Conceptualized within an endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000; 2006), this study will explore how spirituality informs the experience and progress of African American women in a doctoral study program in educational leadership. The study will seek to identify how African American women have harnessed spirituality as a source of energy and determination in their leadership preparation. Three graduate student-scholars will provide the primary data sets. The contributions of this study include the impact spirituality has in the attrition and retention of African American women in a doctoral program, and inform the curriculum, research and climate within a higher education institution.

Research Questions

• How does spirituality inform the experience and progress of African American women in a doctoral program of study in educational leadership?

• Where is spirituality situated when mapping the educational experiences of African American women in a doctoral program?

Rationale

• With only 1.9% of PhDs in the United States belonging to Black women (Dowdy, 2008), there is a continual increase in racial and ethnic diversity in higher education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

• The experiences of African American women in higher education have routinely been ignored in the wider context of educational studies (Johnson-Bailey, 2004).

• Spirituality plays a significant role in African American women’s lives (Wheeler, Ampadu, & Wangari, 2002; Mattis, 2000), and provides a source of power when nourished in the academic life (Dillard, 2006).

• Spirituality is important in African American’s socio-cultural history, and in providing a means of determination (Fielding Stewart, 1999).

The image of the bird, Sankofa, is a West African symbol used to describe looking back or “go back and retrieve” (africawithin.com). In this study, Sankofa represents the socio-cultural history embedded within African American women’s experiences in doctoral study, and the knowledge that the work being done is possible due to the work of many other women who have paved the way; this leaves us to understand “research as a responsibility” (Dillard, 2006). The shape of the cross represents the researcher’s ontology, and representation of Christian faith, while the stacked books in which the cross is created represents the institution of higher education symbolized as the ivory tower. The overall image represents the female symbol (Venus) used to conceptualize an endarkened feminist epistemology. An endarkened feminist epistemology (Dillard, 2000; 2006) “challenges us to (re)think meanings and constructs in educational research” (Milner, 2006), and to do so in unconventional ways.

Purpose of Study

• Contribute to the dearth of literature on this topic in theory and practice

• Explore how spirituality informs the experience and practice of African American women within the complexities of an institution of higher education

• Weave the experiences and ways of knowing of African American graduate student scholars

• Contribute to the growing body of research of spirituality, higher education, and endarkened feminist studies

Data Sources

• Literature Review

• Educational space, climate and curriculum

• Life Maps

• Focused Conversation

• Reflective Journals

Conclusions

Preliminary findings: The literature reveals that African American women who draw upon their spirituality in the academy find it positively affirming.

Next steps: Propose study to committee, collect data and analyze the information gathered.