

**Killing Spirits: How Black Churches and Families Harm Through Homophobia,
Transphobia, and Heterosexism**

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*To my Evie.
To my Black queer and trans community.*

*For Zak, June, Michael, and Myself.
For all of our dead selves.
For all of our selves that still live.*

*For House daLorde.
For all Black queer houses that are family.
For all of us who struggle to stay alive.*

I.

Abstract

This study narrates ways in which Black queer and trans* people experience homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism in their churches and families. This analysis is essential in understanding the high rates of depression that Black queer and trans* people experience as a result of the above systems of oppression. Studies have shown the psychosocial effects racism has upon Black people. Many Black people seek refuge in their families and churches to escape this system of oppression. However, simultaneously studies indicate that queer and trans* people suffer from high rates of depression in comparison to their cishetero counterparts through navigating homophobic, transphobic, and heterosexist spaces. Unfortunately, as many Black queer and trans* people seek refuge from racism in their families and churches, they are met with homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism. I interviewed 18 queer and trans* people across three groups with unique relationships to the Black church. One group of participants still attends Black non-queer affirming churches, the second group attends Black queer affirming churches, and the final group no longer attends church or practices the Christian faith. From this data I am able to illustrate the ways in which these two major institutions of Blackness [church and family] participate in these systems of oppression that may cause or worsen depression in Black queer and trans* people. This study narrates the main ways that Black families, as well as Black churches enact homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism.

II.

Introduction

Suicide is the leading cause of death among youth age 10-24 (CDC-NCIPC, 2010). Queer youth are four times more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to attempt suicide each year (CDC, 2011). This increased rate of suicide is often related to their inability to flourish because of societal homophobia and other forms of gender or sexual violence. IMPACT (2010) reports that “each episode of LGBT victimization, such as physical or verbal harassment or abuse increases the likelihood of self-harming behavior by 2.5 times on average”. Queer and trans* people experience verbal and physical harassment repeatedly. Furthermore, there are certain institutions in society that have been historically homophobic but are making efforts to become more inclusive today. The Black church is one of these institutions. Some Black churches are now making it their duty to state that queer individuals are welcomed or allowed in their congregations.

Though this may be the case, actions within these spaces can often time contradict this “welcome”. This study is intended to narrate the ways in which Black churches enact gender or sexual violence upon queer and trans* people. It is intended for those churches and families who are trying to take better care of their queer members. It is also intended for those that aren’t aware of the effects of their homophobia as well as those that believe that homophobia is useful in eradicating queerness. This study shows the ways in which Black queer and trans* people experience homophobia from the communities that they often seek refuge in the most. Not only are Black queer and trans* people being attacked by racism, but simultaneously they receive the attacks of homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism. This position of having multiple oppressed and stigmatized identities can greatly affect the ability of Black queer and trans* people to flourish and live healthy

lives. This study is written to give voice to the ways that Black queer and trans* people are being oppressed in the places they seek refuge. I interviewed 18 Black queer and trans* people. The narratives below are their stories. (See Appendix A for a list of key terms used throughout).

III.

Background and Theory

The Black Church and Family as Places of Support. The Black church and the family are the two essential institutions of Blackness (Harley, 2005a). These are the spaces where people learn and practice what it means to be Black (Laderman & Leon, 2003). The Black church and the Black family are also the only two places in society that tend to be completely financed and governed by Black people (Frazier, 1974). These are the two institutions many Black people get to call home and get to have autonomy over. These institutions are also known for providing an exorbitant amount of informal support to the Black community (Taylor & Chatters, 1988; Robinson-Wood, 2009). This support changes based on present needs but includes financial, emotional, physical, and spiritual support. In addition, the church and family are often the two spaces that last through the lifetime of Black people. They are usually present to partake in more formalized or ritualized life events. A few of these major events include parenting or births welcomed through christening ceremonies, marriages, and funerals (Taylor & Chatters, 1988). Continuously the Black church is also a place that has heavy influence over political, moral, and social matters even to people that no longer attend regularly (Hill, 2013; Patillo-McCoy, 1998; Schulte & Battle, 2004; Ward, 2005; Evans & George, 2008; Loue, 2014).

Homophobia, Transphobia, and Heterosexism in the Black Church & Family. While the church and family remains of strong influence and a place of inclusion and social support for Black people, many Black queer and trans* people are often pushed out of these crucial developmental spaces. Though this study focuses specifically on Black

churches, Black families, and Black queer and trans* people, this is not to say that these behaviors are specific or exclusive to the Black community. Homophobia was not created by the Black community but is instead implemented on an even greater systemic level. Black people are simply operating under the systems of oppression that are already in place in the larger society. This thesis is specific to the Black population because there is limited research that speaks directly to the Black community and addresses Black queer and trans* people (Battle and Bennett 2006; Greene, 2002). Given the influence that the Black church has politically, morally, and socially, many Black family members base their decision to be supportive of queer or trans* people on the church's stance (Hill, 2013; Schulte & Battle, 2004). Though the Black church's stance is not monolithic and there are churches that are making an active effort to be of support to queer and trans* people (Comstock, 2002), there tends to be a promotion of heterosexual supremacy, ideas that queer people are immoral, and/or ideas that queer gender or sexuality is sinful (Griffin, 2006; Douglas, 2006; Ward, 2005;). My study will provide narrative data as to how these ideas affect Black queer and trans* people in their regular interactions with the church. In addition, this study will narrate similar experiences had with families who may have been socialized by the church. Homophobia, transphobia, and/or heterosexism, as I will recognize, takes various forms.

Mental Illness Caused by Intersectional Oppression. Black queer and trans* people experience high rates of mental illnesses because of holding multiple stigmatized identities. They experience systematic oppression that not only affects their mental health but also prevent Black queer and trans* people from attaining the appropriate health care

that they may need (Francis and Acey, 2013; Wilson et al., 2001; Burlew & Serface, 2006; Harley, 2016). In addition, because this intersectional oppression is woven so neatly into society, it becomes natural that Black queer and trans* people begin to internalize these negative feelings at some point or another (Szymanski & Gupta, 2009). This internalization of negative stigma regarding their identities, coupled with interpersonal prejudice and systematic oppression that excludes Black queer and trans* people from basic right (creates health disparities and makes proper health care inaccessible) (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Muraco, 2010; Metlife, 2010) contribute to the mental health issues faced by this population (Harley, 2016). While these stigmas are not created by nor enacted exclusively by the Black church or family, it can become even more difficult for a Black queer or trans* person to navigate these stigmatized identities while being excluded from or treated with hostility by a group they would have normally received the majority of their support from. This hostility is true both in the form of homophobia from the Black community (Harley, 2016; Ward, 2005; Douglas, 2006; Pew Center, 2006) and racism from the White LGBT community (Asanti 1999; Boykin 1996; Brown 2008; Harley et al. 2013; Loiacano 1989; Plummer 2007; Stansbury et al. 2010; Smith, 1999). Though many Black queer and trans* people experience homophobia and heterosexism from their Black churches and families, they, they still regard these spaces as a refuge from larger societal structures of racism, especially racism faced in the White LGBT community (Boykin 1996; Greene 1994; Savage and Harley 2005). Regardless of their reason to remain connected to a Black Church that conveys homophobic or heterosexist messages, Black queer and trans* people suffer mental health issues for this decision (Jeffries et al, 2008). My study answers the question: In what ways do Black

queer and trans* individuals experience homophobia from their churches and their families? My study will describe these different forms of homophobia and resulting depression caused or worsened by the church and family.

V. *Data and Methods*

In executing this study, I conducted in-depth interviews with 18 Black queer and trans* people. The larger group of 18 was divided into three groups of six covering the different relationships that Black queer and trans* people have with the church. The three general groups that this sample was selected from Black queer and trans* people a) attending Black queer and trans* affirming churches, b) attending Black queer and trans* non-affirming churches, and c) who no longer attending church or adhere to the Christian faith. This separation in sample population was created to ensure a broad range of views and experiences in the Black queer and trans* community. (See Appendix B for my study materials including interview guides, scales, and measures).

I collected the data for this study over the course of a seven-month period ranging from July of 2015 to January 2016. During this time period a significant political event related to my topic occurred, same-sex marriage was legalized in all American states. While there was some commentary on how significant or insignificant this political decision was for Black queer and trans* people in my study, there was no noticeable difference in topics raised and responses given before and after this legalization.

The southern region of the U.S. is a part of what is called the Bible Belt of America. The Bible Belt is made up of very conservative Christians from varied class and race backgrounds. It is a space where Christian doctrine tends to powerfully influence politics and culture on all levels of society (Barton, 2010). My participants all reside in the Southern state of North Carolina, which operates within the confines of the Bible Belt region. 88% of my sample report that they were “born and raised” in the church or a typical Black church within this region.

My participants are also a subset of the oppressed group of Black people in the Southern region of the U.S. I selected only from queer or trans people in the North Carolina Black population. After analyzing all of my data, the vast majority of my sample reports to have been college educated at least to an undergraduate level of education. In addition, the majority of my sample reports to be between the ages of 22-35 years old. Altogether, I interviewed 18 participants, across three specified subgroups. Six participants were still currently attending non-queer or trans* affirming Black churches. Six participants attended queer affirming Black churches. The final six no longer attended church or no longer subscribed to the Christian faith. Participants all report that their first church memories and socializations were in non-queer or trans affirming Black churches. These subgroups were created to capture the different spiritual spaces that Black queer and trans* people find themselves in though they all came from the same spiritual space of the non-queer affirming Black church.

Participants were recruited differently across subgroups. Participants in queer affirming Black churches had a more rapid response rate since they tend to be people that are not closeted and very open about both their sexuality, gender, and faith. For this subgroup, I attended several different queer-affirming Black churches and described my research and my need for research participants. Those who were interested were offered a sheet to provide their contact information or send me an e-mail voicing their interest. Participants were delighted to share and get the opportunity to have their stories heard. Simultaneously, I posted descriptions of my research and my research needs in queer and trans spaces and mediums. This process was aimed at recruiting Black queer and trans people attending non-queer affirming churches. The response rate for this was rather slow

since many of these people are still closeted and were less comfortable with participating in a study. Once I successfully recruited a few participants in this subgroup, I utilized snowball sampling to recruit additional participants. My first set of interviewees reached out to others who they knew were also queer or trans*. They explained my research and solicited contacts on my behalf. Once a participant agreed to be contacted and passed along their information to me, I would contact them directly to reintroduce my project, gain consent, and schedule interviews. This method in conjunction with announcements on public social media pages was how my sample population was collected. Altogether, all participants were Black and there was a fairly even divide between gay men and lesbian women. Though often difficult to find, my study was able to include the perspective of two trans* people who really added to the value of the data. It was important for this project to focus specifically on the Black population because their views are extremely underreported especially in regards to mental health and sexuality. In addition, what little data is available tends to be exclusive of the experiences of lesbian women and trans* peoples.

Once my interviewees consented, we met face to face or through a video conference call based on the interviewee's level of comfort. I tried to be as flexible with this option because some participants had high levels of risk associated with their sexuality being found out. I conducted in-depth interviews that averaged one hour. I employed an inductive approach to this research with an intention of simply highlighting the common themes that came through in the described experiences of Black queer and trans* people who grew up in the Black non-queer affirming church. See Appendix A for my interview guide. After all of my data was collected, it was transcribed and allowed for

me to sift through each interview numerous times to search for trends. Themes of surveillance, depression, human flourishing, homophobia, and compromise arose from my analysis of the collected data.

Results & Analyses

Homophobia/Transphobia/Heterosexism From Family

The Family Acceptance Project (2009) reports that queer youth who come from highly rejecting families are at least 8.4 times more likely to have attempted suicide than those coming from families with little to no rejection. Two major trends that emerged from this study was that out of a sample of 18 participants, 16 of them stated that they were raised from birth in non-affirming churches. Out of the same sample, 15 participants also reported having gone through some level of depression or mental illness due to their sexuality being rejected as a viable part of their being by their church and/or family. My study seeks to locate the specific elements of rejection and socialization that participants say caused their depression to occur or escalate to suicidal ideation. In essence, what are the ways in which Black queer and trans* people experience homophobia and heterosexism from their families and churches? I will illustrate through narrative data the main actions of the families and churches that Black queer and trans* people report as a cause for their depression.

Kicked Out of Home or Family/Disowned

Many Black queer and trans* people risk and endure getting kicked out of their families and homes. In general, queer and trans* people are at a high risk for homelessness (Doan, 2007). Adding the layered oppression of a Black identity, one can conclude that Black queer and trans* people may be at an even higher risks for homelessness than their white counterparts. Some participants in this study give voice to this experience by describing the effect that family rejection and the loss of home had on their mental and emotional health. As explained above, the Black church and the family

unit are the main ways that Black youth are socialized and learn to connect to the Black community. Many people describe coming out and the risk of being kicked out of their home as a threat to their Black identity.

One participant, Toni was made to sit with the question of “Are you Black or are you gay?” when he first came out to his family. A question like this positions queerness at odds with the Black identity. As a young Black male growing up in a fairly monolithic Black community, Toni says that he worried constantly about being rejected by his family and church, which he saw as his closest connection to his Black identity. Having to choose between two critical and also two marginalized identities often times stirs a lot of internal conflict within queer and trans* youth. Toni says that even today he gets forced to make that decision. However, he is now in a place of human flourishing where he can refuse to choose one identity over the other. “I feel comfortable in saying that now, and I felt like for the longest time I needed to say I was black first because I've met so many white gay people that were so racist... even whenever I didn't understand the black people that didn't understand my queerness. I was still black first. But now, I'm all of my identities at once. Toni goes on to say, “It's like they [transphobic and homophobic people] try to beat it out of you. And If there was one thing that I want people to know about me, about my sexuality, about my race, about my religion, is that I'm not defined by one of my identities. I'm defined by all of them.”

Another participant, Joseph shares that his experience with homelessness and being kicked out of his family and home was the catalyst for his suicidal thoughts. It was already a very tough time internally hiding his sexuality from his family but when he came out and was kicked out, this just made things worse. Not only did Joseph lose his

emotional support system but also his means of financial and economic support. He says, “My family is church-ed, so for three years after coming out I was shunned from my family. I had no friends. This separation caused me to go through a time where I *did* want to die.” He further goes on to describe a life of homelessness and financial deficit in his late teenage years and early twenties where he was alone with no family, no friends, no money, and no place to call home. It’s experiences like these that other Black queer and trans* youth are afraid of. Many choose to remain closeted for fear that they too will be kicked out of their homes.

Though being closeted is one form of survival for Black queer and trans* youth, participants report that this inability to be honest about who they are also affects their mental health to a similar degree. Danielle explains, “If I came out I thought for sure I’d be put out into the streets homeless as a teen”. Though she never experienced being physically put out of her home she says this was an active fear that she grew up with. Danielle says this fear was the reason she remained closeted but “not being able to come out to my family all those years left me feeling lost, unsure about myself, and I cried myself to sleep a lot. I was lonely. I had never known anyone else that was queer”. She continues to share, “I tried to fit into the norm for my family’s beliefs. I was supposed to have a husband and two kids, and I did, but I still was not happy.” She says, “There was suicidal thoughts that went along with that. Because I thought that when I came out, that I wouldn’t have anything anyways, so what’s the point of being here [alive]...Having *them* [her children], is kind of what saved my life because when it got to the point where I was the most devastated, and I hated myself the most, I had something else to live for”.

Depression being catalyzed by being kicked out or the constant fear of being kicked out of their homes or rejected by their families is a strong trend observed in this study. Another participant Alex, states explicitly that she “lived with a constant fear of being kicked out; out of my home, my family, the church, the Black community” and that she carried this fear with her on a daily basis for years as a youth. Participants that came out to their families later on in their lives also experienced being kicked out in similar ways. Adriana describes her parents’ refusal to attend her and her partner’s wedding as “a slap in the face”. She says that even though she was already out of her parents’ home, at first their refusal really affected her because they tried to convince her that her marriage would be “a wrong thing that is dishonoring to God”. Adriana says that she had to reprocess the tensions that she felt to realize her own feelings that “I do feel like God honors my marriage. I feel like my God joined my wife and I together”.

In even more traumatizing forms of being kicked out, Kennedy shares the trauma about being dis-fellowshipped/excommunication from his church *by his family*. He says that when his family found out that he was queer, they took him before the church and “I was ostracized by my family, and I was ostracized by my church. I had been dis-fellowshipped/excommunication from my church”. Kennedy describes the process.

“The setup was, if someone found out you were gay, or if someone found out you've been doing anything contrary to the belief of our ministry or of our denomination, charges could be brought up against you. There was a congregational meeting that would be called. The pastor would call the meeting. No children could be—you had to be 18 and older to be in these meetings. And the pastor would present the charges. In my case, it would be "It is alleged that you are a practicing homosexual" and the floor will be given for me to give a response. Evidence—at my church you had to have evidence. So if someone had to have seen you on a site, see you kissing somebody, etc. Now they have the evidence. The evidence is presented, and the congregation gets to speak on it. They get to decide whether you're going to conform to our belief system or you're going to go against it”.

Kennedy continues to share that once he was dis-fellowshipped, neither his church community nor his family members maintained connections to him. This intense process, as Kennedy describes it, left him very lonely and without any sort of community. “I felt like I was in a dark place with no foundation because I’m very family oriented and I love God. And so, those two things that I love were taken away from me because of my truth”. Kennedy continues to share that he was “very suicidal” and had to rebuild his entire life from the ground up. Whether it’s actual displacement from home and family or the fear of such, participants report that this contributes heavily to causing their depression or worsening it.

Shaming/Punishment

My study participants also spoke extensively about being shamed and punished for their sexuality by family members. Kennedy’s experience of being brought to the church for dis-fellowship/excommunication is one example of this sort of punishment. However, for most, this shaming comes in the form of verbal rebukes. Ashton talks about being outed to his family and having to endure a two and a half hour long car ride where his dad scolded him for being attracted to males. Ashton describes this as the moment where his internal tensions began to grow about his sexuality. He was eleven years old at the time and says that this embarrassing conversation and coming to the realization that he would be doing something wrong by having queer affections instigated a lot of turmoil within him. Kathan also shares his experience with being humiliated by his family. He talks about his mother making his siblings pray over him every morning for years that he would be released of his “demonic homosexual spirit”. He says, “My family’s rejection was based solely on our church’s views....for years my mother shamed me and prayed

over me that the spirits would leave me—she would make the whole family gather to pray for me every morning”. Kathan says that even after he left his mom’s house she would still force his siblings to wake up every morning and pray against his sexuality. He describes this as a very humiliating ordeal that came to affect the way he viewed himself, his sexuality, and his life. Another participant Adriana voiced “my family was heavily connected to the church so they were ashamed of me too.” When her parents found out that she was queer she was punished. She says, “my parents pulled me out of school activities that I enjoyed so I wouldn’t see my girlfriend...they policed everything I did which made me deceptive”.

After finding out that Adriana was attracted to girls, her parents tried to cut off any connections with girls and specifically the girl that they knew she liked. She describes this punishment saying her parents withdrew her from her after school activities, and even pulled her off of the basketball team because they were under the impression that female basketball players were more masculine acting and therefore lesbians. This interaction altered Adriana’s mental health in that from her early teenage years she was not allowed to participate in activities and things that she enjoyed for the simple fact of her sexuality. She explains that her sexual attraction was not something that she had control over so she had to hide a lot from her parents as they treated most things as a threat to her sexuality. Alex also brings out a very interesting double standard that many participants also mentioned in their interviews. She talks about when her older brother forced her to *come out* to her mother how her mother’s reaction affected her. Alex says her older brother caught her looking at gay porn and made her go tell her mother. When she told her mother, Alex says,

“She really didn't miss a beat, she's still doing her makeup and she's like, oh what do you mean, like lesbians? Then she's like ‘Marcus watched that too’, my other brother. ‘Yeah, Marcus watched that too it's fine, whatever’. And I said, ‘no it wasn't two women’, so she stops and she looks at me and she says ‘what do you mean it wasn't two women?’ I said, ‘it wasn't two women, it was two men’. And she screamed! She threw her hands up and screamed, like let out a wail. And grabbed her stuff and ran out of the house. And I was just traumatized by this experience, just traumatized by it”.

Alex explains that after that moment her mom spent a lot of time making the rest of the family guilt her out of being queer. She says it didn't stop at that. “She [Alex's mom] would come into my room in the middle of the night, and sit by my bed and be like ‘is this really what you want with your life? You really want to be on your knees sucking some nigga's dick?’ And I quote. ‘Like, that's disgusting!’ I remember once she called me into her room to say, ‘I ordered gay porn, and I vomited. I literally went into the bathroom and threw up. That's the most disgusting thing, I've ever seen, how could you watch that?’ And really—those memories are so vivid”. Alex like many other children that show signs of gender fluidity or queerness from a young age suffer humiliation through their family's efforts to shame them until they realize how shameful being queer in efforts to change their gender or sexuality. Punishment for being queer could look like losing the freedom and ability to engage with certain friends or live outside the realm of close monitoring. They may no longer be trusted by their parents and treated as though they betrayed their family. Alex says that this sort of “terrorization” by her family that was operating under the influence of the church eventually landed her in a child psychiatric ward for years. She says, “my mother terrorized me so much about my sexuality and gender and made me do things like promise I was going to stop being gay. And I honestly in my young mind wanted to stop. I didn't want this. But even today my mother still expects for me to change and holds promises that she forced me to make

years ago over my head today. She's like, 'you said this wasn't going to be permanent'. And I'm like well yeah because you made me". Alex goes on to explain, "I had so much trauma and depression around my sexuality and gender that I spent a large portion of time in a child psychiatric ward. Things didn't get better for me until I left my mom's house where I no longer was being policed in gender, race, and sexuality."

This shaming and guilt had very similar effect on Sage's life where she too ended up having to see therapists as a young child because of her family's rejection of her sexuality. She had other misfortunes in life that affected her sense of self but says it wouldn't have been the case if everything negative didn't come back to her sexuality. "I also had knee injuries and surgeries with my track career that sat me down, and other things that took place that affected my confidence, and it always just came back to sexuality. Like, if you weren't gay this or that wouldn't have happened—like, what the hell does that have to do with me having knee surgery, right now?" Sage and many other participants listed that they were taught to live with the guilt in life that any misfortune that took place in their lives was punishment for them being queer.

"Pray the Gay Away" – You Must Be Fixed Rhetoric

Naturally this process of shaming queer people or teaching that they are being punished for being queer leads to a doctrine that queerness must be stopped or fixed. As queer youth are being taught that everything goes wrong because of their queerness, they are simultaneously being taught that they should "pray the gay away". After being taken out of her desired school activities and monitored both in and out of her home, Adriana experienced a lot of this "pray the gay away" rhetoric. In fact, her parents did something

that was not uncommon according to other participants' reportings during this study. Her parents took her to the church's youth pastor so that the youth pastor could talk her out of being gay. This was another shameful experience for Adriana as more people were now aware of her "defect" or "demon" as it was called. In addition she had to answer to another adult about her sexuality; another adult that was also expecting her to change and telling her dreadful things that would happen to her if she didn't change. Adriana says her parents' response was that "if I was still gay it was because I wasn't praying hard enough for God to take it away". Her parents kept reinforcing Christian ideas that she was incapable of going to Heaven because of her sexuality. She was taught at home that she would go to Hell. This fear alone was enough to consume her life. She says, "I had nightmares all the time about hell because everyone told me that I would die and go to hell". She goes on to further share that this was a "dangerous place to be where you think of death and damnation all the time". She says it was these thoughts that drove her to suicidal ideation. This "pray the gay away" rhetoric took form in similar ways for both transgender participants in this study [Alex and Sevan]. Both go in great detail about how their gender was policed and how they had to perform each aspect of their gender with intentionality. Both Alex and Sevan say that their families were very keen on the way that they walked and constantly tried to change the way that they walked. In Alex's own words, "there was extreme gender policing at home". She says, "it took years trying to 'straighten' my walk. My gender had to be very very calculated in its presentation." Sevan also says, their walk was a great point of contention in their household. "My walk was always corrected. I had to learn how to walk like a Black man." They go on to

explain that it was not sufficient to just walk like a man, but their family was explicit that they needed to be walking like a Black man.

Another participant Campbell tells about his experience of family trying to make him “pray they gay away”. He says that his partner at the time was very aware of his attraction for men but convinced him that “I was queer as a result of early childhood sexual trauma so Jesus could fix it. And we got married. I just needed to keep praying and Jesus would fix it was what I was told”. He later stated in regards to the notion of being fixed that “A lot of my depression came from not being allowed to be who I was. My marriage was very unhappy for the both of us. I loved her but just not in that way.” All except two participants in this study mentioned some experience with being made to *pray the gay away* or being prayed over to have their sexuality fixed. It is often through and during these moments of humiliation and despair that participants seem to grapple with suicidal ideation the most. Bailey voiced this by sharing that it was while in his dorm room praying once more to be fixed so he would no longer be attracted to men, and finding himself even more attracted that the depths of his turmoil and depression took form. He says,

“This was because I'm asking God, ‘Okay, God, if you're true, if you're living take this desire away from me, because that's what you're supposed to do. Because I'm *not supposed* to feel like this. You are supposed to take this desire away from me because I'm praying for it’. And it seemed like the desire got stronger. And I was like, it doesn't work this way. None of this is supposed to work this way. When I pray, and I fast and I seek your face and I read my scripture and I study it, so that it becomes a part of me or a part of who I am, something is supposed to change inside of me. Not knowing that it wasn't my sexuality that was supposed to change, but it was my faith that was supposed to mature and grow up”.

Homophobia/Transphobia/Heterosexism from the Church

This idea that queerness is a mechanical defect and should be fixed for a person to become whole or normal or capable of being treated as human leads to another key portion of what signals a cause of high rates of depression in queer people. This key portion is self-hate and for Black queers and trans* people, as participants state, it comes mostly from the church. For this next portion of my study I will report on the main ways that Black queer and trans* people experience homophobia, Transphobia, and heterosexism in the church, which they report as causing or worsening their depression.

Teaching Self-Hate

All except two participants in my sample were a part of non-queer affirming churches since birth and have very similar experiences growing up in such a space while simultaneously coming to know their sexuality. Kathan speaks to this experience by saying,

“When I was younger there was a lot of homophobia from the pulpit. When I got older I had a lot more agency to leave....I was taught Christianity first and Christianity taught me to hate queerness so when I realized that I was queer, I hated myself growing up...even today I still struggle with worthiness. I’m constantly asking myself if I’m worthy of God’s love, am I worthy of this position, am I worthy of this thing? This is because I’ve been taught by the majority that my sexuality and spirituality are in contention with each other. This message is contrary to what I receive from God during my prayer and meditation times. Though my spirit believes that I am right and in good-standing with God regardless of my sexuality, from time to time my mind and flesh still sides with majority thinking that I am not worthy enough.”

Many parts of this statement is the very pattern of experience that other participants experience. Though these are the words of one participant, many other participants express the same sentiments. The general idea is that participants grew up hearing homophobia hurled from the pulpit. They came to recognize that the same queerness that they heard about in church described their own sexuality or gender. They

realized that who they are is not acceptable to their society/surrounding. They are told either personally or from the pulpit that they need to change or fix their sexuality through praying and suppressing their emotions. They try these methods and still can't get rid of their queer sexuality or gender. Soon they begin to internalize the hatred that has been placed upon their bodies. India also said that her toughest time was caused by having internal conflict about her sexual "demon". India is the only participant that still holds to the idea that she must try to change her desires to become heterosexual. She says that she still has desires and attractions for other women but she continues to suppress those because acting on these desires causes too much tension and conflict within her. She continues to describe that her current non-queer affirming church teaches that being queer is not acceptable to God. In addition, she says that her church has taught her that being in a heterosexual relationship and having heterosexual attractions is supreme to queer relationships and attractions. When asked what she thought about her queer attractions she says that she is still unsure about queer sexuality and whether or not it's sinful. She was taught that people like that have demons or spirits but she's unsure currently. India says that when she was acting on her attractions for women "it felt right, but God says it's not good". This was the source of conflict for her. She is unsatisfied with herself as she currently is and says she works continuously to change her attractions.

Adriana also talks about how her church taught her that her sexuality was demonic. She says she "I struggled from 15 to 28 with my sexuality, going back and forth, 'this isn't what I'm supposed to do', you know? 'God hates me'. 'I'm outside of the will of God', and things like that, just the normal things that were taught." She says that she "had always used personal prayer to cope but I stopped praying for three years

because I was ashamed to be in God's presence. It was never okay to *come out* in my church and it was not okay to have the feelings I have and be in God's presence". Ashton also shares the same sentiments that even today sometimes "my sexuality invalidates my existence in the church". He shares that he can be as involved as he is in his church but whenever people find out about his sexuality then he becomes no longer worthy of God or spiritual enough. Ashton, like many others, had to hide and are still hiding their sexuality today as a form of survival in non-queer affirming churches. Campbell, who started out as a preacher, tells of his experience with being taught to hate himself while hiding his sexuality. He says,

"It was painful going through this [being a preacher] and being good at it, you know. I would preach and people would come to me after church and say 'Oh, you know, you really blessed my life' and 'it's just like you knew all the details of my life', and 'what you said it spoke directly to me, it's almost as if you know exactly what I'm going through right now' and everything like that, and 'I just love you so much'. And I would just look at them, and my heart would break because I'm thinking to myself, you don't love me, you can't love me and not see me, and you don't see me. If you really knew who I was, if you really knew who I am, and what my real struggle is, my demon, as you call it or whatever, you would have nothing to do with me. And even though you've cried and shouted, and danced, and ran around the church and across the church, and you feel so much better now about your situation, I'm going home to pop some antidepressants and anxiety medication with a glass of vodka because I hate myself. I hate everything about my life. And I feel like a complete and utter failure".

Campbell says he had everything that people would consider successful but he hated himself and thought of himself as a failure because he had been praying to not be queer for years and still had to live that secret. When Danielle made the statement that she hated herself, she was asked what that self-hate looked like. She replied, I mean, "it [self-hate] looked like—for me, it was like disgust I guess, for myself because this is not how it's supposed to be. You know, like 'how could you?' kind of thing. It was—there

were suicidal thoughts that went along with that. Because I thought that when I came out, that I wouldn't have anything anyways, so what's the point of being here [on earth/alive]?" She describes that she predicted she would lose her family as well as her church community, which was all that she had at the time. In a similar way to Campbell and Danielle, Joseph explains that it was unacceptable for him to be queer in his church. In fact he says, "my church had a policy to just not talk about it. I couldn't be seen for all I am." Joseph said it went beyond the point of queer sexuality being hated and sinful in his church, it was as though it was so bad that they made it not exist in their minds. "We could never talk about it".

Bailey also talks about trying to come out to elders in his church but having that conversation be avoided. "It was a don't ask, don't tell" sort of environment. This invisibility or inability to be seen for all that they truly were caused many participants to hate the hidden parts of themselves. They tried to rid themselves of the parts that their church told them was a demon or not appropriate to acknowledge.

As mentioned above Bailey, talked explicitly about being depressed because of the rhetoric of needing to "pray the gay away". For many queers at the core of this rhetoric is the explicit ideas being taught that queer people should not accept themselves as they are. Bailey, like many other interview participants, explain that they were taught to hate themselves so much that whenever they were in solitude, even without the pressures of family and church they would be in tears begging God to take away their queer sexuality. He says that for most of his life he did accept the church's belief that he was not enough the way he naturally was so he "suppressed feelings which caused torment, depressions, guilt, fear, and suicidal ideas. I begged God to change me for

years”. Sage’s words were very similar to those of Bailey. She talks about sitting through a sermon that condemned her sexuality right after being baptized. When asked what her feelings were during and after that sermon she says, “that sermon prevented me from being empowered by my sexuality. I went through depression, therapy and all that.” There are many more cause and effect stories like these where Black queer and trans* report that because of being taught from youth that they were not good enough for God or accepted by God because of their sexuality and/or gender they had to either battle with depression, be put in psychiatric wards, have constant nightmares of burning in hell, or live endlessly begging God to change who they are. These experiences concurrently happen while carrying guilt and trauma from recognizing parts of themselves that they have no control over.

Surveillance in/from the Church

In addition to Black queer and trans* people’s experiences of being taught to hate themselves, there was also a trend of surveillance that they described as causing and/or contributing to their depression. Surveillance took on various forms in this study. For example, one participant, Sevan talked about being taught in the church that they were always being watched especially by God and people in Heaven. While they were not as shaken by the prospective of God seeing their every move, Sevan says they remember having a lot of mental anguish over the fact that people in Heaven could always know their thoughts. At the time, they were also being taught that being queer was immoral which caused them to battle with suppressing queer thoughts and attractions. Sevan explains their situation in these words, “I was taught that I was being watched by everyone, even the people in heaven and God, my thoughts were being watched. I

realized that even if I didn't have sex with men, I would still go to Hell because of my uncontrollable [queer] thoughts". Sevan later goes on to say that they felt that they were made to suppress these thoughts and feel guilt for something that they had no control over. To their holistic experience in the non-queer affirming church, Sevan says, "Black liberation is supposed to happen at church, but not for queers. Christianity is implicated in the pain that me and people like me [queer people] go through".

Regarding a different form of surveillance, Sevan shares that they also knew that people in the church were watching them. However, what they said caused them the majority of mental anguish and depression was the idea that no matter how much they suppressed their thoughts and hid, they would still be seen as queer above all things and therefore damned to Hell. Similar to Sevan many other participants spoke of their experiences with being watched by the church.

Many have even internalized this surveillance to control for how they perform and to not implicate themselves in non-queer affirming spaces. One participant Isaiah explains that, "you have to know your audience". Isaiah says as queer people in non-queer affirming churches, in order to survive these spaces you have to perform a different way than you normally would. Participants talked extensively about being under surveillance in the church and by church members even when outside of the church setting. Danielle shared her experience with having to always be hiding her relationships from not just her family but also church members. She says even when on the streets with her partner she had to be very careful about how the two of them presented or even how many times they were seen together. Danielle says her first relationship ended because of that. Her partner revolted saying, "I don't wanna be anyone's dirty little secret". It was

with that quote and experience though that got Danielle thinking “critically about authority of scripture and everything I’d been taught in the church.” She says it was after thinking through that painful experience of not being able to be openly queer but also not being able to maintain her relationship because she was hiding from the church that she came to realize that her sexuality was all about love and God is a God of love so it’s wasn’t sensible for her to believe that she needed to hide her love.

In a similar fashion, Devin also explains that the church’s heavy surveillance of her life in general lead to her living a double life. She had to keep her home life completely separate from her church community. Of this experience she says that living a double life took an “emotional toll to live a lie and remember that lie but also to deny the sexual part of myself”. She says that another difficult portion of this would be hearing other church members spread rumors about who in the church was queer. During instances like these it caused internal conflict around whether or not she should stand up for other people who were rumored to be queer but put herself at risk of also being implicated.

Morgan talks about very similar situations and says that her church had a very strong “rumor culture”. She remembers having to make the decision to stay silent on protecting others that were being talked about negatively because they were suspected of being queer. Morgan explains that because she was very cis-female presenting and single she didn’t have to worry as much about being suspected of queerness but she shared similar internal conflict as Devin when having to silently listen to other queer people be slandered for their sexuality. She says her church members watch constantly to see which queer person they can suspect to be queer. Usually after someone is rumored to be queer

the church members separate from them while saying “derogatory” things about them. For trans identified people, this surveillance creates even more pressure around their public gender presentation. Alex, a trans woman being forced for religious reasons to embody masculinity says, “In the church you get watched to see if you are a good Christian man. I was always being watched on how I performed Blackness, specifically Black masculinity. Black men are to be the saviors of the race so you have to uphold this idea of Black masculinity or else you’re not a good Christian and you’re going to Hell”.

Alex also recalls listening to sermons that enforced what she refers to as patriarchy and misogyny. In one sermon Alex says the pastor went into great details sharing ways that the congregation could better watch for queer behavior. She says, “I remember one day the pastor literally gave a whole sermon on how you can tell if a man is queer or feminine. And I distinctly remember this story he told about—if a man were to step in gum, you need to check your shoe. If he pulls his foot to the front, that's how a man checks his shoe. If he kicks his leg back and looks backward, then that's some indication of his femininity and sexuality. And I remember that just really sticking with me. And that just bringing to life how serious people were about how men had to perform their gender in a very particular way”. She says it was arbitrary rules such as this one that caused her immense pressure when entering church spaces. She had to calculate every portion of her performed gender to ensure that she was not implicated as a gay man. Notice that even if Alex were accused of being queer, this accusation would have been one that implicated her sexuality versus her gender. Spaces like this where the trans* identity is not even recognized for its existence may foster greater transphobic actions.

In the same vein of surveillance, Campbell describes what surveillance looked like in his life while being a queer [same-gender loving] man married to a woman. He says that his whereabouts were always looked after and it was looked on very negatively for him to be absent from church, the space where he could be most watched. While he went through periods of depression due to being closeted in the church, he started to withdraw from church spaces because as he describes,

“I’m looking at these people, running around and screaming at the top of their lungs, and I’m thinking to myself, okay, once upon a time I thought this was joy. But now I’m looking at it and I realize that you’re depressed, you’ve got an anxiety disorder, you’ve probably have some other kind of identity disorder that nobody is dealing with and a lot of what your experiencing, a lot of what you’re internalizing is coming from that pulpit. It’s being preached into you. It’s being preached into you. All this defeatism, you know, is just being—you’re being indoctrinated with it, a healthy dose of it on a weekly basis. and you go out in the world and try to live your life according to somebody else’s ideas and it’s not working for you, and you come here and you scream and cry, or whatever, and hope the next week will be better than the last. And week after week, we keep going through this cycle. This shit does not make sense. And I checked out. I stopped going like I did before”.

He says that the church would demand explanations for his absence and seek to know where he was instead of being in church. Campbell shares that this worked to keep him going back to what was a harmful environment until he decided that he had a right to not attend church if he wanted to.

Ex-communicated/Dis-Fellowshipped and Isolated

Even further than surveillance, many Black queer and trans* people reported experiences of being ex-communicated/excommunication or dis-fellowshipped/excommunication from their church community. Similar processes of purposeful in-church isolation were also recorded. This process generally resembled a person being allowed to still attend the church but either by formal pastoral notice or

because of social teachings, that person is intentionally isolated within the church environment. Kennedy's dis-fellowshipment/excommunication was described above. Other process of putting someone out of the church greatly resembled what Kennedy described as the church trial process. He is unsure of the reason that his family chose to bring evidence against him to the church or why they chose to isolate him. However, he shares that because of the ex-communication policies of his church his family risked being embarrassed and isolated within the church if they claimed him or maintained contact with him. "Being kicked out the church took away the two most important things from me: God and my family", Kennedy says. He goes on to describe this as the moment where he was at his lowest and exhibiting many symptoms of depression. However, this ex-communication gave way for him to question all that he had been taught by his church and to realize that his church's views were not actually biblical. After this rejection of the church's views, Kennedy describes a process of human flourishing where he began to love himself for who he was and trust in his own access to God through personal prayer and devotion.

Ashton shared similar processes of ex-communication that he witnessed in his church's history. He says that he attends a Seventh Day Adventist church, which he believes is even more homophobic than other protestant denominations. Ashton talks about missing church one week and returning to being informed that a member of the church's choir had decided to *come out* as queer to the congregation. He says that this person was made to leave the stage and since a confession was enough evidence for ex-communication then this person was officially excommunicated and isolated that day. For this reason, Ashton says that he doesn't ever publicly say that he is a queer person.

However, he is assumed to be queer but he is single so no one has any evidence against him. Because he is assumed or rumored to be queer, he says that he is treated differently.

When asked how this treatment manifests he says,

“For instance, let's say—at SDA churches, there's always this line you walk through where you shake everybody's hand. You don't necessarily do that at Baptist churches. Everybody gets up and be gone. That's how it works. Though, I give you this example, when I'm walking out I can see them hug the male in front of me who presents straight. Mind you I had long relaxed hair at this time. So you know, it spoke for itself in certain aspects...but I could see the person in front of me get a handshake and a hug, a hearty one from a male, and then I come up and it's awkward. And not awkward because of me, I can see their body movements get awkward, that things have changed. I can see that my sexuality has preceded me and who I am to them”.

Other participants shared similar feelings as Ashton about being treated differently because of their sexuality while some shared a foreshadowing of how they think that they will be treated based on how they've witnessed the church react to other queer people. Morgan says that if she comes out in her church she would need to leave her entire town. She says that currently she is viewed as a very successful individual to her rural Black community. However, once people find out that she is queer, all of her successes will be erased or diminished. She too is very confident that she would be treated differently and purposefully isolated in her community. She says that her church practices one core thing in regards to treatment of queer people, in their own words, “isolate gays until they yield”. Morgan says that people in her church believe that queerness is a sin and therefore heterosexual people should isolate queers until they realize that being queer isn't good for them and thus will give up their queer sexuality.

Public Humiliation or Attacks from Church

Another way that participants reported experiencing homophobia, Transphobia, and heterosexism that causes or worsens their depression is through various forms of attacks or public humiliation in the church or by church members. These attacks range from general sermons to publicly singling out individuals or attempting to assault them. Sage talks of her experience with feeling attacked by the church in a sermon after her baptism. She says,

“So, the church—I was cool with it. It didn't really bother me up until after I came out. And I just couldn't mesh with it, I felt like there was a lot of hypocrisy, and a lot of condemning the things that weren't necessarily fair 'cause I felt like my sexuality didn't change anything about me. My sexuality didn't when I came out either. I'm the same person I was when I was closeted, just more honest now. But after that sermon [when she came out] the next week we go back and there's a whole sermon on the abomination of homosexuality. So it was kind of a slap in my face. Here, I was the week prior at 17 getting baptized because I had gone through so much with coming out and dealing with accepting myself. And to have taken this journey in trying to accept myself and try to get my parents to be more comfortable with me, then they're gonna sit up and reinforce that it's a horrible thing. Reinforce to my parents that who I am is a horrible thing”.

She asserts that nothing about her changed when she came out but all of a sudden she was different to people [in the church]. Sage says that before coming out people thought she could do anything, but once she came out, she suddenly had a ceiling to what she could accomplish in life. “I all of a sudden can't amount to much? I can't reach my goals anymore?” From the pastor's sermon that she says was degrading to queer people to personal comments that she received about how she could no longer reach her goals, Sage explains that these attacks were very key in triggering her depression. She also says that it was comments and sermons like this that encouraged her parents to reject her sexuality, ultimately rejected her as a person.

Morgan had a similar story with the church encouraging her parents to reject her sexuality. She went on to say “homophobia in the Black community comes from the

church”. Similar to Sage and Morgan, other participants talked about homophobia being used as a tool of patriarchy and racism that was passed on to slaves through convincing them that they too would die in Hell if they did not accept Jesus and denounce their ancestral religious systems. Another participant, Eli says that he understands why the church attacks queerness. He says “so much of their practices is based off of very male-oriented, heterosexual and cisgendered oriented structures....so for them to accept identities that aren't necessarily common like a queer identity goes against that”. Sage adds that even though she accepts Christianity as a spiritual tool, it is no greater than the spiritualities of her Black ancestors before they were forced to become Christians. Participants were very keen in acknowledging the fact that the Christian faith came from a place of attacking not just queer people, but also women and Black people as well. Sage says that for her, Christianity, specifically the Black church is a cultural part of her specific Black American experience that has helped her cope spiritually at times, but to her, Christianity is not supreme to other spiritualities. Devin also shared the same sentiments but added that she now attends an affirming church and knows that “being queer in the non-queer affirming church is “a backdrop of turmoil in people’s lives”. She says, “Just by the pressure we receive, the misinformation and the lack of self-acceptance we’re taught.” This comment came after she shared her experiences of having to sit through sermons that attacked portions of her identity and after explaining how she had to participate in conversations with people saying homophobic things in order to avoid facing discrimination and verbal attacks for being queer.

In another instance, Danielle, who is not currently attending any church but at the time of her interview was still searching for a place that accepts her and all of her

identities says, that she hasn't gone to church in a while because she realized that whenever her and her family would enter a church service, the pastor would change their sermon to preach directly to their queer sexuality. She says that this looked like her and her family walking into a church then "the pastor will be preaching something totally different and when we walk in or when he recognizes that we are a family, he closes his Bible and the sermon now becomes about us". Situations like this she said is common for her family but she keeps trying different churches in hopes that each will be different. She describes one situation where her partner held her hand in church and the pastor began to preach saying "queer people were going to Hell". This was after a series of similar experiences so her and her family left the sermon. After they left the church, Danielle says her daughter asked her, "Momma we're gonna go to Hell?" She says she responded, "No honey, No boo! We're going to go home, we're going to change clothes, and we're going to Golden Corral. That's what's going to happen".

Though she was able to take this situation lightly, it is a compilation of events such as this that she described causing her to hate herself and have thoughts of suicide earlier in her life. For Danielle, it is important that her daughter gets a safe place to develop spiritually, a place that "will not teach her to hate herself or her family". She says that she would love to attend a Black queer affirming church but they are few in number and generally small so they do not have a children's ministry and what is most important for her is finding a place that her daughter can participate actively in the church community.

In line with being attacked or humiliated by the church, Toni talks about his church and the most recent time that he attended. He says he was sitting in church recently and got attacked for just existing.

“The preacher comes out after I had finished singing, he's doing his sermon or whatever. And he walks up to me in the middle of everyone and I'm just like—[gasps]—he walked up to me and I was like, shit this is not going to be good. So, I just sat there. And my sister was sitting beside me... He walked up and he was like, you know God has a call on your life, but the devil really has you. And I didn't say anything, I just sat there and I talked to myself, like oh my God, he's really saying this in front of all these people. And he walked away. He came back he was like, I just want you to know when the devil gets through with you, he will kill you, and then I'm just like, oh my God, he really said that in front of all these people. And my sister was like—she feels that I'm bothered and I'm undoubtedly bothered. But I sit there, and I'm thinking to myself, should I just leave right now? What should I do? There were actually probably a thousand thoughts going through my head at that time, and I was—first, I wasn't angry. I was hurt. I was just hurt because it was like, I felt as if he attacked me for no reason. I had said nothing to him, I said nothing to his parishioners. All I did was exist in a space that didn't want me to exist and for him that was enough—he thought it was just okay to come to me, and pretty much embarrass me and attacked me.”

He says this experience happened in the context of him being the only *out* queer person in his church. Toni says his response to this situation was just to leave the church building and as soon as he got to his car he broke down in tears because of this humiliation and hurt. “I went through very dark times because of the church. I accepted what I was taught that I would be single forever and suppressed all of my emotions and attractions for years. I was taught to hate myself but I realized that all they were teaching me was not true.”

It was this explicit rejection of the church or the church's views on sexuality that many ascribe to their turn from depression or suicidal ideation. Over 88 percent of participants that talked explicitly about battling symptoms of depression. Of this 88 percent, 75 percent of participants gave credit to this rejection of beliefs or the institution

of the church as their beginning of self-acceptance and human flourishing. However, even after explicitly rejecting the church's views that his sexuality doomed him to Hell, Toni's public attack in the church still left him "emotionally ripped apart". "The church tries to kill me," he says. "Not physically or naturally, but they trying to kill my spirit, which leaves me just as dead. How is that of God?—that's not God to me. That's not reflecting God to me at all. That's why I won't stay for the whole thing. I won't stay for the preaching anymore. I just won't. The only way I would stay and sit under that preaching, is if my grandmother dies and he preaches the funeral, that's the only way I would ever hear him preach again".

While simple teachings of rejecting a particular group of people could technically end at the internalized rejection and isolation of said group, as seen with racial rejection this is often times not where the effects of homophobia, Transphobia or heterosexism end. We see this demonstrated in this study in how things moved from homophobic messages of queers being immoral to active surveillance in finding out who is queer, to further humiliating, isolating, and even violently attacking a person just based on their association with a *demonized* group. This escalation gets even clearer when we think of Kennedy's report of an attempted assault on his life by a non-queer affirming church pastor.

Kennedy says that after becoming publicly known in religious circles for being a pastor of a queer affirming church that is very active in the community, he received a phone call from a stranger telling him that he'd like to meet him in the parking lot of Kennedy's church. While Kennedy was very eager to offer whatever help this individual needed, he was concerned for his own legal safety being that he would be meeting with

this person in a one-on-one setting. He therefore asked the person to meet him at a nearby Wendy's instead and that's when the caller went on a rant in frustration of not being able to execute his plan in a public place. After calling several times and trying to convince Kennedy to meet him at the church and Kennedy refusing, the call finally exploded yelling that, "Somebody needed to teach these gays a lesson!" Kennedy says that this person said they were a pastor in the area that did not agree with the work that he was doing by turning the community queer. Though safety is still a concern for today Kennedy and many other Black queer and trans* people, Kennedy says that his church continues to do their duty and provide for their community specifically for Black queer and trans* youth. He says that he knows from experience that mental illness is often the effect of surviving a homophobic and racist society so his church offers free certified mental health services and support groups for the church members as well as the larger community. He is especially proud that his church has been able to queer and trans* people but also the families of queer and trans* people that may need to be educated about sexuality and gender differences.

VI.

Conclusion

Most participants came from the shared experience of growing up in non-queer affirming churches, being condemned at home for their sexuality, and experiencing periods of depression based on the conflicts caused by these experiences. They were taught that their sexual attractions and/or gender stood in opposition to what their faith, family, and spiritual community deemed as moral. Though coming from this shared experience, participants currently hold various relationships to the church. Some have chosen to remain in non-queer affirming churches, some have moved to become members of queer affirming churches, and others are no longer attending the church or practicing the Christian faith in general. Participants' current views towards the role of the church in their life vary. Despite this variance, there are strong trends in their collective narrative that gives voice to the main ways that they all have experienced homophobia, transphobia, and/or heterosexism.

Specifically for Black queer and trans* people their origin families and the Black church is generally a place where they should be able to find refuge and support from issues of racism. However, this study shows that Black queer and trans* people are simultaneously being attacked in mainstream society, as well as in the places that they seek refuge, their family and church. Despite attacks from several directions, which they say contribute to or cause their high levels of depression, Black queer and trans* people are still able to settle in places of human flourishing. This study narrates the main ways that the families and churches of Black queer and trans* people enact homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism upon the minds and bodies of Black queer and trans* people.

Literature is very limited in accounting for the experiences of Black queer and trans* people in relationship to either mental health or spirituality. My study 1) adds narrative data about *Black* queer and trans* people to the conversation of sexuality and mental health, 2) adds lesbian and trans* voices to stir dialogue on how homophobia, transphobia and heterosexism affects these experiences that often go unresearched and unrecognized 3) shows that for Black queer and trans* people, spirituality and mental health are interconnected, and 4) underscores this broader research statement by adding the mechanics that lead to church views affecting mental health negatively. Current research indicates that Black people have to deal with the mental health issues accumulated as a result of racial discrimination while having less access to mental health services (Williams et al., 1997). Given that queer and trans* people are at a heightened risk for depression and suicide, further research could analyze the ways in which Black queer and trans* people encounter healing from depression. In fact, my research is an understatement of the effects of homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism since it is impossible to include the perspectives of those who have already been lost to death by suicide. My study leaves us asking: What are the methods of healing that allow Black queer or trans* people to enter moments or phases of human flourishing? What larger societal processes can be implemented to allow for the healing of Black queer and trans* people?

VIII.

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Appendix A: Key Words and Terms

- Queer – The word queer has been used historically to represent “Anti-normative” sexualities (Jagose, 1996). Butler (1993) suggests that queer has been used to disrupt “natural dichotomies such as heterosexual versus homosexual (Doan, 2007). In this study, queer is used to describe all non-heterosexual sexualities. The term “genderqueer” is also used at times to described to be inclusive of all people whose gender or gender expression may not conform to or be performed according to prescribed societal expectations.
- Trans* - This word is operationalized in the methods section of this study. It is used to refer to all genderqueer or gender nonconforming people.
- Cisgender/cis --these terms are used to refer to people whose gender and gender expression conform to societal expectations of their gender performance or genitalia assigned at birth.
- Closeted - this term is used to describe the process in which queer people opt to keep their sexuality a secret. This is generally done out of necessity or protection.
- Coming out/Out*--this is used to describe the process in which queer people opt to [or are forced to] make their queer sexuality public.
- Non-queer affirming - this terms is used to describe spaces [specifically churches in this study] where queer identities are looked upon negatively. In this study, participants decided whether or not their church would fit into this category. Many used to guideline as to whether they felt affirmed and/or would be allowed to perform a queer marriage ceremony at their church.
- Queer Affirming - this terms is used to describe spaces [specifically churches in this study] where queer identities are not looked upon negatively. In this study,

participants decided whether or not their church would fit into this category. Many used to guideline as to whether they felt affirmed and/or would be allowed to perform a queer marriage ceremony at their church.

For this research, I measure the variables of depression, human flourishing, homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism. These terms are operationalized in the following ways:

- Depression: Either reporting depression diagnosed by a medical professional and/or a description of suicidal ideation and recurring thoughts of death or other symptoms of Major Depression Disorder such as a lack of desire to live, feelings of worthlessness or daily guilt, and loss of pleasure in most activities measure depression in this study (Huang et al., 2006).
- Human Flourishing: is measured in this study as one's "level of socio-psychological functioning from the reporter's point of view" (Diener et al., 2010). This study employs aspects of the Flourishing scale, which include having supportive and rewarding relationships, being respected by others, contributing to the happiness of others, having a purposeful or meaningful life, and feeling competent and capable in activities that are important to the respondent to determine if participants are at a level of human flourishing.
- Homophobia: is described as range of antagonistic attitudes toward non-heterosexual [queer] sexualities (Adams et al., 2007; Renzetti & Edleson, 2008; Schuiling & Likis, 2011). This includes but is not limited to lesbians, gays, and bisexual people. This fear may manifest itself in the form of contempt, hatred, and antipathy among other feelings. Homophobia is often times related to religious beliefs (McCormack, 2013).

- Transphobia: is described as a range of antagonistic attitudes such as emotional disgust, hatred, or fear of transexuality, transsexuals, or transgendered people (Chrisler, 2010). This includes anyone that does not conform with or fit neatly in society's gender expectations. The term trans* is used throughout this study to describe all people that do not conform to society's expectations of how they should perform according to their gender assigned at birth. Many trans* people also experience homophobia because their sexuality is generally also assumed to be queer based on their gender expression (Chakraborti, 2009).
- Heterosexism: this is the idea that heterosexual relationships or attractions are supreme and should be desired above non-heterosexual relationships or attractions.