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Small Doses

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Abstract

In *Sweetwater* (2013), Robin M. Boylorn presents an intricate look at the lives of rural, Black women. The author weaves in her own story as she details the day-to-day struggles, negotiations and realities of living in a small town while being Black, poor, and female. This review attempts to provide praise for Boylorn's work, while also offering critiques and further considerations.

Keywords

Womanism, Narrative Inquiry, Qualitative Research, Autoethnography

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Dr. Kathy Roulston at the University of Georgia's College of Education for her continued commitment to teaching and mentoring.

Small Doses

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In Sweetwater (2013), Robin M. Boylorn presents an intricate look at the lives of rural, Black women. The author weaves in her own story as she details the day-to-day struggles, negotiations and realities of living in a small town while being Black, poor, and female. This review attempts to provide praise for Boylorn's work, while also offering critiques and further considerations. Keywords: Womanism, Narrative Inquiry, Qualitative Research, Autoethnography

Sweetwater leads us into the multifaceted complexities found in community, love and healing for the women who are a part of that community. The author presents what I consider to be excerpts of day-to-day encounters of Black women living in a small, rural town in North Carolina. Through a variety of short chapters, we are enabled to metaphorically make brief visitations: sitting at the table with each main character – including the author – taking only peeks at their existence. This book will make you laugh, cry, and mourn. For those who have lived in small rural towns in the south, *Sweetwater* may also call you in to ... remembrance.

I had to read *Sweetwater* in what I have termed “small doses.” The stories resembled so many of those that I witnessed, experienced, heard or wondered about in my own small town that it proved difficult to remember that I was reading someone else’s story and not my own. It is because of this intermingling that I preferred to only read 3-4 pages at a time. Even when attempting to stomach a whopping three chapters in one sitting, I found myself needing debrief time to reflect on my own upbringing and community of rural Black women – what were the differences? Similarities? Painful memories? Unanswered questions? Tragedies? Stories never to be told? These questions and ponderences lingered as I read the entire book – it took me nearly three weeks to read a miniscule 122 pages.

I found Dr. Boylorn’s writing to be creative and extremely easy to follow. *Sweetwater* represented a ripe mixture that incited laughter, tears, long pauses, painful remembrances and thankfulness. As stated by the author (p. 12) the poems represent neither a closing to the chapter or an introduction to the next, but instead a bridge (or window, as described by the author) marking lives, events and existence with continuous overlap.

The author closed the Appendix (pp. 117-122) by using a quote from Goodall (2008): “If the text was written in such a way that they could not or would not want to read their own stories, what would be the point?” I hope that the women of *Sweetwater* found this excerpt of their story as engaging to read as I did.

The author explicitly states the use of black feminist thought and womanism, as well as intersectionality and muted group theories as frameworks for *Sweetwater* (pp. 4-6), while also acknowledging her role – and accompanying dilemmas – in the collection and presentation of data for this research.

While it is clear to me how muted group theory can be applied to this research, I struggled to find the parallels between the listing provided on page 5 and the stories shared in *Sweetwater*. Does the mere telling of stories about the lives of Black women orient the work to be defined as grounded in Black feminist thought or womanism? How do the stories we read represent an overlap of gender and oppression? Are there unstated assumptions that should accompany the stories of the women of *Sweetwater*?

As a novice to qualitative data collection and reporting methods, I was extremely impressed by the time and abundant care that the author took in collecting data *and* managing to streamline that data into a presentable piece. The author's careful use of narrative inquiry and auto-ethnography allowed me to experience *Sweetwater* from the perspectives of the observer **and** community member.

I also appreciate the great detail that was included in the length of time dedicated to data collection, the course of events over which this collection took place, the responses of the participants, as well as various means of protecting their confidentiality. Still I wonder how much data was yielded. How did the author choose what to include and what to omit? Will there be a follow-up piece, perhaps *Sweetwater II*? What were the common themes? Did the author consider using these themes in a more direct way, such as including them as chapter titles? I would love to know more about the analysis and final presentation process (*Author Note: Since the initial writing of this review, a classmate has suggested that I search for the author's full dissertation, which I plan to do*).

I started this review by stating how I personally related to *Sweetwater* by likening many of the stories I read to stories of women I knew or know from my own hometown. Perhaps it is because of this likening that I believe the author has overstated the potential of this book. While *Sweetwater* does an excellent job of presenting snippets of the lives of Black women living in a rural community – and perhaps a mirroring of the lives of many Black women in rural communities across this country – it only scratches the surface. While I understand and appreciate that a final product that attempted to present all facets of the women's lives would be much too voluminous, perhaps even for a dissertation, I am not sure this sole piece allows one to “look at how they [Black women] work out and through concepts of love and justice in their everyday lives” (p. 116). Did the stories presented in this piece adequately “[suggest] that black women can learn generalizable truths from their personal lived experiences and theorize about their daily lives through storytelling?” If I had not spent the first half of my life living in a small, rural town surrounded by women like the characters in this book, would I conclude what the author has stated? Would I come away from this book with an understanding of how Black women “work out and through” love and justice?

I don't think I would. I think I'd have an introduction to rural life and livelihood for a group of Black women. Perhaps I'd wonder how similar their stories – these stories – are to those of other Black women. I'd question which components are missing – didn't make the final count – such as the presence of church and other rituals like holiday meals or family reunions or funerals that are prominent in the lives of many Black folks. And perhaps I'd wonder how the lives of the Black women from *Sweetwater* mirrored those of poor women in other parts of the country. However, I don't believe that I'd feel confident in walking away with any conclusive statements or thoughts about the vital components of survival for Black women living in rural communities, particularly in the south.

As I closed the book, I am thankful for authors (artists, teachers etc.) who find value and make time to tell the stories of Black women. However, I was overwhelmed with sadness at the mere thought of attempting to replicate a similar project in my own town. Who would agree to talk ... I mean, really talk? What fears would prevail? Would people be honest? How would I protect their confidentiality? Could I write about my own parents and our home? I closed the book with these lingering thoughts. I do not have any answers to the questions I posed to myself.

What I do know is that for those wanting to revisit their childhoods in rural Black, southern communities, budding researchers and scholars exploring narrative inquiry and/or auto-ethnography *or* those simply wanting the glimpse the multidimensional lives of Black women across this country *Sweetwater* is a must read!

In addition to the aforementioned thoughts and sentiments, I'd like to add that I completed my reading of *Sweetwater* with a deep and profound respect for the author. I cannot begin to imagine what this process was like, but I assume that she felt just as many emotions as the readers glimpse while reading. It is one thing to research and write about those we label as "other," but I imagine that it takes a varying level of strength, courage and tenacity to write about ourselves. Written with such great vulnerability and transparency makes me appreciate this work that much more!

References

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Author Note

Sabrina T. Cherry is a Research Specialist with the University of Connecticut and full time doctorate student at the University of Georgia's College of Public Health. Her research interests include the intersections of religion and health, multicultural health and women's health. Correspondence regarding this review can be addressed directly to: Sabrina T. Cherry at sabrinat.cherry@gmail.com.

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