

GENDER TALK: The Struggle For Women's Equality In African Americans

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It is with great honor to introduce and present the authors of *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities*, one in which focuses on the analysis of gender politics within African American communities, black feminists, Johnnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Shaftell. The genre of this work is Nonfiction, Cultural, African American, Black studies, Women Feminist studies, African American Feminism, Discrimination and a list of many others that have developed as the work is examined in many ways to bring about change. It was first published in February 4, 2003 and later published in December 30, 2003 by One World/Ballantine. It contains 336 pages that will keep your full attention if you desire to see a transformation in our African American communities and you desire for women and men to work together without focus on gender roles and gender equality.

Autobiographical Information Of Authors

Johnnetta was born in Jacksonville, Florida in 1936. She was the middle child of her two siblings in which they grew up in a two-parent household. Johnnetta's grandfather and his second wife along with her great-grandfather was a role model in her life as a young child. Johnnetta's maternal grandfather, Abraham Lincoln Lewis, Jacksonville's first millionaire was unable to shield his family from racism but afforded her the opportunity of traveling in a car but no way around attending "colored" schools and no way to gain entrance to "for whites only" events and places (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003), p. 7). Cole was afforded the opportunity to be raised in a relatively gender progressive home and benefited from her family having relatively egalitarian gender attitudes (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, pp. 7-8). Johnnetta's family of women did not work as a domestic and was taught to respect women in all regards, be sensitive to other women economical situations and address all women by their last name. Johnnetta's mother played a big part in the advancement of her education and career as a woman and her

unequivocal message that women were equal to men. Johnnetta was a Christian that was active. Among the long list of Johnnetta's accomplishments, she was privileged to serve as the first black woman President of Spelman College and Professor at Emory University. This clearly explains how issues in concern to gender, race, class, sex, etc. became a heart concern for Johnnetta.

Beverly was born in Memphis, Tennessee in 1946. She was the child of three siblings in which she also grew up in a two-parent household. Beverly's parents were married but separated when she was eleven. Her grandfather was a Baptist minister and her mother was a stay-at-home mother. Beverly's family also benefited from relatively egalitarian gender attitudes. Beverly's father served as an example for Beverly in that he did not exercise a "command and control" presence in her life. He did exhibit aggressive behavior, neither physical or verbal. Beverly's mother petitioned the Memphis public school to waive the home economics requirement and demanded the opportunity for Beverly to take typing in order to be a more useful college-bound student (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 10). Her mother valued education and played a big part in encouraging Beverly to pursue her Ph.D. while she was teaching at Spelman. Beverly's mother also reiterated the message that women are equal to men. Beverly was not a Christian but one that had a lack of enthusiasm for organized religion due the fact of being made to go to church as a young child (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 18). Beverly's accomplishments include serving as a Professor at Spelman College, where her work in establishing the Women's Research and Resource Center brought her into close relationships with all kinds of women, including lesbians. Beverly's engagement with gender issues was greatly influenced by her location and professional life that is connected to the study of racism and sexism and other systems of inequality (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 23).

Introduction

It is important to know the difference between race and gender discrimination and its effects on women, men and America as a whole. As a woman interested in the study of gender equality found it important to take a look at the work, *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities*, one in which focuses on the analysis of gender politics within African American communities, mainly in the contemporary period. The challenge according to Johnnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall is seeing Black America from the radical world of young people versus two middle-aged women in their forties and fifties. The quote in the preface by Audre Lorde, "What is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood" (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003) serves as the motivation why Johnnetta Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall thought it was important to provide us with the book, *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities*. As I continue this journey of research on gender equality, I am coming to understand factors that play a part in the process of keeping men and women from working together as one. As later stated by Nellie McKay (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003):

In all of their lives in America...Black women have felt torn between the loyalties that bind them to race on one hand, and sex on the other...yet they have almost always chosen race over the other: a sacrifice of their selfhood as women and of full humanity, in favor of the race (p. xi).

Johnnetta and Beverly's long involvement in Black Studies and Women's Studies and an evolving friendship brought them to crossroad of writing this difficult book, *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities* while they were both

coteaching; engaging in heated discussions outside the classroom about the state of the race; witnessing and debating a number of gender-related issues on and off campus and girl-talking about trivial and serious issues in our personal and professional lives (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003). As a woman minister having conducted monthly empowerment sessions in the past years, I have come to know the importance and lasting effect of families and women sharing their stories of struggle and triumph. This past week, I attended a business mixer in which we were allowed to introduce ourselves and tell what we do on a personal and professional level. This opened the door to allowing us to see where we have come from, accept where we are now and aim for where we want to go in the near future. Believe it or not, the founder of the mixer didn't see the importance of continuing to have the business mixers but after all of the attendants did their introduction and told their stories only then did she realize the importance of why she was having them, to help one another focus and refocus in order to look at the big picture and get suggestions on what to do to get it done. The same reason Johnnetta and Beverly had their sessions. The morning and afternoon sessions were organized around responses to four questions that were proposed to the participants: (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003)

1. What, in your opinion, are the most gender issues within African American communities at the present time?
2. Could you help us understand gender dynamics among our youth, including, but not limited to, hip-hop culture.
3. A number of identity markets, particularly gender, race, sexual orientation, and class, are important in understanding U.S. culture. How do you respond to and organize your life around these constructs?
4. What shifts/transformation have you undergone as an adult in your own thinking

and behavior around gender? (p. xvii).

Johnnetta and Beverly found the morning and afternoon sessions to be the wisest choice made because it allowed them to share their lives as well understand the importance of gender politics within African American communities. Their involvement in both the civil rights and women's movement and their love for seeing community transformation led them to their commitment to the eradication of gender equality, racism, sexism, class privilege, and heterosexism (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. xvii). Marie Wilson, author of "Why women can and must help run the world," like Johnnetta and Beverly participated in Women Studies and forums which led to the exploration of the concept of cultural barriers to women's leadership, saying that in this country we remain in denial. "Americans tend to ignore the societal and cultural foot dragging at the root of the matter, often failing to recognize deeply embedded gender roles that, for all our advancement, have kept our nation from realizing its potential" (Wilson, 2004, p. 18). The barriers are cultural and emotional, societal and historical.

Chapter One: The Personal Is Political

An African proverb states "You can't know where you are going if you don't know where you've been," this proverb is so true, it is our responsibility to glean our journey in recognizing what steps we have taken and what steps are needed to go forward. This process is also called reflection. Johnnetta and Beverly shared their stories of childhood in this chapter. They exposed the fact that they grew up in homes where not only notions of superiority of white racial superiority were challenged, but many widely held notions about male superiority were as well (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 7). The acknowledgement that the personal is the political was one that was of a different mindset of most men and women (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 7). The personal (women's domain) and the political (the public arena of power and action) were

disconnected (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 5). Personal aspects of our lives such as age, gender, class, sex, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. have become political topics of discussions in America. These personal aspects have been used to eliminate or keep African Americans from participating in activities and events that affect our lives in a major way. The goal of America's focusing on these personal aspects is to continue to strategize on how to keep African American down. Johnnetta and Beverly discovered not only was America strategizing to keep African Americans down or not addressing gender matters but was still deeply committed to hierarchy based on race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual orientation. Johnnetta and Beverly believe that "truth-telling" about issues within Black America will unmask the ugliness and complexity of race, gender, and class matters in the broader body politic (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. xxxvi).

In reflecting on the acknowledgment of the personal is political, Johnnetta and Beverly found it to be important to share their stories of experience with marriage, mothering, and "other mothering," and divorce. These experiences have helped shape their experiences with gender and race in America. Marriage has been found to be a problem for feminists, especially with African Americans. Johnnetta and Beverly realized that their feminists views and values might have helped dissolve their marriages.

In this work, Johnnetta and Beverly shared minimal details in concern to their marriages in regard to what they experienced in regard to violence (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p 27). Beverly exposed the fact that her husband was engaged in acts of violence against her (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 27). Johnnetta, on the other hand, exposed the fact that her husband carried out a gender-related abuse involving someone outside the family (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 27). What Johnnetta and Beverly experienced in marriage continues to occur in the

lives of women and girls who are the victims of abuse or abuse-related crimes (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 27). I find this to be true, in my witnessing a young black woman being pulled against her will by her boyfriend in a neighborhood in which I was at a birthday pool party. As the couple walked down into the neighborhood alongside me, the young black man continued to bully the young black woman who was his girlfriend and ultimately pulled her in between some cars and beat her terribly. A black man walking up the driveway told him to stop and the police was on the way. As I walked back up the driveway to the birthday pool party to tell my family what I witnessed, the attention was turned to the couple and young men gathered around the couple telling him to stop instead of intervening in the situation to pull them apart. Shortly after the police arrived on the scene, the police questioned the young black woman about the situation and then an ambulance showed up to. She refused help and didn't press charges on her boyfriend, the perpetrator that fled the scene. This cycle continues because they are not aware of the long lasting effects of abuse and trauma, mentally, physically, spiritually and socially.

Johnnetta took charge over her painful and humiliating experience by healing from the hurt, partaking in spiritual and psychological counseling under the guidance of highly skilled and sensitive Black woman therapist, the love and support of her three sons, family and friends (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 28). Johnnetta and Beverly shared very little details about their traumatic and life-altering incidents because they were more interested in sharing about the nature of patriarchy, the fact that every woman is a potential victim of abuse and betrayal, regardless of her class status, level of maturity, or the care with which she chooses a particular partner (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 28). According to Cole and Guy-Shaftall (2003), "they also learned that despite their familiarity with theories about male aggression and control, and

even the specificity of gender-specific violence, understanding these issues theoretically is very different from dealing with them on a personal level" (p. 28). Beverly and Johnnetta found it important to break their respective silences about the abuse they experienced in order to put their experiences to rest, find freedom and peace, to enlighten, educate and set the other captives free being female or male.

Chapter Two: Having Their Say: Conversations With Sisters And Brothers

According to Cole and Guy-Shaftall (2003), "there is a genuine concern for African American communities that are shaped by normative attitudes about gender that impacts relationships within and beyond their families" (p. 32). Johnnetta and Beverly provided a wide range of information gathered from interviews of black women and men that shared their stories as to how gender matters in their individual and collective identities as African Americans. Other voices were in the form of participants in various forums on gender issues in African American communities. These autobiographical narratives opened to door to gender consciousness and other issues including feminism. It is clear in "having their say," Johnnetta and Beverly witnessed their personal and political struggles with hierarchical gender and racial roles (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 32). Research has always opened the door to other views outside of your own as well as pushed you to find out other views that have not been gleamed or examined in a certain way.

In this chapter, there was a discussion about women's roles in relationships by men with wives and girlfriends. Other conversations were in concern to "failed" relationships and marriages and the desire to fix the necessary behavior in order to have future fulfilling relationships. Reflection is a powerful thing in that it allows you to view the situation in a given light and take responsibility for your actions, in this case study, accept a status that for many of

us find difficult to face: the role of oppressor. Johnnetta and Beverly was raised and taught how to identify oppression in spite of not having experienced it first hand in their homes because their fathers did not exhibit male domination even though the world they lived in painted the perfect picture of oppression daily. Forums were conducted by Johnnetta and Beverly whereby women and men challenged normative beliefs about what it means to be a woman or man and revealed a range of attitudes about gender (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 49). Traditional norms about masculinity, femininity and taboos about homosexuality were rejected by some women and men (Cole & Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 49). The painful experiences of sexism and heterosexism were also added to the list for discussion.

Chapter Three: Collisions: Black Liberation Versus Women's Liberation

This chapter starts with a sexual harassment case that involves Professor Anita Faye Hill and Judge Clarence Thomas while they both worked at Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. This case was captured on prime-time national television and as described by Geneva Smitherman as "a unique and extraordinary complex moment in U.S. History. This was a profound moment for Anita Hill who forced "a mandate on gender" by refusing to remain silent and taking a stand against abuse and violent acts. Johnnetta and Beverly shared several accounts of history that illustrated the long lasting debate of women choosing between the well-being of her race and her own needs as a woman. One in particular, a century earlier, in 1892, educator Anna Julia Cooper broke rank and wrote eloquently about the "voiceless Black woman of America" who was "confronted by a woman question and a race problem (Cole & Guy-Shaftall, 2003, p. 73). Black women leaders committed themselves to wage war against sexism within their communities, were openly critical of Black male leadership, and spoke with remarkable candor about intraracial gender tensions (Cole &

Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 73). According to historian, Deborah Gray White, these Black women were "convinced that black female issues and race issues," and that throughout their gender struggles, it was not dirty laundry they were airing, it was just cold hard truth" (White, as cited in Cole & Guy-Shaftall, 2003, p.73).

Chapter Four: The Black Church: What's The Word?

The black church, as progressive as it tries to become, still has an old patriarchal mind-set. Women can dress-up, look good, count the money but when it comes to doing the announcements they are not invited into the pulpit. In the Catholic church, it is still a struggle for a woman to become a priest. Consequently, women, gays and lesbian have broken away from the traditional mainstream church to start their own churches and ministries.

Chapter Five: Race Secrets and the Body Politic

The sentiments of W. E. B. Dubois should be resounded. Many crimes against the black community can be forgiven. However, there is one crime that can never be forgotten or forgiven and that is the persistent insulting of black Womanhood. The truth is that black harassment has never been scrutinized but adversely widely accepted. The struggle for equality, for women especially black women is still an uphill battle.

Chapter Six: Black, Lesbian, and Gay: Speaking and Unspeakable

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people face the same family issues as their heterosexual counterparts, but that is only the beginning of their struggle (Cahill & Tobias, 2007). In my critique of this chapter, I disagree with the author. It appears that the author is somehow agreeing with the myth that the perpetuation of HIV/AIDS in the black community is directly related to the sexual gender orientation issues that black men and women are discovering in this century. The sexual orientation issues that have developed over the last ten years is

indicative of what ails the black community. There is a lack of self-focus and lack of self perpetual love.

Chapter Seven: No Respect: Gender Politics and Hip-Hop

Today, hip hop culture is fully integrated into American culture (Boyer & Graham, 2016, p. 215). Our music, fashion, film, art, politics, and society as a whole are all influenced by the genre (p. 215). In this chapter, there are two immediate concerns that stand out. First, the use of the word “dangerous” in relationship to the Hip Hop culture. Second, is the true understanding that Hip Hop is itself a culture. Hip Hop is not just defined by what happens in the black community but by what happens to the culture as it relates to the entire world. It is a culture that is aggressive and defiant by choice.

Chapter Eight: Where Do We Do From Here?

In this chapter, the focus is on being a better self, working together and partnering. Organizations like the 100 Black Men and 100 Black Women were established for the sole purpose of enhancing all of the positive aspects of being black in America. Topics that focus on a better tomorrow for blacks have consistently been the same topics such as power, money, esteem, etc. The writer believes that the mindset of black leadership during the Reconstruction Era speaks to the question of where we do we go from here. The mindset of these early leaders dealt primarily with “expectations.”

References

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