

# **The Path Towards Literary Liberation: The Role of the African Worldview in Conducting an African Centered Analysis of *Jacob's Ladder***

by

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## **Abstract**

Using African/Black culture and the African worldview as the lens for examination, this essay conducts an African centered literary analysis of the Black novel entitled *Jacob's Ladder* by John A. Williams published in 1987. Not only will this analysis provide an in-depth cultural reading of this specific text; but it will also help to re-center African/Black literature as a body of knowledge in the discipline of Black Studies by demonstrating how the inclusion of the African worldview is essential to any discussion of African/Black literature. This will help to lay the foundation for additional African centered literary theories to be created in the future, and also strengthen the discipline around what every body of knowledge in Black Studies has in common: African/Black culture and the African worldview.

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African/Black literature is one of the most co-opted bodies of knowledge in the discipline of Black Studies next to African/Black history. This is mainly because many of the literary theorists who analyze African/Black literature are from disciplines outside of Black Studies. These literary theorists are Eurocentrically trained and tend to unconsciously, automatically, and universally use the European worldview as the foundation for their theories, analysis, and discussions. African centered scholars in Black Studies know that using theories based on the European worldview to analyze African/Black phenomenon (in this case, African/Black literature) is “blatantly absurd.” (Ani 9). Not only is this Eurocentric type of analysis faulty on many different levels; it also helps to further separate African/Black literature from the discipline of Black Studies by allowing the “external penetration” (Azibo 421) of anyone who “just happens” to analyze, interpret, and discuss African/Black literature, regardless of their background, training, or understanding of African/Black culture and the African worldview. In order to reclaim African/Black literature as a body of knowledge, more African centered literary theories must be developed and employed.

Contrary to popular belief, Black Studies does not need to look outside the discipline for these theories because they can be found in one of the other bodies of knowledge, such as African/Black Psychology and Black Sociology, or can be created by scholars in the discipline. Therefore, if African/Black literature is about to travel down the path toward literary liberation, the journey must begin with African/Black culture and the African worldview.

If it is difficult to discuss African/Black life without discussing the African worldview, than it is equally difficult to discuss African/Black literature without discussing the African worldview. This is especially true since African/Black literature is a direct reflection of African/Black life, regardless of the genre. Thus, proving how significant the African worldview is to any analysis of African/Black literature. Understanding the African worldview will not only help to recapture African/Black literature and return it to the discipline of Black Studies; but the African worldview will also help to eliminate the further co-option of this body of knowledge by ensuring its inclusion in future discussions of African/Black literature. Once this foundation has been laid, more African centered literary theories can be proposed and utilized in the future. Consequently, this article will begin the building process by conducting an African centered analysis of *Jacob's Ladder* by John A. Williams. Even though this is an example of one text where the African worldview is needed for an in-depth understanding of the story; this example is the rule in African/Black literature and not the exception.

Before anything else can be discussed, Black Studies must be defined. Defining Black Studies helps to ensure that all research conducted involving African/Black people not only represents the discipline of Black Studies, but also furthers the discipline. Therefore, Black Studies is the examination, analysis, and investigation of African culture, heritage, and traditions focusing on African people not only in America, but on the continent and throughout the Diaspora. According to Linda James Myers and Daudi Ajani ya Azibo, this examination and analysis should be from an African centered perspective; meaning that African culture and the African worldview is the primary lens for examination. Scholars in Black Studies must acknowledge the ancestors who came before by making connections back to Ancient African civilizations and to the African continent to understand the foundations laid for us to build upon today. Every discussion must also be brought forward to find the relevance and application to the African/Black community, both inside and outside the academy. Overall, Black Studies is inherently political and must always forge some type of social change. All research conducted in the discipline must also aid in the liberation of the African/Black community by increasing the life chances of African/Black people spiritually, mentally, physically, psychologically, etc. In regards to this research, conducting an African centered analysis of *Jacob's Ladder* by John A. Williams represents Black Studies by using the foundation of the discipline, the African worldview, as the lens for examination. This research will also further the discipline by helping to return African/Black literature back to Black Studies; thus, creating a stronger, more cohesive, and unified discipline.

Since the Black Arts Movement and their crucial discussion on how the African worldview relates to the Black Aesthetic through writings by authors such as James T. Stewart (1968); very few texts and/or articles have been published analyzing African/Black literature from an African centered perspective. Even if a text claims to be African centered, most are still missing an in-depth discussion of African/Black culture and the African worldview in their analysis. Some of the most well known African centered literary texts are *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* by Houston A. Baker, Jr. (1984); *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988); *Warriors, Conjurers and Priests: Defining African-Centered Literary Criticism* by Joyce Ann Joyce (1994); *Emerging Afrikan Survivals: An Afrocentric Critical Theory* by Kamau Kemayo (2003); and *Africana Womanist Literary Theory* by Clenora Hudson-Weems (2004). Since Baker, Gates, and Hudson-Weems poorly conceptualize culture, do not provide an in-depth analysis of any other ways that African culture influences Black life beyond their specific purview, and do not mention the African worldview (besides Hudson-Weems who mentions it in passing); they will not be included here. However, Joyce and Kemayo will be included because their texts most closely resemble an African centered literary analysis.

Joyce Ann Joyce conducts an African centered literary analysis of such authors as Richard Wright, Nella Larson, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, and Sonia Sanchez. Although she uses the word choice “African centered” in her title, Joyce actually uses the terms African centered, Afrocentricity, and the Black Aesthetic interchangeably. She states, “Afrocentricity (or the term I think should be should be used, African-centeredness)...” (6). She later states, “I use the words *African-centered* and *Black Aesthetic* interchangeably” (26). This is also evident a few pages later where she states she is using “...an African centered/Black Aesthetic approach...” (34). Unfortunately, Joyce never defines any of these terms besides Afrocentricity stating, “Although African-centered thought and scholarship pre-date Molefi Asante’s analysis of Afrocentricity, his definitions continue to emphasize the need for people of African descent to place African ideas at the center of their worldview” (27). She continues, “While Afrocentricity is a ‘philosophical outlook determined by history’ (*Afrocentricity* 27), the Black Aesthetic is the critical process that transforms an African centered philosophical outlook into art in which African history and culture become essential elements of theme, structure, mythology and language. Thus, the practitioners of the Black Aesthetic are inherently African-centered” (27).

Joyce also mentions African/Black culture and the African worldview in passing, but does not conceptualize these terms either. In regards to the African worldview, she quotes Chinua Achebe who states “...a man’s entire worldview” (29); she references her own “...African-centered worldview” (45); she discusses how the African American scholar must help to develop “...a liberating worldview...” (116); and how “...*all* African-American novels contribute to the making of a comprehensive African-American worldview” (238). Joyce includes only one component of the African worldview and it is in reference to “ontological racism” (8).

In terms of culture, she includes statements such as "...we must examine African-American culture to find the consistent thematic and technical threads that are woven through a distinctly African-American literary tradition" (43-44) and how "Ishmael Reed and Henry Dumas are the only two African-centered fiction writers who use Africa or African culture in their works" (259). But, the closest Joyce comes to the African worldview is with her analysis on African traditional spirituality in *The Salteaters* by Toni Cade Bambara and in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison.

Kamau Kemayo conducts an Afrocentric analysis of *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison, and *The Chaneyville Incident* by David Bradley. Using Molefi Asante's theory of Afrocentricity, Kemayo analyzes the identity of the Black male characters by applying "...Asante's three fundamental Afrocentric themes" (91) in order to "...locate Afrikan survivals in African American literature" (91). The three Afrocentric themes are: how one relates to others (91) or "extended family" (98); how one relates to the supernatural (91) or "spirituality, and ancestor legacy/communion" (103); and how one relates to their own being and identity (94) or "identify and worldview issues" (108).

Although Kamau also uses the terms culture and worldview countless times throughout his text; he never conceptualizes these terms and often uses them in the plural. This, of course, implies the existence of more than one African culture and more than one African worldview. He also includes only two components of the African worldview; again, only in passing: ontology and cosmology. He states, "African cultures are diverse and even, in some cases, antagonistic" (31). Later Kamau states, "Morrison's and Bradley's self conscious use of Afrikan worldviews frame their characters' identities (161). He also uses the word choice Afrikanity to "refer(s) to a generalized African culture" (31). Rather than utilizing a worldview framework, even though he uses the term, he follows the constructs of Afrikanity as his lens for examination which includes "...oral traditions, elastic time, extended family structure and kinship patterns, rhythm, unity of body/mind/nature, religion/philosophy (spirituality), death/immortality, experiential communality, unity, stylish expressions of individuality" (10). Although Wade Nobles, in his article "Toward an Empirical and Theoretical Framework for Defining Black Families," connects Afrikanity to the manifestations of the African worldview in the Black family, regardless of living in a Eurocentric environment (685); Kamau does not make this connection and, instead, discusses Afrikanity devoid of the African worldview.

Ensuring the mistakes of the past are not repeated here, African/Black culture and the African worldview will be defined and discussed in detail. In any discussion of African/Black culture and the African worldview, we must turn directly to African/Black Psychologists Kobi K.K. Kambon, Linda James Myers, Daudi Ajani ya Azibo, and Wade Nobles, and to African centered anthropologist, Marimba Ani, who have spent the most time and energy defining and discussing these theories and concepts.

Most often quoted for his definition of culture by scholars such as Daudi Ajani ya Azibo and Marimba Ani, Wade Nobles states that “Culture rightfully should be viewed as a scientific construct representing the vast structure of language, behavior, customs, knowledge, symbols, ideas, and values which provide a people with a general design for living and patterns for interpreting reality” (71). Every culture has a specific way of understanding and perceiving reality; every culture has a specific force guiding its actions and behaviors; and every culture has a general and/or specific design for how to live one’s life. Marimba Ani states, “One of the things that culture does for its members is to present them with a systematic way of ordering their experiences; these experiences together making up their phenomenal world” (3-4). Culture not only explains why different groups of people interpret life and reality in different ways (in the case of Africans and Europeans), but also how different groups of people interpret life and reality in similar ways (in the case of American Indians, Africans, Asians, Latinos, etc.).

Worldview is then the organized way these cultural components or assumptions (Myers 97-98) are processed, interpreted, and articulated. Worldview is also how a historically connected group of people see and make sense of the world. In “Africentric Paradigm and African American Psychological Liberation,” Kobi K.K. Kambon states, “Each culture generates its own peculiar view of the world or approach to reality/existence, which we might call its worldview/cosmology...” (58). Wade Nobles adds to this and states, “The examination of culture and its relationship to the ‘meaning’ of a people’s reality occurs by examining first its factors, cosmology, ontology, and axiology; second, its emergent aspects, ideology, ethos, and worldview; and third, its manifestations, customs, behavior, language, symbols, ideas, values, etc.” (73). Marimba Ani believes that:

World-view refers to the way in which a people make sense of their surroundings; make sense of life and of the universe...World-view does not include our rituals, but it explains why they are necessary. Human beings cannot function in chaos, and out of the chaos of life they create an ordered existence. The dominant theme or character of that order (world-view) will be a function of their collective ethos. Culture is ordered behavior. It is not created individually. All groups of people who have been historically related over long periods of time share a way of viewing the world and the realities with which it presents them. A world-view results from a shared cultural experience, just as it helps to form that experience. (4)

She continues to state that “A people’s world-view effects and tends to determine their behavior” (4), and how the “World-view helps to interject ‘meaning’ into life; to determine which are meaningful experiences and events and which are not” (4). Worldview then “...effects our perceptions of nature, of ourselves as human beings, and of each other and our relationship to all being” (Ani 4).

At the core of the worldview is the ethos. This is not only the guiding force behind the thoughts, actions, and behavior of a particular group of people; but the ethos is also the shared group reaction and response to all aspects of life that helps to determine culturally specific behavior. Wade Nobles states that “The ethos of a people represents their character, tone, quality, and mode of being” (72). In addition to ethos, every worldview also contains additional components or assumptions that help to further organize culture into a specific way of viewing the world. Kobi K.K. Kambon, in *African/Black Psychology in the American Context: An African-Centered Approach*, states that “Worldview represents the distinct unifying cosmological, ontological, epistemological and axiological principles representing a racial-cultural group’s natural cultural (conceptual) orientation, outlook or perspective on and construction of reality” (120). In addition to the components Kambon mentions, other aspects also include life/space, logic, and aesthetics. Every worldview contains these components or assumptions; yet it is a people’s culture that provides the specific details for that worldview allowing for a symbiotic relationship between both worldview and culture.

More specifically, Linda James Myers defines the African worldview stating that:

The Afrocentric conceptual system assumes that reality is at once spiritual and material...in this regard, everything is spirit manifested. Spirit refers to that permeating essence we come to know in an extrasensory fashion (i.e., via energy/consciousness/God). Within this spiritual/material ontology we lose the sense of individualized ego/mind, and experience the harmony of the collective identity of being one with the source of all good. (12)

The ethos of the African worldview is underlined by the spirit and “our spirit symbolizes our uniqueness as a people, or we could say that the African-American [and African] ethos is spiritual” (Ani 3). In the African worldview, it is believed that one’s spirit influences one’s thoughts and in turn, influences one’s actions. One’s spirit then becomes the guiding factor in the way in which African people gain knowledge (epistemology); make sense of the world around them (logic); organize their lives (life/space); choose what to place value on (axiology); decide what is real (ontology); structure and interpret the universe (cosmology); and what they consider to be beautiful (aesthetics). The African worldview represents harmony with nature; the unification of opposites; the interconnectedness of the material and the spiritual; the highest value of life placed on interpersonal relations; life and space is organized in an infinite and cyclical manner; the universe is holistic; it is harmonious; it is unlimited; life is community orientated; knowledge is known through intuition, dreams, prayer, rhythm, dreams, and symbolic imagery; beauty is a balance between the internal and external; there is an equality of the sexes; and it is collective, communal, and organic.

Building upon Cheikh Anta Diop's Two Cradle Theory presented in *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa: The Domains of Matriarchy and Patriarchy in Classical Antiquity*, Daudi Ajani ya Azibo states that "The position taken here is that there is one singular African worldview as opposed to a multiplicity of 'African worldviews'" (423). Wade Nobles agrees and states:

Hence, the generic term, African peoples, has utility because it represents a label for a people who are characterized by a shared sentiment and spirit which is traceable to a common experience and/or condition and who have a similar general design for living and patterns for interpreting reality. The concept of African peoples used in this manner does not deny the specialness of the distinct contemporary experiences of different groups of African peoples; i.e. Africans from Africa, the Antilles and the Americans. (75)

Therefore, every aspect of African culture, the similarities and the differences, are all encompassed and represented in one singular African worldview. Even though African culture may look different on the surface structure of culture (Myers 12) in various places throughout the Diaspora, these are only superficial differences. Looking at the deep structure of culture (Myers 12), one will see the purpose and function of every action and behavior of African/Black people is steeped in the African worldview and is completely motivated by the spirit. In fact, it is this African spirit that connects all African people together over time, space, and history. African culture, as Marimba Ani states, "...is malleable. It changes under the pressure of changing circumstances, but it changes in order to remain the same" (21). It is both the superficial diversity, along with the deep similarities, that help to reinforce and strengthen the foundation of African culture and enables the African worldview to live on forever through the spirit that never dies.

Although most scholars tend to define the novel as fiction or a written story that is untrue, this is not the way the African/Black novel is viewed or defined in the African/Black community. This is revealed when one reads any African/Black novel and compares the events included in the novel to the events the author has experienced in their lifetime. African/Black novelists, such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Dianne McKinney-Whetstone, all write novels that are autobiographical in nature, and that include events, places, and characters taken directly and indirectly from their lives. Therefore, the only way to truly define the African/Black novel is to turn to the African worldview for the answer.

The African/Black novel can be defined as a lengthy recorded story about African/Black life and culture, specifically written to convey a message and/or to teach a lesson to the reader. It can be a story about an experience that actually occurred or it can be a story about an experience that never happened, especially since there is always truth in everything. This story can actually take place in the past, present, and/or future, and can also include the spiritual, the physical, and the metaphysical.

Since the creativity of African/Black people is limitless, there is no limit to how the story is presented. This story can be orally passed down and written later, or it can be written down immediately. But, since everything is purposeful in the African/Black community, the African/Black novel has always been used as a tool to protest injustice; to make positive change in the African/Black community; and to offer a glimpse into the diverse lives, experiences, and shared culture of African/Black people throughout the world.

Known primarily as a novelist, John A. Williams is also a journalist and academic who published countless texts, wrote for various magazines, and taught at several universities such as the City University of New York; the College of the Virgin Islands; Sarah Lawrence College; the University of California at Santa Barbara; the University of Hawaii; Boston University; and Rutgers University where he was named the Paul Robeson Professor of English. Born in 1925 in Jackson, Mississippi, John A. Williams wrote several novels including: *The Angry Ones* (1960); *Nightsong* (1961); *Sissie* (1965); *The Man Who Cried I Am* (1967); *Captain Blackman* (1972); *Mothersill and Foxes* (1975); *The Junior Bachelor Society* (1976); *!Click Song* (1982); and *Clifford's Blues* (1999). He also wrote a book of poetry entitled *Safari West: Poems* (1998); numerous non-fiction works such as *Africa: Her History, Lands, and People, Told with Pictures* (1969); and edited several anthologies such as *Beyond the Angry Black* (1966). Some of the topics included in his writings are: African Americans men fighting in the Vietnam War; a white police officer shooting an unarmed young, Black male and the Black community's reaction to the murder; and a gay, Black musician who is interned in Dachau during Adolph Hitler's reign in World War II. Traveling the world was very much part of Williams' life when he became the Director of Information for the American Committee on Africa in 1958; the European Correspondent for *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines in 1958-1959; and the Africa Correspondent to *Newsweek* from 1964-1965. In terms of his purpose and function for writing, he is quoted as stating:

I think art has always been political and has served political ends more graciously than those of the muses. I consider myself to be a political novelist and writer to the extent that I am always aware of the social insufficiencies which are a result of political manipulation. The greatest art has always been social-political, and in that sense I could be considered striving along traditional paths  
(<http://biography.jrank.org/pages/4837/Williams-John-Ifred.html>).

*Jacob's Ladder* is about Jacob Henry, an African American man, and his journey towards consciousness of self, community, and nation. Jacob finally realizes that no matter how much he tries to run away from it, he is African. His journey begins in 1966 when he is stationed in the fictional African country of Pandemi (presumably Liberia) by the United States military and ordered to dismantle their nuclear power plant. Jacob agrees to do this even though Pandemi is where he was born and where he spent the first ten years of his life.

Jacob also agrees to do this even though he knows it will inhibit their independence, force them to be forever reliant on the western world for resources, etc., and will destroy their connections to Communist countries such as China and Russia. But, the more time Jacob spends in Pandemi with Chuma Fasseke (his childhood friend and the current President of Pandemi); Yemi Fasseke (Chuma's wife); Akenzua (Chuma's father); Bonaco (Akenzua's friend); Iris Joplin (an African American visiting Pandemi); Taiwo Shaguri (the President of the neighboring country of Temian); Nmadi Ouro (a famous African writer and poet who is the Pandemi Ambassador to the United States); Abi Pendembov (Chuma Fasseke's Chief of Staff); Tubman (a Pandemi soldier); General Obika (the general of the Pandemi army); and the people of N'Duli (the Pandemi city he lived in as a child), the more he realizes that he cannot fulfill his assignment because his loyalty is not with the United States; it is with the Pandemi people. Like Chuma, Jacob realizes by the end of the novel that his real enemy is "America" (237). Therefore, the higher Jacob climbs up the ladder towards consciousness, the closer he moves towards his African roots and culture; and the further away he moves from the European influences that once encompassed his life. Jacob states, "There were two things he knew he'd have to do. The first was stop thinking like Klein [a white man], stop thinking the way he had in Europe. The next was to start thinking, if he could remember how, like a black person. Especially here [in Africa]" (107).

It is no coincidence that Williams strategically sets this novel in an African country, governed by African people, who are fighting for independence and self sufficiency from the white, western world, and who share a common history, culture, experience, and worldview with other Africans who also live on the continent. Nmadi Ouro states, "Epic. Pre-European history, Traffic between East and West Africa, language connections, similarity of customs-" (18). Williams also chooses to set this novel in an African country that has direct connections to Black people in America through their voluntary and involuntary resettlement in Pandemi during and after enslavement. This is precisely why the Pandemi people consider Black people in America to be their "brothers and sisters" (25). As Chuma explains, he has a "...fondness, especially for America, because there were so many folk there who resembled him and were, in fact, related to him by color and history" (8). This demonstrates not only the cultural and historical connection of African people throughout the continent; but also demonstrates how these same connections can be found throughout the Diaspora in the lives of Black people in America.

The main focus of this novel is Jacob Henry's journey towards his optimal self and his true embracement of African culture. Although Jacob was born in Pandemi, he always had a negative attitude towards the country and its people. Jacob thinks back to his childhood and remembers how:

He'd learned of America because his parents talked about it, had many pictures of places there and of people; they'd had books about it. It was a shining place that then seemed as distant but somehow as close as the skies around them. 'We will be returning; America is our home,' his father had added. That had given Jake the sense of being a visitor who was always on the way back home, and had formed in him a curious detachment for Pandemi and everyone associated with it. (51)

Because Pandemi was never presented to Jacob by his parents as his home, even though that was all he had ever known; he only viewed it as a temporary place to live. His parents presented America as a faraway place where they would one day live again because that was their true home. This inadvertently instilled a pro-American (or white) and anti-Pandemi (or African) attitude in Jacob and his sister, Miriam, at a very early age. This negative attitude towards Pandemi is especially evident when Chuma comes to visit the Henry family in New York. Williams' states:

Miriam [Jacob's sister] was always busy. Fasseke recalled the pain he suffered when he was introduced to her dates as a friend from Africa. Jake saw, surely he did, and tried to guide him away from his sister, who plainly, Fasseke saw, not only did not like him but despised Africa as well. Jake was patronizing in his own manner. (101)

Chuma also recalls that, "When I talked of African independence, of Africa for Africans, he [Jake] didn't seem to understand. He was amused. He was tolerant. It was as though those ten years we shared here were nothing. His mind was on other things" (40). During his visit, Miriam also tells him, "Why Chuma, that was a long time ago. In Africa. When we were children, I can't even visualize all that now. I'm an American completely. I want American men and American money, and I expect to have had plenty before you finish Syracuse" (101). When Chuma tells his father about his experiences with the Henrys in the United States, his response is, "...the Henrys suffered very badly when they left us and went back. That was what changed the girl. Bent further the boy. Changed the father" (32). Although both Jacob and Miriam have attempted to deny their childhood in Africa and their African culture, Miriam still unconsciously walks in America the same way African women walk in Pandemi. Williams' states, "...now he [Chuma] thought of the way she [Miriam] walked in New York, like a Pandemi woman with a bundle on her head, striding, bust thrust forward, buttocks well back, neck and head straight, as she'd learned when a child in N'Duli. It was no wonder men looked at her; the beauty and her motions carried to her face and body..." (102). Their Africanness is manifested in everything both Miriam and Jacob do, even if they are in denial of it at this moment.

Although Jacob brings this negative attitude with him when he becomes stationed in Pandemi; once he arrives, he cannot help but remember the childhood he suppressed for all of these years. He states:

He did not recall much else about that time, had he did not try to. That was in another life, neither here nor there, an ugliness in limbo. Nor did he want to remember too much about Pandemi right now; yet its colors and smells assailed him, forced him into the past from which names now drifted up: haemanthus shrubs with their huge red balls of flowers, the hibiscus, and the faint scent of pepper. Remember and recognized. Some recall begun, he looked once again at the name on the wagon. Where from...Then came the leakages of the past, more steadily now, the Bible lessons, his mother's arms swinging up and down in a teacher's rhythm, the young voices calling to each rising...(48)

He quickly checks himself and asks, “Why would I remember any shit like that, he wondered” (49). After Jacob meets an African American woman named Iris, also visiting Pandemi, he asks her to accompany him to N’Duli, the city he grew up in as a child. He tells her, “Don’t go back tomorrow. Come with me to the village I was raised in. N’Duli. I gotta try and...rediscover myself. Come on. I can’t do that with an African and I don’t want to do it alone” (91). On the way to N’Duli, Jacob tells Iris that he is happy she came with him because “It’s not too cool going back to the womb alone” (110). This comment acknowledges the importance of this African city and its people to Jacob’s life since it is what birthed him and made him the person he is today.

Epistemology in the African worldview is based on knowledge acquired through intuition, dreams, prayer, vibrational energy, symbolic imagery, rhythm, and meditation (Myers 13). This can be seen when Jacob and Iris first arrive in N’Duli and nothing seems familiar to him. Williams’ states, “He had thought something about the region would be familiar, but nothing was” (115). When Jacob walks around the city and sees the church his father worked as a missionary, details of his childhood come back to him very quickly. Williams’ states:

And now he remembered: You crossed the field, keeping to the left of the great tree with the deep furrows in the bottom of its trunk that led down to roots, and behind it the path took you down an angled back to a slow-moving brown stream where you swam and fished and sneaked through the grass to watch the girls bathe. There was a bridge made of logs and vines that you crossed to enter the deep forest, where you sat around fires at night and listened to stories about Ya and Ye and their son, Abu, and his son, Za, who married the cat woman, the peacemaker, and who bore Za Sera and Zuakpwa, twins; and around the fires he also heard of the Unknown Woman to whom one kind man gave elephant meat while the other jeered at her. She was a Magic Woman and made the kind man chief of the country. He heard the story of the singing waters, the petrified village and villagers, who’d been turned to stone because of some evil deed done in the deep forest...(119)

Although this trip triggers memories Jacob has suppressed, Iris believes that the people in the city did not like him. She states, “They didn’t like you too much” (126). After Jacob asks her why she thinks that, she states, “I felt it. You didn’t?” (127). Because the people in the city knew intuitively, through the African epistemology, that Jacob did not come to reconnect with his roots and was there, instead, to do harm to the people; they embraced him, but were still very distant and skeptical. This was the negative energy and vibrations Iris felt, forcing her to ask Jacob, “What are you really doing here?” (127).

Akenzua (Chuma's father) first hears about Jacob's return to Pandemi when Chuma comes to his house to tell his father that Jacob will want to see him when he arrives. Because Jacob is a soldier, Fasseke states, "He must have another kind of assignment, because there is no fighting here in Pandemi" (30). Williams' states, "Akenzua grunted. He was not sure he wanted to see this man who'd come without a doubt to do harm to his son" (35). Chuma mentions to his father, "Even now they watch us with things I do not know or understand because they don't want us to have power" (42). Akenzua knows he is talking about "the white men" (42), and despite being Black, "Jacob, of course, was a member of 'they'" (43). As an elder, Akenzua does not need to be told what Jacob Henry's true intentions are when he arrives in the country, nor does he have to be told whose side he is on. Because Akenzua is so in tune with the universe and is utilizing the African epistemology in the same way as the people in N'Duli, Akenzua intuitively knows and understands the situation without having to be told any additional details from Chuma, or even seeing Jacob Henry for himself.

This intuition is also the reason why Akenzua and his friend, Bonaco, frequently appear in Jacob's life while he is in Pandemi, and press him about why he is really there. In addition to showing up in N'Duli when Jacob visits with Iris, they also appear at his flat in the middle of the novel and near the border of Temian at the end of the novel. As elders in the community, they feel it is up to them to convince Jacob not to do whatever he is planning to do by helping him realize he will be hurting not only his own people, but, ultimately, himself. This concept represents life/space in the African worldview where life is organized in an infinite, unlimited and cyclical way, and where all individuals are directly tied to their community and their nation of people (Myers 98). Therefore, what we do or do not do affects everyone and everything around us. Bonaco states, "But Jacob...isn't an American. He's one of us. They just let him live there until they figure out what they'll do with him" (175). Akenzua responds:

We know you're not here to help us...you're here to help hurt us...And we wonder how this can be, Jacob. We helped raise you. We knew your father and your mother, so we wonder, though in truth, Jacob, you had in you then what you have in you now. Even so, how is it that you are here and your brothers and our brothers are being beaten and killed in that place you call home? How is it that you do not seem to see the connections between this new war in Asia with so many black men fighting and what you do here-. (175-176)

After pointing out the hypocrisy of America with issues of race, Akenzua states, "And that is your country, for which you were here, to do us harm" (178). He continues:

We do not all awake at the same time. Some of us sleep forever, into the grave and beyond. For others there is a wandering in a forest where great trees are marked with signposts. Chuma was lucky. He was wakened, but it is the sleeper that will kill him, or the wanderer, the one who seems awake, but is still with those who lie still. (178)

Utilizing the ethos of the African worldview, Akenzua is trying to appeal to Jacob's spirit by letting him know what the repercussions are for his actions, especially since he knows that it is his spirit that will ultimately determine his thoughts and actions for the future.

Aesthetics in the African worldview is based on the balance of internal and external beauty and is also connected to ethics (Myers 98). A person's ethics, morals, and beauty is represented in their vibrational energy. For example, positive vibrations/energy usually emanate from someone who has a positive spirit and character, and lives a balanced, harmonious, and beautiful life. Negative vibrations/energy usually emanate from someone who has a negative spirit and character, and lives a chaotic, unbalanced, and ugly life. This is why everyone in Pandemi is so skeptical of Jacob because they can feel his negative vibrations/energy and know he is there to harm to his own people. The vibrations one gives off also helps to attract the energy that will be returned. If you project positivity into the universe, positive things will come back to you. Likewise, if you project negativity into the universe, negative things will come back to you. This is why Akenzua asks what negative things Chuma has done lately that would bring Jacob back into his life as a repercussion for his actions. This becomes especially true since everything in African culture happens for a reason; therefore, something had to bring Jacob back to Pandemi. He asks, "What is it that you do that brings Jake like this? Surely not this thing about the new lights and the power station? His coming has brought you here to talk own the night. His coming has not made you happy. And he comes without first writing. What is it that you do, my son?" (41). Akenzua questions whether or not building a nuclear power plant is what has projected chaos into the universe and brought Jacob back to Pandemi to inflict harm on his own people.

Based on cosmology in the African worldview, everything is interconnected and interdependence; no matter how big or small (Azibo 424). Therefore, everything that does or does not occur has an effect on everything else in the universe. This overlaps with epistemology where there is an emphasis on self-knowledge. Myers states that "self is extended to include all of the ancestors, the yet unborn, all of nature, and the entire community" (13). Knowing who you are in relationship to your community and your nation is the most important type of knowledge one gains in their lifetime. This is especially important since every person is born with special gifts given to them by God and the ancestors, and using these gifts becomes our purpose in life. In this novel, Nnmandi Ouro's purpose in life is to be a storyteller; this is why he is a poet and a writer. Abi Pendembou (Fasseke's Chief of Staff) acknowledges Ouro's purpose in life when he calls Ouro, "The griot of griots...The storyteller of storytellers" (20). Williams clarifies Ouru's purpose by stating:

But his lineage demanded that he tell stories. That lineage was long and receded even more deeply into the past than the ironsmiths'. Who had told the stories to entertain the smiths while they worked? Who had kept all the family, clan, and tribal histories in their heads, histories that burst forth in week-long recitations during the festivals or when other important events took place? Surely Fasseke had not forgotten his, Ouro's heritage. (17-18)

Ouro is a bit uneasy about taking the position as the Pandemi Ambassador to the United States because he knows this is not his purpose in life. He is also not sure what type of chaos this might project into the universe for the future. He is also afraid that this may interfere with his true purpose: writing. Not embracing your purpose or doing something other than what you are supposed to do in life is disrespectful to both God and the ancestors. And, this is the last thing Ouro wants to do. This is why he has to confer with an elder (his father) and think deeply about this before he can make an official decision.

In *African/Black Psychology in the American Context: An African-Centered Approach*, Kobi K.K. Kambon points out that one of the most prominent aspects of African culture is their respect for elders (134). Because elders in the community have so much life experience and knowledge, they are highly respected and revered. In African society, it is custom for children take care of their parents and their elderly family members; this is why there are no nursing homes or retirement homes on the continent. Williams states, "Of course the Council of the Elders tried to maintain the old ways, a belief in the ancient God and god, the dignity of the tribe and all people, an order that was maintained by a tradition that began beyond memory" (39). An example of this is when Ouro goes to his father's house to discuss the position offered to him by Fasseke, and when Fasseke finds himself at his father's house the same night asking for guidance regarding Jacob Henry's arrival. Williams' states, "Fasseke knew he would go directly to his father's home to discuss the parts of the talk he could reveal. Fasseke knew he would have done the same, and so would Pendembou" (27). Williams' states, "Fasseke had not imagined that he, too, like Nmadi Ouro, would be sitting in his father's house this night" (31). He continues, "He had not always listened carefully to his father as he ranged down back the years when the Henry's first arrived in Pandemi as missionaries; he needed to know all there was to know, all he'd forgotten, all he'd never known" (31). Jacob also acknowledges that Akenzua is a village elder when he states, "President Fasseke's father's at the village now. He went to my father's church. He is a village elder, you know, like a member of the town council" (111).

When Akenzua and Bonaco show up at Jacob's house in Pandemi, they are worried that Jacob may do something to harm them. But, Akenzua knows that nothing will happen because even though Jacob is the enemy, he still respects these two men as elders. Williams states, "What can he do, Akenzua asked himself. He remembers to be respectful of his elders. He would not do them any harm" (172). Even though Jacob is in Pandemi to do something that will harm the people, he still shows respect to these elders because he knows how important it is in African culture.

Through the embracement of life/space in the African worldview, having children is an important part of African life because it continues the ancestral lineage and completes the circle of the past, the present, and the future (Ani 8-9). Already understanding that everything is interconnected makes it easier to understand how life moves in a cyclical fashion. Even though Chuma does not have any children (even though his wife does become pregnant at the end of the novel), he states, "I want them...and as far as we know, Yema and I can have them.

The doctors agree on that...Doesn't seem right, does it, an African without children? Both according to our traditions and in the West, we're considered ungodly breeders. Consider yourself fortunate, Jake, and supremely blessed" (105). It is also customary in African culture to wait to name the baby until after one gets to know the child so they can be properly named according to their spirit and personality. Usually, African parents wait about a week before the naming ceremony occurs; but, in this novel, they wait one year. Akenzua states, "That's why we do not name children until they are a year old. We think then we can see how they have been shaped" (40-41). Thus, demonstrating the communalistic nature of African people and the direct connection of one's spirit to their name.

Axiology in the African worldview is based on the belief that interpersonal relations between man/man, man/woman, and woman/woman are the most important entity in society (Myers 98). Also, in Cheikh Anta Diop's Two Cradle Theory, African people embrace xenophilia and are very welcoming to strangers and outsiders (Diop 177). This is why it is no surprise that the African people in this novel try to make those who visit their city/village as comfortable as possible. Thinking back to Reverend Henry's first visit back to Pandemi after returning to America, Akenzia states, "We didn't have time for the roast goat because he's taken us by surprise, driving up like that in that funny car" (37). It is customary when someone visits the city or village that they have celebration and a feast. But, since those in the village were not given any notice he was coming, they were not able to prepare the feast ahead of time. Akenzua states, "He laughed one moment and cried the next. We could not understand why this, Pandemi, felt more like home to him than America" (38). He continues:

We offered him a girl, but he refused. A woman, and he refused, and then a boy, and he refused. He thanked us, but said no. He did not seem to be offended. That used to be our custom, in the old, old days, to make a stranger comfortable, and since he no longer was, truly was, a man of God, because his God had left him, he said many times, we thought he would be a man like any other. He refused them all. (38)

When Akenzua and Bonoco travel to N'Duli, they are openly welcomed by the people; they are also given food, and a place to stay. Williams' states:

They were surrounded by a host of people with vaguely familiar faces and guided to the guest house. In the same place and unchanged. Akenzua saw. Good, good. In the light he recognized old friends and hugged them, asked of their children, their health. Quickly food and beer came and Akenzua and Umoja sat down at the table and ate hungrily with their fingers, pausing to compliment the books and to ask of this one and that one. Bonoco did not include the village in his regular run and, while not the strangers Akenzua had become, he was not considered to be a regular visitor. (92-93)

Akenzua states, “We are sorry to disturb you...But I’m happy to see the old hospitality is sound” (93). Later, the two men joke about how they were given food and a place to sleep, but were not offered any women. Akenzua states, “You see the old ways are gone. Where is a woman for me?” (94). He continues, “That is a joke! But, you see, the old ways are indeed gone” (94). Even though the people of N’Duli know Jacob’s true intentions for returning to Pandemi, they still embrace him and Iris as family. Along with having a feast and a celebration in his honor, they chant, “The child returns” (121).

Ontology in the African worldview believes that the spirit and matter are one (Kambon 122). Therefore, everything has a spirit and it is the spirit that is the guiding force behind everything. This is why African people, in general, are a spiritual people. Not only is their ethos guided by the spirit, but there is an emphasis on the interconnectedness of God (or Gods), the ancestors, the unborn, nature, animals, and humans, both past and present (Ani 3). Although Jacob’s father and his family came to Pandemi as missionaries, Williams makes it clear that they did not bring God to the Pandemi people because religion and spirituality were already there. Akenzua states, “We’d always had God, long, long before the Henry’s came” (37).

Just like the struggle Chuma fights to maintain control of Pandemi, this text also includes many references to other African leaders who were also, in 1966, in a life and death struggle for the liberation of their own country and their people from the colonizing forces. Chuma states:

For Patrice independence meant death, as it had for Hammerskjold; for want of it Chief Luthuli and Nelson Mandela remained trapped in that vast concentration camp to the south; for others there had been shattering, fiery deaths, disappearance; for Roberto independence meant duplicitous strivings; for Jomo, a chance to invite more British back to Kenya than had been there before the ‘emergency.’ Wherever one looked, independence had not truly come. And hadn’t that British fool in Rhodesia just recently declared ‘unilateral independence?’ (10-11)

He continues to state how, “There was, still, in every part of Africa, struggle” (11). All of the leaders mentioned above played a pivotal role in the overthrow of colonization across the continent. Patrice Lumumba was the President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1960; Dag Hammarskjold was a Swedish man who was the Secretary General of the United Nations from 1953-1961; Chief Luthuli was the President of the African National Congress (ANC) and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1960; Nelson Mandela will become the President of South Africa, but in 1964 was imprisoned for taking action to end apartheid; and Jomo Kenyatta was the first Prime Minister of Kenya in 1963.

All of these leaders were also overthrown, incarcerated, and/or murdered by outside forces attempting to stop the liberation of African people at any cost. Patrice Lumumba was killed by the United States Government in 1961; Dag Hammarskjöld died in a plane crash in 1961 near the border of Zambia while trying to help end the conflict in the Republic of the Congo; Nelson Mandela was imprisoned from 1964-1990; and Chief Luthuli died when he was hit by a train in 1967. The inclusion of these leaders in this paragraph is not coincidental since Fasseke will also soon be overthrown by the same outside forces (i.e. the American government) that are responsible for the many occurrences listed above.

Many of the African leaders referenced in this novel also embraced an ideology of Pan-Africanism and believed not only in a united Africa, but also in the unification of African people across the globe through solidarity, cooperation, and community. This text begins with a quotation by Leopold Sedar Senghor, a famous Negritude poet and writer, who became the President of Senegal in 1960. He states, “In order to emerge or simply survive as a race, we thought that the only alternative was to steal the conqueror’s weapons, which, incidentally, they were offering to us, secure in the knowledge that they would not be turned against them” (n. pg.). Senghor is brought up again in the novel when Chuma meets with Nmadi Ouro to ask him if he will be the new Pandemi Ambassador to the United States. Fasseke tells him, “Maybe presidents should take the time to talk with poets instead of with other politicians...and Senghor is a poet and so must seek his own counsel” (19). Ouro’s situation is reminiscent of Leopold Senghor’s since he was also a poet, writer, politician, and Pan-African leader.

Overall, it is very difficult to demonstrate, in such a small amount of space, all of the components of the African worldview present in this novel. Yet, it is clear that the African worldview plays a pivotal role in the overall understanding of this story; including who the characters are, how the action that unfolds, and the overall message the reader walks away with. This also means that ignoring or negating the African worldview ensures that important aspects of the story are misunderstood, misinterpreted, and/or neglected. This is extremely evident in many of the previously published reviews of this novel. Not only are they very short in length, but they tend to only focus on the basic plot of the story and not on any of the specific details.

For example, George Packer, in his *New York Times Book Review*, says, “Mr. Williams introduces his basic message: that no matter how far a black goes in America he will never be respected and that his soul inevitably lingers among his brothers across the sea” (26); but then later states “‘Jacob’s Ladder’ belongs to the sentimental left, and is so persistent about its point that the story hits a roadblock at every turn: Halt for the meaning. But the themes of African independence and black identity are too important and too complex to be presented in such a fashion” (26). David W. Henderson, in the *Library Journal*, states “Williams, a prolific and well-regarded black writer, makes clear his understanding of life and attitudes in West Africa and his contempt for U.S. policy in the Third World but unfortunately fails to create the suspense necessary to make this a real ‘thriller’” (130). John D. Kalib, in *MELUS*, published by the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, states:

Jake must discover for himself where precisely he stands on the ladder of upward mobility. May he ascend, descend, or is he firmly cemented in place in the role of CIA pawn? While his brothers and sisters fight for their civil rights in the streets of Selma and Montgomery and Watts back home and his former friend struggles to maintain his political position in Jake's boyhood homeland, Jake must determine whether his 'power' is an illusion or a fact. (130-131).

He continues stating, "Perhaps best known for his 1967 novel *The Man Who Cried I Am*, which pitted the CIA against African Americans, Williams scores again with this portrayal of the American government's interference in a Third World nation's attempt to achieve freedom from encroaching powers" (131). Yet, none of these writers include the novel's countless references to African culture in their review, which is unfortunate because this is where the true depth of the story is found.

Just like *Jacob's Ladder* is the journey of a Black man coming to consciousness, African/Black literature needs to travel down this same path. Representing the idea of Sankofa, the Adinkra symbol for returning to the source; Jacob embraces African culture and becomes conscious of not only who he is as an individual, but he also understands his role in the African community and in the entire African nation. Jacob knows that no matter how much he tries to deny it, his spirit is still African. This is exactly what needs to happen to African/Black literature. African centered scholars in Black Studies must remember that what makes Black Studies "Black" is exactly what makes Black literature "Black": the presence, importance, and utilization of the African worldview (Azibo 422). We must ensure that culture and worldview are taken into account in any future interpretations of African/Black literature. We must ensure that new African centered literary theories are developed by scholars who are trained in African/Black history, life, culture, and worldview. We must ensure that anyone working on this intellectual project has the liberation of African/Black people as their main goal. We must utilize theories from other bodies of knowledge in Black Studies for our analysis of African/Black literature in order to strengthen the discipline further. And, we must remember to include pivotal African/Black writers in our work, such as John A. Williams, who are not only negated and neglected by mainstream society, but the discipline of Black Studies as well. What brought Jacob physically, spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically home was embracing African culture; and this is what will also bring African/Black literature back to the discipline of Black Studies. Traveling down the path toward literary liberation might be a long and difficult journey; but beginning the first steps with African/Black culture and the African worldview ensures the travels ahead will be balanced, harmonious, and centered.

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