

A Dissertation Review

*Set our spirits free: Exploring the role of spirituality as an anti-oppressive agent  
in the formal education of African Nova Scotian learners.*

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The title of the dissertation I chose is: *Set our spirits free: Exploring the role of spirituality as an anti-oppressive agent in the formal education of African Nova Scotian learners*. The author of this dissertation is Kesa Munroe-Anderson. Munroe-Anderson completed her dissertation at Mount Saint Vincent University. The members of her committee were Dr. Susie Brigham, Dr. Devi Mucina and Dr. John Eustace.

Munroe-Anderson is a woman of African descent who is originally from the Bahamas. She married an African Nova Scotian man, and has three African Nova Scotia children. Her personal situation, but also her professional experience caused her to focus on this topic. She is also an adult educator and lifelong learner. Because of this she says she brings ‘a different awareness of the power of inclusion, a sensitivity to the need for the silenced voices of the oppressed to be heard, and marginalized knowledge to be centered’ (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p. 12).

I chose this dissertation because I wanted to learn more about the role of spirituality in African Nova Scotian communities, and the role spirituality could play in social movement learning. I currently work with an organization called In My Own Voice (iMOVE) that is based in Uniacke Square in Halifax. I provide organizational support. I have known the Executive Director, Sobaz Benjamin, for many years. We both have children about the same age. I’m also close friends with his wife, Lillian, who is African Nova Scotian. Sobaz is not. He is from Grenada in the Caribbean, and grew up in London before coming to Canada.

A year ago, I had some extra time on my hands as I was making a career change, so I reached out to Sobaz to offer help. Because of the high level of trust between us, and the knowledge we had of each other not just as professionals, but as families, this connection has been like a doorway for me to learn more about the African Nova Scotian community. I have spent time going to church with Lillian, and seeing how important the church is to her and to the community at large. I have also spent time in other Baptist churches in the Halifax area including Hammonds Plains (where my cousin married an African Nova Scotian man), North Preston and East Preston.

At a time when I was searching for ‘guidance’ in my life, seeing how different the Baptist church tradition was to my own experience with the Anglican church intrigued me. I appreciated the easy way I was welcomed in, and literally ‘hugged’ and supported by people who didn’t even know me. I believe a large part of it was because I was there with Lillian, but I think it was more

than that. There was a genuine sense of community and a level of ‘spirituality’ (joy, celebration, support and belief in something bigger) that I had never seen before.

I appreciated this community more than I can say at this time in my life; the sense of fellowship, warmth, acceptance, vibrancy and humor. I stopped going because I could not say I really believed in God and I felt like a bit of a fraud, but the appreciation of that sense of community and a sense of the importance of that community and its traditions to the African Nova Scotian community has never left me. I have always wanted to learn more about it, and it feels more important than ever (because of my current work, and because of the times we live in) to explore the role ‘spirituality’ can play in creating change in community.

The broad research question posed in the dissertation seems quite clear: Could including African-centered spirituality in the classroom for marginalized learners be a critical step towards dismantling oppression, using its knowledge to address issues of power, systemic inequities, alienation and social oppression (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p. 9)? Other research questions included: “In what ways do African Nova Scotians define spirituality? What is its role in their everyday lives? What role might spirituality play in fostering anti-oppressive, transformative formal learning spaces that support the educational success and well being of ANS learners?” (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p.10).

The context for this research is described as a desire to contribute to improving the educational outcomes and wellbeing of African Nova Scotian students at a time when the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development was turning its attention towards “adopting culturally relevant teaching practices as one means of addressing the academic gaps facing African Nova Scotian and Indigenous students” (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p.8). Munroe-Anderson (2018) described the atmosphere in formal education as “ripe for change” (p.8).

The key areas of scholarly literature this dissertation draws upon includes Afri-centricity, postcolonial and anti-colonial theories. Munroe-Anderson (2018) citing Asante (1998), Dei (2012), and Dei & Johal (2005) says she chose these frameworks because they all “prioritize the centering of marginalized peoples, their knowledge and their lived experiences as the focal point of research (p.37),” and citing Merriweather Hunn (2004), Dei (2005), Chilisa (2012), and Dei & Kemf (2006) she felt it was critical to “validate” (p. 37) the spirituality of African people as “legitimate knowledge” (p. 37). She also uses theory and learnings related to African/Black

feminism/womanism as well in consideration of her own positionality in the context of the work. She adds citing Chilisa (2012): “...by rejecting the dominant knowledge systems and perspectives that rule the world, postcolonial theory encourages marginalized peoples to question what counts as legitimate knowledge, who has the authority to define and produce this knowledge and why” (2018, p. 37).

Munroe-Anderson (2018) also notes there is a difference, and some controversy, over the ideas of postcolonialism versus anti-colonialism. There are many who take issue with the term ‘postcolonialism’ because we are not past the effects of colonialism; we are still in the thick of dealing with them. Citing Nabavi (2006), she also says anti-colonialism also goes further by “acknowledging the need for local knowledge, originating from collective experiences and actions, as necessary for empowerment” (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p. 38). Munroe-Anderson (2018) also includes anti-racism theory as a critical part of her theoretical framework. She says citing Dei (2005) this theory “places the minoritized at the center of analysis by focusing on their lived experiences and the ‘simultaneity of [their] oppressions’” (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p. 38). For Munroe-Anderson (2018) citing Hill Collins (1990), these theories provide a ‘platform’ to explore the world from the perspectives of “race, class and gender oppression” (p. 38).

In speaking of the theories that inform her work, Munroe-Anderson (2018) does not speak explicitly about critical theory as part of her work, but given she is hoping her work will also provide guidance to help change the nature of many educational institutions in Nova Scotia that reinforce systemic racism and oppression, and perpetuate violence and trauma against African Nova Scotia students, it would also seem this is an important part of the framework for her work. Overall, I would say the framework she is using is excellent; very clear, coherent, detailed, and suitable for the context of the research problem and topic.

In one of the poems, titled *I am Centered*, included in the dissertation, written by Munroe-Anderson (2018), it speaks of being centered “In my skin” and there being a “comfort in this centeredness” (2018, p. 72). It also says: “When we tell our own stories, We are centered” (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p. 72).

Munroe-Anderson (2018) refers to her own poetry in the dissertation as “life-giving” not just as poetry in general, but in the form of the “spoken word;” the “ancient wisdom of Nommo” (p. 71). Time and time again, she says she “poured out” (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p. 72) her spirit in her writing, and found it gave her strength when she was feeling a lot of pressure to

produce research that she hoped would make a real difference in the lives of African Nova Scotian learners. She refers to these poetic narratives as “life notes” and “spiritual jolts” and evidence of how her ‘spirit’ “showed up” (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p. 71) in her work.

This connection and understanding of the value of expressing herself in narrative and story seemed to also help inform Munroe-Anderson’s research methods. Or maybe it was the other way around. Either way, storytelling was at the heart of her data collection methods. She talks at length about the way storytelling was a conscious choice as a means of challenging the dominant and more traditional research paradigms and ideologies. Citing Huber (2009), she was actively looking to open things up to allow for “multiple realities and therefore multiple truths” she says (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p. 74). She also says the “articulation of voice” (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p. 77) was a significant consideration as well.

For Munroe-Anderson citing Errante (2000), “to deny a person the possibility to narrate his or her own experience is to deny a person’s human dignity” (2018, p. 77). She adds: “By centering the voices and stories of First African Nova Scotian learners... and as subjects rather than objects of the research, the sixteen participants have names, lives and stories. It is important that they each be named as contributors to the knowledge,” she says, to underscore their humanity and to validate the role they play as “tellers and carriers” of ANS community experiences and stories, not just in the context of this research, but in their everyday lives (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p. 78).

Munroe-Anderson (2018) also used ‘story circles’ as a way of modelling the “wealth of knowledge that ANSs have available” (p. 114) building on the idea of creating spaces where participants could reclaim their culture, history and heritage in ways that are ‘familiar,’ and exemplify the principle of ‘Sankofa’ and the idea of “returning home to recover the best of African culture” as cited in Akua, 2012. They also counter the ‘single story’ idea of Eurocentric approaches to ‘knowing.’

In the section called *Where theory meets practice*, Munroe-Anderson (2018) asks herself, “How did [her] theoretical framework show in [her] research?” (2018, p. 267). To answer this question, she discusses the significance of Africentricity, anti-racism, postcolonialism, anti-colonialism and African/Black Canadian Feminism and womanism in her work. She says she chose these theories because they provided “agency” for her to “validate and legitimize the spirituality of African people as knowledge” (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p. 267). She said this

also reinforces “African people as knowledge producers, bringing their lived experiences and all of their knowledge to the centre of research” (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p. 267) at large. She recruited sixteen ANS adult learners from three historic ANS communities to be ‘knowledge holders’ and ‘knowledge givers’ in three different ways: 1) by participating in six Story Circle sessions, 2) by choosing eight different Community Artists to facilitate one-hour African-centered, arts-based workshops which demonstrated various ways African people have and continue to tell their stories, and 3) by bringing her own lived experiences to the research as an active researcher engaged with the participants and artists in the research process and as the person responsible for documenting the research (Munroe-Anderson, 2018). To help her do the latter, the sessions were also filmed for note-taking and transcription purposes.

In reviewing the research question in this dissertation, I feel the findings and conclusions are very sound. Munroe-Anderson (2018) has fully answered and engaged with the research question posed in her introduction. The question was: Could African-centred spirituality play a role in fostering anti-oppressive, transformative formal learning spaces that support the educational success and wellbeing of ANS learners? According to the research and data gathered, participants in the process gave evidence of many ways spiritual practices could be validated, and used to transform various institutions into more inclusive and engaging learning spaces. I would argue the learning from this dissertation is not just relevant for learners of African descent either.

A renewed connection between the spirit, mind and body could also benefit other learners including descendants of the dominant Euro-centric culture who need to understand the full needs and contributions of both people of African descent but also others who are not part of the dominant culture. When we make space for everyone to share and be valued, we all benefit. This was one of the key findings that stood out for me about this research.

Afri-centrism is not just about building a better community for people of African descent, it is also about building a community at large that values collaboration, equity and connection as central for all of us to feel a sense of belonging and community (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p. 292). We all need “inclusive and nurturing educational environments” (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p. 293). Munroe-Anderson (2018) says central to this is the “decentering of Eurocentric knowledge, history and culture as the be-all and end-all of knowledge” (p. 293). She adds the dominant culture of Eurocentrism needs to “make room for other knowledge including...

multiple stories and histories...” (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p. 293) in all areas of curriculum in education. She also says the data collection method she used of story-telling also has much to offer the formal education process and practice.

Munroe-Anderson (2018) says: “Whereas colonial education has denied the existence of a culture and history of African peoples... indigenous knowledge like African storytelling of the oral tradition gives evidence of the cultural heritage and histories,” and is an integral part of the ongoing co-creation and re-creation of academic knowledge/work” (pp. 293-294). She adds: “If academia is to truly represent all knowledges, African indigenous knowledges like stories and storytelling... have to be included” (Munroe-Anderson, 2018, p. 294). She also suggests some very practical ways of doing this including discussions that invite students to talk about and share their own experiences (Munroe-Anderson, 2018).

Munroe-Anderson (2018) citing Merriweather Hunn (2004) also notes: “It is accepted by most people in the field of education that “learners learn best when they can use their experiences as a source of learning” (p. 294). Therefore, the integration of dialogue and storytelling are critical ways all learners can give voice to their experiences; what is key is that they have ‘space’ to share their stories. She cites Sheard (1999) as referring to this as a process of co-learning and co-authoring of knowledge production. In conclusion, Munroe-Anderson (2018) says it is a critical a ‘balance of stories’ about people of African descent are included at all levels of formal education to ensure the wellbeing of learners of African descent, and to ensure the “proper education of all learners regardless of their background” (p. 295).

The three things that stood out for me the most included: 1) what spirituality is about and how it can play a role in community in a very direct, tangible way; 2) the role of spirituality in healing especially in the context of the connection between spirit, mind and body; 3) how important it is to recognize the full range of effects that oppression, current and historical, can have on a community, a people.

The questions that came to mind while reviewing this dissertation were how can I use the learnings of this work to help inform my own work around creating change in community more effectively; not just for people in the African Nova Scotian community, but also for ‘people’ at large. I feel, after reading this work, that ‘spirituality’ and that connection between spirit, mind and body is important for all of us; especially those of us that want to create a more just, caring and inclusive society.

The insights I've gained from this review for my own work include a better understanding of the concept of 'spirituality,' and its past and potential future role, in movement building and creating change in community. Reviewing this work, and the other work related to this class, has created a sense for me that we need to do more to connect with the 'human' side of creating change in community. We need to understand better who we are as human beings and ask the question of who we want to be as foundational work in creating change. If we don't start with ourselves, who we are and what kind of human beings we want to be, then how can we really change anything in a more comprehensive, larger, global way.

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