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A glimpse of the complexity of identity

by

Tikka Jan Wilson

Can you perhaps say a little about how you understand the relationship between your experience as an African-American woman, as a person who has lived a life outside mainstream notions of sexual identity, and as someone who was adopted as a child? Are these different realms of experience somehow related to one another?

These are interesting considerations. There is, to me, some connection between being adopted, being African-American and being a lesbian. I don't think lesbianism is any way an 'essential' part of me. Far from it, I think my lesbian identity has been shaped by all my experiences of life.

I felt very much an outsider within my adopted family. For whatever reason, I felt a fundamental difference from my parents. This wasn't due to race, they were black as well, but it may have been a part of my particular adoption experience, or it could have been age. Back then, you had to be pretty old to

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adopt a child. My parents came of age at the turn of WWI. I came of age in the 1960s. The distance between us could have been history. For whatever reason, I didn't feel I belonged to them.

This sense of not belonging was also influenced by the fact that my parents had grown up in the south of the US and had then migrated to the north. Due to this migration we lived without an extended family. As well, I grew up in a white neighbourhood. There were all sorts of dislocations and experiences of not really belonging, not only in relation to my immediate family, but to the community around us.

Then there were expectations about getting married and being sexual, and I found this all pretty complex. Heterosexual relationships were still starkly segregated. People didn't date across race lines very much in those days. So, I was clearly supposed to date and eventually marry another black person. The trouble was, these other black people were not around. I think that my early experiences of heterosexuality were quite fraught because of all of this. The only sort of relationship I had with young black men was through dating, and this influenced the shape of those relationships.

For me then, when I found a lesbian community, it was one of the first times I felt I could belong on my own merit. Although there were many problematic aspects of the relationship between black and white lesbians at that time (as there still are), there was also a sense of community across racial lines that I hadn't experienced as a heterosexual woman. While my attempts to negotiate heterosexual relationships had occurred in a starkly segregated context, the lesbian community of Boston in the 1970s was a community of people of different races who were coming together around sexuality.

I don't want to make it sound simplistic though. To be an African-American lesbian in the 1970s was to be seen as something of a 'race traitor'. This was the time of 'Black Power' and black consciousness and the role of black women was to support and stand in solidarity with black men. Homophobia has specific racial configurations and there were strong invitations to black women to relate to black men in certain ways at that time. Those invitations succeeded in making me feel some guilt, but the other black lesbians were helpful in articulating the sexism implicit in these ideas.

As an African-American, I know that my lesbianism was incredibly embarrassing for my parents, as I imagine children's homosexuality initially is

for many parents of white children. Here again though, it made a difference that I had been adopted. For adopting parents, it's probably very weird to have a gay or lesbian child. Those questions about 'did I do something wrong' are perhaps even more difficult for adoptive parents. I suspect that there's some sort of gap between adoptive parents and their children that can make sexuality even more difficult to negotiate.

So yes, my experience of lesbianism, of being African-American and being adopted are certainly all inter-related. It's not really possible to understand them separately.

Could you say some more about what it was about the lesbian community in Boston in the 1970s that enabled the sense of belonging that you mentioned? Were there certain community practices that made this more possible?

Perhaps most significant was that the lesbians I hung out with did not expect me to be hyper feminine. I had always experienced femininity as a requirement to be stupid. If some guy said something that he felt was terribly smart and wonderful, and if I knew it was totally incorrect, then I was supposed to keep my mouth shut and pretend to be an idiot. For some reason this never fitted very well for me! Entering the lesbian community meant getting free of those expectations of femininity and this was a delight.

At the time I was working as a motion picture operator and the sexism was really profound. Yet with lesbians, it was perfectly fine to step outside of sex stereotyped occupations and ways of being and to be able to be proud of this rather than embarrassed by it. I was able to be athletic, to ride motorcycles and do other things that at that time were transgressive gender behaviour. In the 21st century all of this is totally unremarkable, but then it was significant and quite scary. Within the lesbian community these other, non-feminine ways of being women were all valued. It was an incredible relief.

Boston was a wonderful place to come out. There were many lesbian bars and it was so freeing to be able to go to a pub and not worry about men. I would never have just gone to a local heterosexual bar without a man in tow (or without being towed by a man!), but I was able to go to lesbian bars on my own and shoot a game of pool. It seems such a small pleasure looking back but it was significant then.

Most of the lesbian bars were mixed race and that was quite unusual in the US at that time. The gay and lesbian community was less segregated, differently segregated, and all these things were liberating.

I think from those times I could see that it was really possible for people who were very different to somehow negotiate those differences. Sure there would be difficulties and shouting matches, but it seemed possible. Everybody was trying and that was a real opening. It was a gift.

So too was the sense of belonging that I found there. To belong involves having a sense of community with other people whom you feel at some level you have a fundamental similarity too. That is what I did not have in my family or my neighbourhood. The lesbian community was where I felt that I could be comfortable, where things that I liked to do, other people liked to do. It's not that there weren't ways that we were expected to conform, there were, but they were just easier than what hyper femininity had expected of me. I felt cared for and at times there was a sense of belonging that was new to me. The things that hadn't been valued about me before, were now being valued, and that was precious.

But this was all a long time ago, culturally and historically. The seventies was a time of transition. People had always lived double lives around sexuality and now they were coming out. It was a slow transition. Not everyone just leaped out of the closet! But things have changed radically since the 1970s. Not least, I now live in Australia.

Perhaps we could talk now about Australia. Can you say a little bit about what must have been a big transition moving from the US to this country?

My experiences in relation to sexual identity and racial identity are very different here. Partly this is because I am a lot older, and my sexual identity is a lot less important to me now than it once was. It's just a part of my life now whereas in the period I was talking about before it was most of my life. My whole world was then structured around being lesbian and that is different now.

The other reason why issues of sexual identity are no longer as central to my life is because, at least in the circles in which I live, homophobia is no longer so rampant. At work, everyone knows that I am lesbian, as do the people with whom I generally mix. A lot has changed and so my life here in Australia is less centred around lesbian life, politics and identity.

The intersection of racism and homophobia is also different for me here. My experience of racism in this country is as someone who is marginal to the two fundamental axes of racism in Australia. These fundamental axes are between white people and Indigenous people, and between white people and Asian people. There are deep and significant histories in this country in relation to conquest, exploitation, exclusion and all the accompanying laws, emotions, fears, hatreds and self-hatreds. As an African-American I am on the margins of all of this. In fact, in this country, I am often located as an honorary white person. I get many of the privileges of being white, and often feel as if I am a not quite white person. Because of this I rarely experience the intersections of race and sexuality in the ways that I am sure Aboriginal and Asian lesbian women must experience here.

Still, the issues do come up. I am in a cross racial relationship with Manja Visschedijk, who immigrated to Australia from Holland as a child. There have certainly been times, such as when we have been trying to rent a place to live, when the intersections of homophobia and racism have been vividly clear. Actually, though, in our relationship, most of our discussions are about different experiences of race and class.

Can you say a little more about this?

Where Manja is from a working-class immigrant background, I am from a middle-class/professional black background. Now in the US, there is a considerable debate about class amongst African-Americans, and an acknowledgement of how class shapes black experience. But in the 1960s, the real economic differences between the black middle-class and the black working-class were somehow hidden or buried under a sense of being united in the civil rights movement. Then, as now, class was complicated by race – the economic differences between black middle-class life opportunities and white middle-class life opportunities were stark.

I bring these histories into all the discussions that Manja and I have about class. Actually, for Manja, what stands out about me is class rather than race. I think this is complex though because I believe Manja associates being middle-class with being white! We can have big misunderstandings about the connections between race and class! I see her as having considerable race

privilege (about which she would agree) and she would see that I have considerable class privilege (about which I agree).

While this can lead to plenty of arguments, it can also lead to intriguing conversations. A classic example was when we were driving together and saw a car broken down on the side of the road and three or four white men gesturing for help. Manja read their class position as being working-class and wanted to stop and help them. I read their race position and there was no way I was going to stop for white men on the side of a road! It was very interesting how strong both of our responses were. Where I saw them as a very real threat, Manja saw them as people like her. It was absolutely fascinating! After a heated discussion we kept going. At least we could agree on the gender issue, that perhaps as two lesbian women stopping for four men wasn't so wise and that we could leave it to someone else this time.

What's also significant is that we are both migrants. I have no idea of what the Australian culture was like that Manja grew up in (after they moved from the Netherlands) and she has no idea of the intricacies of US culture. This all leads to a lot of interesting scenarios!

Knowing both you and Manja, I can imagine how you would put your different views of the world to great use ...

It's certainly been an eye-opener for both of us. There are so many areas in which our assumptions about life and how we see the world vary. We even interpret the same words differently. We come from different places and we can help to make sense of each other's experiences of life. This is pretty interesting. Where it becomes most powerful is when we can observe the different ways in which people relate to us.

There are so many minute practices of life in this culture that otherwise I would have never known about. To be able to experience these things together, differently, and then talk with each other about it brings a richness to the relationship and also to life itself. We're always learning from the other's perspective.

Thanks Tikka. I've no doubt that others will really enjoy learning from your perspective as they read this interview.