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Angelina Graham
Institute of Transpersonal Psychology

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Introduction to the Special Topic Section on Black Psychology and Spirituality

Angelina Graham
Institute of Transpersonal Psychology
Palo Alto, CA, USA

The development of this premier collection, *Black Psychology and Spirituality*, was born out of a commitment by the editors of IJTS to embrace and acknowledge a transpersonal consciousness that is culturally observant. Grossly under-recognized, many of the foundational elements of transpersonal culture originate within the cosmology of Black people. Despite the definitive ties between transpersonal and African-centeredness many scholars and researchers fail to link the two disciplines or to utilize the richly relevant theoretical and empirical data yielded from Africana Studies and Black Psychology. Although a few extremely germane contributions can be found in transpersonal literature, the dearth of Afrocentric scholarship coupled with a pervasive failure to infuse culturally relevant sources into the canon has consistently left the field fairly absent of African-centered perspectives. This pervasive absenteeism has multiple issues, including distorting the historical origins of various aspects of the transpersonal field, and promoting a bird's eye view of the nearly non-existent relationship between the field and a multifaceted population that is predominantly, deeply rooted in an enduring spiritual ethos. Literature from a variety of disciplines reveals the intensely spiritual and religious nature of people of African ancestry. Equally important to note is that the spiritual and religious beliefs among people of African descent are extremely expansive, and in innumerable ways mirror what has come to be labeled transpersonal in the Western world. There are some notable exceptions, such as the use of psychedelics as a therapeutic method among some highly regarded transpersonal practitioners, yet many of the prevailing tenets are remarkably similar. Other structural nuances poignantly differentiate the Afrocentric world and contemporary transpersonal discourse, such that Afrocentric scholars have repeatedly named, situated and articulated their standards, practices, and beliefs distinct from the more Eastern-based conceptualizations preferenced by Eurocentric transpersonal academics.

Part of my own dilemma while studying transpersonal psychology has been the lack of Black psychology, history and womanist literature both in the classroom and in transpersonal scholarship at large. In fact, during my residential PhD classroom instruction at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, which consisted of nearly 55 separate courses, I was only introduced to the work of two established Black scholars, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Adonijah Okechukwu Ogbonnaya, plus a singular contemporary, Juko Martina Holiday, among the countless scholars referenced throughout the curriculum. Consequently, Afrocentric scholarship was added to course syllabi after my critical queries, classroom presentations, and literary contributions, yet the resulting cosmetic inclusion is, and was, insufficient and proved, in this academic scenario, to be short lived.

Unapologetically, I call on all transpersonal scholars to use this section as a guidepost to actively engage in and increase access to authentic, validated and thoroughly embraced interdisciplinary perspectives that are culturally appropriate, not appropriated. The contributions in this section are intended to stimulate further integration and appreciation for non-Westernized tenets. Wherever possible Afrocentric and womanist scholars have been referenced for credibility and for scholarly exposure within transpersonal studies.

This issue's Special Topic Section begins with Apollinaire Ebede-Ndi's, "A Critical Analysis of African-Centered Psychology: From Ism to Praxis," in which he surveys the scholarly field of African-centered psychology and mode of transcendence while describing some perceived shortcomings. The paper suggests that the field should move beyond discussions on African-centered ideologies and identities, and concentrate on praxis by developing practical applications of its guiding principles. Most importantly, Ebede-Ndi emphasizes the need for more professional attention to the specific needs of Black communities within the field of psychology.

Such an application of praxis is exemplified in "Feeling Seen: A Pathway to Transformation." The author, Michaela Simpson, describes her professional experience with an African American male patient in an accelerated experiential dynamic psychotherapy (AEDP) setting to demonstrate that implicit and explicit acts of acknowledgment of race can facilitate transformational experiences in therapy. This case study, documented through treatment vignettes, highlights the importance of the therapeutic alliance, which in this example is rooted in the patient's perception of his therapist's empathy and kinship. The author describes the impact of the "the nod," a spontaneous, non-verbal, and symbolic act of recognition and acknowledgment communicated between African Americans conveying an acknowledgement of race and racism-related experiences.

In the next article, the focus moves to describing a *collective* coping mechanism used amongst the enslaved people in the United States: the signing of Negro Spiritual songs. In "Prayer Songs: Therapy that Aided a People's Survival," Bisola Marignay proposes a parallel between existential psychotherapy and the psycho-spiritual healing function that Negro Spiritual songs had for enslaved people. Inspired by her own successful use of Spirituals in facilitating psycho-spiritual self-healing groups for women recovering from trauma, she discusses the attributes of music to substantiate the power of the Spirituals as distinct expressions of sound healing. Marignay demonstrates the songs' comparability to existentialist psychotherapy with a detailed analysis of their therapeutic content.

Following, Angelina Graham's "Womanist Preservation: An Analysis of Black Women's Spiritual Coping," analyzes existing research regarding Black women's use of spirituality to cope with mundane and oppressive experiences. Her examination includes the spiritualized support of family, church, and "a deeply personal relationship with what Alice Walker called the divine Mama" (p. ?). In this piece, Graham critiques the current invisibility of Afrocentric spirituality within the transpersonal literature, and argues for the expansion of a transpersonal womanist orientation, notably through the adoption of culturally appropriate research structures, measures, and instruments. She urges one to remember that "the cultural hegemony in mainstream social science research is not beyond repair" (p. ?)—and that filling those gaps falls well within the transpersonal mission.

In "African-Centered Transpersonal Self in Diaspora and Psycho-spiritual Wellness: A *Sankofa* Perspective," Adeeba Deterville explores the connection between African-centered spirituality and transpersonal psychology, in the frame of participatory theory and relational spirituality. Emphasizing the ongoing absence of the African voice in transpersonal discourse, the author describes the African-centered transpersonal self and psycho-spiritual wellness utilizing the West African philosophical concept *Sankofa* from the Akan *adinkra* cosmology. In addition to Sankofa, this paper touches on two other African constructs: the *Maafa*, which is commonly referred to as the middle passage, and the psycho-spiritual power of *àse*, or life-force, and how these notions interact in the diaspora to create participatory transpersonal experiences, healing and wellness.

To conclude the section, Arisika Rasak addresses the gender-specific oppression created by "Eurocentric beauty standards, patriarchal gender norms, and racist depictions of Black female sexuality" (p.?), providing a compelling contrasting narrative through an iconographic account of what she calls the African Sacred Feminine. She uses the term to describe "African representations of the feminine aspects of nature and divinity, as well as the innate, human and spiritual powers embodied by women" (p. ?). Using artistic depictions from ancient Algeria, dynastic Egypt, and West and Central Africa, "African Sacred Feminine, Sacred Women of Africa, and the African Diaspora: A Womanist Vision of Black Women's Bodies and the African Sacred Feminine," explores visual traits of the *African Sacred Feminine,* representing Black women as sacred embodiments of social, spiritual, and cultural power.

I hope that the articles included in this special topic issue will help build stronger ties between the fields of African-centered psychology and transpersonal studies, and elicit further research in those arenas. Such an alliance could potentially spark immeasurable advances to transpersonal's initial mission to include

> the vision of a whole-person psychology [that] can blossom into a psychology of humanity that celebrates our differences as much as it honors what we hold in common . . . [as well as] a way to reduce the degree to which psychology may unwittingly serve as a tool to maintain societal structures of inequity and injustice. (Hartelius, 2014, p. iii).

My personal gratitude goes out to members of this journal, the pioneers and scholars mentioned herein, and to each person who contributed to the development of this unique addition to the social science arena. May we continue to strive toward embracing the true meaning of beyond the self.

In Unity,
Angelina Graham
IJTS Fellow

Reference

Hartelius, G. (2014). The imperative for diversity in a transpersonal psychology of the whole person (Editor's introduction). *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*, *33*(2), iii - iv.

About the Author

Angelina Graham, MA, is completing her doctorate at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, with a research emphasis on spiritual leadership lived by women of African ancestry. Early in her PhD studies, Angelina became the first Western region graduate student representative for the Association of Black Psychologists Student Circle Board of Directors (ABPsiSC). During her tenure on the ABPsiSC board she organized, *Ubuntu: Defining Transpersonal Psychology within Our Afrocentric Epistemology,* an unprecedented conference combining transpersonal and black psychospiritual expertise. Furthering her commitment to expanding her transpersonal education, Angelina's independent research on African Derived Religions and other non-Christian belief systems includes field study within the US and Cuba. Her research findings are frequently presented via invitation in forums with womanist, religious, and diversity concentrations. Recognized for her commitment to interdisciplinary advancement, she is currently a special topics guest editor and inaugural fellow for the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies*.

About the Journal

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