

THE JOURNEY

TRUTHS OF SAME-GENDER-LOVING
BLACK MALES IN HIGHER EDUCATION



Antione D. Tomlin

**A VOLUME IN RESEARCH, THEORY, AND
PRACTICE WITHIN ACADEMIC AFFAIRS**

The Journey: Truths of Same-Gender-Loving Black Males in Higher Education

EMERALD: RESEARCH, THEORY, AND PRACTICE WITHIN ACADEMIC AFFAIRS

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INTRODUCTION

A RARE SPACE TO COMMUNICATE, SHARE, AND EMBRACE BLACK, SAME GENDER-LOVING, MALE EXPERIENCES

Antione D. Tomlin

This text stands apart from others, and so does its introduction. The motivation behind this work is to provide a platform for Black same-gender-loving (SGL) men in higher education to articulate their experiences in a space that, while making recent strides toward inclusivity, has historically been exclusive. Each narrative within these pages opens a window for authors to share their journey—capturing moments of resilience, invaluable lessons, and the navigation of obstacles to stand proudly in their Black brilliance. Focused on the narratives of Black male SGL students, faculty, and staff in higher education, this text encapsulates the essence of what it means to be a Black male and SGL in the academic realm. As a Black gay male, this project holds personal significance for me, providing a rare space to openly communicate, share, and embrace Black, gay, male experiences within

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higher education. Each section unfolds as an individual narrative, emphasizing the importance of every unique story.

NARRATIVE ONE: QUARENESSE EMBODIED: LIVING AUTHENTICALLY AT THE INTERSECTIONS OF SEXUALITY, RACE, PROFESSIONALISM AND ABILITY

In this captivating narrative, Andre' Ford delves into the intricate tapestry of his Black male life, navigating the complex intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and ability within the realm of higher education. The story unfolds against the backdrop of the Southern United States, where Andre's upbringing is intricately woven with the threads of religion, shaping the very fabric of his identity. As we journey through the narrative, Andre' artfully unravels the impact of minority stress, drawing from Meyer's seminal work in 2003, and highlights the indispensable nature of resilience for triumph in his professional pursuits. Echoes of the subject's evolution resonate through recollections of his odyssey towards self-acceptance, interwoven with experiences working with LGBTQIA+ youth and students. The narrative gains depth as Andre' reconciles not only with his queer identity but also grapples with the nuances of disability. In his quest to be a beacon of inspiration, he strives to carve a path where a queer-identified Black man can flourish in academia, seamlessly blending teaching, research, and service. Amidst the journey towards self-discovery, Andre' explores the delicate dance of developing an integrated identity, seeking equilibrium between the personal and professional realms, all the while navigating the undercurrents of heteronormativity. The narrative continues to develop from a lens and approach of quare theory, as elucidated by Johnson in 2001, manifesting within the academic landscape. In a powerful demonstration of "theories in the flesh," the narratives weave real-life examples, dissecting individual and collective identities. The aim is to unravel the challenges and opportunities that arise at the crossroads of research and practice. The spotlight then shifts to the collaborative efforts of a queer-identified Black male professional, working hand-in-hand with BIPOC LGBTQIA+ students. Andre' notes, together, they strive to create spaces that not only affirm identities but also foster inclusivity and learning. Andre's narrative invites readers into a rich space of sharing, where personal stories, academic theories, and societal challenges converge. It serves as a testament to the resilience, determination, and transformative power inherent in the journey of a Black man at the crossroads of identity, academia, and advocacy.

NARRATIVE TWO: OBSCURITY OF BLACK GAY MALES IN ACADEMIC WORKPLACES

Embarking on the academic journey, Dr. Kelly Wallace emphasizes that one is quick to notice the deeply entrenched roots in heterosexual identities. The pervasive influence of white culture casts an imposing shadow, erecting formidable

barriers for people of color attempting not only to exist in these scholarly spaces but also to navigate them authentically. Within this landscape, the unique intersection of being Black and Gay often remains unacknowledged or, worse, entirely disregarded. In the hallowed halls of academia, where colleagues predominantly do not share these dual identities and lived experiences, the plight of Black Gay men unfolds. Isolation and roadblocks become familiar companions in their educational odyssey. The absence of supportive systems compounds the challenge, leaving scant resources for cultivating a healthy work/life balance. This narrative is more than an exploration; it is a narrative voyage through Dr. Wallace's experiences as a Black Gay male educator. Through the lens of his personal story, he unveils the triumphs and tribulations that have dotted his path in academia. It's a tale of resilience, a testament to the fortitude required to navigate a system where one's identity often stands at odds with the established norms. Amidst the narrative, successes emerge as beacons of hope, proving that despite the prevailing challenges, strides can be made. Yet, the journey is far from smooth, and the challenges are not mere footnotes; they are integral spaces shaping the narrative. Each obstacle becomes a stepping stone, paving the way for recommendations aimed at fortifying an inclusive work environment for Black Gay men. This narrative is not just a reflection but a call to action. It beckons academia to acknowledge, embrace, and uplift the voices and experiences of Black Gay educators. It serves as a blueprint for fostering an environment where diversity is not merely acknowledged but celebrated, where the richness of identity is seen as an asset rather than an anomaly. In sharing his story, Dr. Wallace aims to contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding inclusivity, urging academia to evolve into a space where every voice, irrespective of its intersectionality, resonates and thrives.

NARRATIVE THREE: IT WASN'T JUST A PHASE

In the backdrop of societal expectations dictating that a man should be with a woman, and vice versa, Desmond Dunklin shares how his emotions defied the conventional narrative. Desmond explores a past experience: He, a figure of strength and inked artistry, lived just across the college hall, standing at 5'10, weighing 175 lbs. Our connection ran deeper than the surface, transcending the boundaries set by societal norms. We shared more than just space; we shared workouts, study sessions, and the narratives of our most profound traumas. In him, I found a sanctuary—a place where he felt secure. Our bond was rooted in genuine friendship and love, unburdened by the constraints of societal expectations. Little did I know that one evening would alter the course of our connection forever. As we sipped drinks and immersed ourselves in a movie, he broke the silence with unexpected words, "Dez, you know I love you, bro." My reflexive response echoed the camaraderie we had built, "I love you too, bro." However, he rose from his seat, solemnly declaring, "No, Dez, I am in love with you." Shock and amazement coursed through me as he walked over and sealed his confession with a kiss. In that moment, the torrent of emotions, thoughts, and fantasies that

had been swirling within me for years crystallized into reality. Someone out there loved me for exactly who I was. They saw my flaws, yet their love endured. It was a revelation, a confirmation that what I felt wasn't a passing phase—it was real, genuine, and profoundly transformative. Love, in its purest form, had entered my life, bringing with it an overwhelming sense of happiness and authenticity. Everything I had been feeling all of these years, the emotions, thoughts, fantasy, it was real. There was somebody out there who loved me for me. Who genuinely loved me and saw all of my flaws, yet they still loved me. I knew then, it wasn't just a phase, It was real. It was love. It was happiness.

NARRATIVE FOUR: DUOETHNOGRAPHY: TRUTH TELLING, DIFFERENCES AND COMMONALITIES IN THE EXPERIENCES OF TWO SAME-GENDER LOVING BLACK MEN IN ACADEMIA

Embark on a riveting duoethnographic expedition as this narrative unfolds, chronicling the intertwined tales of two Black gay men, Dr. Andrew Campbell and Dr. Kaschka Watson, who have traversed the challenging terrain of homophobia in Jamaica, only to find themselves as educational leaders in Canada. Their narrative journey is not merely an exploration of similarities, differences, and nuances but a deep dive into the emotional tapestry of their experiences. Through the lens of duoethnographic methodology, Dr. Campbell and Dr. Watson wove personal reflective narratives, each strand pulsating with raw emotions. Rooted in reflective research, this approach became the vessel through which they dissected their encounters with homophobia, scrutinizing the intersections of their identities. The stories they share transcend mere recounting; they stand as empowering narratives poised to disrupt and dismantle the pervasive homophobia in the Caribbean. Dr. Campbell and Dr. Watson's collaboration unfolded over five virtual encounters, facilitated by the digital realm of Zoom, where they delved into four core topics central to our experiences as gay men. The conversations, meticulously audio-recorded, captured not just the words exchanged but the nuances of their emotions, gestures, and expressions—a rich tapestry of their shared narratives. These recordings, both verbal and non-verbal, encapsulated the essence of their lived experiences. In the ebb and flow of their dialogues, they found themselves traversing uncharted territories—core topics emerging organically, unscripted. Recognizing these serendipitous detours, they navigated back to the heart of their discussions. Post each meeting, a meticulous review of their shared narratives enriched the depth of their data collection and analysis. As educational leaders within the Canadian academy, their reflections unveil the tensions and traumas of their time as gay men in a homophobic Jamaican landscape. Yet, within the folds of adversity, they spotlight their navigation of those experiences, emerging not only as successful gay scholars but also as impassioned activists for the LGBTQ+ community. Their journey transcends borders, weaving a narrative that intertwines personal resilience, academic prowess, and advocacy in a symphony of triumph over adversity.

NARRATIVE FIVE: AM I BLACK AND GAY ENOUGH?

Dr. Richard Marks, Jr. invites us to step into the intricate dance of identity, where the celebration of being Black and gay echoes louder than ever before. In this evolving narrative, intersectionality emerges as the unapologetic vehicle that traverses the landscapes of race, gender, sexual orientation, and myriad identities. Yet, society, with its penchant for simplicity, often insists on the singularity of identity, pressuring individuals to choose one facet to define their essence. Within the experiences of the Black community, a dichotomy persists, wherein LG-BTQIA individuals find themselves subjected to ostracization and shame, birthing a tumultuous mix of confusion, anger, and racial-cultural dissonance (Marks, 2015). As society propels the notion of embracing multiple identities, the internal struggle becomes palpable. For Dr. Marks, a Black gay male administrator navigating the corridors of higher education, the question arises—which identity takes precedence, gay or Black? This narrative is a canvas painted with the hues of his experiences as a Black, gay higher education administrator. However, it is a mere glimpse into a realm where much more exploration is warranted. The spotlight, historically fixated on the experiences of Black gay students, now beckons toward the often-neglected narratives of Black gay faculty and staff within the educational context. In the vast landscape of academia, the research on the experiences of Black gay faculty and staff is a glaring void. It is not merely limited; it is virtually non-existent. This narrative serves as a call to arms, a plea for the amplification of voices that remain obscured. To understand the success and challenges woven into the journeys of Black gay faculty and staff navigating the complex culture of higher education administration, research is not just desirable; it is imperative. As administrators, Dr. Marks emphasized that voices hold the power to shape the narrative, not only for himself but for the students we strive to guide. The call for research is a call for advocacy, a declaration that stories of Black, gay, men matter, and experiences are integral to the fabric of higher education. In the absence of Black, gay, male voices, we risk failing not only ourselves but the very students we are entrusted to support and uplift. The time is now to raise the voices of Black, gay, male administrators, to be heard, and to pave the way for a more inclusive and empathetic educational landscape.

NARRATIVE SIX: HEY CIS!

In this narrative journey, Sean Rice, Jr. delves into the transformative power of understanding intersectionality and allyship, as he navigates the intricate terrain of living unapologetically in both his queerness and Blackness within the realm of higher education—a journey that seamlessly evolved into his chosen profession. In the symphony of advice echoing from elders, young Black men are urged to walk with heads held high. Yet, the question lingers: who guides the gaze of Black queer individuals, navigating a world that often dehumanizes them based on their sexuality? This narrative unveils the story of how, against the backdrop

of societal expectations, Sean’s personal evolution unfolded, shaped by his relationships with cis heterosexuals and those actively committed to allyship. The crux lies in the term “active”—an ally, not a mere noun but a verb, embodying a continuous commitment to understanding and supporting the multifaceted nature of my identity. The narrative unfolds as he dissects pivotal moments where these relationships empowered him to cultivate self-awareness and authorship over his own experience. Friendship emerges as a crucial theme, an avenue through which bonds are formed, understanding is cultivated, and support becomes a tangible force. The significance of developing connections with others, especially those who stand as allies, becomes a cornerstone in his journey. Yet, the most pivotal relationship explored is the one with the “man in the mirror”—an introspective exploration that laid the foundation for embracing the entirety of Sean’s identity. This chapter is not just a reflection on personal experiences; it is a testament to the power of active allyship and the evolution that unfolds when genuine connections are forged. It speaks to the transformative potential of relationships in navigating the complexities of identity. As the narrative unfolds, it beckons readers to reconsider the role of allyship, not as a passive concept but as a dynamic force that, when harnessed, can guide individuals towards authentic self-discovery and acceptance.

NARRATIVE SEVEN: IN AUTHENTICITY: (DE)VALUING SAME-GENDER-LOVING “BLAQUEER” MEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In Dr. David Sterling Brown’s narrative, he builds upon Dr. T Anansi Wilson’s groundbreaking concept of “BlaQueer,” a recognition of the dual identity of being openly Black and queer. This narrative unfolds as a challenge to the ivory towers of higher education, urging institutions to confront the perilous oversight of neglecting the protection of the vulnerable Black and queer population. Dr. Brown directly confronts the paradoxes inherent in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and anti-racist agendas that, despite their noble intentions, can inadvertently perpetuate anti-Black and homophobic practices. As the narrative unfurls, the rewards of embracing a BlaQueer positionality in higher education are acknowledged, casting light on the resilience that arises from navigating this unique intersection. Woven into the fabric of his narrative are the threads of personal-experiential anecdotes, carefully disclosed. These narratives serve as critical engagements with the pervasive issue of sexual violence, providing a lens through which the reader can intimately connect with the challenges faced by the BlaQueer community within the academic landscape. A discerning critique surfaces as Dr. Brown examines the prevalent usage of “safe space” rhetoric within higher education. The narrative contends that, rather than seeking an illusory safety, institutions should embrace and advocate for a “productive discomfort” philosophy. This philosophy recognizes the inherent impossibility of everyone attaining or feeling absolute safety in any given moment, challenging the traditional narrative surrounding safe spaces. Additionally, this narrative, with its immersive exploration of BlaQueer

experiences, not only challenges the status quo but also serves as a call to action for higher education institutions. It beckons them to reevaluate their practices, fostering an environment where the vulnerable Black and queer population can thrive, unencumbered by the shadows of systemic biases.

NARRATIVE EIGHT: BARELY GETTING BI

Eric Martin shares a personal narrative that unfolds within the unique landscape of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the United States. This narrative is a journey through uncharted territory, where Eric assumed the pioneering role of leading the first LGBTQ center in the southeast region. An additional layer to this groundbreaking venture was being the inaugural Black cis-male to serve as the coordinator of the center. Anticipating the challenges that accompanied this role, he willingly stepped into uncharted waters. However, what Eric wasn't prepared for was the profound impact this position would have on his own intersecting identities, adding intricate layers to his personal narrative. Amid the timeless battle of navigating the complexities of Black identity, a new challenge emerged—the subtle yet palpable waves of bi-erasure within this predominantly Black space. Choosing this professional journey meant embracing the assumption that he would be perceived as gay, a label he readily accepted given the nature of the work, particularly in higher education. However, the real challenge lay in the scarcity of bisexual representation in this field, exacerbating the complexities of his own assimilation. This narrative delves into the nuanced journey of unpacking this assimilation, unveiling its close relationship to the broader assimilation that many Black men undertake in their quest for acceptance within the confines of masculinity. As the narrative unfolds, it traverses the unexplored landscapes of identity, representation, and the intricate dance between personal authenticity and societal expectations. This is not just a story; it is a personal odyssey through uncharted territories, a testament to the transformative power of embracing one's identity, even when the path is laden with challenges and uncharted complexities.

ALL EXPERIENCES MATTER

In addition to asking all of the men to write about their narratives and sharing the stories that needed to be heard, I also asked them to briefly share an experience that helped shape their identity as a Black, same-gender-loving male. Take a look at some of the experiences below:

An experience that I had as a same gender loving Black male within the field of higher education, was when I participated as a part of an oral history project exploring my reasons for relocating from the South to New York City. My rationale at the time was that I needed a space to explore my sexuality and identity that wasn't under the gaze of my religious upbringing. As a young adult I learned that my sexuality was to remain private and secretive and that to acknowledge my queerness within a professional setting was not only unnecessary but ill advised. However, as I started

my work in the nonprofit sector and worked with young adults who were out, I began to develop the courage to become transparent about my identity. When I transitioned to a community college, I began to embrace it not as an ally to LGBTQIA+ students, but also as a burgeoning content expert on issues affecting my community by facilitating cultural competency trainings and workshops. As a doctoral student at the University of Alabama, I advocate for authentic inclusion of LGBTQIA+ students through my research and service to the college. Participating in this oral history project gave me the opportunity to curate my journey and to publicly celebrate myself as a pansexual Black man thriving in the academic space.

—*Andre' Ford*

Being socialized in a world where Black and same-gender loving men didn't exist was the biggest challenge for me in developing into the person and professional I am today. For example, growing up in a family where everyone is heterosexual. Or watching television where there were very few shows that presented both Black and same-gender loving relationships in a positive light. These moments shaped an early belief that being a Black and same-gender loving male are not identities that society would happily embrace. Additionally, these stereotypes and false narratives contributed to my internalization of not being able to be successful. This birthed imposter syndrome. However, the top three pivotal moments where this shifted for me were in college, graduate school, and getting my doctorate degree. Yes, academia was my pathway to not only prove myself but break barriers that existed in the world. In most of the academic and similar spaces I have been in, I have been the only self-identified same-gender loving person. This dominance of heterosexual identities further pushed me to make my presence known and do work to increase visibility of my communities and be a leader for the next generation of Black and Gay men.

—*Dr. Kelly Wallace*

As a man of color, our image and reputation is everything. I have always kept my personal life and my private life separately. However, when I transitioned into higher education, I saw men who walked like me, talked like me, but also lived their truth in secret like me. It wasn't until I attended a higher education conference where I met this amazing Black man and he told me these words. No matter what you do in this life to thy own self always be true. You have one life, so live it and live it unapologetically. From that moment on, I begin to live my truth. One thing that I have learned is that people will not always respect your choices of how you live your life, however they will respect how you carry yourself when you live the life that you live in a positive light. So today, I am living my life mentoring, coaching, and inspiring the next generation of same gender-loving males, because you only have one life to live and you can have it all. Success, love, truth, respect, but most importantly a life free from shame and guilt of denying who you are.

—*Desmond Dunklin*

As an undergrad in the early 90s, the phenomenon around Black gayness centered around the "DL Brutha" and "Don't ask, don't tell" campaigns. I navigated the world of the "DL Brutha" quite well. I dated men and women, taking on the conquest typical of the hyper-sexual Black male stereotype. College was a space and place for self-discovery. In many ways, I took full advantage. Matriculating in my

academics while growing more aware of my sexual preference and comfort in accepting who I was, I began reading books to help me understand my feelings and how I lived. I was dating women to please others, but behind closed doors, secretly in the desire to spend my time with the same gender. While learning more about gayness, it often felt like I had to choose between the two. It was not until I learned about intersectionality that I proudly embraced them both.

—*Dr. Richard Marks, Jr.*

One experience that helped shape my identity as a Black, same-gender-loving male was during the height of the pandemic and quarantining. At that time, everyone was stuck inside, while also seeking community outside of our own minds. I was able to find community and curate a space on the audio app, “Clubhouse”. I came together with a group of talented Black Queer men to create the group, “Black Gay Men Chat”! On the app, we were able to educate and highlight the lived experiences of Black SGL men across the world. I tapped into my creativity and my voice in so many ways, by producing multiple projects such as: a talent show through the “Black & Gay” group, a seductive improv audio show, “The Art of Seduction”, a shoot your shot show “The Black Gay Bachelor”, a book club called “Reading Rainbow”, and facilitating/moderating multiple conversations across the platform (crystal meth in the Black Queer community, Black Gay Fatherhood, Dating Red Flags, etc.). This experience shaped my identity because I was able to share/facilitate a space with individuals that were able to challenge me and validate my lived experiences, while bringing new perspectives to the conversations. Our group currently has 7,000+ members and showed me the power and influence that we have as Black Queer people when we come together. I recognize that at times society will not accept us fully which was evident in heterosexual spaces on the app where the expectation was for us to show-up “Black first”, but we are full people, and we deserve to share and take up all the space we desire, while standing in all that we are. This experience was empowering, inspiring, and made me feel seen holistically.

—*Sean Rice, Jr.*

Serving as the first Black male coordinator of a LGBTQ center on a HBCU campus has without a doubt shaped my experience as a SGL cis-male completely. Entering this role has been a blessing that’s allowed me to have an impact on a community that I care so deeply about but also continues to illustrate a disconnect between two of my salient intersecting identities. On a campus where my center exists mere feet away from the Men’s Center, I’ve experienced students and staff who avoided eye contact with me, barely engaged in our “collaborations”, and chose to only talk from the doorway of the center instead of coming in. But in accepting this role, it also meant accepting all the razzle dazzle that came with it, including the looks of shock I get when people hear my official job title and watching other men tense up in casual conversation. My experience with maleness in tandem with my own sexual orientation and profession are something that I find to always be in question by other people, men specifically. And it fuels the fire and desire that I have to do my part in dismantling the oppressive nature that keeps men away from the understanding that true DEI work is not just the advancement of cishet men, but for all of us.

—*Eric D. Martin*

With this introduction, we pivot to the narratives and vignettes that amplify the diverse voices of same-gender-loving, Black men. To Andre', Aaron, Kelly, Anthony, Desmond, Andrew, Kaschka, Brandon, Richard, Sean, Rodrick, David, D, and Eric thank you! Without y'all this project would not be possible. I am extremely proud of you all and excited for what is next! Again, thank you, much peace and love.

—*Antione D. Tomlin, Ph.D.*

NARRATIVE ONE

QUARENESS EMBODIED

Living Authentically at the Intersections of Sexuality, Race, Professionalism and Ability

Andre Ford

La Guardia Community College

This chapter explores the impacts of a Black man living at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and ability within a higher education setting. By examining the subject's upbringing in the Southern United States and the role religion played in his identity formation, the author seeks to explore the cumulative effects of minority stress (Meyer, 2003) and the essentialness of developing resilience to succeed in his profession. This chapter will include recollections of the subject's journey to self-acceptance through work with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual and other sexual and gender identities (LGBTQIA+) youth and students, while reconciling his own identity because of a disability and the desire to serve as a role model of how a queer identified Black man can thrive in the academy through teaching, research, and service. The author will explore the concept of developing an integrated identity in which achieving a homeostasis between the personal and professional is discussed within and in tension with heteronormativity. The goal is to identify ways in which quare theory (Johnson, 2001) manifests within academia. By providing real life examples of "theories in the flesh" (Johnson,

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2001), in which individual and collective identity is investigated, the author intends to explore the challenges and opportunities of working at the intersection of research and practice. Furthermore, this chapter will explore the salient issues that arise as a queer identified Black male professional works in collaboration with BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) LGBTQIA+ students in creating identity affirming and inclusive learning spaces.

Keywords: Minority Stress, Quare Theory; Personal and Professional Identity

INTRODUCTION

Within the field of higher education most studies concur that lack of representation of Black men effects environments on campus, retention of students, and the accessibility of role models who are Black males (Harper & Simmons, 2018; Henry, 2021). As an adult and continuing education instructor and program manager who has experience in both non-profit and higher education, I am acutely aware of the importance of representation and the essentialness of students identifying with educators who look like them. This is more apparent because I am a Black male, pansexual, white-collar professional, who possesses an advanced degree. As a social worker, I am ethically obligated to practice cultural humility, with the objective of dismantling racist and oppressive systems (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). Community colleges have served as an access point to a better quality of life for several groups who have traditionally experienced marginalization and oppression. These institutions are potentially capable of uplifting the socio-economic status of members of the LGBT community, especially those who have experienced disproportionate higher rates of poverty, including bisexual and transgender people, as compared to heterosexual and cis-gender individuals (Badgett et al., 2019; Conron et al., 2022). While being mindful of my individual journey, I must be unyielding in my quest for equality which calls for ameliorating of injustices that are systematically and structurally embedded (Bernstein et al., 2020), all while in pursuit of social justice, for the population I am called to serve and to whom I also identify with.

My name is Andre J. Ford. I was born in Houston, Texas at the dawn of the Reagan Revolution. I grew up in a working-class community in which both of my parents worked at their respective jobs until retirement. We were not rich and despite their divorce, I never went without, and I was fortunate that my father was a constant and consistent presence in my life. This was also a time in which I would encounter role models who either passed away due to complications of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) or who managed to survive the initial onslaught of the epidemic. The outcome was usually delineated along lines of race, economic status and class, in which young Black men were its casualties. As I bore witness to this, I realized the potential risks and pitfalls of being a same gender loving Black man. This would profoundly shape my personal life, as well

as my career trajectory. My journey to living authentically would require a change in my basic assumptions about how I would choose to show up in professional settings. As a burgeoning practitioner scholar and social activist, my life experiences have shaped me into the pragmatic individual that I am today. This chapter will explore major events in my life and how they informed my experience as a same gender loving Black man who is thriving in the community college space.

GROWING UP AS A QUEER BLACK BOY IN THE SOUTH

I am the youngest of three boys. As a child I was introverted and shy, until my mother allowed me to participate in the Easter program at the Christian primary school that I attended. It was here that I learned the importance of decorum, following every question or call of my name with a *yes or no mam or a yes or no sir*, in deference to my parents or any adult who occupied the room. As a child I would recite such classics as *The Creation* and *The Prodigal Son*, both by James Weldon Johnson, to the approval and applause of my congregation. It was here where I would find my voice, only to have it silenced for fear of going to hell. This experience was traumatic. I would literally attempt to block out invasive thoughts in my mind as I developed an intense crush on an older boy at the age of 15. I navigated this by telling myself that as long as I didn't act on my desires, that I would remain in God's will. I became an expert at impulse control, almost to the point of being obsessive compulsive. I didn't allow myself to experiment with my sexuality. It was something that was to remain unexplored until adulthood. I came of age during the media sanctioned "downlow phenomenon," which described some Black men as out, however, the majority of them were secretly having sex with other men and as a result adhered to the expectations of parenthood and masculinity while associating homosexuality primarily with Whiteness (Denizet-Lewis, 2003). This allowed the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and AIDS to become pervasive in the African American community, with gay and bisexual Black men being reduced to incubators and disease spreaders. The message was clear for me as an adolescent who was starting to experience same sex attraction. That my feelings were wrong, unnatural, and abominable in the sight of God. I would find refuge in the words of Ntozake Shange and Zora Neale Hurston, who both pleaded for the liberation of women within their works. I too wanted to be loved and to be warmly embraced (Shange, 1975). I valiantly attempted to remain faithful to my Southern Baptist upbringing by briefly participating in the now defunct Exodus International, which promised deliverance from homosexuality by virtue of prayer and counseling (Lovett, 2013). I decided to join this group after watching a news segment about it on my local television station. To my recollection the subject of the segment had been "delivered" from homosexuality and was happily married to his wife. The group had a clear hypothesis of the causes of same sex attraction and ways to combat it. Their theory was reasonable in my view. However, after taking part in group sessions where participants who were married with children we still struggling with their desires, something in me internally

felt that their conversions weren't true. Therefore, I decided to leave the group. It was then that I, as so many same-gender loving Black men before me had done, would "move up North" to re-discover who I was. Individuals who relocate to places outside the South such as New York City and other urban settings are better equipped to manage sexual marginalization over their lifetimes (Scott, 2021). My life in the South was one that revolved around God, family and the intense love and commitment that I gave to both. This prepared me for the next stage of my life, as my identity evolved. The following section will provide examples of how I began to successfully integrate my personal and professional identity, eventually becoming a content expert on issues concerning BIPOC LGBTQIA+ students in higher education, a role model for what it means to be a queer Black man pursuing doctoral education and the strategies and recommendations that I would share with others like me who are currently navigating academia.

INTEGRATING MY PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

The state of mental health for the LGBTQIA+ community is challenging with disproportionate negative outcomes for a POC. When compared to the larger community, individuals who are LGBTQ POC, experience mental health challenges at higher levels (Human Rights Campaign, 2021b). This and other issues which were evident before the Co-Vid pandemic, have prompted higher education and other service-oriented institutions to intentionally promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, even though evidence is emerging of retrenchment from those efforts across multiple industries. Furthermore, it is essential to explore how BIPOC LGBTQIA+ employees effectively utilize their personal and professional identity to combat the inherent racism and oppression that exists in institutions. It is only by advocating for the implementation of specific policies that create an inclusive organizational climate and culture (Schneider et al., 2013), while also modeling these behaviors that will lead to impactful change. This section will explore some of the challenges that I experienced as a same gender loving Black man in academia. We will also explore how my professional identity was impacted by working with BIPOC LGBTQIA+ youth, how I became a model employee, and intentionally chose to take a proactive role in bridging the gap between practice and research, in which I partner with BIPOC LGBTQIA+ faculty, students and staff in sharing their knowledge and wisdom in what it takes to create a truly diverse, equitable and inclusive campus environment.

Witnessing Resilience

I started teaching adult and continuing education students in my mid-twenties. I worked as an instructor at a shelter that assisted youth with transitioning from homelessness to stable housing, most of whom were BIPOC. Several of them were also LGBTQIA+ and had to contend with multiple stressors at the intersections of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. LGBT

youth experience homelessness or instability at a rate of 28%, with higher rates being reported by transgender/non-binary youth (The Trevor Project, 2022.) As I worked with these students, I was humbled by their resilience, bravery, and courage in the face of daunting odds. They encouraged me to collaborate with them to create a learning environment that was trauma informed and culturally responsive. As I pursued my Master of Social Work degree, I was able to synthesize my newfound knowledge, with my understanding of pedagogy, curriculum development, and instruction, to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within my classroom. This was fundamentally important for all the students, but particularly for those who were LGBTQIA+ as I formed relationships with them. LGBT youth who develop connections can diminish the effects of stressors which helps alleviate minority stress and the mental health issues associated with it (Meyer, 2003; Robinson, 2021). I did this while being mindful of the importance of maintaining professional boundaries. I also came from a background in which I was taught that my personal life was to remain private. Therefore, I consistently negotiated within myself of whether if or when it was appropriate to disclose my sexual orientation. The guiding principle being, if it was of service to the student in seeing someone “like them”, so they could know that achieving their goals was possible.

Model Employee

Higher education has grappled with diversity in leadership and faculty roles at higher education institutions (Gasman et al., 2015; Henry, 2021). I experienced this as I transitioned from working in the non-profit sector to a community college in the adult and continuing education division. Even though I was an educator and program supervisor, I was not classified as faculty. The title was reserved for those who taught credit-bearing courses. Most professional development opportunities were designed for them. This put me at a disadvantage because the learning needs of my students were not necessarily the same as those who were pursuing a college degree. I once again felt “othered” as I did during other critical junctures in my personal and professional life. I assumed ultimate responsibility for my professional development. This was important as I continued my work with a student population whose unique needs are often overlooked or poorly researched. Furthermore, I worked in a program that served young fathers who were mostly people of color, which caused me to adopt a more masculine demeanor, as to not be outed. My primary concern was whether disclosure of my sexual orientation would have a negative effect on their ability to learn. Therefore, I made the decision to focus on being technically competent in my work and to have above average job performance. I developed culturally responsive curriculum, set up policies and procedures for holistic student evaluation and developed skills in collecting quantitative and qualitative data. My transparency and vulnerability were limited to anecdotes about the loss of my brother to gun violence. I engrossed myself in my work as based upon what I thought a model employee should be. There were no vocal LGBTQIA+ colleagues who could serve as mentors, so I

was responsible for navigating this new terrain alone. The purpose of higher education is ascribed to three interconnected missions which include, educating the population, discovering new knowledge and engagement with the community or society at large (Papadimitriou, 2020). It is taken for granted that post-secondary institutions are leaders and innovators in promoting DEI and that there are institutional mechanisms in place to achieve these goals. The journey for me, as it is for so many others, was how to develop an identity that integrates my education, professional background, practice wisdom and the appropriate use of self, to further the mission of the institution in which I am privileged to work. Not having a mentor made me feel uncertain as to my future. There wasn't a model of how to be transparent and open about one's sexual orientation and whether there were unintended consequences by doing so. If I came across as effeminate, would that negatively impact my career? How would I deal with homophobic slurs directed towards me in the classroom if they occurred? There wasn't a guide for me to follow. This caused me to practice hypervigilance in a quest to maintain my personal and professional integrity. However, there are consequences when one can not be their complete authentic self in the workplace.

Identities Converge

The seeds of change were planted at my previous job as I began to become a content expert on issues affecting LGBTQIA+ youth. I would observe that staff members did not have the requisite knowledge to serve this population. There was a need to assist the organization in developing cultural competence to effectively work with this community. I created workshops which gave employees the opportunity to learn about systemic issues impacting LGBTQIA+ youth, basic terminology to understand variation in gender identity, expression, and sexual orientation, while helping employees devise strategies to better assist them with engaging clients. One specific approach was the integration of mindfulness which requires a singularity of focus without distinction between the several facets of one's practice (Epstein, 1999). The purpose is to look at the individual holistically in which one's mental, physical, and spiritual needs are all interwoven. I would cultivate this practice in my work at the community college as an instructor. Two students would serve as role models for me in my development. One was a Latinx transgender woman, who I worked with at my previous job. She demonstrated resilience and pride in herself, withstanding the discrimination, harassment, and prejudice she endured. The second was an African American man who was open about his sexuality despite being in an environment that was potentially hostile. Due to his honesty and transparency, he earned the respect of his peers. These experiences, in addition to my diagnosis with a neurological condition compelled me to take a more proactive role as "out" same gender loving Black man in academia. It all started with numbness and tingling in my hands and feet which became chronic. This escalated to clinical weakness on my left side and subtle but noticeable differences in my cognition and gait. Based on my symptoms, multiple

sclerosis(MS) was a possibility. When not enough clinical evidence wasn't available to make a definitive diagnosis for MS, my neurologist determined that my symptoms were idiopathic. It was at this moment that I realized that I would have to live as a fully integrated human being in which my queer identity, Christian faith and Blackness could peacefully co-exist in all facets of my life. The internalized trauma I endured brought me to this point and it was my responsibility to make a change. My well-being and life depended on it.

ONE STEP CLOSER TO SELF-ACTUALIZATION

Further integration of my professional and personal identity took shape when I posted a rainbow flag on my office door. I neither confirmed nor denied my own sexual orientation at work, but this statement was one of communicating to others that I would provide a safe space for LGBTQIA+ students, as well as a sign of resistance in which I subtly protested the heteronormative privilege that is deeply embedded within our institutions. I would be asked to participate in an oral history project that would chronicle my journey from the South, to my life as a non-heterosexual Black man living in New York City. It was here that I began to operationalize the challenges and rewards of being a professional who was queer and male, while living in a Black body. The challenges included the burdens of being the only one who openly identified as such, maintaining clear boundaries to protect myself, as to not become an unassuming victim of implicit bias and the hypervigilance that comes with deciphering whether I was safe to be my complete and true self in professional settings. My interview was recorded, transcribed, and stored in the college archives. I joined the LGBTQIA+ Advisory Committee, and I would be featured as a part of an exhibit with other faculty and staff members who were a part of the same community, me being the only Black male to be curated. I facilitated a workshop on Ballroom Culture to the Queer Student Club, to share with them the historical underpinnings that have helped queer and trans people of color create community. I was inspired by the fierceness and pride of the participants. My steps towards integration have been incremental, however, each has led me closer to living fully at the intersections of race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender.

I would begin to formally bridge the gap between my lived experience, practice wisdom, and research when I decided to pursue a Doctor of Social Work (DSW) degree. I chose this approach because it would allow me to develop expertise in the nexus of research and practice. A DSW possesses superior expertise, with profound knowledge in one chosen subject related to the practice of social work and communicates said knowledge through instruction, presentation, practice, and scholarly endeavors (Hartocollis et al., 2015). In so many ways there was a parallel process to my professional development in choosing to make the experiences of BIPOC LGBTQIA+ students the focus of my research. I began to learn about the theoretical frameworks that would undergird my work, which included creating identity affirming learning environments for BIPOC LGBTQIA+ students,

and expanded into understanding the experiences of transwomen of color, who are disproportionately victims of fatal violence (Human Rights Campaign, 2021b). It has been in my pursuit of a doctorate that I realized that clinical skill and technical knowledge is not enough. I am obligated to contribute to the practice knowledge base as it pertains to our community and to serve as a bridge in which I partner with relevant stakeholders by virtue of Community Based Participatory Research, which strives to alleviate health disparities through client centered practice and community directed systematic examination (Colins et al., 2019). Further integrating my roles as human, educator, social worker, and researcher will allow me to achieve this goal.

CLAIMING AND CELEBRATING MY AUTHENTIC SELF WITHIN THE ACADEMY

Implications and Recommendations

To address the experiences of what it means to thrive authentically as a same gender loving Black male in the academy, the following recommendations are proposed and are anchored in facilitating change at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice, while utilizing an anti-racist and anti-oppression lens. The implications include developing strategies to break down barriers and to promote authentic inclusion on behalf of the students we serve and of ourselves as professionals.

First, as academicians and leaders, we must take a proactive role in narrowing the gap between research and practice. Identifying an area of interest as it pertains to LGBTQIA+ issues within higher education and collaborating with underrepresented groups in producing research that centers them is essential. As literature on the experiences of Black LGBT students grows, research on Latinx, Native American and Two-Spirit LGBT pupils remains limited (Duran, 2018). We stand in a unique position as allies to develop a culture of mutual trust so that we can contribute to developing a better understanding of groups who have not been adequately represented in the literature.

Second, we must be visible to demonstrate to colleagues and students alike that we are an essential part of the fabric of the campus community and to be role models for BIPOC LGBTQIA+ students. For those who are educators, making our classrooms inclusive spaces produces better academic outcomes. Students identified their campus environments as affirming when faculty address topics within their classes related to race, sexuality, and gender (Garvey et al., 2019). Furthermore, data has revealed that faculty members who are either allies, or identify as queer, and are supportive of students, within educational settings, while visibly interacting with them informally on campus as participants, are identified as sources of support by those who are LGBT (Linley et al., 2016). Staff members can serve as leaders in creating safe zones in their respective departments by promoting best practices that are culturally responsive. Allied groups are fundamen-

tal in facilitating spaces for LGBT faculty and staff to combat against homophobia and transphobia (Lesnick, 2021). Promoting proper use of preferred pronouns and advocating for policies which incorporate sexual and gender diversity at the institutional level are also crucial. Gender neutral restrooms, policies inclusive of gender identity that are non-discriminatory and the opportunity to change one's name on academic records without legal proceedings were deemed most important (Goldberg et al., 2019). Our visibility and advocacy at multiple levels within our institutions is fundamental for change.

Theory Meets Practice

Finally, we must honor and celebrate our individual and collective identity as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. By integrating my understanding of intersectionality, minority stress and quare theory with praxis, my work with BIPOC LGBTQIA+ students has evolved. Quare theory (Johnson, 2001) considers how race, class, gender, and sexuality interact (Ellis, 2023; Means & Jaeger, 2013). It articulates the individual and collective experiences of BIPOC LGBTQIA+ people, and how they live and create meaning, as they seek to change oppressive systems from within. It consists of four components (Carmicheal, 2023; Johnson, 2001) for which concrete examples of how each one can be translated into practice within higher education settings will be given. *Theories in the flesh*, highlights the differences within and amongst people of color in the LGBTQIA+ community, while synchronously acknowledging the effects of racism and classism in how the community experiences the world by integrating theory and practice as a mode of political resistance (Johnson, 2001). Safe Zone and allyship trainings must recognize that the LGBTQIA+ community is not monolithic and that individuals who are BIPOC must contend with unique challenges that require different solutions. Providing training opportunities for faculty, staff and administrators in identifying racism, transphobia, and homophobia and helping them devise concrete strategies to combat both issues in their areas of practice is essential. Theory of performance cultivates self-empowerment by developing, acknowledging, and maintaining self-assurance and cultural identity despite being in an environment that fails to acknowledge it (Carmichael, 2023; Johnson, 2001). LGBTQIA+ campus organizations have long served as safe spaces of expression for its members. College administrations and other relevant stakeholders must be proactive in their allyship by sponsoring and participating in events which celebrate the LGBTQIA+ community. Performativity calls for Black people to be aware of their past and present in order to understand what it means to live within a Black body (Carmichael, 2023). Educators should include the historical contributions of the LGBTQIA+ community while highlighting the experiences of BIPOC individuals in their curriculum. Trailblazers such as James Baldwin, Bayard Rustin, Audre Lorde, Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, Essex Hemphill and Marlon Riggs should be studied due to their work in the areas of political and social activism, artistry and performance. Finally, contributions from resistance

recognizes that Black people have developed resilience and strategies to survive, as manifested in theories of performance and performativity (Carmichael, 2023; Johnson, 2001). A prominent example of this is the evolution of Ballroom Culture from being a once underground movement to becoming mainstream. Blacks and Latinos created this culture in order to celebrate their diversity at the intersections of sexuality, gender identity and expression, while also acknowledging the stressors associated with class and race. From this came the opportunity for the BIPOC LGBTQIA+ community to create meaning in a society that all too easily condemned them, as based upon the aforementioned attributes, while also sharing their dreams and aspirations by virtue of performance. Relevant stakeholders must serve as reservoirs of support in making the larger campus climate and culture truly inclusive. We must ensure that policies which directly impact the progress and advancement of students, faculty, staff and administrators who are BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ are equitable. Operationalizing the approach to your work, while authentically being who you are is where the capacity for professional success and personal fulfillment exists. All while serving as a role model for the next generation of students and colleagues within the community. Our northern star should be to fiercely advocate for the authentic inclusion of the marginalized for which it can be communicated: “When they possess opportunity, we all do” (Crenshaw, 1989).

CONCLUSION

As someone who embodies multiple identities, I am mindful of my responsibility and opportunity to live my life boldly and to anchor myself and my work from a place of strength. My profession, mission and vocation call me to do so, and to help clear the path for those who will follow me.

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