

The essay below is taken from the book *Graduate admissions essays: Write your way into the graduate school of your choice* (2000) by Donald Asher.

Raina L. Croff

“The Real History”

It was February again and I could feel that familiar uneasiness returning to me. My fourth grade classmates' stares seemed to chain me to my seat with unbearable weight. I slumped in my chair, head lowered, eyes downcast staring at my open textbook. My nine-year-old body looked the physical portrayal of the effects of racism – degradation, self-consciousness, and embarrassment. My teacher's voice still rang in my mind, “Raina, would you like to read to the class the chapter on slavery?”

At the time, all I knew about my cultural background as an African-American was what the textbooks had made sure I understood – my history in this country began as a slave. This was among the only roles in the history books in which I was shown a reflection of myself – an image painted by someone else, an outsider looking in. I too felt as an outsider when my fourth grade teacher picked me out because of my color, asking me to read for my race to the rest of the class. It was not what the textbooks told me about my African-American heritage that had the greatest impact on me as a young person developing a worldview and a self-perspective. Rather, it was what the writers had strategically left out that stunted my knowledge, pride, and self-worth as a human being contributing to the achievements of the world.

African history before its transplanting, or “before its beginning again” in the New World, has been repeatedly and systematically written out of human history. This is one of the greatest oppressions affecting the African Diaspora. This failure to acknowledge and appreciate African contributions to human civilization creates a void in the self-development and self-perspective of the New World African individual. In turn, its ramifications ripple outward to contort how the rest of the world perceives us. As a developing African-American thinker, I was unable to connect myself to a cultural context greater than what my education had spoon-fed me: redundant images of slave auctions and sardine-packed cargo trains of which the textbooks seemed to never tire. Since that fourth grade experience my parents have taught me that in order to learn anything about myself I must take my own initiatives. It is imperative that I choose my own sources and find accounts of my people's experiences written from their own minds. This is my passion – actively investigating sources of knowledge from which I can draw my own conclusions. The systematic suppression of African history in conventional education has only added fuel to my curiosity to learn about a history in which a reflection of myself emanates from the center. I want to share my passion and my research findings with others, especially reaching children at an early age so that they may have firm foundations on which to build knowledgeable minds and healthy self-esteem.

As a double major at Beloit College in anthropology and classical civilizations I have a strong background from which I can develop a successful future *doing* my passion - researching and teaching. I want to concentrate on the sociocultural traditions of West Africa, as well as studying her great achievements and contributions of antiquity. I want to research how traditional social patterns have been transplanted among the Diaspora in the New World, especially among African-Americans. I want to investigate this through a historical-archaeological approach as well as from a modern perspective through cultural anthropology. In order to achieve this goal I must interact between a web of disciplines: African and African-

American studies; archaeology; and cultural anthropology. Ultimately my goal is to actively engage the public. I plan to do this through volunteer and professional training programs that focus primarily but not only on African-Americans, targeting our youth and immersing them in the rediscovery of African history and contribution through education in archaeology.

My vision works from the mindset that African history is world history. It belongs to all of us as a part of our collective human history. I also believe in the educating of the peoples from the inside out – instilling a solid foundation of African knowledge in the black community and reaching out from there. My vision begins in the teaching of primarily African-Americans with emphasis on the educating and hands-on involvement of our youth, but ultimately it is to equip them with the tools to be the educators of a wider, cross-cultural audience. A major part of my vision is in leading excavations, both in the New World and in Africa, where African-Americans will have the opportunity to dig, learn, and hopefully develop a deeply seeded respect and passion for their long-neglected histories. In addition, I want to set up an internship program where African-American students can be African archaeological research assistants, training them in excavation techniques and mentoring them in scholarly research methodology.

I want my brothers and sisters to experience the same excitement and inspiration that I feel through the empowerment of research and re-discovery of themselves and their history. I want them to share the feeling I had during a visit to Howard University when I laid my eyes on the bones of first-generation New World Africans whose remains had been salvaged from a black burial ground in New York. I was fascinated and moved to learn how they had kept their West African tradition alive even in their death through the details of their burial ritual. Archaeology is an eye-opening and mind-enriching avenue for the education of our youth. It is a field of ever-advancing scientific technology while simultaneously a science of human imagination through the employment of individual interpretation. After all, archaeology is the material evidence of human ritual. It is the byproduct of behavior, which is itself a manifestation of an ideology. This is what I want to re-discover and teach – African *ideas* that have been forgotten, mis-credited, or stealthily lost from the pages of history. It is time they were recognized and repatriated to and by their own people.

I have already made some progress toward my goal of becoming an Afrocentric archaeologist. As both a McNair Scholar and an Associated Colleges of the Midwest Minority Scholar, I designed an archaeological research project. This past summer I was the research assistant to archaeologist Dr. Robert Salzer. I spent 13 weeks at the internationally recognized southwest Wisconsin Gottschall rockshelter site doing intense excavation and conducting original research. As the assistant ceramics analyst at the site, my project was to research and record the style category and vertical distribution of each of the 2,000 pottery sherds unearthed over the past 14 years of excavation at this site. In addition to this, I had to format a computer program into which this data could be stored and re-opened as new sherds are uncovered over the following years. Ultimately, in addition to an in-depth research paper, I will speak about my project results at a professional archaeological conference in the spring. Also, my findings will culminate in a joint publication by me and my mentor in a professional journal – an article which will challenge the pre-established ceramics chronology for that region. This research and analyst assistantship and publication has equipped me with the archaeological training and exposure that I will need in order to be successful in my future studies in Old and New World African Archaeology - a rare opportunity for an undergraduate.

In addition to this experience, by the time this essay is received, I will be in Senegal, West Africa, studying anthropology at the Universite de Cheika Anta Diop – the father of and greatest mind of his time in Afrocentric anthropology. Finally, I will be doing what I am passionate about – experiencing firsthand West African culture. This trip will be the physical reconnection for which I have been mentally preparing myself. I see this experience as the launch pad toward a successful future as a student in the Ph.D. program in African studies at Temple University.

I am the first person on both sides of my family to attend college, let alone continue my education into the graduate level. I have made it this far, but if I am to make my goals into achievements, I must find my future at Temple University. I see myself as a dedicated, serious, and passionate student and leader, and I am confident that I possess the drive and self-discipline to successfully complete my doctoral study at Temple University. I strongly feel I have found my *nia*, or purpose, and now I must take the next step toward making my vision a reality. I have researched African studies and anthropology programs at Temple University and am excited to find that they align perfectly with what I want to study and teach others. I am enthusiastic about my field of study and anticipate the day when I will be teaching. In my study of Professor Molefi Kete Asante's book *Afrocentricity*, in speaking of his writing and the transformation of one's worldview through Afrocentricity he states, "Formless becomes form; black spaces are filled with truth . . . a new perspective, a new approach, a new consciousness invades our behavior" (pg. 6). I think of my own vision taking form, becoming reality. I will know the reward of the pursuit of my goal when I will see a young person sitting tall, head raised, and voice loud and confident as I ask her to read to the rest of the class about her ancestors and the mighty West African kingdom of Cayor.