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Makia Harper

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# Better Than Before

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Better Than Before

by

Makia Harper

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts Integrated Media Arts, Hunter College  
The City University of New York

2017

Thesis Sponsor:

January 3, 2018

Date

Signature

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January 3, 2018

Date

Signature of Second Reader

Shanti Thakur

## **ABSTRACT**

*Better than Before* is an experiential art installation that profiles the life of James Isreal, a Vietnam vet who shares a spiritual journey that is filled with self-discovery, introspection, and hope in the midst of war and abhorrent racism. His poignant retrospective follows his struggle to find peace in the midst of trauma and disease, providing life lessons that transcend the pangs of adversity and the unknown.

## Project Description

“Better than Before” is an audio-visual installation highlighting the life of James Isreal, a Vietnam veteran recently diagnosed with multiple myeloma<sup>1</sup> due to Agent Orange<sup>2</sup> exposure, living in the small town of Siler City, North Carolina. Mr. Isreal uses large doses of comedy and his unwavering faith as he faces one of the most difficult struggles of his life. Transitioning to the last third of his life he finds great solace in the person he has become, the support of his family, and the anecdotes that have proven to have gotten him through life’s unpredictable, difficult, winding journey. By his own reflection, he is amazed that he is still alive; however, his unyielding faith, light heartedness and strength propels him through serious illness, discrimination, and war with undaunted optimism. He shares a spiritual journey, filled with self-discovery, reflection, and hope intersected by racism and the battlefields of South Asia.

The installation is a compilation of a 32-minute audio interview dissected into 3-parts, chronicling Isreal's journey with the disease. The sections are: Vietnam, faith, and his philosophy on life, which are questions he’s answered that remain somehow hopeful, and those that are unanswered and rhetorical. In many ways, this project named itself. As I oscillated between derivations of self-help book titles, philosophical quotes, and religious scriptures, I thought about my uncle's life within the context of where he has been. It may have been easier to choose a title that lamented my anger and innate urge to underscore the need for justice for him and

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Multiple myeloma-

<https://www.cancer.org/cancer/multiple-myeloma/about/what-is-multiple-myeloma.html>

Multiple myeloma is a type of cancer of the plasma cells of the bone marrow. These are protein-making cells that normally make all of the different kinds of antibodies of the immune system. In multiple myeloma, the plasma cells undergo what is referred to as a **malignant** transformation and become cancerous. These myeloma cells stop making different forms of protein in response to the immune system's needs and instead start to produce a single abnormal type of protein, a monoclonal or M protein. Multiple myeloma plasma cell populations accumulate in the bone marrow and these collections of cells called plasmacytomas can erode the hard, outer shell or cortex, of the bone that normally surrounds the marrow. These weakened bones show thinning of the bone such as is seen in nonmalignant osteoporosis or what appear to be punched out or lytic bone lesions. These lesions may cause pain and even breaks or fractures of the weakened bones.

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Agent Orange-

<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/agent-orange-in-vietnam-program/what-is-agent-orange/>

Supplemental on agent orange patterns of usage

The extent and patterns of usage of Agent Orange and other herbicides in Vietnam (article)

and other veterans that face similar circumstances. When I intently listened to him from the space of the present, his lucidity, peace, and humility couldn't have been more evident. In many ways he'd already written his story, reflecting upon the ways in which his life was better now after living through these transformational life experiences.

### **Roots in Christianity**

My uncle's story metaphorically rests at the crux of Christianity and Protestantism. The story of "before and after" *transformation* lies essentially at the heart of Christianity-- being saved by Christ from our previous self-serving ways to a more enlightened experience that embraces the importance and fullness of life within a larger context. Frequently, he alludes to his youth, a time before he understood life and the way that it has been enriched after building a relationship with God. He illustrates how his diagnosis with a terminal disease went on to reveal a certain Christ-like enlightenment and elevation through suffrage.

The installation is staged like a corner of a living room: we see an old leather chair, a dark colored rotary phone placed on an end table. Slightly to the left of the chair there are *Earth Wind and Fire*<sup>3</sup> records and an old record player. The living room is reminiscent of my uncle's own living room in the late 1960's/early 1970's, replicating the moment that he heard God call his name, a quintessential life changing moment in his spiritual journey. Lying on the arm of the old chair is a wire-bound journal that offers a prompt to viewers to share a moment that was a turning point in their own life. In the front of the room we see a television set that is playing the audio from his interview; we see old pictures from my uncle's family album, Philadelphia in the 1960's and 1970's, and images of the countryside where he currently resides.

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Earth Wind and Fire Biography <http://www.earthwindandfire.com/history/biography/>

## Background Information

James Isreal, a Philadelphia native, is my uncle. I grew up moderately close to him, and was always intrigued by his humor and fascinated by his lightheartedness. I was curious about his personal story but never knew a lot about him. Being the oldest of four, 11 years older than my father, allowed for protruding gaps between their generations as well as the growth of family secrets. I remember asking my grandmother one day about the graffiti on the wall of our basement with my uncle's nickname, which said "Welcome Back Frog." She explained that he had gotten the name from a friend in elementary school because of his thick glasses, and that managed to stay with him. She also said that it was made when he came back from the Vietnam War. I didn't know a lot of the details of the war, other than it was not necessary and lots of people were severely hurt and killed. No one in my family talked about it much and the topic was not to be discussed around my uncle. I later learned that he was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)<sup>4</sup> but as a child I did not understand what that fully meant beyond having bad dreams about the past.

Learning of my uncle's PTSD raised a lot of questions for me. I was close to his eldest son, my cousin, and not his daughter, my other cousin that he had in another marriage. I often wondered why he seemed disconnected to her. Throughout my childhood and early adult years I remained very cordial with him but didn't inquire about his life. In 1999 he and his wife left Philadelphia and moved to North Carolina to follow his church. I admit that I found this odd, but I remained silent for the next 13 years until my grandmother died in August 2012. It was shortly after that time that I felt the need to ask questions. Four months after her death, he was diagnosed with multiple myeloma and since that time I've gradually gained the courage to ask questions to

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Post Trauma Stress Disorder  
<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml>

find out more about his story and our family story. It's important to note, that my grandmother, the matriarch, was also the keeper of all our family secrets and stories. With her death, I was afraid all knowledge would also be lost if I didn't start asking my uncle for answers to the questions I'd never asked.

Wedge in my desire to understand more of my uncle's story was my own journey. I needed to make sense of my existence, as I had lost three of the most influential people in my life, and then made an abrupt move that needed to happen but seemed like more trouble than it was worth. I was thrust from my late blooming young adult years and placed firmly into adulthood, mostly alone, trying to understand what life meant. This proved exceedingly difficult since the voices I had grown dependent on suddenly shrank to whispers of my past. It created a yearning for me to understand my family, while seeking a semblance of peace for my life and myself. My uncle's reserved and playful demeanor inspired me to seek him out and to find the same resilience and stillness for myself.

In October 2013, I visited my uncle at his home in North Carolina. I didn't really know what to expect given that I was visiting a man with terminal cancer. During my visit, I found much more than I could have asked for; I was so inspired by the way he had been dealing with this illness. His faith in God and his humor amazed me. While I could see slight traces of fear in his eyes, there was this courage and strength that seeped from him and filled the room. My experience with him that year inspired me to document his life. We were both making transitions into new chapters of our lives, and I couldn't deny the impact of his life on my own. Paying homage to his journey was the best way that I could thank him for the way he helped me find purpose in myself.



## Research Analysis

The research tools utilized for this project were a combination of academic texts, articles, books and films. I sought to understand the intersectionality of trauma, spirituality, and racism, a near intrinsic connection for Black Americans. The research topics encompassed faith and spirituality, the therapeutic and biological effects of positive thinking on the body, the psychological effects of war, and the effects of the Vietnam War on Black male soldiers.

I also researched the role of the oral tradition and healing that emerges from telling and embracing one's story, a process that continues to be therapeutic for my uncle as he finds catharsis and serenity in the process. Storytelling has been used by therapists in tandem with psychoanalytic sessions.

"Clients' stories are not "simply" stories. They are rich, dynamic manifestations of clients' struggles with disturbing feelings. Storytelling by clients involves both defensive and therapeutic processes," (Rennie, 1994, p 240).

While the art and practice of storytelling is a cultural staple with people of African descent, borrowing from West African griots<sup>5</sup>, there isn't a lot discussion within communities around its benefits and the ways in which healing and support can be found when dealing with trauma. Perhaps the subconscious affects are more acute than any direct communal discussion could provide. When looking to craft this story I considered the way in which the oral tradition/story telling was used in West African and Native American cultures as a mechanism that upholds history while allowing for critical life lessons to be shared utilizing a safe and

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Griot  
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/griot>  
<https://www.britannica.com/art/griot>

creative platform allowing for others to participate in the experience as well as ‘emphasize individual reflection,’ (Hodge, Pasqua, Marquez & Geishirt-Cantrell, 1992).

Storytelling rests at the core of my identity, the ability to creatively tell stories was passed down to me by my grandmothers, as they remembered growing up in the Jim Crow South as Black young women, as maids, factory workers, and domestics. It was through stories that I began to understand the dynamics of race in the US; I began to recognize pain and trauma, especially ‘Black pain’ which is still taboo in the Black community. In her book *Black Pain* psychologist Terrie Williams (2008), discusses the positive that can be found in suffering and the role of faith while in pain.

“Suffering is one of life’s great equalizers. Suffering makes us human, tests our faith strengthens our belief, and in an ironic twist, can give us the powerful will to hope and a burning desire to give life meaning,” (Williams, 2008).

While my uncle might disagree on the way I see racism, trauma, and faith converge, it is quite clear that faith lies at the center and is the base of his spiritual journey. It’s the foundation and quite possibly may be part of the reason that he remains alive with 95% of his body riddled with cancer for nearly 5 years.

“Studies have found that injections of harmless substances, even water, can trigger the suppression of tumors in rats (this is known as a learned immunosuppression response) but there is also that these conditioned rats have a weaker ability to resist tumors that occur at a later date. This may indicate that our positive beliefs might help to postpone the inevitable decline of health,” (Newberg, 2006, 12).

There continues to be a great deal of research done on the healing benefits of prayer and faith while there are few concrete results but the correlation between overall wellness and faith is apparent:

“According to a recent CDC survey of more than 31,000 adults, 43% had prayed for their own health, 24% were prayed for by others, and 10% had prayed as part of a group on behalf of others—what's called intercessory prayer. The survey found that prayer was by far the most commonly used method among complementary and alternative therapies. And the National Institutes of Health has sponsored at least \$3.1 million in research over the past few years to study prayer's effect on heart disease, cancer, and AIDS, among other conditions,” (Ness, 2011).

Over the past 10 years I have done research and have studied the impact of a spiritual practice on one's overall well being. This has focused primarily on the role of one's faith and ways that it affects the body and mind. In my studies I have come to examine the physical effects of yoga, the emotional freedom technique (EFT)<sup>6</sup>, meditation, prayer, and one's belief system. My uncle asserts in his interview, “I should have been dead by now,” and for all intents and purposes and statistics on his disease staged at his level, he's probably right. However, Dr. Andrew Newberg writes about the power of belief. He opens his book with an anecdotal story about a cancer patient's belief in a power of a new drug that was promoted as a miracle drug. This belief effectively correlated to an almost instantaneous remission, however, a couple months later the medication was found ineffective, the patient died soon after (Newberg, 2006). “Each year thousands of cases of remarkable recoveries are described and although such

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Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT)  
<https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/types/emotional-freedom-technique>

miracles are often attributed to the power of faith and belief, the majority of scientists are skeptical of such claims,” (Newberg, 2006, 12).

While my uncle is not in remission, it is quite interesting to note that his cancer hasn't gotten worse and for the most part he has relatively mild reactions to his chemotherapy.

Spirituality/ Religion in the Black American community has in many ways lain at the foundation of our existence since the early beginnings of slavery. While Christianity was used to dominate, manipulate and control, it has become the source of strength for thousands of years. According to The Pluralism Project<sup>7</sup> (2017), “Christianity—adapted to their situation—became a deeply-held faith and a means of self-preservation”.

Like his ancestors, the winding road to Christianity was greatly paved from trauma. His troubled relationship with his father oddly led him to Vietnam, which led to a spiritual awakening years later after processing the experience of war. He shares a common story but one that is often not heard or told by Black men.

My curiosity about the psychological and socio-economic effects of the Vietnam War on Black men began about 22 years ago when I saw the film “Dead Presidents,”<sup>8</sup> a film produced and directed by Allan and Albert Hughes, about three Black veterans experiences coming back to the United States after the Vietnam War. The film alluded to the war that they faced once they got home, one injured, suffering from PTSD, drug addiction somehow normalizing into a country that was filled with racism and systematic structures and institutions that made it nearly impossible to earn a living as a Black Vietnam veteran. Their hopelessness, emasculation, and despair led to a plot to heist worn out federal currency from the Department of Treasury. The

film was a Hollywood cacophony of a grim bloody, action movie, filled with a social and political statement about war.

The film was loosely based on the life of Haywood Kirkland, a Vietnam vet whose story appears in the book by author Terry Wallace (1984), *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans*. Wallace saw the role of Blacks in Vietnam as "seminal in American history." Vietnam was America's first fully integrated war, and Wallace thought the armed services could present an unprecedented opportunity to advance race relations.<sup>7</sup>

I vividly remembered thinking that the film had uncovered the blanket of whispers, uncertainty and pain that had been associated with a war I'd only heard murmurs from when I talked to grandmother about my uncle. It was also in that moment in my 16 years a subconscious desire to uncover a story that is rarely told. Similar narratives in Wallace's book catalogue my uncle's story on the trauma of war and racism he experienced inside the military. Few of them unable to be squandered by their experience, and for those who weren't, were much like Haywood Kirland who is now Ari Sesa Merratazon, also transformed holding a similar tale of life before Vietnam and life after.

### **Inspiration**

The inspiration for this project rests within the works of the most eloquent and vivid writers, poignant ethnographic Black filmmakers, and non-Black filmmakers whose works highlight the sacredness of familial relationships, history, and identity. Their narratives and representation of truth, family, struggle, and the Black experience accentuate the crafting of this story. Memories of my grandmother's stories telling their experiences growing up in a poor Jim Crow south pierced though the spaces in this project. The ethereal and mystical tone of this

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on Terrie Wallace, Washington Post, 1995 - [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1995/10/15/dead-presidents-precident/aab9754e-310e-4e3c-a762-2969c0eca92e/?utm\\_term=.8f751b1509d6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1995/10/15/dead-presidents-precident/aab9754e-310e-4e3c-a762-2969c0eca92e/?utm_term=.8f751b1509d6)

project was heavily influenced by the film *Eve's Bayou*, by Kasi Lemmons, as her film with its poetic fluidity dances between the spiritual and human experience, the black family, circling between space and varied realities. The film begins with narration from the present and works backwards from an upended chronologically as told by Eve Batiste. The story of the Batiste family, its Southern roots, and its skeletons are found in the darkest spaces within the closet of the family's foundation. The story conjoins the supernatural with reality producing an esoteric version of this families' truth.

Perhaps the film's use and understanding of memory is one of the great inspirations for shaping this project. The film opens with the following narration, "Memory is the selection of images, some elusive, others printed indelibly on the brain."<sup>8</sup> The film unravels memory and its nuance with delicacy that becomes entrenched within the story telling process. The ability to connect vivid moments with those that became slightly distorted led to a certain magical realism that I wanted to recreate in my piece aurally. Much like Lemmon's co-existence of ghosts and humans, past and present, my project is crafted with an ambiguity between space/time, the real, "imagined" and the spiritual world.

At the base of my artistic career is one of my favorite writers, James Baldwin, whose literary eloquence and transparency inspires my work. Both as a filmmaker and as a writer he has been a pivotal influence on the way in which I tell stories, especially those of the Black experience. His candor, use of language, effervescent mapping of social issues, the Black church, identity, and racism in America have become the tracings of my work. The power of the Black church and its influence on identity and spiritual grounding was the literary epicenter for the project.

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*Eve's Bayou* (film) 1997, directed by Kasi Lemmons: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119080/>

The semi-autobiographical “*Go Tell It on the Mountain*” (Baldwin, 1954) was a narrative that connected to the story of my uncle, as it revealed the impact of the Black church and Christianity as a means of survival as a Black American. The main character, John, much like my uncle, traveled a spiritual journey that was precipitated by a stern and abusive father one which removed him from his traditional religious underpinnings. While my uncle’s story may seem to be the inverse, I find many parallels as John’s quest in the story is largely about his search for himself as a Black, gay male, in a racist, homophobic, society that still reels from the effects of slavery at large and within the Black community. Baldwin provides a sharp and analytical critique of the Pentecostal church, but doesn’t completely divorce the main character or himself from some of its beliefs regarding the human spirit and one’s connection to God. *Go Tell It on The Mountain* (Baldwin, 1954) is filled with Bible verses matched with the lyrical prose reminiscent of those found in Proverbs in the Bible. It is filled with a lyrical voice that I wanted to recreate in my project as I began to understand my uncle’s journey as well my own. Layering and re-examining traditional Christian ideology would allow for me to create a piece that would offer a secular and philosophical relatability. The following passage reads with profound wisdom; I attempted to recreate a similar wisdom and growing omniscience as Baldwin reflects on his characters’ personal journey.

But to look back from the stony plain along the road which led one to that place is not at all the same thing as walking on the road; the perspective to say the very least, changes only with the journey; only when the road has, all abruptly and treacherously, and with an absoluteness that permits no argument, turned or dropped or risen is one able to see all that one could not have seen from any other place, (Baldwin, 1954).

Coming of age, enlightenment, identity were themes that resounded as I began to parallel the stories between my uncle and myself. The book, *“The House of Mango Street”*, by Sandra Cisneros (1991), was the impetus for crafting intricate vignettes. She tells the story Esperanza Cordero as she creates a semi- autobiographical tale of a Latina women’s experience with migrant parents living in Chicago. Her character struggles to understand the complexities of womanhood and of being a woman of color. Cisneros employed a writing style comprised of small scenes or stories . I borrowed from this style as my project consisted of several independent scenes; each story related but not following a traditional linear structure. Instead, much like Cisneros, I used my own narration to thread the story.

The personal narrative and even more specifically the family narrative was a form that I yearned to explore several years before the production of this project. About a year and half before I got the idea for my thesis I was reacquainted with Professor Shanti Thakur’s film: *“7 Hours to Burn”*<sup>9</sup> as a student in her documentary production class. I’d seen the film in the late 90’s. It told the stories of her parents whose individual experiences coincide, riddled with the devastation of war, ethnic and religious conflict, giving way to another subtle story from which she would emerge. Her perspective as daughter, filmmaker, observer was enveloped by vibrant imagery, archival footage, and performance that seemed to crisscross and untangle her relationship with and understanding her family history, merging the past with a transcendental reflection on her own identity and heritage.

The experimental structure of this film allowed for each role to be examined, recognized, detached and re-attached. In my project I sought to create a blended dimensionality and

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“Seven Hours to Burn” 9 min 1999  
[http://www.shantithakur.com/pdf/SEVENHOURS\\_presskit.pdf](http://www.shantithakur.com/pdf/SEVENHOURS_presskit.pdf)  
<http://www.wmm.com/filmcatalog/pages/c529.shtml>



perspective, as I am a niece, filmmaker, observer, and woman. It was important to create a layered distinction but parallel stories between my uncle and myself.

## Process

When I first thought about this piece I thought that this would be a traditional documentary divided into four acts, chronicling my uncle's early life up to the current moment. In the summer of 2014, I went to Siler City with a friend's borrowed DSLR, light kit, and Zoom recorder. The sun was rich and warm, pouring into the camera. I closed the f-stop while still compensating for my uncle's dark skin. It was challenging, but, I set up each shot intricately, then proceeded to set up his sound and then finally I began to rattle off my prepared interview questions. After about 20 minutes I knew things weren't working but I plowed through the first day of my week-long shoot. Later that night, I watched the footage. It was overexposed and only mildly audible. The thing that bothered me most, though, was that my usually casual, fun loving, comedic uncle was unnaturally aloof and uptight. Perhaps it was the question about the relationship with his father and the pain that it dredged up; or the question about his daughter who was born while he was in Vietnam knowing very little of her early life; maybe it was the chemo that seemed to rest in his feet, making it difficult to walk. It could have been all of these, but what I knew in that moment was the footage that I had was not only aesthetically displeasing, but it didn't reveal the man I'd come to know.

At the end of my visit I stopped shooting and instead just learned to listen and watch him. We rode to Wal-Mart together; I watched him operate his smart TV with pride and vigor; I went with him to his weekly blood screening, and we rehashed the moment he got his diagnoses. When I left North Carolina, I knew the footage wouldn't work and I needed to find another way

to tell his story on my own. Wedged between a few decades, lay our lives that were somehow parallel to one another, a journey we both shared. I knew I needed to learn from him. I knew the form that the piece would take needed to be poetic, as I needed to feel like I was with him in his living room sharing his story; it also needed to have the elements of the story telling form with which I had become familiar.

When I arrived back in New York I was disappointed. While I was appreciative to have been able to spend time with my uncle, I had no idea how I would capture his story. I thought about going back trying to hire a crew in North Carolina, but my uncle's health seemed to be worsening and I didn't have the funds to get back to North Carolina, let alone afford a production team. One evening I was talking to my uncle's wife and I told her my dilemma about the footage not working well and my need to tell his story to complete the project. She told me that he wasn't feeling well and even if I were to come back he probably wouldn't be up for a shoot. She suggested recording him over the phone. At first, I was apprehensive because I didn't think that I had the proper technology to capture his voice over the phone. After our conversation, I searched for high quality phone recording apps and saw there was a plethora.

Over the next month I reviewed my uncle's interview and my questions. I began to get excited about the possibility of an audio documentary. A few days later I decided that I wanted to test the audio, so I called my uncle. We chatted for a few minutes and I recorded the call. I played the conversation back and called him back right away, it was crystal clear. I peered at my interview questions as we talked. Sheepishly I asked him, "If you could write your own story, what would it be about?" Emphatically, he said, "My story, it would be about God," It was at that moment it was clear to me that the foundation of the story would be his faith, and secondly his experience in Vietnam. That evening I recorded our "impromptu" hour and half conversation and

it was one of four or five (similarly long) conversations that would end up in the documentary portion of the project.

During that time, I thought a lot about my grandmother and the way she used to tell me stories in her living room, much like uncle did on my last visit. I thought it would be amazing if I could recreate the living room and make that a part of the project: to create a set that would reflect his past and represent part of my own. It seemed most fitting to begin nestling the foundation of his story in one of the places where he found and recognized God and his faith. He provided a vivid explanation of one of the many moments he heard God calling him, but there was something ethereal, magical, transparent and remarkably honest about his encounter with God in his living room. He starts, “I was smoking, getting high, I was doing so much... listening to Earth Wind and Fire,” humming the music as if he re-entered that space again, his memory invaded the present and for a few minutes, I joined him as if we were in parallel worlds, also embracing the transitory stillness and presence of God, shaping him, drawing him further than we could both perceive.

After we finished that interview I knew for sure that would be the backdrop – a living room outfitted in the décor of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. I’d imagined his living room to be a cross between the set of the sitcom “All in the Family”<sup>10</sup> and the sitcom “Good Times”<sup>11</sup> aesthetically and metaphorically converging worlds experienced by him; a racist and bigoted middle America fused with the experiences of a man with limited resources working hard to provide a life for his family for an African American male.

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“All in the Family” <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0066626/>

11

“Good Times” <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070991/>



Figure 1- *“All in the Family”* Set



Figure 2 - *“Good Times”* Set

I initially intended for the living room space to be interactive and less experiential, as I planned to have a series of phones connected to a part of his interview, each phone would

represent a major part of his life. Initially, the script was organized in four chapters following a more chronological structure, starting with this early life to his time in Vietnam to the present. But I found that it would be hard for people to truly follow his story that way. It could be quite possible that someone could hear the end of the story or the most recent part without understanding how he got there. This was of the utmost importance to me. I realized that I wanted to have more control in the way the story was told while also being able to move fluidly through time and space both embracing and challenging linear storytelling conventions.



Figure 3- *Better than Before* Installation

Additionally, I knew that the technical component of programming telephones would overwhelm. I had some experience with working with electronics, but I didn't feel comfortable testing out my skills for the project. I wanted the focus of the installation to be more about the lived experience rather than the wizardry technology has to offer. I also didn't want the viewers of the installation to become consumed by the form. The most significant part for me

was the story and ability for others to experience and be inspired by his story. I decided that the simple technology worked best and it was important to me for people to have the complete experience of the space so they could also be assisted on their own journey using the living room set as a vessel.

The way in which the set design happened was just as serendipitous and edifying as the process of telling my uncle's story. The only piece of furniture that I knew that I had for sure was a beat up red leather couch that was in the television studio in Hunter North, but I was ecstatic to have it, and it was perfect. But what happened after was truly nothing short of miraculous. I asked almost everyone I knew for old household items, coffee tables, lamps that had a bit of a retro feel to them. I described the look that I was trying to achieve and my boss said he had a rug and a couple other items, a lamp and table that he thought might work. I remember when he brought the items into the office; my eyes lit up with glee, I couldn't believe he had an old Persian rug that was red and gold, a heavy-duty brass lamp and a tiny coffee table. It was absolutely perfect! I could see the set beginning to shape up. I knew that since I had the major items that it would be the details and accessories that would make the rest of the set an authentic late 60's early 70's living room. I borrowed the infamous "Earth Wind and Fire" album and rotary phone from Professor Marty Lucas and found bound clippings from *Life Magazine* and a red and creme colored painting for Liberty Bonds that had a sponge painted image of the Statue of Liberty in the background from Professor Stuart Ewen. The final additions would be a piece of gold felt material that Professor Shanti Thakur had from a previous set and a record player that an IMA student had just purchased. I purchased flowers, and stationery to adorn the coffee tables. It was very clear that I too was truly on a spiritual journey. Crafting the project itself, was pure alchemy.



One of my major challenges when developing this story was figuring out how to insert myself into the narrative. I was very comfortable sharing my uncle's story and the lessons that he provided for me but felt very insecure about my presence in the piece, shying away from the story that in many ways reflected a reciprocal experience. Hiding my grief, insecurity, and fear lied about the missing element of the intricate narrative of the story; me. I somehow thought that because I was the author of the project that it would somehow fill in the wide gaps. However, I found that the elusive music and the vague poetry I inserted early in the story, seemed to make the spaces even bigger. For several months the thought of recording my voice over made me cringe. I had immense trouble listening to the sound of my own voice. I think the turning point for me in this process was the moment that I surrendered to the process of storytelling and heeded the advice of my thesis advisor as he gently but firmly told me to get over myself - and I did. I realized that this project, while it was about me, was also much bigger than me; it was work that was not only healing and inspiring to my uncle and to myself but it could also be to those that would experience it. In order for that to happen I needed to be transparent.

I began to think more about why I decided to do the piece and I realized I needed desperately something to hold on to, as the years of death, financial adversity, and health issues seemed almost too much to bear. I needed to understand my own faith in a different way. The God that I worshiped for years seemed somehow different and distant to me as my anxiety and fear of my own uncertain future seemed to strangle me in my solitude. I also knew that I needed guidance and peace. Once I punctured that emotional space, the floodgates opened for me as I began writing my section of the story, adding to the script my own spiritual journey and connection to God and the world. I even ventured to explore the racism that I experience and continue to experience as Black American woman, I recalled stories of being chased and being

called racially charged names as a child. I hadn't thought about them with such vividness in years; I suppressed them out of politeness and excruciating pain. In this revelation, I created a distinctive perspective that organized the narrative, connected my story to that of my uncle's, and served as a navigational tool to the listener.

Technically, there were several challenges that I had with the audio component of this piece. Working solely in audio was a brand-new experience, as I had only ever done video and film work, using only audio to tell the story was quite challenging for me. I spent quite a bit of time translating my imagery into sounds, shifting my visual thinking so that it could be translated aurally. I thought about scenes that my uncle would recount, drawing out the details in my mind and making lists of the things that I would visualize, then I would go back and think about the ways that I could create similar environment sonically, creating the sound environment was a multi-phase process.

Once I created the sound environments, I needed to think about the natural ebb and flow of the piece. I considered the shifts in tone and created a relatively consistent and expansive musical sound track. After this, I began filling in the remaining spaces with various sections of my voice-over. I found that editing the sound was quite challenging initially. In the first stages of the post-production process I used my transcripts to guide my edits until I became familiar with following the sound. I had become accustomed to using video as the visual cue and crutch for editing audio, with this process my listening skills became more acute, easily using natural voice inflections pauses, tone, and empty space to guide editing of the piece.

Layering the sounds was also a process that was a little tricky for me, as I had to move out of the linear formats that I'd been accustomed to allowing the sound to take shape and have its



own fluidity, instead of stifling the sound. I struggled with creating natural space and dimension with sound trying to move away from a staccato placement of sound effects and sound environments.

For the final elements of the post-production process, I brought on a sound editor so that I could have cleaner edits. I felt that although my editing work did improve throughout the post-production process I needed to have someone to clean up spots that felt a bit clunky and uneven. I worked with Samantha Riddell, an artist I worked with on another project who had a good sense of my aesthetics as a filmmaker and an understanding of my story. Though, looking forward as I start to travel with the project I would like to do another sound edit with Pro-Tools and record my voice over with professional equipment. Surprisingly, I recorded most of my audio with my iPhone.

This project was in many ways “a coming home” experience, artistically, creatively and spiritually. The piece allowed me to use all my storytelling skills that I previously felt had become dormant. With this piece I got a chance to explore and use different styles of writing; intertwining elements of poetry, narrative, and screenwriting. I interlaced my visual skills as a filmmaker to design and edit the story. I realized a new love for sound and gained a better idea of how sounds work psychologically, and the ways that it can be used as a storytelling vehicle -- not to mention that working with sound is downright fun. Probably the most exciting part of this “coming home” process was that I got a chance to work with elements of theater for the installation and that I had forgotten about how I thoroughly enjoyed set design and establishing the atmosphere for “period specific” work. There is a certain “in the moment” elasticity that I think the theater offers that film doesn’t, so I was able to make subtle up to the moment changes shifting tables, moving sound, that influenced with the way the audience interacted with the piece.

I think that generally as an artist, I grew exponentially; the process itself took over two years to complete. In that time my confidence has grown, as I took a lot of risks creatively pushing far beyond where I ever thought that I could. I converged mediums in a way that I had never felt comfortable with, finding and embracing my voice and story as an artist. I also shed my linear and standardized approach to storytelling, finding ways to embellish and release the narrative threads incorporating more experimental and non-linear forms of storytelling. These are all achievements and practices that I intend use in the future as an artist. I plan to explore more multimedia, using more mixed narrative and experimental approaches to documentary filmmaking.

### **Exhibition/Distribution**

One of the goals for this piece is for it to exist as a multi-platform piece of artwork extending to multiple forms. The project will tour as a comprehensive installation but will tour as individual elements as an audio documentary and as and a longer-term mobile digital installation. I am planning to exhibit the installation in art galleries and small museums that house experiential installations. More specifically, I would like the installation to be a part of themed curations that either focus on the social and emotional trauma of war, intersections between social justice and spirituality, Christianity & spirituality, and the Black experience in America.

I will reach out to local galleries throughout the country. In the early months of this phase

I will focus on the New York and Philadelphia areas working with venues such as Mocada and the Brooklyn Media Center, which often feature local works by artists of color. In addition, I will be working with the African American Museum in Philadelphia to have the piece featured

in one of the museum's monthly programs. I have a couple of contacts there and would like to have the installation or parts of the installation on display for programming about local veterans from the Philadelphia area.

I'd like to partner with Scribe Video in Philadelphia and work in tandem with the programming department to incorporate the piece into their audio Narrative Storytelling workshop. I'd also like to facilitate students in learning the basics of oral and narrative storytelling. I would offer a Q & A session, along with a listening session of 10-minute excerpts. Having worked with Scribe Video in the past (I screened worked and attended workshop), I think that it would be relatively easy to coordinate; the major issue being programming the piece. In addition, it's important that this doesn't tour solely as an art piece. This piece needs to function as a media that is healing, cathartic and redemptive spiritually. It needs to reach audiences that are veterans and are a part of religious and spiritual institutions. While this is a creative art piece, one of the major reasons I composed this project was to allow for others to find healing and solace within the work. Therefore, I will be reaching out to veteran centers across the country, holding workshops on the social, emotional, physical and cultural effects of war on veterans and more specifically those of color. I will be exploring ways in which they heal from trauma by learning how to tell and create their own stories using media.

I would like to stage the installation within each center for one week and have veterans share turning points in their lives reflecting on how being in the military or in war has impacted the person that they've become. I would like to gather this information in journals strategically placed within the exhibit and would later offer an opportunity for vets to help write and develop their own stories.

My hope is that, like my uncle, other veterans would eventually be able to take their experience and let it be the foundation of who they are, drawing strength, leaning on it and into it but not letting it define them, allowing it to be impetus for creating the person they desire to become. Ideally, I would lead workshops and exhibitions that would be held in conjunction with therapists, holistic health, palliative care workers and social service providers. The series would be devoted to healing the emotional wounds of war. In addition to working with veterans, I'd also like to exhibit the installation in churches, spiritual centers and institutions. I'd specifically like to connect with contemporary churches and spirituality centers to house and host workshops on faith, understanding one's spiritual journey and developing one's concept and relationship with God. The piece has strong roots in Christianity, Eastern Philosophy and religion, so I'd like to hold exhibits and workshops that more generally speak to the idea of faith and how that it is established, providing multiple perspectives. My hope would be that "Better than Before" could serve as a teaching tool inside of congregations and spiritual centers.

Locally, I plan to propose that the audio-visual component be screened at the Celebration Spiritual Center in Brooklyn, (which I attend) in conjunction with the Bedford Stuyvesant community center, as I think that the piece would be a great tool for personal spiritual growth but also assist in the development in the wellness of people of color that have experienced trauma.

Finally, the other medium that I will use to distribute the film will be internet and satellite radio channels that focus on wellness and spirituality. I have a former instructor from Temple University that has his own internet radio show that is based on the teachings of Eckhart Tolle. His show features various concept surrounding peace, stillness, and detachment, all of which

emerge from Tolle's books, "A New Earth"<sup>12</sup> and "The Power of Now".<sup>13</sup> I plan to work with him to hopefully offer a segment on developing faith and enlightenment from the challenges of one's journey. I intend to research other stations like his to distribute the audio documentary.

### Next Phase

The next phase of this project will be an online digital installation using my uncle's story as a jumping off point to inspire other stories of transformation. Using the website and coffee table book *Humans Of New York*<sup>14</sup> as inspiration, over the course of two years, I will travel across the US and abroad to various countries in Europe and South America to speak with others asking them to share a transformative moment in their lives that has made them the person that they are. I will also explore questions around faith, its definition and significance in their life. I was incredibly inspired by my uncle's story and I think that it's important to hear other stories that encourage and speak to the human condition.

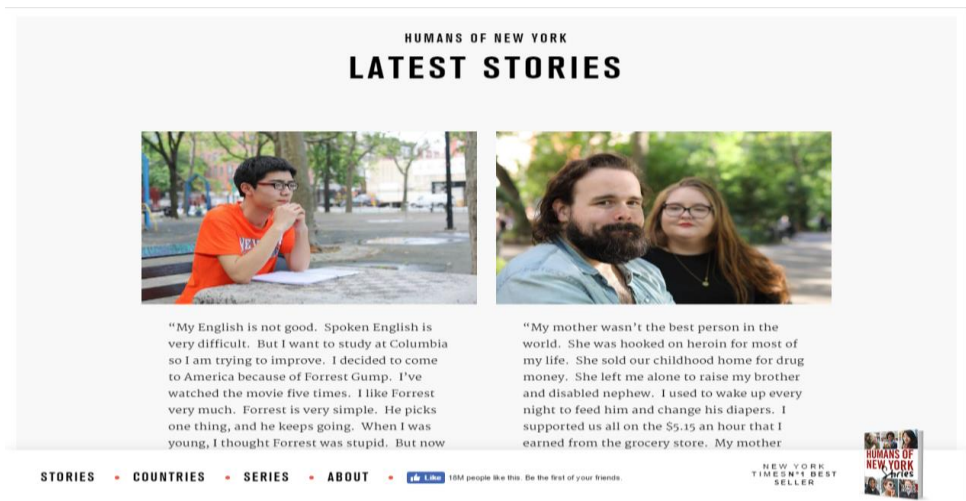


Figure 4- Humans of New York

12

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13

Tolle, Eckhart, and OverDrive Inc. *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 2010.

14

Humans of New York, Brandon Stanton (artist), <http://www.humansofnewyork.com>

The interview process will be short and somewhat informal as I will interview individuals willing to share while traveling. I will record their responses for ten minutes, take a few candid photos and video of them and will post their image and stories inside the digital installation archive online. As referenced earlier, this project will be multi-platform and will have many incarnations, as my hope is that this would become a larger movement towards collective healing.

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## Endnotes

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