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Lift Every Voice: Voices of African-American Lesbian Elders

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Old lesbians of African descent have experienced racism, heterosexism, homophobia, and ageism. This article explores the topics of aging, ageism, heterosexism, and minority stress among older African-American lesbians. The narratives and subsequent analysis offer significant contributions to the dialogue regarding Black aging lesbians in the aging and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) communities generally and in the African-American and African-American lesbian communities specifically.

KEYWORDS African Americans, African-American lesbians, ageism, aging, Black lesbians, Black lesbian elders, elders, heterosexism, lesbians of African descent, older adults, old lesbians, racism, seniors, minority stress

INTRODUCTION

For many Black lesbians in U.S. culture, becoming older or being perceived as old marks the beginning of another chapter of oppression. They may begin to wonder “When did I change?” “When did I get old?” “What will happen now?” “Will I have enough resources in my old age?” “Will I become physically or financially dependent?” However, there is little scholarship that can answer these questions and even less that captures the complexities of being a Black woman who is a lesbian, and who is aging. To rectify this omission, this article presents results from a qualitative study that collected data during in-depth, face-to-face interviews from a convenience sample of 15 self-identified lesbians ages 57–72. This article uses the words elder and older adult, and Black and African American interchangeably. Pseudonyms are used to protect the participants’ identity.
According to 2008 data from the Administration on Aging, 25% of older Black women (65 years and above) lived with their [heterosexual] spouses, 32% lived with other relatives, 2% lived with non-relatives, and 42% lived alone and their median income was $14,559 (The Administration on Aging, 2010). A 2013 policy brief, highlighting elders of color, found that this cohort is especially reliant on Social Security, due in part to lower incomes, higher rates of long-term unemployment, lower lifetime earnings, and a higher concentration in jobs that do not offer pensions or other retirement plans (Aldridge & Espinoza, 2013). In addition, a national study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) older adults reported that elders of color experience significant health disparities across areas related to physical and mental health (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011).

**INVISIBILITY**

There seems to be little or no mention of Black lesbians in historical documents prior to the 1920s. They may have dissembled, used coded language, and passed as heterosexual to survive in a racist and heterosexist world. During the Harlem Renaissance (1918–1927) there were fragments in literature, song and dance insinuation. Black lesbian Bessie Smith singing “Tain’t nobody’s bizness if I do...” and the bisexual and lesbian characters in Nella Larsen’s writings are examples of hidden Black lesbianism and bisexuality (Fields, 2006). Even today, many Black lesbian elders refuse to identify themselves as lesbian to outsiders unless there is a critical need to know. Social science research focuses on gender or race, but often not at the intersection of sexual orientation, gender identity, and aging, thus ignoring the multi-faceted lives of Black women. Thus invisibility because of being an old, Black lesbian was a recurring theme among the women I interviewed:

What I find is like being placated because you are older. I have to say things two and three times, not because they don’t hear me, but because they don’t see me. It’s like I’ve become invisible or something. When I was younger like even 10 ... years ago, I would say what I needed to say and people would hear me. And now I have to raise myself and my voice to be heard [she sits straight in her chair to demonstrate] to bring back whatever they used to know. Because they see my gray hair or see me walking slowly and want to take my arm ... because it’s like I don’t know anything. (Celie, age 67)

As I was growing up, I knew enough that you shouldn’t speak of it. Even if you thought it, you don’t speak of it [woman loving woman]. And you assimilate as much as you can. And assimilation meant that you made sure your behavior was above suspicion. As I said, a lot of people suspect and a lot of people know, but since they’ve never asked
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the question [participant raises her eyebrows and shrugs her shoulders] because I would never deny it. I mean they see [my partner] and I together and they say, “I wonder.” You know? I mean we obviously have the same address. See in the African American community at least in my experience, that’s not something you ask or something you act upon unless the person has done something to you. (Mildred, age 67)

I’m a counselor so I’m not going to have pictures of my family around because people . . . talk about your family . . . and ask you some personal questions that are not necessary. But if I have someone who is gay or lesbian and has some issues of discrimination, I may come out to them. (Catherine, age 64)

SENSE OF ALIENATION AND LOSS WITHIN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

The risk of losing support from the African-American communities because of perceived sexual minority status can be devastating and lead to isolation and depression (Wilson & Miller, 2002). My interviewees carried the memories of alienation and loss in hostile environments:

My best friend and she was my best friend for years and years and years even though I was doing gay things nobody knew it. I wasn’t out; I was doing it in the closet. And when she found out . . . I didn’t tell her, a guy that I worked with saw me down at some gay club and he came back and told everybody. But everybody knew he was gay because he was real flamboyant, so he came back and told everyone at work that I was at the gay club so she came back and asked me why I didn’t tell her. She went and told her boyfriend . . . who beat her up because she was associating with me and told her never to talk to me anymore. I just had to put this out of my mind. It hurt for a long time. (Celie, age 67)

I grew up over on 5th Street, NE before it was Capitol Hill. All Black and you know here it is I was blond and blue-eyed and of course no one took to me and I was called names. . . . I was referred to as the half-breed because I looked like no one in my family. And of course the kids didn’t take to me because they thought I was different. Well I was different. So I grew up pretty much a loner. (Donna, age 65)

BY ANY OTHER NAME

Black older women reported being called names or harassed because of being perceived as a lesbian woman. Consequently, many African-American older lesbians do not like nor use the terms “lesbian” or “queer” and prefer
the terms “women who have sex with women” (Fish, 2007) and “same gender loving” (SGL). When the word lesbian is used to characterize a woman particularly in African-American communities, it is name calling, akin to bull dagger and dyke (among older women). The word lesbian is perceived as a bad word—a label that disenfranchises Black women, causing them to be perceived as other, unworthy to be a member of the Black community, or “a threat to Black nationhood” (Lorde, 1980). Because of fear of the consequences associated with being called a lesbian, many women deny they are members of the same gender loving clan; often harassing others who are or who are perceived as lesbian. Audre Lorde addresses this phenomenon in her talk *Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference* where she states: “A fear of lesbians, or of being accused of being a lesbian, has led many Black women into testifying against themselves” (p. 121).

I knew I was different as a child. . . . But I guess I was in my early teens [before I knew the words], because you don’t know what the word is. When I was coming up the word was bull dagger. It was so negative so you still don’t know. You are a kid; you don’t know, there were no words for it. I hate that word. It’s just I’ve gotten older, I just ugh . . . That’s so derogatory. It’s negative. . . . [The word] lesbian wasn’t there. Gay wasn’t there at that time. Those words came later. It was either butch or bull dagger. Most of the time white folks were called were bull daggers, but guys had a tendency to call everyone they thought was gay a bull dagger. I got called that so many times, I can’t remember. (Evelyn, age 66)

SAFETY

LGBT people must gauge their safety before divulging their gender identity and sexual orientation (Grant, 2010). This research shows that many African-American elder lesbians still deny their same gender loving orientation to stay safe in a sexist, racist and ageist world:

As I get older, what I regret is that I didn’t feel safe enough to tell some of the folks who know me and knew me, you know early on. . . . As you get older you always think back because there was still some shame to it. And I wish I hadn’t bought into it. If I had to give advice to someone at this stage . . . I would say tell somebody, tell several somebody’s because that’s the only way to erase the fact that you have to look around the corner and be careful who you are seen with and how you are seen. I mean because it’s a bunch of garbage. It really is, but nevertheless . . ., I used to tell myself that two strikes are bad enough. (Donna, age 65)
DISCRIMINATION

The National Center of Lesbian Rights (NCLR) (2009) reported that discrimination in housing, retirement communities, nursing homes and care facilities are common for those identifying or being perceived as LGBT persons. Moreover, research addressing racial segregation and discrimination has shown that elderly African Americans are systematically denied access to quality nursing homes because of their race (Yearby, 2007). Similarly, Ford and Airhihenbuwa (2010) hypothesize that everyday racism influences the health and well-being of African Americans.

Among my respondents, older African-American lesbians perceive racism as a constant in their lives and believe it to be more insidious than ageism or heterosexism:

Well, I would say that getting older in this country is difficult because we have no reverence for the elderly, which is not true in a lot of cultures. So when you add another ... stigma to it now, not only am I old, I'm old! I'm an old African-American female. And females in this country, at least my experience has been that you don't enjoy the same reverence as males do and then when you add African American to that, then it's even less. So now, I'm already down pretty far, and then when you add being a lesbian to that, that puts you in the toilet. (Donna, age 65)

ISOLATION

Like their heterosexual counterparts, older Black lesbians experience isolation, and this is compounded by the fact that many older lesbians do not have children or close family support (Grant, 2010). Furthermore, older Black lesbians often do not access community and other social services available to them because of documented and perceived homophobia (Cahill et al., 2000). Many respondents in the current study experienced isolation from the majority population because of a fear of reprisal, job loss, or disparate treatment. Older Black lesbians spoke of being the only people of color in LGBT organizations or communities. Often these organizations and events were described as “too male and too White.” Conversely, self-imposed isolation because of aging was experienced by some women. Aging issues that contributed to isolation included an unwillingness or inability to drive, limited transportation options, chronic ailments, and disabilities, lack of events for their age group, and a youth-focused culture that discriminates against old people. More than half of the participants in my study remarked that they no longer go to clubs or other social venues because of the “stares, and unkind comments.” They are often perceived to be the oldest person in the room,
or they find themselves surrounded by people with whom they had nothing in common.

EXPERIENCES OF MINORITY STRESS

Minority stress theory hypothesizes that people from disenfranchised populations are exposed to such stress because of stigmatized social positions (Myer, 2010). The quality of life, self-esteem, and mental health can be affected by minority stress through the experience of prejudice events, expectations of rejection, hiding and concealing, internalized homophobia, and ameliorative coping processes (Kertzner et al., 2009; Moradi et al., 2010). Szymanski and Gupta (2009) examined the relationships between African-American lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning individuals’ self-esteem and psychological distress and multiple internalized oppressions. They found that many African Americans are closely connected psychologically and culturally with their racial and ethnic communities from birth and feel a sense of identity and connection based on their race and ethnicity. However, many LGBT people do not feel accepted and supported in their lesbian and gay identities and often hide that part of themselves. Accordingly, the risk of losing one’s support from the African-American racial and ethnic communities because of perceived sexual identity and orientation can be devastating and lead to isolation and depression (Wilson & Miller, 2002). One of the participants invited extended family to spend the night after a holiday celebration and the invitation was declined. “They didn’t even want to stay in our house when we had a big Thanksgiving celebration because they had two young daughters and I guess they thought we were going to jump [molest] them. That’s all I can figure” (Cynthia, age 60).

RESILIENCE

This cohort has developed mechanisms to adapt to hostile environments, honing skills that allow them to shrug off a lot of oppressive behavior or stand up to it depending on the situation. A 60-year-old Black lesbian respondent recounted that in a Bible study class she attended with her wife, the minister started making comments about “those funny women.” She told the minister “You will not get another check from me to support ministry that is so mean-spirited!” Many Black lesbian elders speak of being older and wiser, and having learned to navigate ageism with lessons learned from other oppressions.

... getting older for me helps me deal with ... other oppressions and things. Because I am wiser, I pray more. ... It doesn’t bother me as much
as it did when I was younger, anger and had a fast temper and stuff like that and would fight back. . . . Some things still hurt, but I don’t have to linger over it, carry it around with me all the time and cause myself internal harm because of something someone says or does to me. . . . But when I was young, I didn’t think like that. (Celie, age 67)

Despite these barriers, some respondents found a certain freedom in aging.

When people see you with gray hair, they do one of two things. They either begin to say yes Ma’am, being respectful or they assume you have no idea how to do anything. Now most people don’t make that mistake about me because they hear me speak and that’s where the PhD comes in. So anyway the PhD allows me to carry myself in a certain way, so therefore people that are younger than I am even if they think they wanted to. . . . I mean age 40 and a PhD allowed me to say no to a number of things. As I became 50 it allowed me to say no to people and at 60 I am free to do all or none of it. (Mildred, age 67)

CONCLUSIONS

As this study has demonstrated, the voices of older Black lesbians are important for understanding the diversity of aging among sexual minority populations of color. Additional research is urgently needed to make recommendations about housing, health care, and social and community services for LGBT communities of color in an aging nation. This recommendation is affirmed by ZAMI NOBLA: National Organization of Black Lesbians on Aging (n.d.), which has issued “an urgent call for local, state and federal governments to strengthen and reinforce policies and practices that work toward filling the gaps in the public’s knowledge about lesbian aging and health and helps make visible the lived experiences of Black lesbians.”

REFERENCES


CONTRIBUTOR

Dr. Imani Woody is the Founding Director and CEO of Mary’s House for Older Adults, LGBT friendly residential housing. She is a DC Mayoral appointee to the Advisory Committee to the Office of GLBT Affairs, the Chair of SAGE Metro DC, and has been an advocate of women, people of color, and LGBT issues for more than 20 years. Dr. Woody works as a diversity and inclusion consultant specializing in aging and LGBT issues and lives with her wife of 14 years in Washington, DC.