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Elana C. Betts

Pennsylvania State University

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Black Lesbian Spirituality: Hearing Our Stories

Elana C. Betts, Pennsylvania State University, USA

Abstract: This paper examines the intersection of race, gender, sexual orientation and spirituality, specifically Black lesbian spirituality. One of the difficulties in citing current research is the dearth of published research on the spirituality of women of color, who identify a sexual minority. There have been many studies and books written about spirituality, culture, gender and sexuality, however the study of Black lesbian spiritual identity remains largely untouched. The purpose of this study is to explore how spiritual development and the expression of spirituality is connected to the African American lesbian culture through narrative inquiry meets autoethnography. The findings indicate that Black lesbian spiritual development is largely inspired by the influence of spiritual facilitators and spiritual constrictors that create a fluid balance, defined as spiritual wholeness.

My Story

A chance meeting on the internet on December 26, 1998 would forever change my life, my identity, my spirituality and the essence of my soul ... all for the positive. While I was unaware it at the time, it was then I began the path to spiritual wholeness. I had recently reestablished myself from a brief heterosexual marriage, which in the end failed. This was a blessing in disguise, because it was then that I met my partner, now wife, of 13 years.

My spiritual journey began as a small child attending a local Black Baptist church. I sang on the choir, became a member of the usher board, and attended Sunday school weekly. My parents were both educators and very active in the church. My father decided to become a minister and attended seminary at night while maintaining his commitment as an educator during the day. Soon he was ordained and became the youth minister at our church. My mother was a deaconess, and the president of the choir. Church was a large part of my upbringing.

During high school, I attended a Quaker school, where I learned the peace loving ways of the Quakers. I attended Quaker meeting on Wednesday mornings and the Baptist church service on Sundays. One of the requirements was to take a Quakerism class, where I learned the beliefs of the Quakers, who stressed the key to spiritual wholeness was each individual's unique relationship with God. In college, I had friends from various religious paths. The diversity of religion fascinated me, so I used my college years to attend the worship services of my friends to better understand various belief systems and, in part, to continue to develop my own belief system.

As an adult, I returned to the Baptist church. I joined a congregation with equal numbers of Black and White congregants. I enjoyed attending this church because Bible study was a large focus. It was then I purchased my first study Bible and began to take notes and develop an understanding of different interpretations and what the Bible actually said, rather than relying on someone else's interpretation. It was during my tenure at this church, that I met my wife. It was very clear to me the stance that the church took on same gender loving couples, so I stopped attending that church and began the search for a welcoming congregation.

After attending a welcoming Baptist congregation, I found a new church home in Metropolitan Community Churches, which was founded by Reverend Troy Perry in 1968. The

denomination identifies itself as Christian with an affirming ministry to those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ). I had finally found a place that would embrace my sexuality as a part of my spiritual growth. I became an active member, leading the children's ministry and teaching Sunday school.

Over the years, I have continued my exploration of spiritual practices. I have studied several Eastern religions, which has taught me to make room for meditation in my life. I have learned that spirituality is very individualized. What allows me to maintain balance embraces taking the time to take in the world using my senses. I have developed an appreciation of fine art, scrapbooking, admiring nature, listening to music, and using prayer. These are my tools for spiritual wholeness.

Introduction

The current empirical research paper examines the intersection of race, gender, sexual orientation and spirituality. One of the difficulties in citing current research is the dearth of published research on the spirituality of women of color, who identify as a sexual minority. There have been many studies and books written about spirituality, culture, gender and sexuality, however the study of Black lesbian spiritual identity remains largely untouched. The purpose of this study is to explore how spiritual development and the expression of spirituality is connected to the African American lesbian culture.

Kenneth Burr (2009) conducted a study for gay spirituality to hear the stories of how lesbian, gay and bisexual adults reconcile their spirituality. Cynthia Dillard (2006) wrote a thoughtful, comprehensive book regarding spirituality for African American women in higher education. Elizabeth Tisdell (2003) explores the intersection of culture and spirituality. bell hooks (2003) takes a critical look at African American spirituality. While all these informative and respected works inform aspects of Black lesbian spirituality, the one common missing element in each of these works is the Black lesbian perspective on spirituality.

Akerlund and Cheung (2000) conducted a literature review of sexual and ethnic minorities. They found the barriers affecting the African American gay or lesbian identity development are twofold. The first barrier is that traditional African American religious values typically condemn homosexuality. They also found that there is a general stigma against sexual minorities within the African American community. In a study involving once married African American lesbians and bisexual women, Bates (2010) found that 50% of the women expressed difficulty assimilating into the African American community since coming out.

Bowleg (2008) warns about the dangers of using additive research. She finds research on African Americans + research on women + research on lesbians or bisexual women does not equal research applicable to African American lesbian/bisexual women. It is therefore important to avoid additive research for African American lesbian women.

So how do we become more knowledgeable about Black lesbian spirituality? Listen to our voices. In this exploration, an autoethnography meets narrative inquiry to give voice to Black lesbian spirituality. Emergent themes elicited from an autoethnography and narrative inquiry are examined to give voice to traditionally marginalized voices to provide a greater understanding to adult educators.

Theoretical Framework

There are three theoretical frameworks, which inform the current study, queer theory, black feminist thought, and the teaching of Audre Lorde. Queer theory (QT) is a critical posture that questions traditional norms of sexuality, which emerged from critical theory (Jagose, 1996). It provides us with a guide for critically assessing the world by examining the influences of the dominant culture as it relates to sexuality. There are three core assumptions of queer theory, which are relevant to the current study. The first is that queer theory is critical of heteronormative assumptions. Queer theory rejects the assumption that all lifestyles, which are not characterized by the heterosexual nuclear family, are abnormal or deviant. The second assumption recognizes the centrality of experiential knowledge. Queer theory thrusts the knowledge created by the lived experience from the margins, toward the center. Grace and Hill (2004) relate queer theory to a transformative learning process, where meaning schemes and perspectives are gradually broadened to become more comprehensive. Lastly, queer theory seeks to deconstruct the categories to empower the individual. Labels are not necessarily relevant or empowering, and should therefore be avoided.

Four key components of Black Feminist Thought inform this study (Collins, 2009). Black feminist thought affirms the Black woman as an agent of knowledge. Black feminist thought also acknowledges the lived experiences of the Black woman as an important lens to define meaning to life. It also empowers the Black woman's experience by acknowledging the resisting intersecting oppressions of being a woman and being a racial minority. Black feminist thought also empowers through the self-definition of social constructs.

Finally, Audre Lorde's (2007) essays inform this study. As a Black lesbian, she spoke about the natural connection between all Black women as a pillar of support because of our mutual understanding of oppression and the results this oppression has had upon us. She also encouraged the use of Black women as spiritual symbols. Lorde (2007) discussed the importance of communication and learning through language and through nonverbal visual methods. Each of these concepts informs this study. It is important to the field of adult education that theories relating to learning and knowledge for Black lesbians continue to develop and emerge.

Methodology

Qualitative research has roots in a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, and clinical psychology. Qualitative researchers seek to understand a particular point of view within a specified context (Merriam, 2002). An autoethnographic approach was incorporated into the study because my own story intersects the findings in the current study. Narrative inquiry was selected to frame this study to understand the reality of African American lesbians and to illuminate these life stories.

The current study was interested in eliciting the stories of African American women who identify as same gender loving. In the current study, participants were selected based on their personal identification as a Black woman who is primarily attracted to women. In addition, all participants must identify with some aspect of spirituality by their own definition. Participants were between 41 and 66 years of age. The names used, with the exception of my own, are pseudonyms.

Interviews were the primary method of data collection for the current study. In addition, I kept a notebook of observations during interviews. Only one source was located on the

internet, which applied to Black Lesbian Spirituality. Spirit Health Education (SHE) Circle is an organization dedicated to promoting health and wellness for African American lesbians. On this website, there is one page dedicated to developing a healthy spirit (McCray, 2005). Information on this page was reviewed and integrated into the findings.

I digitally recorded each interview, transcribing each manually. Once the transcripts were created, they were reviewed and provided to the interviewees for their input, feedback and corrections. Any recommended corrections were made to the transcripts. The transcripts were reviewed to develop narrative summaries based on the interviews. These summaries were also provided to the interviewees for accuracy. Constant comparative analysis was used for coding the transcripts to determine common themes among the participants.

There were three primary dependability strategies used in this study. These include member checks, peer review and data triangulation (Merriam, 2009). Member checks occurred throughout the process. Participants were asked to review interview transcripts. They were also asked to review the narratives based on their interviews. Their input was integrated into the final narrative summary.

Peer review also occurred with the transcription, thematic analysis, data display and findings. The peer review was in conjunction with a graduate course on qualitative research. Lastly, there were two forms of data triangulation. The notes were reviewed and compared to the thematic analysis and the narratives. Also information from the SHE Circle website was compared to the findings of the study.

Findings

The findings of this study are presented in two ways. First, the narratives for each of the participants are presented. An autoethnographic narrative presented at the beginning of the article is included in this analysis. Due to space limitations, the narratives are presented as narrative summaries. Secondly, a summary of the emergent themes from the data analysis is presented.

Yvonne's Narrative Summary

Yvonne's story illustrates the tension that can emerge for Black lesbians who were raised in traditional organized religions, which are not uniformly welcoming to those who identify as sexual minorities. The result can be disorienting.

I am a 41-year-old African American woman, who identifies as being a lesbian. I was raised Baptist. That means church all day Sunday, Bible study on Wednesday evenings and choir rehearsal on Saturdays. Church and religion were a part of my daily life as a child. It wasn't really an option for me not to go to church, unless I was very sick, and sometimes even then I had to go. My church commitment remained steady through my teenage years. I do remember one pivotal incident in my life, which opened my eyes on religion. When I was in my mid to late teens, our pastor's son gave a sermon. In his sermon, he came out as a gay man. This caused a big stir in the congregation. It ended up that the pastor and his son were asked to leave the church. It was at this point that I saw the lack of acceptance in the Baptist church. Since he was asked to leave, the pastor opened a new church. Half of the congregation moved to the new church, the other half remained at the old church. My family went to the new church with the pastor and his

son. Many of my friends and relatives stayed at the old church. It was a painful growth experience.

Tanya's Narrative Summary

Tanya's story also highlights the inherent tension between messages received from spiritual sources that are alienating for a lesbian. She also talks about the continuing struggle that exists in finding a spiritual outlet. For Tanya spirituality continues to evolve in ways that periodically trouble her.

I am 43 years old and I continue to struggle with my spirituality. I was raised Baptist and attended church with my grandparents and great grandparents every Sunday. I have moved away from organized religion only to return time and time again. I definitely believe in a higher power, but sometimes when the answers don't come quickly enough, I become impatient. When I become impatient, I am unsure where to turn for the answers. I have explored other sources for spiritual outlets. At times, I rely on advice from partners or other friends in the lifestyle on their spiritual and religious outlets. Sometimes the lack of acceptance from others makes me angry. I know anger is not healthy, but it angers me that because of who I am, I don't have the same choices in spiritual guidance that others have. Spirituality is a never-ending journey. Right now I pray and watch televised church services, which is how I express my spirituality. If you listen to the outside world, your sexuality is supposed to be a negative in the church world. Spirituality comes from within and it is something that you need to grow into yourself. For me, my spirituality continues to evolve.

Dorothy's Narrative Summary

Dorothy appears to have achieved a balance that seems to come from wisdom. She talks about a conservative upbringing in the Lutheran church, but over the years that has evolved into a personal spirituality, which sustains her and grounds her each day. She integrates her sexuality into her spirituality as a small portion of who she is today. She feels that she is a spiritual person, which gives her direction and drive toward the future and assists her in her day-to-day life.

I am a woman-identified woman, by that I mean that my practices and identity are defined as lesbian. I am 66 years old, so I have seen a lot when it comes to religion and spirituality. I was raised Lutheran. I attended a Lutheran grade school and high school. I was taught with basic Christian beliefs. I never questioned the things that did not make sense, but looking back, many things did not really make sense. Today, I believe in a higher power. The Divine Spirit lays out a plan for everyone. My sexuality is a small part of me and I see myself as a spiritual being. Spirituality is a personal thing that is not the same for everybody. Organized religion is very confining. For me, the symbol that connects spirituality to the LGBTQ culture is the rainbow flag. Each color stands for one aspect. Hot pink stands for sexuality. My sexuality is a part of who I am. Red is for life, and as a spiritual person I believe in life and being the best that I can be. Orange is for healing. Healing is how we maintain our sense of self. Yellow is for the sun. Green is

for nature. Nature is important because it connects us with the earth. Blue is for art, indigo for harmony, and violet for spirit. Spirit is what connects us to each other.

Thematic Analysis

The themes that emerged from these stories can be summarized as a sense of spiritual wholeness, which is defined and influenced by spiritual constrictors and spiritual facilitators. Spiritual wholeness is achieved uniquely for each woman. For Black lesbians, this appears to be a fluid balance of ethnicity, sexuality and spirituality. While this balance is different for everyone, it also fluctuates within each person depending on how the spiritual facilitators and constrictors present themselves at any given moment in time.

Spiritual constrictors. In the stories, examples of spiritual constrictors include alienation, religious hypocrisy, religious confinement and doubts or fears. All the women in the study, and my own story discuss a sense of alienation. The source of the alienation was from organized religion, loved ones and from general discrimination. Dorothy discussed spirituality as giving her strength from those who “test her fortitude daily.”

All also found the mixed messages from religious outlets as being highly disturbing. Most faiths preach loving all people, but many continue to discriminate against those who identify as a sexual minority. Yvonne said “... it felt kinda hypocritical to me when you say that we are all God’s children and we should love one another and then they do something that I basically consider just the opposite of that.” SHE Circle also described this on their web page where it mentions:

Often it is our spiritual foundation that was put into place when we were children, going to Sunday school and church with grandparents or our parents, which created a sacred place for us to go in the time of trouble. Sometimes that place of safety was denied us because we were same gender loving (McCray, 2005).

A sense of feeling confined by religion was also a theme in two of the three participants. There was a general sense of feeling that spirituality was much bigger than what was being offered through most religious denominations. There was also a general belief to express their spirituality fully, that they would need outlets beyond what could be offered through religion. Yvonne stated, “Religion is too structured and follows very traditional ways.”

Emotions such as anger, doubt and fear tended to be a barrier for spiritual wholeness. Participants talked about doubting their previously learned belief systems, which caused feelings of fear and loss. Tanya discussed anger as being a barrier to her spirituality. She stated, “You get angry sometimes and that is not helpful to yourself or your spirituality if you get angry.”

Spiritual facilitators. Some factors were helpful to building spiritual wholeness. These factors included being open to process changing views on spirituality, music, prayer, Bible reading and discussion, and connecting with supports.

All participants mentioned that spirituality is a fluid process. The expectation of fluidity and being open to that fluctuation is essential in maintaining a sense of spirituality. Some of the factors that participants considered fluid is how they defined their sexuality, their competing priorities in life, the form of how they express their spirituality and how others interpret their own spirituality. Yvonne states:

I think it was a great encouragement because you don't have to be accepting of everything and it is good to determine your own meanings of things. And like I said, spirituality is different for each person, so what I read and what you read in that same sentence may be two totally different things in our interpretation.

Two of the three participants mentioned music and/or prayer as having healing qualities to restore a sense of wholeness. Both music and prayer are mentioned in my story as ways I connect to my spirituality. All three mentioned belief in a higher power, higher being, or divine spirit. They defined this higher power as all knowing and connecting to the world in a way that is beyond description. Dorothy states, "I believe there is a divine plan to everyone's life and every situation. I am not in charge. There is a divine spirit that lays out a plan for everyone." On the SHE Circle website, McCray (2005) encourages the African American lesbian to "take time to reconnect to your spirituality and the divine."

Reading and discussing the Bible was also mentioned in two of the three interviews. A key theme is that there is an openness to accept that there are many interpretations to the meaning of the scriptures in the Bible. Being open to hearing and discussing these differences is essential in maintaining a sense of wholeness. There also seemed to be the belief that all the answers can be found within the Bible.

The last spiritual facilitator that was mentioned in all three interviews was the importance of support systems. Examples of support systems included mental health professionals, family (both family of choice and biological family), significant others and role models. Tanya says:

To know that other people are living the life that I am, and are progressing, they're happy, they're having families, have property together... you know just the growth process of seeing other lesbian couples growing together, getting older together ... I mean that enhances me and enriches me so it gives me hope so that makes me want to do better and grow also ... so that helps my spirit to know that it can be done.

Traits of spiritual wholeness. All participants described their ultimate goal as reaching spiritual wholeness. All described reaching spiritual wholeness as a process that is fluid, which can appear to be unreachable at times, and other times the balance seems to come easily. All described spiritual wholeness as a goal, which requires a concerted effort to attain. The descriptors used to describe the traits of spiritual wholeness include kindness, thoughtfulness, self-growth, connecting with others, loving oneself, loving others, compassion, generosity, selflessness and healing.

Dorothy describes this sense of wholeness as, "A sense of interconnectedness with all living creatures and an awareness in the purpose and meaning of life and the development of personal absolute value. It's the way you find meaning, hope, comfort and inner peace in your life." The SHE Circle website describes spiritual wholeness as:

Sometimes we simply have to surrender to that special place for our peace, comfort and healing. Spiritually, no action is more important than surrender. Surrender is the tenderest (sic) impulse of the heart acting out of love for oneself to get exactly what we need. Surrender is living in the moment, not imposing expectations from the past (McCray, 2005).

Discussion

It is clear from the current study that African American lesbians continually strive for a sense of spiritual wholeness, which is a fluid process. This fluid process occurs with the ebb and flow of life experiences. Life experiences are central to queer theory, black feminist thought, and the teachings of Audre Lorde.

In queer theory one of the central tenets is deconstructing categories to empower lived experiences. In the quest for spiritual wholeness, breaking down stereotypes, being open to process and discussing other points of view were some of the avenues discussed to achieve spiritual wholeness. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to dismiss heteronormative assumptions on a daily basis. It is also important to actively use the knowledge created from life experience. One of the difficulties in this writing the findings for this study was the resistance to label within the Black lesbian culture. It seemed to be somewhat against the grain of the culture to assign labels to categories in order to understand and explain. Therefore, a mixture of labels was used to define ethnicity, and sexual identity to pay homage to the variety of labels individuals use.

Black feminist thought and the teachings of Audre Lorde (2007) affirm the black woman as agents of knowledge. This knowledge is generated by the resistance of intersecting oppressions. These oppressions include racism and sexism and in the case of the African American lesbian, heterosexism. Empowerment occurs for the Black lesbian when she empowers herself through self-defined social constructs rather than the definitions established by the dominant culture.

None of the stories specifically stated that there was difficulty connecting to Black culture as reported in the Bates (2010) study, however, all participants reported difficulty with connecting with their initial religious roots within the churches of their childhood and actively sought alternative spiritual outlets. Akerlund and Cheung (2000) found that traditional African American religious values typically condemn homosexuality.

These findings have both personal relevance and implications for adult education. Personally, I gained a stronger connection with the understanding of shared meanings and struggles for same gender loving African American women. I now understand that when I feel uncentered, it is worthwhile to examine my current spiritual constrictors and their influence. At the same time, I need to rely more on my self-defined spiritual facilitators to return to that feeling of spiritual wholeness, such as prayer, scrapbooking and the healing power of listening to centering music. I also now understand that my spiritual facilitators may evolve and change over time, which means I should remain open to new and unexplored outlets, which may facilitate spiritual connection.

This study is also significant for the field of adult education. Tisdell (2003) discusses the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy in adult education settings to potentiate transformative experiences. Spirituality is important for adult educators who want learners to bring their whole selves into a learning experience. To do this, adult educators need to understand spirituality and its development in all learners, not just the learners in the center. When in a learning environment, it is important for the adult educator to understand that spiritual wholeness is important to those who define themselves as an African American lesbian. In adult education learning environments, factors that may be perceived as spiritual constrictors should be avoided. Alienation can occur inadvertently to a non-attentive educator. Adult educators

must concentrate on using inclusive language, avoiding heteronormative assumptions, actively challenging heteronormative assumptions which arise, soliciting and embracing new definitions for social constructs and assuming there are learners present at all times who do not identify as heterosexual. As adult educators, it is our responsibility to be spiritual facilitators and encourage spiritual wholeness in all learners.

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