Making sense of spirituality in our academic lives through co-mentoring

Christine W. Nganga, Makini Beck & Joyanne De Four-Babb

Published online: 22 Mar 2021.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Making sense of spirituality in our academic lives through co-mentoring

Christine W. Nganga [a], Makini Beck[b,c] and Joyanne De Four-Babb[b,c]

[a]The George Washington University, Washington DC, USA; [b]Rochester Institute of Technology, New York, USA; [c]University of Belize, Belmopan City, Belize

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we utilize a blended conceptual framework based on spirituality, endarkened feminist epistemology, and feminist co-mentoring that draws upon dialogue from a Freirean perspective to inform our inquiry. In our analysis, we sought to respond to the question: How does spirituality inform the work we do as Black women faculty? We engaged in spirituality focused, co-mentoring dialogues and embraced a collaborative autoethnography research design that involved individual writing, dialogue, reflection, and sharing and meaning making. Through these processes we came to articulate our individual definitions of spirituality and made sense of how spirituality informs our way of being and knowing in the academy. We experienced spirituality as a means to heal self and others, and as a source of resistance and courage.

Introduction

Black women faculty have long utilized mentoring networks and relationships to sustain themselves in the academy (Henderson, Hunter G., and Gladys 2010). The benefits of mentoring and peer mentoring include countering marginalization and isolation (Butner, Burley, and Marbley 2000; Henry and Glenn 2009); navigating a career trajectory of tenure and promotion (Parker and Ruth 2010); and forging cross-cultural relationships that help them to sustain each other in the academy (Agosto et al. 2016; Unterreiner et al. 2015). However, spirituality in mentoring, as an integrated aspect of personal and professional growth for Black women faculty, is rarely acknowledged in the literature.

The role of spirituality in higher education has been an emerging body of research (Dillard 2006; Chang and Boyd 2011; Tisdell 2003, 2007). Much of this research focuses on the interconnections between spirituality and pedagogical practices among faculty (Lindholm and Astin 2008; Shahjahan 2010). Nevertheless, for many Black women faculty, spirituality plays a key role in their overall sustenance and resistance to dehumanizing practices in the academy (Agosto and Karanxha 2011). In this paper, we wish to contribute to these intersections of research by exploring how spirituality shapes our practices (Buzzanell 2009). This inquiry is informed by the research question:

'How does spirituality inform the work we do as Black women faculty?' We utilize a blended conceptual framework based on spirituality, endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard 2006), and feminist co-mentoring from a Freirean perspective to inform this inquiry. We also utilize collaborative autoethnography as a methodological framework to share our narratives and analytical processes. To this end, we articulate how we came to understand spirituality collectively through our co-mentoring practices, and the way we used this lens to invite healing for ourselves and others.

Conceptual understandings

Spirituality

Spirituality is an ambiguous yet contested concept. Wright (2003, 7) posits that 'the spiritual is … linked to that which is vital, effervescent, dynamic and life-giving'. Swinton (2011, 14) notes that sometimes spirituality is perceived as 'the manifestation of love; sometimes it is the search for hope, meaning and purpose; for some people it is about religion and God; others clearly and self-consciously want to exclude God and religion'. In education, several scholars have used spirituality to understand academic life in relation to teaching and research (Cutts 2020; Dillard 2006; Dillard, Abdur-Rashid, and Tyson A 2000; Lavia, Neckles, and Sikes 2011; Palmer 2003). Spirituality, or what Dillard (2006) calls spiritual strivings, is more than a theoretical concept, but a belief system that is deeply rooted in the social and cultural traditions of people of color. Moreover, it is often a source of power from which they find strength, hope, and clarity (Starks, Vakalahi, and McPhatter 2014).

We lean on Freire's (2000) work to situate our notions of spirituality as an action to promote social justice. Although Freire did not explicitly address his own sense of spirituality, it is clear that his work engaged a spiritual perspective that advanced notions of faith, optimism, resilience and social change (Boyd 2012). From this perspective, spirituality offers a place 'from which to launch a critique of the status quo' (Wright 2003, 209), and requires us to acknowledge the presence of hegemony, sexism, and racism as constructs that intersect to inflict wounds, particularly on the minds and spirits of Black women. As Dillard (2016, 9) notes, it is important that we heal ourselves in order to 'show up strong and whole' while continuing the work that we do as educators. Understanding spirituality as a source of strength, meaning and purpose thus allows us to remain hopeful and resilient while pointing out injustices within the walls of the academy. Together, these broad perspectives inform our ontological views of spirituality as a means of finding meaning in the larger purpose of our work as educators.

Endarkened feminist epistemology

Approaching our work from an endarkened feminist epistemological perspective allows us to be intentional about the intellectual, social, and cultural contributions that are intimately woven in us as people of African descent. This perspective values 'the indigenous African knowledges, epistemologies, ontologies, and cosmologies' of how we understand ourselves as Africans, African Americans, and Caribbean people (Dillard and Bell 2011, 337). As noted by Dillard and Okpalaoka (2011, 65), 'an *endarkened feminist epistemology*

articulates how reality is known when based in the historical roots of global Black feminist thought and when understood within the context of reciprocity and relationship'. Through this framework, the principles of:

> love, compassion, reciprocity, ritual and gratitude as methodologies in the spirit allow us to more clearly recognize humans in our various ways of being. In this way, more principled relationships can be realized—and love, compassion, reciprocity, ritual, and gratitude can be enacted in ways meaningful to African people and to others who struggle under various forms of domination and oppression. (Dillard 2008, 289)

This endarkened feminist epistemology offers as a foundation to articulate Black women's sense of knowing and being in the world within the praxis of research.

Feminist co-mentoring, collaboration, and spiritual friendships

As three Black women scholars from different regions in the African diaspora, we draw from our 'spiritual strivings' (Dillard 2006) to make meaning of our personal and professional experiences in the academy. Some would call our meeting serendipity; however, as sisters in the spirit, we believe that nothing happens by chance or by circumstance, but for a reason and higher purpose. Christine lives and works in the U.S. but was born and raised in Kenya; Makini was born in the U.S. to Jamaican parents; Joyanne is originally from Trinidad but currently lives in Belize. Makini and Joyanne met at an international educational research conference in 2010. Christine and Makini met in Alaska in 2013 at a small narrative conference. Makini introduced Joyanne and Christine at an educational conference. We have since developed close professional and personal friendships and have co-authored several conference presentations and publications, including Beck, Unterreiner, and De Four-Babb 2017; Beck and Nganga 2016; De Four-Babb, Pegg, and Beck 2015; Nganga and Beck 2017.

Our co-mentoring relationships have given us an avenue to purposefully encounter wholeness and healing that transforms the way we approach our work and our relationships in the academy. Centering spirituality in our co-mentoring practices through an endarkened feminist perspective offers opportunities to speak to 'the truth of who we are [and what is] at the core of our being' as people of African descent (Richards 1980, xxiii). We also bring these understandings into the classes we teach and how we build relationships with students and colleagues.

Utilizing dialogue in a Freirean sense, while incorporating feminist co-mentoring practices, acknowledges that our relationships are non-hierarchical and offers us opportunities to share knowledge, critical insights, and perspectives. Dialogue in this regard is 'the essence of revolutionary action,' and an avenue to consciously achieve understanding rather than musing our thoughts in isolation (Freire 2000, 135). As Freire (2000, 72) writes, 'For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, men [*sic*] cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other'. Dialogue then, in our co-mentoring space is an avenue for love, humanization, liberation, and critical self-examination through the transformation of lived experience into new knowledge.

Co-mentoring in this way challenges knowledge drawn from what is deemed as 'objective, passionless, unemotional,' and masculine (McGuire and Reger 2003, 53). We also acknowledge that expressions of emotion and caring in our relationships contribute to the knowledge created through our dialogue. Therefore, in this work, we are intentional about not only challenging the mind–body duality (McGuire and Reger 2003) but also exploring 'the inner landscape' of our academic lives (Palmer 2003). Such an approach allows us to examine how taking care of our mind, body, and spirit positively impacts the work we do in the academy.

Taken together, these concepts of spirituality, an endarkened feminist epistemology, and feminist co-mentoring offer us the space for dialogue and to reflect on and transform the oppressive spaces that shape the higher education institutions in which we work. Moreover, co-mentoring practices that involve an endarkened feminist epistemology provides critical self-reflection in community with others, as well as and opportunities to contribute to the much-needed empirical knowledge on Black women's spiritual strivings in the academy (Dillard 2008). It is in this vein that we use these frameworks to uncover the oppressive and dehumanizing experiences many, such as ourselves, have endured, and offer insight on the ways we move towards liberation, healing, self-understanding, and action towards praxis.

Collaborative autoethnography as methodology

We embraced collaborative autoethnography (CAE) (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez C 2013; Hernandez, Chang, and Ngunjiri 2017) to answer the research question: 'How does spirituality inform the work we do as Black women faculty?' CAE is methodologically and theoretically rooted in autoethnographic research (Roy and Uekusa 2020); however, it is conducted by two or more researchers (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez C 2013; Lapadat 2017). CAE combines reflection on self, in a common socio-cultural context, and dialogical collaboration with others to interpret autobiographical data (Lapadat 2017; Martinez and Andreatta 2015). This methodology enables the examination of first-hand and familiar phenomena from combined standpoints at the same time (Nowakowski and Sumerau 2019). This allows for the co-creation of knowledge and enables 'groups of researchers to turn their collective self-narratives, observations and experiences into rich qualitative data … . instead of continuing to rely on limited data collection tools to study society by researching others' (Roy and Uekusa 2020, 385). CAE allows for a 'systematic study of our subjectivity through reflexivity, appreciating the creativity, autonomy, and rights of the "subject" of knowledge' (Shapiro and Atallah-Gutiérrez 2020, 3).

Our CAE process

Our iterative CAE process draws upon three critical components: (i) independent self-reflection (ii) collaboration and interrogation of narratives (O'Connor Duffy et al. 2018; Roy and Uekusa 2020); and (iii) meaning making through dialogue. As collaborative autoethnographers, we acknowledged our dual roles as participant-researchers (Seniuk Cicek et al. 2020). Within this methodological and collaborative space, we sought to understand how spirituality informed our work as teachers and scholars and

questioned how spirituality enabled us to be intentional in countering dehumanizing practices in our teaching, research, and service. We also connected our autobiographical stories to the wider cultural, political, and social settings in which we live and work. Thus, CAE as a method allows us to 'question one another and examine our experiences to better understand our previously un-vocalized thoughts' (O'Connor Duffy et al. 2018, 70) and author our own counterstories (Ashlee, Zamora, and Karikari 2017).

Self-reflection

Harris and Watson-Vandiver (2020, 3) argue that CAE data should be 'narrative in nature, such as remembered experiences, poignant memories, feelings or sensory information, or general retrospective thoughts.' In this study, we refer to our narrative data as 'life notes' (Bell-Scott 1994). Life notes are 'constructed personal narratives' or personal thoughts expressed in 'letters, stories, journal entries, reflections, poetry, music and other artful forms' that reflect the meanings and sociocultural contexts of individuals (Dillard 2006, 5). This kind of personal writing is a reflection of our intellectual, emotional, and embodied journey as Black women faculty (Nganga and Beck 2017; Phillips et al. 2009). As Dillard (2006, 56) notes, this kind of writing is needed because much of our voices, though 'legitimate and powerful, have been excluded … in teacher education research'. These life notes are also considered 'autoethnographic texts' filled with 'emotion, action, introspection, self-consciousness, and the body itself' (Martinez and Andreatta 2015, 228) that allowed for each of us to speak for ourself (Lapadat 2017). Each of our life notes were equally valued and represented our unique experiences.

Our life notes were written in response to the questions: (i) What does spirituality mean to me? How do I define myself as a 'spiritual being' and (ii) How does this definition of who I am as a 'spiritual being' influence, motivate, inspire, or energize what I do as a teacher, scholar, or researcher or other dimensions of who I am? We each used this series of prompts to articulate and share our personal understandings of spirituality. Our life notes were written in the form of reflections, poems, and unstructured personal narratives when we were inspired, hopeful, angry, or felt powerless.

Collaboration and interrogation

We posted our individual narratives within a folder in Google Drive which we called *Life Notes*, which only the three of us could access. We then posted analytical notes in the margins of each other's life notes and discussed them in our biweekly virtual meetings on Skype or Zoom. We used these life notes, recordings of the sessions, and comments to structure our analytical conversations. In these sessions, we embraced our researcher roles and explored what our notions of spirituality meant within the larger sociocultural contexts in which we lived and worked. This cycle of collective discussion and analysis lasted two years, from 2016 to 2018.

As educational practitioners, we are versed in self-reflection and experience in qualitative research methods; therefore, we were able to act as each other's academic sounding-boards. As we read each other's life notes, we 'complemented, contradicted, and probed each other as critical peers' and in so doing raised new understandings of what we had individually written (Hernandez, Chang, and Ngunjiri 2017, 252). As participant-researcher-authors, we engaged in 'collective and cross-analytic questioning'

which allowed for 'multivocality in reflection and collaborative process in self-analysis' (O'Connor Duffy et al. 2018, 61). This collaboration helped to reduce the stress and isolation of dealing with issues (Roy and Uekusa 2020) and so strengthened our autoethnographic understandings. The degree of rigor of the study was enhanced by each of us contributing to the data generation and discussing from multi-dimensional perspectives (Lapadat 2017). This analytical process also helped to deepen our peer-mentoring relationships and provided a 'space to hold up mirrors for each other in communal self-interrogation' (Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez C 2013, 26).

Meaning making through dialogue

We were able to interpret the larger meanings and social implications of our stories of what individually seemed to be isolated incidents (Nganga and Beck 2017). The discussion about the themes in the data became an iterative and reciprocal process, where we mentored each other on the issues raised. It is through these processes that we came to collectively understand how spirituality informed our way of being in the academy. Through our discussions, we combined our multiple voices to interrogate our experiences. This led us to recognize that as autoethnographers, we could not obtain 'this synergy and harmony … in isolation' (Nganga and Beck 2017, 24) but through 'multiple sessions of conversations and negotiations' (Roy and Uekusa 2020, 387).

Ethical considerations and limitations of CAE

Lapadat (2017) proposes that CAE offers ways to address some of the methodological and ethical issues of autoethnography. Still, our experiences revealed that CAE is not without its own 'logistical, relational, and ethical challenges' (Hernandez, Chang, and Ngunjiri 2017, 252). O'Connor Duffy et al. (2018, 69) identified that some teams have difficulties being 'open with each other and transparent in their feelings and thought processes.' This was not our case. Our friendship and collaborative partnerships over several years helped us to build and develop trust and share the challenges we encountered in higher education. We also have established procedures for negotiating authorship, sharing ownership of data, and recognizing each other's personal and professional obligations.

We were mindful of the limitation mentioned by Roy and Uekusa (2020, 389) that a project such as this one has been produced 'by scholars who are generally in a privileged situation' and may not be representative of the general population. However, our aim was not to be generalizable, but to engage in a collaborative and self-reflective investigation of our own meaning making processes. Thus, our engagement in this work, in terms used by Ngunjiri and Hernandez's (2017, 6), offered a 'communal examination [that] enhanced our ability to self-critique and … analyze our self-stories'. We are also aware of researcher vulnerability (Gross, Rubin, and Weese 2020) and the risk of identifying ourselves in the research. The stories we share may put us at risk of stigma or negative judgement. However, the benefits of our engagement in this work outweighs these risks, and instead has allowed us to reduce the 'lonely traumas of the self' and 'locate them within categories of experience' shared by Black women faculty (Lapadat 2017, 599).

Understandings

As Dillard and Bell (2011) note, Black women's stories speak to our indigenous ways of being and knowing. Yet our stories, particularly those of our collective spiritual wisdom, are often marginalized or not valued as a legitimate source of research inquiry. For this reason, we sought to place spirituality at the forefront of this inquiry. While we knew our 'spirit-filled' conversations were intuitive in our co-mentoring practices, this research allowed us to embrace spirituality as a legitimate source for understanding our activist and humanizing practices in our teaching and research. As a result of this inquiry, three themes emerged: (a) Our definitions of spirituality, (b) Spirituality as a means to heal ourselves and others, and (c) Spirituality as a source of resistance and courage.

Our definitions of spirituality

We recognize that spirituality is an 'essentially subjective notion' and a 'contested concept' (Lavia, Neckles, and Sikes 2011, 114). Therefore, one of the goals for this research was to make sense of what spirituality meant to us individually and collectively. We also sought to make sense of how our spirituality influenced our work and co-mentoring dialogue. Thus, in the discussion of this theme, we share how we each defined and understood spirituality in our work and everyday lives.

Christine: Spirituality as a way of seeing, being, and knowing

Spirituality for me is a way of seeing, being and knowing. This means that when I see my students, I do not just 'see' them as students, but individuals who have come to cocreate knowledge in that space called the classroom. This kind of knowledge is anti-oppressive, liberatory, and brings forth new life. It connects them with something bigger than themselves or the content we are studying. My spirituality entails a pedagogy that offers my students an opportunity to experience freedom … whatever that may look like for them. My hope is to bring life into my classroom, not death.

Makini: Spirituality as providing strength for endurance

My spirituality allows me to recognize my race and historical legacy as strength and power. My spirituality is the force that drives me to stay on course - just like my ancestors kept going in times of despair. It is my spirituality that allows me to say: 'But didn't they go through this before? How did they cope? Where did they find their strength?' And, if my source and their source is the same – then I'll be ok. In this stance, my spirituality also informs my faith and hope.

Joyanne: Spirituality as connection

I see spirituality, not necessarily in terms of religion, but in terms of relationship … how I connect with others. That unseen experience. That nonphysical connection that we make with others. The meaning making is about authenticity for me … being true to the self. I embrace the concepts of spirituality as the search for hope, meaning and purpose, and living in one's true purpose. Spirituality is also a destiny and journey in which we live to make a difference in the lives of others.

Through our discussions, we came to see how each of our individual interpretations of spirituality influenced the role we play as faculty in the lives of our students. For Christine, religion and spirituality are separate entities that are both important.

While her spirituality is informed by her Christian faith, she also viewed spirituality as liberating rather than being oppressive. For her, liberative spirituality informed by Freire's (2000) work, is anti-oppressive, accepting of differences, life flowing and life giving. Makini believes that spirituality gives her hope and allows her to understand her life within a larger historical legacy of struggle and endurance in the U.S. In this vein, her spirituality allows her to see her life's purpose and gives her courage and strength to endure personal and professional challenges. Joyanne conceptualizes spirituality as a journey and a search for gaining a deeper meaning of self and one's own purpose for being. Her definition of spirituality is rooted in the belief that all things in the universe are interconnected and serve a larger purpose greater than oneself. So, for her, spirituality involves influencing the lives of others, even if one may never know the extent of that influence. Our co-mentoring dialogues illuminated our varied definitions of spirituality that encompassed notions of seeing, being, knowing, source of strength, and connection.

Spirituality as a means of healing ourselves and others

Much of our work is done within the context of predominantly White institutions in higher education. As Hill Collins (2000) writes, as outsiders within the academy, our positionality as Black women, and our experiences (often in the form of microaggressions), causes us to rely on our spiritual strivings (Dillard 2006) and co-mentoring dialogue as sources of support. Several of our discussions centered on the wounding that occurs within the academy. Makini wrote about her experiences in a hostile academic department, and the internal wounding it caused. She noted:

> There are many internal scars and wounds from my daily encounters.
>
> Each incident – another wound
>
> That thing you said – that wounded. I tried to ignore the other statements, but this one wounded.
>
> Your attitudes, your words, your blatant disregard – wounds.
>
> Your words are like sharp swords. You use them as powerful weapons against me.
>
> When you use a top-down approach to tell me what to do,
>
> Or when you needed to double-check my work – wounds.
>
> When you ventured to tell me what to wear – wounds.
>
> Your desire to control – wounds.
>
> Your deeds of exclusion …
>
> Like when you didn't include me on the department website, yet those who came after me were present – wounds!
>
> My interactions with you are minimal but when we meet, you use your body as a weapon.
>
> Your body speaks, 'you are invisible' – wounds!

Although faculty across race and gender boundaries endure challenges within the academy, our positionality from the race-gender duality simultaneously creates hostile spaces for women of color. Speaking from a teacher education perspective (but quite applicable in our co-mentoring), Palmer (2003, 383) acknowledges that '[t]he culture of higher education too often creates spaces that send the soul into hiding'.

Our spirituality focused, co-mentoring dialogue enabled us to bare our souls safely to one another, to share our experiences in honesty, and question and analyze their meanings. It is from this stance that we realized that healing dialogue entails awakening and educating the soul. We also recognized that healing self has a tangible impact on our well-being and those we serve (Dillard 2008, 2016). In this light, we realized we need to be whole in order to participate in the liberation of our students. Christine wrote how she intentionally practiced healing during difficult moments:

> Sometimes, healing comes from simply journaling what I am grateful for in the midst of unsettling circumstances. Rather than sit and nurse my wounds, I have learned to intentionally allow my heart to be filled with gratitude. In practicing gratitude, I am able to see not only the bad, but the good. The academy can be an isolating place, but when I feel isolated, I am reminded that so many women back home (in Kenya) would only dream of the opportunities I have. I am grateful for the opportunities to teach, do research and have insightful conversations with colleagues, and this posture of gratitude produces joy and hope. Healing also comes from having conversations with my sister-scholars. They offer a perspective to an issue when I seem to be going down a path of self-destruction.

This theme of healing self and others helped us to analyze how our spiritual ways of being, doing, and knowing in our personal and professional lives gives us agency to 'engage with and prevent the daily oppression of oneself and others' (Shahjahan 2010, 474). This spiritual dialogue allowed us to 'come back into wholeness, individually and collectively from the brokenness that so many of our people experience as a result of the assaults of cultural and racial oppression' (Atta 2018, 228). For example, when Joyanne was asked to write a life note on her response to healing, she stated:

> I have hesitated and struggled to write this response because it has been difficult to identify a period of healing. I see healing as the process of making or becoming sound or healthy again. However, Christine in our discussions helped me remember an incident that made me feel a sense of dissonance. I needed to heal myself after a very difficult class in which I was a student. Through our co-mentoring discussions, I was able to write a publishable paper … ..to capture the wounding experience. I was able to give voice to my hurt and to heal.

To cope and thrive in oppressive and hegemonic spaces, we often used phrases such as 'have faith' or 'I pray it will work out for you' as sentiments and words of encouragement when we faced challenging situations. We also used these opportunities to gently nudge one another during moments of discouragement to focus less on the wound and on the learning experience. In this respect, our spirituality focused, co-mentoring dialogue provided spaces of healing for ourselves and one another.

Spirituality as resistance and courage

Henderson, Hunter G., and Gladys (2010, 36) remind us that '[h]istorically, Black women have relied on a network and community of women to resist subordination and domination and to support their own self-definitions and self-valuations, which continues to be

an excellent form of personal resistance'. Resistance is anything we do to counter oppressive practices or talk back to the institution (hooks 1986). While it is important to name injustice, it is also crucial to envision the kind of change we would like to see in our institutions. We find the naming of spirituality as our resistance critical because it locates power back to us rather than in the institution.

The naming of spirituality as resistance can be unsettling and downright threatening to the forces of complicity in the academy. Thus, when we considered how we are located in the academy and how we chose to locate ourselves, we wondered: 'What does challenge look like for those who occupy the margins of our institutions? How does our lens as outsiders/within the institution shape a collective resistance among Black women faculty?' And, lastly, 'In what ways do we utilize our spirituality to negotiate challenges we face in the academy?'

There were times when we had to make calculated decisions regarding our professional lives. Addressing the questions above helped to enrich our dialogue and our actions regarding professional changes that we needed to make. For Makini, spirituality as courage meant seeking a new academic home in sociology while her training is primarily in curriculum and instruction. For Joyanne, spirituality as courage meant making another move to a different country to work, where she knew no one. For Christine, spirituality as courage meant leaving a tenure track position and moving 1,500 miles.

Our ongoing experiences of spirituality focused co-mentoring dialogue allowed each of us to have the courage to make the 'jump' while aligning the decision-making processes with faith as a source of guidance. Our dialogue offered us a space to articulate gratitude and find the courage to make needed decisions regarding our professional lives. In this vein, Makini wrote:

> I was told I would not get a position in sociology because I didn't have an advanced degree in the field. It was a combination of prayer and faith to not listen to the naysayers, but instead acquire the courage to deliver a job talk in a space where I felt uninvited. The academy can cause us to run away in shame every time we face defeat. But I've learned to fail more often and speak up more often – especially when I'm told 'you are not good enough to sit at the academic table.' My spirituality and connections to friends in our co-mentoring group kept me going. I ultimately won the battle and received the desired position.

The literature is replete with examples (including our own) of how pervasive stereotypes and racist ideologies manifest in the behaviors and comments among peers and colleagues in the academy (Jackson and Johnson 2011; Moll 2004). As Black women faculty we are constantly reminded of the oppressive intersectionality of race and gender through the materialization of chilly and hostile workspaces, or the ways our research, the classes we teach, or the time we spend mentoring students is undervalued by institutions (Rodriguez 2006). Through our dialogue, we have come to see how we draw upon spirituality as a source of resistance and courage to make much needed changes in our lives as Black women faculty.

Conclusion

Dillard (2019, 112) reminds us that 'the endarkened part of our struggles' are often silenced and we must fight and contend for the expansion of scholarship that is informed by 'friendship as endarkened feminist praxis'. In this paper, we draw upon our feminist co-

mentoring practices while engaging in spirituality focused co-mentoring dialogues. Our dialogues were developed over several years of friendship and sisterhood, with intentional data gathering over two years. We wanted to document these discussions because we realized that our ways of knowing were an expression of a spiritual and humanizing practice. Our autoethnographic analysis revealed three themes, (1) our definitions of spirituality, (2) spirituality as healing ourselves and others, and (3) spirituality as resistance and courage. From a Freirean perspective, engaging in this kind of research encompasses a 'process of learning and knowing' that embodies an 'epistemological curiosity' that informs our teaching, research, and survival in the academy (Freire 2000, 19). Moreover, these dialogues highlight our efforts towards our own humanization as we intentionally counter othering and exploitation (Nganga and Beck 2017). Thus, this dialogical process has captured the essence and importance of our endarkened feminist friendship and sisterhood.

Traditional mentoring rarely offers opportunities for Black women faculty (even faculty from dominant populations) to openly wrestle with their struggles from a spiritual perspective. Therefore, it is critical for faculty, from non-dominant populations especially, to build communities that nurture their wellbeing. In this regard, our work offers a contribution on how Black women faculty can nurture co-mentoring relationships that explicitly incorporate spiritual perspectives. Our spirituality focused, co-mentoring dialogue allowed us to articulate the meanings we make of our daily experiences, and to acknowledge the ways we resist and speak back to the academy while maintaining our standpoint in marginalized spaces. We have come see that despite our varied interpretations, spirituality has helped us to heal ourselves and others, and offers us sources of resistance and courage to make choices and negotiate the challenges of being Black women in the academy. We hope that others who wish to engage in similar work can find the inspiration and courage to incorporate spirituality in their conceptualization of mentoring practices.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Christine Nganga is an Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership at George Washington University in the USA. Her teaching and research interests include leadership practice with a social justice and equity focus, narrative inquiry, and mentoring theory and practice.

Makini Beck is an Assistant Professor in the School of Individualized Study and the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the Rochester Institute of Technology in the USA. She focuses her academic inquiry on immigrant women teachers in the USA, and mentoring women of color in higher education.

Joyanne De Four-Babb is an independent service provider who serves as a Lecturer in the Faculty of Education and Arts at the University of Belize. Joyanne's research focuses on identity development and peer mentoring among women faculty.

ORCID

Christine W. Nganga http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0360-2640

References

Agosto, Vonzell, and Zorka Karanxha. 2011. "Resistance Meets Spirituality in Academia: 'I Prayed on it!'." *The Negro Educational Review* 62/63 (1-4): 41–66.

Agosto, Vonzell, Zorka Karanxha, Ann Unterreiner, Deirdre Cobb-Roberts, Talia Esnard, Ke Wu, and Makini Beck. 2016. "Running Bamboo: A Mentoring Network of Women Intending to Thrive in Academia." *NASPA Journal About Women in Higher Education* 9 (1): 74–89. doi.10.1080/19407882.2015.1124785.

Ashlee, Aeriel, Bianca Zamora, and Shamika Karikari. 2017. "We are Woke: A Collaborative Critical Autoethnography of Three 'Womxn' of Color Graduate Students in Higher Education." *International Journal of Multicultural Education* 19 (1): 89–104. https://ijme-journal.org/index.php/ijme/article/view/1259.

Atta, Derise Tolliver. 2018. "Calling on the Divine and Sacred Energy of Queens: Bringing Afrikan Indigenous Wisdom and Spirituality to the Academy." In *Black Women's Liberatory Pedagogies*, edited by Olivia Perlow, Durene Wheeler, Sharon Bethea L., and BarBara Scott M., 227–244. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.

Beck, Makini, and Christine Nganga. 2016. "Narratives of Foreign-Born International Teachers: Implications for Dialogic Leadership for Social Justice." *Education Leadership Review* 16 (3): 58–71.

Beck, Makini, Ann Unterreiner, and Joyanne De Four-Babb. 2017. "Keeping our Boots on the Ground: Independent Scholars Maintaining Academic Identities." *A Professing Education: A Journal of The Society of Professors of Education* 16 (2): 67–84.

Bell-Scott, Patricia1994. *Life Notes: Personal Writings By Contemporary Black Women*. New York: WW Norton & Company.

Boyd, Darrell. 2012. "The Critical Spirituality of Paulo Freire." *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 31 (6): 759–778.

Butner, Bonita K., Hansel Burley, and Aretha F. Marbley. 2000. "Coping with the Unexpected: Black Faculty at Predominately White Institutions." *Journal of Black Studies* 30 (3): 453–462.

Buzzanell, Patrice M. 2009. "Spiritual Mentoring: Embracing the Mentor-Mentee Relational Process." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 120: 17–24.

Chang, Heewon, and Drick Boyd, eds. 2011. *Spirituality in Higher Education: Autoethnographies*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.

Chang, Heewon, Faith Wambura Ngunjiri, and Kathy-Ann Hernandez C. 2013. *Collaborative Autoethnography (Developing Qualitative Inquiry)*. California: Left Coast Press. doi:10.4324/9781315432137.

Cutts, Qiana M. 2020. "More Than Craft and Criteria: The Necessity of Ars Spirituality in (Black Women's) Poetic Inquiry and Research Poetry." *Qualitative Inquiry* 26 (7): 908–919.

De Four-Babb, Joyanne, Jerine Pegg, and Makini Beck. 2015. "Reducing Intellectual Poverty of Outsiders Within Academic Spaces Through Informal Peer Mentorship." *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning* 23 (1): 76–93.

Dillard, Cynthia B. 2006. *On Spiritual Strivings: Transforming an African American Woman's Academic Life*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Dillard, Cynthia B. 2008. "When the Ground is Black, the Ground is Fertile: Exploring Endarkened Feminist Epistemology and Healing Methodologies in the Spirit." In *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, edited by Lincoln Denzin, Yvonna Lincoln S., and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 277–292. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Dillard, Cynthia B. 2016. "To Address Suffering That the Majority Can't See: Lessons from Black Women's Leadership in the Workplace." *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 152: 29–38.

Dillard, Cynthia B. 2016. "To Experience Joy: Musings on Endarkened Feminisms, Friendship, and Scholarship." *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 32 (2): 112–117.

Dillard, Cynthia B., Daa'iyah Abdur-Rashid, and Cynthia Tyson A. 2000. "My Soul is a Witness: Affirming Pedagogies of the Spirit." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 13 (5): 447–462.

Dillard, Cynthia B., and Charlotte Bell. 2011. "'Endarkened Feminism and Sacred Praxis: Troubling (Auto)Ethnography Through Critical Engagements with African Indigenous Knowledges.'." In *Indigenous Philosophies and Critical Education*, edited by George J. S. Dei, 337–349. New York: Peter Lang.

Dillard, Cynthia B., and Chinwe Okpalaoka. 2011. "The Sacred and Spiritual Nature of Endarkened Transnational Feminist Praxis in Qualitative Research." In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by Norman K. Denzin, and Yvonna Lincoln S., 147–162. California: Sage Publications.

Freire, Paulo. 2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed 30th Anniversary Edition*. Translated by M. Ramos. New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.

Gross, Kim, Lisa Rubin, and Anne Weese. 2020. "College Athletes and Suicide Prevention: A Collaborative Autoethnography." *Journal of Issues in Intercollegiate Athletics* Winter: 82–97. Special Issues: http://csri-jiia.org/college-athletes-and-suicide-prevention-a-collaborative-autoethnography/

Harris, Lyric, and Marcia Watson-Vandiver. 2020. "Decolonizing Race and Gender Intersectionality in Education: A Collaborative Critical Autoethnography of Hope, Healing and Justice." *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change* 5 (2): 1–16. doi:10.20897/jcasc/9321.

Henderson, Tammy L., Andrea Hunter G., and Hildreth. J. Gladys. 2010. "Outsiders Within the Academy: Strategies for Resistance and Mentoring African American Women." *Michigan Family Review* 14 (1): 28–41.

Henry, W., and N. Glenn. 2009. "Black Women Employed in the Ivory Tower: Connecting for Success." *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal* 27 (1): 1–18. http://advancingwomen.com/awl/awl_wordpress/.

Hernandez, Kathy-Ann C., Heewon Chang, and Faith W. Ngunjiri. 2017. "Collaborative Autoethnography as Multivocal, Relational, and Democratic Research: Opportunities, Challenges, and Aspirations." *A/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 32 (2): 251–254. doi:10.1080/08989575.2017.1288892.

Hill Collins, Patricia. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and The Politics of Empowerment*. New York: Routledge.

hooks, bell. 1986. "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women." *Feminist Review* 23: 125–138.

Jackson, Sandra, and Richard Johnson III, eds. 2011. *The Black Professoriate: Negotiating a Habitable Space in the Academy*. New York: Peter Lang.

Lapadat, Judith. C. 2017. "Ethics in Autoethnography and Collaborative Autoethnography." *Qualitative Inquiry* 23 (8): 589–603. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1077800417704462.

Lavia, Jennifer, Themesa Neckles, and Pat. Sikes. 2011. "' … And This Too Shall Pass!' Spiritual Striving and the Academic Life of Three Women." *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 1 (1): 112–129.

Lindholm, Jennifer A., and Helen S. Astin. 2008. "Spirituality and Pedagogy: Faculty's Spirituality and use of Student-Centered Approaches to Undergraduate Teaching." *The Review of Higher Education* 31 (2): 185–207.

Martinez, Alejandra, and Maria Marta Andreatta. 2015. "'It's My Body and My Life': A Dialogued Collaborative Autoethnography.'." *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 15 (3): 224–232. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1532708614562901.

McGuire, Gail M., and Jo Reger. 2003. "Feminist Co-Mentoring: A Model for Academic Professional Development." *NWSA Journal* 15 (1): 54–72.

Moll, Luis C. 2004. "Rethinking Resistance." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 35 (1): 126–131.

Nganga, Christine W., and Makini Beck. 2017. "The Power of Dialogue and Meaningful Connectedness: Conversations Between two Female Scholars." *The Urban Review* 49 (4): 551–567.

Ngunjiri, Faith, and Kathy-Ann Hernandez. 2017. "Problematizing Authentic Leadership: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Immigrant Women of Color Leaders in Higher Education." *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 19 (4): 393–406. doi:10.1177/1523422317728735.

Nowakowski, Alexandra, and J. E. Sumerau. 2019. "Reframing Health and Illness: A Collaborative Autoethnography on The Experience of Health and Illness Transformations in the Life Course." *Sociology of Health & Illness* 41 (4): 1–17. doi:10.1111/1467-9566.12849.

O'Connor Duffy, Jennifer, Leah Wickersham-Fosh, Linnea Rademaker, and Elizabeth Wetzler. 2018. "Using Collaborative Autoethnography to Explore Online Doctoral Mentoring: Finding Empathy in Mentor/Protégé ReLationships." *American Journal of Qualitative Research* 2 (1): 57–76. doi:10.29333/ajqr/5794.

Okpalaoka, Chinwe L., and Cynthia Dillard B. 2011. "Our Healing is Next to the Wound: Endarkened Feminisms, Spirituality, and Wisdom for Teaching, Learning, and Research." *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 131: 65–74.

Palmer, Parker J. 2003. "Teaching with Heart and Soul: Reflections on Spirituality in Teacher Education." *Journal of Teacher Education* 54 (5): 376–385.

Parker, Darlene. C., and Scott M Ruth. 2010. "From Mentorship to Tenureship: A Storied Inquiry of Two Academic Careers in Education." *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning* 18 (4): 405–425.

Phillips, Donna, K. Gennie Harris, L. Mindy Larson, and Karen Higgins. 2009. "Trying On–Being In–Becoming: Four Women's Journey(s) in Feminist Poststructural Theory." *Qualitative Inquiry* 15 (9): 1455–1479.

Richards, Dona M. 1980. *Let the Circle be Unbroken: The Implications of African Spirituality in the Diaspora*. New Jersey: The Red Sea Press.

Rodriguez, Dalia. 2006. "Un/Masking Identity: Healing our Wounded Souls." *Qualitative Inquiry* 12 (6): 1067–1090.

Roy, Rituparna, and Shinya Uekusa. 2020. "Collaborative Autoethnography: 'Self-Reflection' as a Timely Alternative Research Approach During the Global Pandemic." *Qualitative Research Journal* 20 (4): 383–392. https://www.emerald.com/insight/1443-9883.htm.

Seniuk Cicek, Jillian, Robyn Paul, Patricia Sheridan, and Liz Kuley. 2020. "Researchers Explore Their Roles as Participant-Researchers in Characterizing the Lived Experiences of Graduate Students in Engineering Education Research in Canada: A Collaborative Autoethnography." *Canadian Journal of Science, Mathematics & Technology Education* 20: 98–115. Published online 31 January 2020. doi:10.1007/s42330-019-00075-5

Shahjahan, Riyad A. 2010. "Toward a Spiritual Praxis: The Role of Spirituality Among Faculty of Color Teaching for Social Justice." *Review of Higher Education* 33 (4): 473–512. DOI: 10.1353/rhe.0.0166.

Shapiro, Ester, and Celeste Atallah-Gutiérrez. 2020. 'Cultivating Feminist Transnational Practice with Immigrant Women: A Collaborative Autoethnography.' *Women & Therapy*, Advance online Publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2020.1775997.

Starks, Saundra Hardin, Halaevalu F. O. Vakalahi, and Anna McPhatter. 2014. "Spirituality: A Sustaining Force among Women of Color Academics." *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work* 33 (2): 131–147.

Swinton, John. 2011. "What is Missing from Our Practice? Spirituality as Presence and Absence." *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 1 (1): 13–16.

Tisdell, Elizabeth J. 2003. *Exploring Spirituality and Culture in Adult and Higher Education*. California: John Wiley & Sons.

Tisdell, Elizabeth J. 2007. "In the New Millennium: The Role of Spirituality and the Cultural Imagination in Dealing with Diversity and Equity in the Higher Education Classroom." *Teachers College Record* 109 (3): 531–560.

Unterreiner, Ann, Joyanne De Four-Babb, Anne Kern, and Ke Wu. 2015. "Women's Ways of Collaborating: A Study of Cross-Cultural Peer Mentoring." In *Uncovering the Hidden Cultural Dynamics in Mentoring Programs and Relationships: Enhancing Practice and Research*, edited by Frances Kochon, Andrea Kent, and Andre Green, 7–22. North Carolina: Information Age Publishing.

Wright, Andrew. 2003. *Spirituality and Education*. London, NY: Routledge/Falmer.