell their story, the meaning and significance of the aspects of resistance or redemption often do not take shape until the story is told and shaped by the responses of witnesses. As described earlier, it is the process of call and response which builds upon these testimonies of hope, or which thickens these testimonies.

New Afrikan people have rich traditions of testify'n. During slavery there were places called Brush Harbours where enslaved folk gathered to give testimony to one another and to have their reality witnessed and their survival acknowledged (Raboteau 1978). Away from the eyes of white folks these Africans could, for a short time at least, worship in the ways that they wished to and could give their testimony to those who would lovingly bear witness to it.

New Afrikan people also have long histories of redemptive song in which there is a dual acknowledgment of sorrow and hopefulness. This dual acknowledgment is the basis of the music that is known as 'the blues'. In terms of New Afrikan culture, there's always a kernel of hope in even the saddest of songs. That's the beauty of blues music and other New Afrikan musical traditions. W.B. DuBois wrote about the *sorrow songs* (1903), the spirituals that were sung by enslaved Africans. These songs express profound sadness and longing, and yet there's always a kernel of hope or humour within them. There is always redemption written into the melody line. There is always a hidden testimony or a counter-hegemonic story to be heard, witnessed and built upon. A significant part of post-colonial therapy, to my mind, is to create a space in which hidden testimonies can be told; in which people can give testimony to their lives and through a process of call and response this testimony can be thickened and made more meaningful.

Key principles for a post-colonial therapy for New Afrikan people:

Having described a range of areas that I believe provide the broader context for the development of a post-colonial therapy for New Afrikan people, I would now like to summarise ten principles that shape this endeavour. To create a post-colonial therapy for New Afrikan people, the challenge is to develop forms of healing and therapy that:

1. Acknowledge the leadership and influence of our African predecessors in psychology and the social sciences, and that locate our work as following in their tradition. This includes acknowledging the healers and healing philosophies of Ancient Africa, the healing traditions of West Africa, as well as the psychological liberation work of Africans such as Frantz Fanon (1967), Amos Wilson (1991) and others.

2. Are based on a critical understanding that culture is never fixed nor homogenous, and instead is ever changing and the result of the contentious and complimentary relationships between differing groups in any given society at any given time.
3. Are centred in the history of New Afrikan people, including our history before enslavement, our resistance and survival of the Transatlantic slave trade and Jim Crow, and the links that all New Afrikan families have to the collective history of resistance movements.
4. Are centred in the experience of New Afrikan people including the effects of living with everyday racism and the effects of the colonization of our own minds and spirits.
5. Invite counter-hegemonic cultural action based on the stories, history, experience, cultural practices and folk knowledges of New Afrikan people.
6. Continue to build Pan-African links and engage with current African traditional cultural healing practices on the continent, while also sharing with those on the continent our ongoing explorations which are also connected to African history and tradition.
7. Enable New Afrikan people to share the stories of their lives in a context free from the imposition of meaning, in which they can begin to identify and separate from Eurocentric assumptions, values and judgements, and divine their own meanings about their lives.
8. Recognise and witness New Afrikan testimonies of hope, and utilise processes of call and response to thicken these testimonies.
9. Are our own. A central organising theme of African centred post-colonial therapy is the idea of self-determined, independent cultural action. This therapy is developed from our experience, by us, and in our own interest.
10. Are practical and effective – the therapy needs to work!

These are some of the key principles that I believe can inform the development of an African centred, post-colonial therapy. As we connect with African tradition and engage with some of the practices of life of our African ancestors and our brothers and sisters throughout the Diaspora, we are not

only returning to something old, we are creating something new.

What is my stance as an African centred therapist toward those ideas and practices derived from European traditions? African centred and other post-colonial therapists may and often do use some of the same therapeutic approaches in our work as our European colleagues. However, it is certainly important that we are vigilant in making distinctions and clarifications about the origin of particular healing practices, and that we are constantly thoughtful about what would be necessary in a New Afrikan context to make such healing practices meaningful and appropriate. If we are grounded in our own history and culture, and if we are determining the direction of our work, when we engage with the healing practices of other cultures, we are not abandoning our ways, we are instead doing what our people have always done. We are reaching out and adapting and continually recreating cultural life. At the same time, it seems important to acknowledge that our engagement with these healing practices will also transform them (see box on Making genograms our own). In turn, this will influence the work of other cultures and communities in ways that we cannot yet imagine.

The very process of deliberately constructing a post-colonial therapy along the lines of the principles outlined above will generate something new. The process of decolonization always does. The result of decolonization is not to return to the state that existed prior to colonization - that is never possible. The task is to free ourselves from the assumptions of the dominant culture, to place ourselves into the flow of our own culture and self-determined history in order to create our own ways of healing for New Afrikan families.

Creating pockets of freedom

It is my hope that in the process of developing post-colonial therapies for Africans, Asian, Latin and indigenous peoples we may contribute to the creation of pockets of freedom, or 'liberated territories'. When struggles against colonial powers were taking place within Zimbabwe, Algeria and South Africa, pockets of land were won and referred to as 'liberated territories'. In these liberated territories people lived differently than they could in other spaces. In some liberation movements these liberated territories were specifically designated as places of healing for those involved

in the ongoing struggle. These were places for people to go and rest and regather their energies before returning to the occupied territories to continue to struggle for freedom.

Similarly, in Brazil, further back in history during the days of enslavement, there were the Quilombos (Schwartz 1992). These were societies of Africans who escaped from enslavement and created communities that became beacons of hope and liberation for those still enslaved. In these societies, those who had been enslaved lived as free people and those who were running away from the slave territories were protected and supported. The Quilombos were also used as bases from which expeditions were undertaken back to the enslaved areas to liberate others.

In no way do I wish to imply that therapeutic work in the United States of America at this time is the same as the struggles of those African people who fought for their freedom against slavery, or struggled for liberation from colonial powers. Indeed, to make comparisons between the work that we do in a therapy room with struggles for political freedom is misleading and could be interpreted as arrogant. However, I think this metaphor of creating pockets of freedom is one that can be linked to my greatest hopes for an African centred post-colonial therapy.

It is my hope that African centred therapy could provide African individuals and families a space to talk about their lives, to make sense of their relationships, free from the interpretations and judgments of dominant Eurocentric culture. It is my hope that a post-colonial therapy could offer a 'liberated territory' in which New Afrikan people could re-value their lives before heading back into a world that is so often hostile to the hopes and dreams of our people. It is also my hope that the development of a post-colonial therapy for New Afrikan people could play a small part in the broader overall struggle to decolonize our minds and spirits. By creating liberated cultural spaces, much the same way that we have created freedom schools, perhaps a genuinely post-colonial therapy can reinvigorate the aspirations of the New Afrikan people, and who knows where this could lead.

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Making genograms our own

Within the field of family therapy, the genogram has been used in numerous ways (McGoldrick, Gerson and Shellenberger 1999), some of which I believe are appropriate for New Afrikan families and others which are not. In developing an African centred post-colonial therapy it will be necessary to appraise the real effects of the use of any therapeutic practice and to develop ways to maximise their appropriateness for New Afrikan families.

One way in which the use of the genogram has been engaged with by New Afrikan therapists has been to acknowledge how New Afrikan families reach out and include non-biological relationships within their families of choice. Throughout our history, as generations have been separated from one another, it has been a matter of survival to claim and re-make families in whatever form would sustain our people.

The genogram has also been used differently by New Afrikan therapists in the location of family members' lives in the broader social and political context. For instance, in telling the story of a black family in the south, in tracing the generations, it becomes critical to talk about the social, political, cultural conditions that those ancestors were living in, and to be curious about how they survived those conditions of life. It becomes a part of the process of developing genograms to wonder how one's mother or grandmother was able to get an education at a time when education for black people was so hard to obtain. It becomes part of the process of developing genograms to trace the histories of resistance within any New Afrikan family. The social context of our family's stories must accompany any exploration of their history.

In these ways, genograms can be used to engage with the stories of those who have come before us and to consider the legacies of particular values and practices that have been passed on through the generations. These are ways of honouring our heritage and our origins.

While the use of genograms was developed from European tradition, there are ways in which this aspect of family therapy practice is being reinterpreted and re-made in our own image. As the concept of family, heritage and history is of vital significance to New Afrikan people, engaging people in the construction and reconstruction of inclusive New Afrikan genograms is, I believe, one avenue for the honouring of our past.

Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge that the origins of this paper can be traced back to conversations shared with Rhea Almieda and Pila Hernandez.
2. Makungu Akinyela is a family therapist in community practice in Decatur, Georgia, USA. He is also an Assistant Professor in the African-American Studies Dept at Georgia State University. He can be contacted at Ujamaa Counseling & Consulting, 2616 Old Wesley Chapel Road, Suite 103, Decatur, GA 30034, email: ujamaa@bellsouth.net
3. Jim Crow was the name for the legal system of racial separation and structured exclusion and control of black people from power in the American South. The Jim Crow laws of segregation were the model for the Apartheid system in South Africa. The Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States were movements to dismantle the Jim Crow system.
4. Racial colonialism is the structured and systemic practice of economic, political, social and cultural privilege accrued by the collective Euro-American community that allows the exploitation of black and other peoples for the benefit of the collective Euro American cultural community. For example, the practice of red-lining in the insurance and banking industry that economically penalizes residents of black neighborhoods because they live in certain geographical areas, allows those banks and insurance agencies to provide lower fees that benefit and effectively reward those who live in dominantly white areas. This system of rewards and punishment based on skin-color/ethnicity, has the same exploitative outcome of draining resources from black population areas as the more familiar forms of colonialism.
5. Maafa is a Kiswahili term first introduced by Marimba Ani in her book *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (1989) Meaning 'Disaster', the word describes the human loss in what happened to us culturally, politically, economically, socially and spiritually with the European invasion of Africa. Maafa serves as a unique cultural description of our experience of Genocide in much the way that the word Holocaust has come to be associated with the unique experience of Jews who suffered the Genocide of Nazi domination.
6. Hereafter I will refer to 'New Afrikans' as the cultural/national identification for Africans born in the United States (as distinct from Continental and other Diaspora African national groups). This is my preferred term to identify Africans born in America and is one that is used by thousands of Africans born in the USA.

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