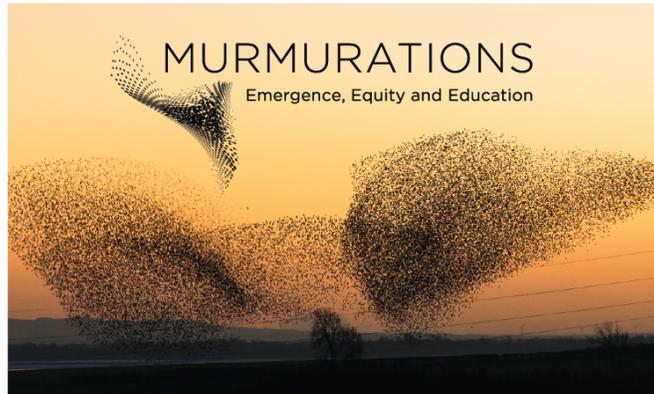


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ARTICLE

“Talk Doesn’t Cook the Soup”: Reflections on a Collegiate Rites of Passage Program

Keywords:

rites of passage, black culture, Afrocentricity, sisterhood, service, campus involvement

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Abstract

Point-of-view: I am a cisgender, African American woman. My identities shape my teaching, service, and research interests in 19th and 20th century United States history, African Americans, women, class, Africa and the diaspora, transnationalism, and social justice issues. I am an associate professor of history at Atlanta Metropolitan State College, a minority-serving institution primarily committed to offering an affordable liberal arts education to urban, first-generation students. I earned degrees from Spelman College (BA), Clark Atlanta University (MA), and Georgia State University (PhD) where my interactions with caring professors influenced my sense of self. I strive to relate to my students in similar ways. I think education should be a life-altering process, not only in the intellectual or the economic sense but also cognitively uplifting.

Value: Through the lens of my personal recollections, this piece highlights what I believe are beneficial practices for helping students feel involved on campus, gain purpose through service, and enhance their collegiate experiences.

Summary: This article is centered on my memories of participating in campus-based rites of passage activities. The program was open to women aged eighteen to thirty-five and took place in the Atlanta University Center during the black cultural renaissance of the 1990s. My recollections align with scholarly findings, which assert such programs bolster relationships that improve students' self-perceptions, encourage cooperation, and support retention and graduation efforts. Researchers also note that the programs discourage substance abuse, coercion, and violence. Given current trends signaling renewed interest in African-centered ideals and black pride, many aspects of rites of passage programs could appeal to students looking for safe spaces in an increasingly fractured socio-political climate. This paper additionally calls for more research on collegiate rites-based groups of the era. We know few details about them despite the fact that their importance is suggested in the literature.

This work was completed without the support of a funding agency.



The Flyer

Recently, gathering in line with throngs of excited, dashiki-clad *Black Panther* moviegoers and watching Beyonce's Egyptian-inspired pageantry at the Coachella music festival made me recall my days as an undergraduate at Spelman College. I was a sophomore in the 1990s when I saw a flyer clinging to a corkboard as I climbed the stairs of Giles Hall on campus. The proverb, “Talk Doesn’t Cook the Soup,” was emblazoned on the paper above a woman wearing a beautiful headwrap.¹ An invitation to attend a meeting if I wanted to participate

1. “Talk doesn't cook the soup,” was seemingly adapted from an aphorism with origins in the Buddhist epigram, “Talk doesn't cook the rice.” The saying was meant to convey the idea that simply talking

in a transformative experience was also splashed across the handbill. I took the leap, got involved, gained a greater sense of purpose through service, and found community in a rites of passage program that enhanced my college experience and changed me for the better.

Expectations for social change hung heavy in the air on campus that fall. We were in an Afrocentric cultural moment following a politically conservative resurgence somewhat like the celebration of black culture surrounding *Black Panther* and “Beychella,” as fans affectionately renamed the concert.² While today the world witnesses growing support for far-right politics alongside the Black Lives Matter, Me Too, and Never Again movements, those heady days of two decades ago happened amid the fall of South African apartheid and the Rodney King uprisings. I was an observer among the masses of people taking to the streets in anger and frustration over news that three Los Angeles police officers were acquitted after being caught on tape savagely beating King following a car chase.³ We felt the American justice system held little regard for King’s existence as a black person. We also thought his life symbolized many of our own. Some of us would adopt “no justice, no peace” as our life’s charge in the aftermath of these events. A lot of us were searching for the point of our existences.

Seeking Connections, Getting Involved, and Finding a Call to Service

“Come join us if you want to take action!” The words on the handbill spoke to me, not only because of the larger socio-political context but also because I longed for an opportunity to get involved with student life in a personally self-affirming way. I arrived on the campus full of hope about developing a deep sense of sisterhood. Spelman, an all-women’s institution in Atlanta, GA, was acclaimed as the top liberal arts college in the South. The institution also stood among the most elite historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), once known as the “Negro Ivy League.”⁴ My divorced parents were first-generation college graduates. I was a brown-skinned girl on financial aid. Although I loved most aspects of the Spelman experience, I soon began to feel somewhat alienated because of the colorism and classism

about an ambition does not accomplish the goal. It is cited without attribution in theologian Robert M. Price’s *Top Secret: The Truth Behind Today’s Pop Mysticisms* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2008), 88. Memorizing and sharing Africana proverbs were key aspects of the rites of passage program in which I participated. African and diasporic sayings such as, “Talking about the fire does not boil the pot,” and, “A chattering bird builds no nest,” stress sentiments similar to the Buddhist statement. Askhari Johnson Hodari and Yvonne McCalla Sobers, *Lifelines: The Black Book of Proverbs* (New York: Broadway Books, 2009), 128-129.

2. Pioneered by such scholars as W.E.B. Du Bois and most closely associated with black studies scholar, Molefi Kete Asante, Afrocentricity is the theory underlying a philosophy, cultural movement, and pedagogical approach, which advocates the centering and positive representation of African and African-descended people’s histories, cultures, and worldviews. Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1988), 6-7; Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1-2; Ama Mazama, “Naming and Defining: A Critical Link,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 34, no. 2 (2010): 251; Academic administrator, Walter M. Kimbrough, discusses the Afrocentric influence on college student affairs during the mid-1980s and the early 1990s. He delineates the Afrocentric era of influence as a period running from 1985 to the early 2000s, when the book was published. Walter M. Kimbrough, *Black Greek 101: The Culture, Customs, and Challenges of Black Fraternities and Sororities* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 106-110; Elahe Izadi, “Beyoncé’s Coachella Performance Wasn’t Just Pure Entertainment. It Was a Historic Cultural Moment,” *Washington Post*, April 15, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2018/04/15/beyonces-coachella-performance-wasnt-just-pure-musical-entertainment-it-was-a-historic-cultural-moment/>.

3. Nicole Maurantonio, “Remembering Rodney King: Myth, Racial Reconciliation, and Civil Rights History,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 91, iss. 4 (December 2014): 740.

4. Karima A. Haynes, “The Women of Spelman,” *Ebony* 48, no. 5 (March 1993): 40; Clyde Wilcox et al., “The Changing Demographic Functions of Historically Black Colleges and Universities,” *New Political Science* 36, no. 4 (December 2014): 557 & 561; Marybeth Gasman and Ufuoma Abiola, “Colorism within the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs),” *Theory into Practice* 55, no. 1 (2016): 41-42.

I encountered in certain circles.⁵

I hoped the group posting those beautiful flyers would help me overcome feelings of exclusion. Although the adage, “Talk doesn’t cook the soup,” was ostensibly about preparing food, it was really a metaphor for getting involved in sisterhood and personal transformation. It was also a call to service. I seized the opportunity to go to the gathering where older students invited us to continue attending meetings if we were interested in embarking on what they termed a “journey to African womanhood.”⁶ I sensed that the “excursion” would transform the way I saw myself, my education, and the world.

The Journey

Spelman belonged to a consortium of HBCUs called the Atlanta University Center (AUC), and faculty from the various institutions guided the journey.⁷ The advisory group for the rites functioned as a council of elders and included professors’ spouses as well as local healthcare experts. I would like to imagine the council maintained the rites of passage program because it drew on age-old West African customs like those of the Sande and Poro secret societies whose members upheld moral standards and influenced affairs among the Mende, Temne, and other ethnic groups in present-day Guinea and Sierra Leone.⁸ The elders and participating students sought to revive aspects of these practices, especially among African Americans whose ancestors had undergone cultural transformation in the crucible of enslavement, enduring systematic attempts to strip away their native beliefs and customs and indoctrinate them according to their captors’ values.⁹ Programs such as the journey additionally had a newfound reputation for contributing to student success by helping young African Americans develop socially and fortifying their ability to resist various forms of oppression.¹⁰

Advisors, like humanities professor Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie, often lent a caring ear and gifted us with their knowledge of African- and diasporic-cultural practices. She also offered suggestions for campus service projects and social activities.¹¹ Decades before Beyoncé hit the Coachella stage in her Queen Nefertiti-inspired cape and crown, group members under Zauditu-Selassie’s guidance had the opportunity to witness our journey sister, Ifetayo, in her Miss Morris Brown College pageant regalia defiantly embodying a Kushite queen.¹² We learned these royal African women were once called Kandakes or

5. For more information, see Gasman and Abiola, “Colorism within the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs),” 2016, 39-45.

6. For more on the origins of “the African woman” conception as a certain approach to African American women’s black nationalist self-identification, activism, and resistance, see Ashley D. Farmer, *Re-making Black Power: How Black Women Transformed an Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 93-126.

7. The Atlanta University Center consisted of Spelman College, Clark Atlanta University (CAU), Morehouse College, the Morehouse School of Medicine, Morris Brown College (MBC), and the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC). MBC and ITC no longer belong to the consortium. Gwendolyn Glenn, “Museum Exhibit Sheds Historical Light on Atlanta University Center,” *Black Issues in Higher Education* 13, no. 13 (August 22, 1996): 12; “History,” Atlanta University Center Consortium, <http://aucenter.edu/about-us/history/>.

8. Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 94-100.

9. Gomez, *Exchanging*, 154; K. Anthony Appiah, “Africans before Americans: An Argument for the Durability of Imported Cultures in North America,” *The New York Times on the Web*, May 10, 1998, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/05/10/reviews/980510.10appiaht.html>.

10. Angela Norma Campbell, “Gendered Passageways in Freedom School: An Ethnographic Study of Adolescent Girls’ Journeys to Womanhood,” PhD diss., Temple University, 2013, ProQuest (3564800), iii-iv.

11. See Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie, *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014) for an example of the professor’s work.

12. The northern African Kush kingdom was also known as Nubia and was located in present-day Sudan and southern Egypt; Karen Whitney Tice specifically noted the popularity of “Egyptian-themed” campus coronations at Morris Brown College in *Queens of Academe: Beauty Pageantry, Student Bodies, and College Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 105; Writer and educator, Clint Smith, describes HBCU students’ engagement of seemingly anachronistic, patriarchal pageant traditions as

Candaces.¹³ While prevalent symbols of aristocracy have long focused on Europeans in the dominant culture, the buzz around *Black Panther* reminds us about the emotionally uplifting effect of depicting regal blackness for African-descended people.¹⁴

In addition to being emotionally impactful, the journey had all the standard characteristics of rites of passage: separation, liminality, and reaggregation.¹⁵ After initial interest meetings, some of us curious “seekers” committed to the full process and gained a moniker essentially equating to “caterpillar.” We caterpillars participated in a series of private ceremonies marking the journey’s commencement. The months-long rites also required a short period of separation from our campus friends and communal living with other women in the cohort during the liminality phase. Our group connected intensely during this “pupal” stage.¹⁶

We caterpillars also committed to foregoing extraneous chatter to give our attention to additional studies, work, and community building during our liminal period. Seemingly in tune with the proverbial message, “Talk doesn’t cook the soup,” we could not engage in casual speech with people outside our cohort according to the rules of the journey. We supplemented our regular university coursework with assigned readings on the African past. We also explored the more recently forged histories and cultures of African-descended peoples in the diaspora with a specific focus on women’s and girls’ experiences. Our group of newfound sisters continued to maintain our college course requirements and work schedules. The process required discipline.

We had to avoid processed foods, make-up, and jewelry during the journey. We used some of our free time for cooking. We shared meals. In apparent contrast to the proverb, the intensive bonding activities encouraged “critical dialogue.” This imperative to speak with intention incited us to use our voices for planning and implementing service projects.¹⁷

We spent many nights exchanging ideas while literally cooking pots of soup. We shared healthy recipes. I learned to cook east African-styled collards sautéed with onions and plenty of garlic from one of my journey sisters. She inspired me to prepare the greens without the fatty hunks of salt-cured pork in my southern family recipe. The group’s elders shaped “journey” activities to nurture a particular understanding of and pride in our heritage. They also wanted us to develop self-care practices supporting attention to our health, reverence for our bodies, and appreciation of our natural beauty.

The journey culminated with a series of rituals and celebrations marking reaggregation at the end of the challenging process. Elders and sisters who had already gone through the rites helped us unfurl our wings and reunite with our communities as “African women.” Afterward, I returned to painting on my favorite deep-maroon lipstick, piling mounds of bright beads on my wrists, eagerly seeking the company of old friends, and reuniting with family. In some ways, I returned to the habits of any other American nineteen-year-old.

“political performance” in Clint Smith, “Why Historically Black Colleges are Enjoying a Renaissance,” *National Geographic*, April 2018, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2018/04/black-colleges-universities-race-class-gender-sexuality/>.

13. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, “Nubian Queens in the Nile Valley and Afro-Asiatic Cultural History,” (paper presented at the Ninth International Conference for Nubian Studies, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA, August 20-26, 1998).

14. Derreck Johnson, “When We Were Kings and Queens: From Haile Selassie to Wakanda to Zambunda, Seeing Ourselves as Leaders and Royalty is Pure Escapism and Cathartic,” *Slate*, February 14, 2018, <https://slate.com/culture/2018/02/black-panther-coming-to-america-and-the-tradition-of-black-royalty-in-pop-culture.html>.

15. Martha L. Dickerson-Dorsey, “The Influence of African Centered Rites of Passage on Racial Identity and Psycho-Social Competence of African-American Adolescent Females,” PhD diss., University of Louisville, 2007, ProQuest (3286693), 92.

16. The journeys’ lengths varied depending on how well participants performed on the various tests and trials constituting the process. The initial group had the longest rites, which lasted four months. *Auset History*, n.d. in the author’s possession; “AST [Auset] - Seekers of the Truth,” Spelman College, *Reflections Yearbook*, 1989, 6-7.

17. Although the proverb, “Talk doesn’t cook the soup,” seems to minimize the significance of discourse in producing results, Campbell suggests “critical dialogue” is a central component of rites of passage for cultivating healthy female peer relationships. She further emphasizes the importance of service as a socio-political act drawing on the kinds of critical consciousness and collective action that such rites of passage programs aim to foster in participants. Campbell, “Gendered Passageways,” iv, 71, 107, 217, 270, & 334.

Many of the journey ritual's major lessons, however, resonate with me to this day. (I can still sing the South African national anthem *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika* by heart.)¹⁸ A part of me emerged from the rites of passage more mature and focused. People in my cohort called me by a new, African name, Njemile, which meant "upstanding."¹⁹ My name, however, was not my only characteristic that changed.

Discovering Community

Taking the journey helped me "find my tribe" or my "homeplace" on campus.²⁰ The sisters and elders I gained as a result of completing the journey were part of a larger organization. It was named Auset, an African Sisterhood after the ancient Egyptian goddess, whose Greek name was Isis. The Auset sisterhood was founded in 1988.²¹ The group fulfilled my yearning for campus involvement and inclusion in a self-affirming and uplifting manner. The journey played a vital role in my process of identity formation and self-definition as a young adult.

Both the people in Auset and the process of the rites allowed me to understand what I later realized were intersectional aspects of my identity: race, class, and gender.²² I emerged

18. The legacy of the black freedom struggle in the United States and the South African liberation movement influenced Auset sisterhood in the context of global anti-apartheid activism in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s. AUC students in general, including those at Spelman, expressed feelings of connection to the black South Africans who apartheid impacted. One South African Spelman student and founding Auset member received the journey name, Kasia Mwalimu, which meant "oar" [guide] and "teacher." Participants in subsequent journeys learned and performed *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika* (God Bless Africa) on campus. The song symbolized the fight for solidarity and liberation in South Africa. The hymn provided a vision of "a virtual Africa yet to be born" and also reflected common sentiments for African and African-descended people who struggled to achieve unity and freedom beyond the nation's borders. *Global Nonviolent Action Database*, Spelman College Students Win Divestment from Apartheid South Africa, 1978-1986, South Africa Apartheid Divestment Movement (1970s-1980s), September 19, 2009, <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/spelman-college-students-win-divestment-apartheid-south-africa-1978-1986>; Askhari Hodari, *The African Book of Names* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc., 2009), xiii; *Auset History*; "SWAC Spelman Women's Action Coalition," Spelman College, *Reflections Yearbook*, 1989, 92; David Coplan and Bennetta Jules-Rosette. "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika and the Liberation of the Spirit of South Africa." *African Studies* 64, no. 2 (December 2005): 285-286 & 303-305.

19. Members of the sisterhood maintained "Njemile" was from the southeast African Yao language, spoken in Malawi. *Auset History*; Founding Auset member and African American Studies practitioner, Askhari Hodari, confirms the group's understanding of the meaning and origin in Hodari, *The African Book of Names*, 230; "Njemile" is also cited as an Ngoni name from Malawi in Julia Stewart, *African Names: Names from the African Continent for Children and Adults* (New York: Kensington Publishing, 1993), 98.

20. Citing black feminist scholar, bell hooks, Campbell uses the term "homeplace" to describe the ways rites of passage can serve as places for nurturing girls and helping them resistance oppression. Campbell, "Gendered Passageways," 69-71 & 302.

21. *Auset History*; Some texts included in the supplemental education for the journey often fit within an ideological model proposing Egyptians were essentially an African civilization that colonized the Greeks, introducing new ideas and culture. The curriculum included controversial works by such authors as anthropologist and African Studies scholar, Ivan Van Sertima, and lectures combining history, culture, and science with professors like Charles S. Finch, III, of the Morehouse School of Medicine. We learned from them that Auset was originally an Egyptian deity who was later worshipped in the ancient Hellenistic world, hence, the name Isis. Ivan Van Sertima, ed., *Black Women in Antiquity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1988), 8-9; Additionally, see Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization: Volume I: The Fabrication of Greece 1785-1985* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Auset's elders advised a rites of passage program and organization for males, which was called Kemet (KMT). The men founded an organization in the AUC in 1988. Auset and Kemet existed among several other Afrocentric rites of passage programs and organizations with different origins and advisors, including Hetheru (Tuskegee University) and Ndugu and Nzinga (CAU). (This author believes Hetheru in Kimbrough's work refers to the organization Ka-Het-Heru/Ka-Ra at Tuskegee.) Kimbrough, *Black Greek 101*, 107-109; The non-religious, campus-based Auset, an African Sisterhood should not be confused with the religiously-based, Ausar Auset Society, which was founded in 1973 by Ra Un Nefer Amen I. For information, see Marjorie Lewis, "Divining Sisters: Reflections on an Experience of Divination by a Priestess of the Ausar Auset Society," *Black Theology: An International Journal* 7, no. 3 (November 2009): 325.

22. The term "intersectionality" was coined to describe the interrelated aspects of various social

from the journey much prouder of the sun-kissed hue my African ancestors bequeathed to me. True to the group's ideals of "fighting the racism, classism, and sexism inherent in Western society," leaders recruited participants from the myriad of area college campuses with their diverse missions and student bodies from disparate backgrounds.²³ While I was on the margins in many external definitions of womanhood, the journey helped me center myself, my identity as a female African American in pursuit of higher education, and as an aspiring leader within a long history of black women's excellence dating back millennia.

No Utopia

Although Auset was no utopia, the community functioned for me as a safe space or homeplace on campus. Despite its flaws, the organization provided a platform for thinking critically about the world. We in the sisterhood often debated such topics as the problems with reifying the concept of a bipolar planet through the idea of an East-West dichotomy and fetishizing "the Eastern world" as a part of challenging our positionality in "the West." We considered the promises of viewing Africa and African-descended peoples from the perspective of "Afrocentric unity" as well as the pitfalls of envisioning them as monolithic or frozen in the past. We additionally mulled over the flaws of analyzing historical societies through modern constructions of race and the shortcomings of perpetuating binary gender roles.²⁴

Even as we vowed to fight classism, extending our program to women and girls in the communities surrounding our universities proved a perennial challenge we never overcame. For instance, I recall that we tried multiple times to establish similar rites of passage experiences called Chrysalis for adolescents in southwest Atlanta. We had mixed results. Some sisters fondly remember the program, while I think it was inadequate in meeting the working-class and impoverished young ladies' needs and expectations. In all our efforts at inclusiveness and tolerance, it was difficult to detect blind spots and contradictions in our thinking. Internal struggles over issues—from sexual preference and identity to gerontocracy, respectability politics, and freedom of expression—further hampered the organization's development and sustainability. Progressive and innovative in many ways, while conservative and outmoded in others, Auset's institutional expression barely survived beyond the Afrocentric 1990s. We certainly did not make it through the "post-racial" age of President Barack Obama in the 2000s.

An Enhanced College Experience and a Better Me

Our informal sister circles persisted despite our differences, in part, because the group's work was important. The journey and sisterhood helped me develop better female peer relations. Though conflict was an inevitable part of the process, many of us finished the rites program with invaluable conflict resolution tools. We also developed more disciplined study habits, stronger leadership skills, a network of like-minded professionals, and lifelong friendships. We participated in community cleanups and tutored students in the poverty-stricken

categorizations by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 no. 6 (1991): 1241-1299.

23. *Auset, An African Sisterhood, Inc.*, in the author's possession, December 2006; Spelman College, *Reflections Yearbook*, 1993, 42.

24. The term "Afrocentric unity" describes the idea that some African-descended people in the diaspora, particularly those who embrace Pan-Africanism, self-identify essentially as an African people and as "African" in general more than a single ethnicity or nationality. Molefi Kete Asante, *The Book of African Names* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1991), 9; Afrocentric conceptions of Africa have been critiqued in such literature as Moses, *Afrotopia*, 19-17 & 226-241, and Martin W. Lewis and Karen Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 116-123. There have also been calls for nonbinary approaches to thinking about Africa and the African diaspora in terms of time, space, peoples, and aspects of culture, for instance, in Charles H. Long, "What is Africa to Me? Reflection, Discernment, and Anticipation," *Journal of Africana Religions* 1. no. 1 (2013): 91-108.

and working-class neighborhoods surrounding the university center.²⁵ Seeking to support causes that assisted women and children, we collected donations for the Atlanta Food Bank, Cascade Battered Women's Shelter, and the National Black Women's Wellness Project and volunteered to help incarcerated mothers and abused women. I have aided Auset sisters through labor and childbirth, given professional references, and offered career assistance. Likewise, women in my cohort helped rear my children, supported my matriculation through college and two graduate degrees, and provided shoulders for me to cry on. Many of us continue to celebrate life's milestones together.

Conclusion

The takeaway from my musings is that revisiting the journey's outcomes could be appealing and helpful in this moment of cultural renaissance taking place against the backdrop of the rising storm of racism, homophobia, sexism, xenophobia, and general intolerance currently resurfacing on campuses and in the larger milieu.²⁶ Although Spelman's dynamic social environment gave rise to the journey, the rite was never solely meant for HBCUs. It was originally aimed at assisting African-descended students in many different types of institutions. I am also keenly aware of Black Greek Letter Organizations' roots in benevolent societies and appreciate the central, positive roles the groups continue to serve in many students' university experiences.²⁷ However, I was not alone in my wariness about getting involved in sorority life. Historian Ibram X. Kendi has compared certain Greek Letter Organizations to gangs because of their similar patterns of violence, coercion, and substance abuse.²⁸ Recent reports of sexual misconduct and hazing in one specific sorority chapter raise additional questions about the activities of such campus organizations.²⁹

Studies have suggested, however, that rites of passage programs lead to intentional cohort groups aimed at building students' self-esteem, help develop feelings of inclusion and self-affirmation, support successful matriculation in various educational contexts, and serve as counterpoints to gang-like activities.³⁰ More research is needed, however, on the backgrounds, successes, and failures of such programs. Little is known about the histories of the campus-based rites of passage programs the specific groups in Auset's cohort conducted. Their influence on student life in the 1980s and 1990s has been briefly noted in the literature. They, ironically, appear as a sidebar about the influence of Afrocentricity in a broader discussion about black fraternities and sororities, even though the African-centered groups often positioned themselves as alternatives to Greek life.³¹ I must say anecdotally that Auset's journey served as a valuable safe space for me and facilitated some of my most important personal metamorphoses. Similar rites of passage programs could be places for students who feel marginalized in certain ways like I did to find tribes, homeplaces, platforms for service, and invaluable skills. In hindsight, I believe our group of

25. "AST Sisterhood," Spelman College, *Reflections Yearbook*, 1992, n.p.

26. See Katlyn Ayn Patton, "Trumping the First Amendment: Student-Driven Calls for Speech Restrictions on Public College Campuses," *Case Western Reserve Law Review* 68, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 189-212 for an example of prevailing campus issues.

27. See Kimbrough, *Black Greek 101*, 107-110 for a discussion of reasons why groups such as Kemet and Auset resisted functioning like typical fraternities and sororities. For more info on Black Greek Letter Organizations, see Tamara L. Brown, et al., eds., *African American Fraternities and Sororities: The Legacy and the Vision* (2nd edition), (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012).

28. Ibram X. Kendi, "What's the Difference Between a Frat and a Gang?: They're Both Blamed for Predisposing Their Members to Violent Acts, but They've Sparked Radically Different Public-Policy Responses," *The Atlantic*, April 21, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/03/america-frats-and-gangs/555896/>.

29. Kyle Swenson and Amber Ferguson, "AKA Sorority Chapter at Small Georgia College Embroiled in Sexual Misconduct Investigation," *Washington Post*, May 1, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/05/01/aka-sorority-chapter-at-small-georgia-college-embroiled-in-sexual-misconduct-investigation/>.

30. Campbell, "Gendered Passageways," ii-iv; Dickerson-Dorsey, "The Influence," 91; Lathardus Goggins, II, "The Academic STARS Retention Model: An Empirical Investigation of Its Effectiveness," PhD diss., University of Akron, 2003, ProQuest (3108203), iii.

31. Kimbrough, *Black Greek 101*, 107-110.

Auset sisters overestimated how much we could change society. We, nevertheless, learned the importance of taking small steps toward making a better world because, as the saying goes, "Talk doesn't cook the soup."

Kenja McCray, 2018

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