

**Gay is (Not) Okay?: Queer Identities at an All-Women's Historically Black
College**

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Introduction

The homophobic climates of many Historically Black Colleges and Universities force students to hide their queer identities. This phenomenon is especially apparent at Spelman College, an all-women's historically Black college in Atlanta, Georgia. While a narrative exists in the media that all student identities are accepted at all-women's institutions, as well as all Black students accepted at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), in reality, students at these institutions choose to accept only some identities while excluding others. Unfortunately, the queer community encompasses many of these "unacceptable" identities to the student body. As a result, some queer students at HBCUs feel it is necessary to hide their identities to ensure their own safety, rather than risk being targeted and possibly facing backlash due to their sexual preferences.

The present study intends to challenge the narrative of the heterosexual, cisgender norms of Spelman College. I will challenge the narrative by detailing the intricacies of the identity regulation that occurs for queer people. The identity regulation occurs after their introduction to the heteronormative culture, a culture that adheres to dominant heterosexual norms, existing at Spelman. This includes an introduction to "down-low" culture created by queer students who pretend to be straight in public. The identity regulation, I argue, is partly due to the trauma queer students experience as a result of the respectability politics imposed on students. I have designed a pilot study to investigate the creation of queer identities within Spelman's intolerant ecosystem.

My research interest is rather personal and stems from my own experiences of being queer at an all-women's historically Black college in the south. Before I got to Spelman, I thought I would be entering an inclusive environment, however when I arrived and observed the culture, it was a much different story. My experiences include being berated by aggressions such as "f*** gay people," receiving questions about why I choose to be attracted to women, and withholding disclosing my sexuality to my freshman year roommate for fear of rejection. Thus, my life has been more difficult than I imagined before attending Spelman. I am interested in finding out why homophobia still exists in a space originally designed to center all Black women and combat intolerance. Finally, I will offer solutions to the college to support queer

students by investigating how the identities of queer individuals are formed and regulated at an all-women's HBCU.

Spelman's History

Spelman's humble beginnings can be traced to the basement of Friendship Baptist Church in 1881, originally named the Atlanta Female Baptist Seminary. Two white abolitionist missionaries, Sophia B. Packard and Harriet E. Giles, traveled south from Massachusetts to give the gift of education to Black women and girls. In 1924, Spelman Seminary officially became Spelman College, named after Laura Spelman Rockefeller, the wife of John D. Rockefeller, who is a significant benefactor.¹ The motto of the Spelman Seminary was: "Our whole school for Christ" -- a motto which Spelman embedded in the institution that is still valued in contemporary times.²

Spelman is an elite, private, Christian liberal arts institution that currently has 2,100 students enrolled. It is ranked the number one HBCU in the United States. Located in the West End of Atlanta, Spelman is adjacent to Morehouse College, an all-male historically Black college. Morehouse and Spelman act as brother-sister schools and have a number of joint events, including a Brother-Sister Exchange in freshman year, where each first-year student receives a sibling pair they keep throughout their four years. Morehouse, similarly to Spelman, has problems with heteronormativity and homophobia that directly connect to Spelman in how the men present themselves and shape women's behaviors, which I will address later in the paper.

Afrekete

Over the years, multiple support systems have been created to help mitigate the oppression queer students face on Spelman's campus. The first student organization for queer students at Spelman was chartered in 1993 and was named Lesbian and Bisexual Alliance (LBA). It started as a group of students who met secretly in the counseling center. Eventually, the group morphed into Afrekete in 1997, named

¹ "Spelman History in Brief | Spelman College," accessed June 19, 2020, <https://www.spelman.edu/about-us/history-in-brief>.

² Sarah H. Case, *Leaders of Their Race: Educating Black and White Women in the New South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

after Catherine McKinley's Black lesbian anthology.³ Afrekete is a student group that strives to offer safe, creative, and liberating spaces for Spelman students across the entire spectrum of the queer community and its allies.⁴ The organization provides a multitude of events that serve this purpose and foster political action within the community. Afrekete has weekly meetings for queer students in the Atlanta University Center, plans and executes campus Pride week, and supports various social action initiatives. Afrekete is well received by queer students on campus since it is the only queer-centered space. For other students on campus who are not part of the queer community or actively seeking a place to be an ally, Afrekete is not widely known or discussed. It is also where some queer students go to find romantic partners, which sometimes causes internal disputes. Despite any negative factors that come with Afrekete, having a support group contributes significantly to queer students' comfort, making Afrekete vital to queer campus culture. I will further explain the importance of student groups later in this paper.

Queer Campus Culture

Historically, Spelman has not been the most accepting campus for queer students. Acts of violence against queer students have been documented in the Atlanta University Center (AUC) archives. One recorded account in the AUC archives features an article from the Spelman newspaper from 1999 entitled “Afrekete Unwelcome at Spelman.” The report details the “constant opposition from the Spelman community” that forced Afrekete into inactivity that school year. The formerly known Lesbian Bisexual Alliance changed their name to Afrekete to be more discreet after prior overt incidents of homophobia. During one of these incidents, a member of Afrekete chose to leave the school after receiving hate mail, enduring mental and verbal abuse, and harassment after deciding to shave their head.⁵ Similar articles were released in 1993, 2001, 2009, and 2013, detailing consistent recordings of issues.⁶ The issues continued when Spelman released their official policy indicating transgender students would be permitted to enroll at

³ Alexander, Jacqui M and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, “Introduction,” in *Facilitating HBCU Campus Climates of Pluralism, Inclusivity and Progressive Change*, n.d., 9–48.

⁴ “Afrekete - Spelman College,” accessed July 3, 2020, <https://spelmancollege.campuslabs.com/engage/organization/afrekete>.

⁵ “The Spotlight, 1999 April 9,” *The Spelman Spotlight*, 1999, <https://radar.auctr.edu/islandora/object/sc.001%3Asc.001.1999.05/>.

⁶ “Search | Atlanta University Center,” accessed July 10, 2020, <https://radar.auctr.edu/islandora/search/afrekete?type=dismax>.

Spelman College in 2018.⁷ The new inclusive policy decision faced opposition from many current Spelman students, parents, and alumnae, who notably threatened to pull funding from the school.⁸ It also provoked protests from the wider Atlanta community, including Westboro Baptist Church, who showed up at Spelman to protest the policy.⁹ Due to community resistance, the initial letter detailing the policy has since been removed from the website.¹⁰

After the policy release, violence arose when three Spelman students physically assaulted a transgender Spelman student. Spelman administration claimed no cameras captured the incident and they were unable to identify the perpetrators.¹¹ The assault caused an uproar from queer students and allies, culminating in protest action.¹² The protest served two purposes: 1) to expose the assault and express disapproval for how Spelman addressed the violence, and 2) to mobilize allies of trans students and adopt an acceptable plan for the protection of these students.

In addition to the physical assault, students were receiving queerphobic notes slipped under their doors. One note stated, "We don't want you. F*** you freaks!" and another declared "no queers" on the campus.¹³ These outward displays of homophobia create a hostile environment for queer students. In response, Spelman released various media statements to display their solidarity with queer students. Besides the media statements, Spelman did not take adequate measures to prevent hate crimes in the future, and they did nothing to assist other queer students. The lack of support after this violent incident is abreast of the fact that queer students typically leave Spelman traumatized after facing chronic instances of

⁷ "Admissions Frequently Asked Questions | Spelman College," accessed July 3, 2020, <https://www.spelman.edu/admissions/frequently-asked-questions>.

⁸ "Strong Reactions As Spelman College In Atlanta Opens Doors To Transgender Women," Cascade, GA Patch, September 7, 2017, <https://patch.com/georgia/cascade/spelman-college-atlanta-opens-doors-transgender-women>.

⁹ "Westboro Baptist Church Protests Morehouse and Spelman Colleges over Their Transgender Admission Policies - Metro Weekly," accessed July 3, 2020, <https://www.metroweekly.com/2019/05/westboro-baptist-church-protests-morehouse-and-selman-colleges-over-their-transgender-admission-policies/>.

¹⁰ "404 Page Not Found," accessed July 3, 2020, <https://www.spelman.edu/about-us/office-of-the-president/letters-to-the-community/2017/09/05/spelman-admissions-and-enrollment-policy-update>.

¹¹ "Welcome Back!," accessed July 3, 2020, <https://www.spelman.edu/about-us/office-of-the-president/letters-to-the-community/letter/2018/08/15/welcome-back>.

¹² "WATCH: Spelman Students Protest Recent Anti-Trans Speech On Campus," VOX ATL, May 4, 2018, <https://voxatl.org/spelman-college-trans-march-video/>.

¹³ Matt Hennie, "LGBTQ Students at Spelman Called 'Freaks,' Targeted with Hateful Notes," Project Q, accessed June 12, 2020, https://www.projectq.us/atlanta/lgbtq_students_at_spelman_called_freaks_targeted_hateful_notes.

homophobia during their enrollment.¹⁴ Unfortunately, the president's responses were merely performative actions meant to save the institution's image rather than support students. The lack of support for queer students demonstrates that the college is not ready to accommodate more queer students, as they choose not to adequately protect those already enrolled. Taking on this type of work is difficult in Spelman's environment because historically, the administration has not been supportive of work that attempts to change the norms. The 1999 Spotlight article details how the administration "refused to support or sponsor any alliance that would foster a haven for those practicing same-sex or bisexual preferences" and the administration's decision to force Afrekete to dismantle a tree they put up on campus that was erected to celebrate the group's founding.¹⁵ For people who have tried to promote change, such as one current Spelman professor and activist, Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, she reveals, "It has been difficult to create what I would call a queer-friendly campus because we haven't acknowledged as an institution the deep and persistent issues around homophobia that exist in the community—and HBCUs are a microcosm of that."¹⁶ Notably, Spelman's homophobia is not only deeply rooted in the school, but is systemic within the Black Christian community. Therefore, one solidarity letter against a hate crime will not change what is ingrained in the culture.

The campus culture also polices the sexuality of students at women's colleges. The policing is seen from the historical viewpoint that "during the early years of Black colleges, Black female students were sheltered by the administration; their lives were shaped by institutional policies designed to control their behavior."¹⁷ Policies related to dress length and shoulder coverage at the traditional women's ceremonies, the monitoring of men who are allowed in the dorms for visitation, and promoting abstinence as part of the educational curriculum are examples of current policing of Spelman students. The effects of surveilling dynamics have persisted over the years, so policing continues to surround sexuality matters. The policing

¹⁴ Marlena Baldacci CNN, "Spelman College Investigating Hateful Notes Sent to LGBTQ Students," CNN, accessed July 3, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/01/health/spelman-hateful-notes-lgbtq-students-trnd/index.html>.

¹⁵ "The Spotlight, 1999 April 9."

¹⁶ Sherri Williams, "It's Time for HBCUs to Address Homophobia and Transphobia on Their Campuses," June 21, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/time-hbcus-address-homophobia-transphobia-campuses/>.

¹⁷ Erica Lorraine Williams, "Women's Studies and Sexuality Studies at HBCUs: The Audre Lorde Project at Spelman College," *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 2 (2013): 520–25.

has translated to the policing of queer people's sexuality and identity as well, done by regulating when it is appropriate to discuss queer issues (in Afrekete meetings), display queer paraphernalia (during Pride Week), and show queer public displays of affection (never). Public Safety, Spelman's state-certified internal police system, also tends to require identification of more masculine-presenting Spelmanites, despite seeing them exit and enter campus each day.¹⁸ They are only required to request identification from males entering campus, but many masculine-presenting women and non-binary Spelmanites feel targeted by their surveillance tactics.

Review of Literature

Aspects of relevant literature on the identity development of queer individuals at an all-women's HBCU include topics of respectability politics, campus environment, Black cultural and religious attitudes toward homosexuality, student support groups, and finally, trauma.

Respectability Politics

Respectability politics, which are the specific guidelines of creating a more "respectable" Black person, are the foundation of culture at HBCUs. Evelyn Higginbotham coined the term "politics of respectability" to describe a newfound political philosophy in the Black community which emerged during the Progressive Era. The politics of respectability focused on making changes for the goals of individual success as well as a reform strategy. Reform politics during the Reconstruction Era were for two audiences: Black people, who were encouraged to be respectable, and white people, who needed to be shown Black people were respectable. The traits she included in her definition of a respectable Black person are temperance, cleanliness of person and property, polite manners, and sexual purity. The politics of respectability are particularly visible in and applied to Black women.¹⁹

Respectability politics were designed to shield Black women from various racist stereotypes, including those that suggested Black women were "sexually aggressive, uncouth, and lacking in self-control," which excluded them from certain aspects of the public sphere, such as acquiring jobs other than

¹⁸ "Spelman Expands Its Admissions Policy to Include Trans Students," *Diverse*, August 13, 2018, <https://diverseeducation.com/article/122665/>.

¹⁹ Paisley Jane Harris, "Gatekeeping and Remaking: The Politics of Respectability in African American Women's History and Black Feminism," *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 1 (May 30, 2003): 212–20, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2003.0025>.

domestic work. Education was one way for people to achieve a status of respectability.²⁰ Part of the discovery came from the perception that "With 95 percent of southern Blacks unable to read or write at the outbreak of the Civil War, illiteracy proved a bitter fruit of bondage. African-Americans were quick to identify literacy with personal fulfillment and upward mobility."²¹ So, as Black people started going to schools to become more respectable, schools began to revise their curriculums and offerings to fit the new demographic and give them the training they were looking for. Schools for women offered courses to model proper households as part of the journey toward respectability. They focused on teaching "frugality, cleanliness, order, and intelligence" to ensure these traits would continue to infiltrate Black households.²²

The formation of HBCUs created "respectable" college-educated Black people, so these policies influenced by respectability politics are evident in these Black educational spaces. They have specific methods of identity construction that follow the lines and traits of respectability politics. Part of the administration and its students' respectability politics include antagonism toward queerness. Respectability politics do not include the freedom to live outside of heterosexuality and the gender binary. As long as these norms are in place, the colleges will choose to remain stagnant in their views and policies.

Spelman still holds these values of respectability, which can all be demonstrated clearly through our white dress ceremony. The white dress tradition has existed since the early 1900s, requiring each student to have a "respectable and conservative" white dress. The color white symbolizes purity, and there are specific guidelines as to how students must wear the white dresses. Shoulders must be covered, dresses must be "true" white and no shorter than two inches above the knee, and students must wear pantyhose with the outfit. Besides those specifications, they require black close-toed shoes, and the only accessories allowed are a small black purse, a wristwatch, and rings worn on the hand. In the spirit of this tradition, all first-year students must wear the ensemble for the New Student Orientation Induction Ceremony. All students are required to wear the attire when attending the Founders Day Convocation, and graduating

²⁰ Case, *Leaders of Their Race*.

²¹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*, Revised edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

²² Case, *Leaders of Their Race*.

seniors are required to wear the same attire underneath the academic regalia for Founders Day, Class Day, Baccalaureate, and Commencement.²³ Alumnae enforce this tradition on current students by making them fear they will not be able to participate in the activities if they don't abide by the rules. The fear tactics employed by alumnae add to the conformity, as they walk down the lines before students are allowed to enter Sister's Chapel and pull out students who are not appropriately dressed. The white dress tradition exemplifies Spelman's values of respectability, highlights how they want students to act, and outlines the binaries they expect students to fit.

Campus Environment

Respectability politics have an influence on another factor affecting queer identities at Spelman: the campus environment and culture. Spelman's campus culture relies on "conflictual arrangements of silence, religious taboo, closeted Black faculty, and an overall climate that enforces heterosexuality."²⁴ This indicates how even professors at Spelman are unable to help open up new spaces for queer people through their pedagogy. They themselves are held up to the same respectability tenets and restricted, personally and in their teaching, by the homophobic environment. Some cited reasons to cause these restrictions are "fear of institutional backlash," fear of being seen as too "controversial," and possible "refusals around tenure in promotion."²⁵ On the opposite spectrum, in Spelman classrooms, there are incidents of homophobia where students' identities are used to mark negative differences. Some professors do not know how to handle students' homophobic comments, creating toxic learning environments for queer students. Some of these experiences are recounted in the interview analysis section.

I base much of my research on the "Facilitating Campus Climates of Pluralism, Inclusivity and Progressive Change" report, a compilation of essays and works created by those who focus on sexuality at HBCUs. A team compiled the report after *Breaking the Silence: The Audre Lorde Black Lesbian Feminist*

²³ "The White Attire Tradition | Spelman College," accessed June 26, 2020, <https://www.spelman.edu/alumnae/alumnae-engagement/the-white-dress-tradition>.

²⁴ Jacqui and Guy-Sheftall, "Introduction."

²⁵ Alexander, Jacqui M. and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "Breaking Silence," in *Building Womanist Coalitions: Writing and Teaching in the Spirit of Love*, ed. Gary L. Lemons (University of Illinois Press, 2019), 95–122.

Project which aimed to establish an LGBT Program within the Women's Center at Spelman.²⁶ Within "Facilitating Campus Climates of Pluralism, Inclusivity and Progressive Change," Roderick A. Ferguson argues that in general, HBCUs are "institutions often constructed as naturally heterosexist and therefore opposed to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender practices and identities."²⁷ This opposition to queer identities proves to be true in their policies and practices, and it is due to the "face" they want to uphold as a college. Face work, the process of outwardly performing one's self-image, and heterosexist tendencies are prevalent at Spelman.²⁸ These are mostly due to its thirteen years and counting top placement on the ranking list of HBCUs, a position as a women's institution, and long-standing traditions of celebrating womanhood, all of which allow Spelman to focus on "saving face" to uphold their positions. Sustaining their status in the Black community requires staying in line with the essential values of respectability politics, including those of homophobia.

Black Cultural & Religious Attitude Toward Queer People

Religion is one of the contributing factors to the historical negative attitudes toward and opinions of queer people. Johnetta B. Cole (past president of Spelman College) and Beverly Guy-Sheftall (class of 1966 and current professor at Spelman) discuss the "cultural homophobia," a term coined by Raymond East, in their book *Gender Talk*. Cole and Guy-Sheftall argue cultural homophobia is linked to Black America's struggle to try to conform to the mainstream, or white, gender ideologies; as well as to resist labels of sexual deviance; and finally to preserve the structure of the Black family.²⁹ Cultural homophobia is extremely evident in all-Black spaces, such as the Black Church and HBCUs.³⁰ In addition to *Gender Talk*, I will engage multiple other works which detail how homosexuality is treated within the Black Church, specifically ways in which the Black Church has rejected queerness that translates into Black culture.

²⁶ Jacqui and Guy-Sheftall, "Introduction."

²⁷ Roderick A. Ferguson, "The Past and Future Diversities of HBCUs: Queerness and the Institutional Fulfillment of Black Studies," in *Facilitating HBCU Campus Climates of Pluralism, Inclusivity and Progressive Change*, n.d., 49–72.

²⁸ Erving Goffman, "On Face-Work," in *Readings for Sociology*, ed. Garth Massey (W. W. Norton, 2015), 169–79.

²⁹ Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Johnetta Betsch-Cole, *Gender Talk: The Struggle For Women's Equality in African American Communities* (New York: Ballantine, 2003).

³⁰ Johnetta Betsch-Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, "Black, Lesbian, and Gay: Speaking the Unspeakable.," in *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women's Equality in African American Communities* (Ballantine, 2003), 154–81.

In the context of my research, the Black Church is defined similarly to how Cole and Guy-Sheftall define it in *Gender Talk*. The Black Church is the general conglomerate of Christian religious institutions to which Black people have belonged to since enslavement.³¹ It is important to mention the Black Church within this body of research because "to be cut off from the Black church is really being cut off from the Black community," contends Horace Griffin.³² As evident in Griffin's statement, the Black Church is a central facet of the community, as it has been since times of enslavement. The church was one of the only places enslaved people were able to go without the gaze of the masters, and so after enslavement, it continued to serve a similarly liberatory purpose. After enslavement, the Black Church continued to function as a space for freedom, as it served a central organizing position in the Civil Rights Movement.

However liberating the Black Church might be, it is also oppressive in its adherence to strict gender and sexuality roles that undergird heteronormative and patriarchal structures. Various verses in the Bible are interpreted to condemn homosexuality.³³ These verses are used and misused to ensure members are not living a queer lifestyle and to condemn those who do.

Hatred of queerness is circulated in Black Churches, despite the fluid gender constructs that inform Black experiences and which can be traced to pre-colonial indigenous African societies. Black communities link same-sex desires to practices learned from whites in an attempt to detach Black people from the label of "sexual deviant." Despite the affinity to unlink same-sex desires from Black culture, there are records of same-sex relations between enslaved people as well.³⁴ These histories have all been ignored in the effort of casting an image of sexually "pure" to Black people.

By painting homosexuality as a sickness and linking it to pedophilia and the abuse of young boys and girls, church officials ensure their congregation is not engaging in homosexual behaviors for fear of ostracization.³⁵ In some cases, Black churches adopt a "don't ask, don't tell" policy, and queer people are

³¹ Guy-Sheftall and Betsch-Cole, *Gender Talk: The Struggle For Women's Equality in African American Communities*.

³² Horace Griffin, "Their Own Received Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches," *Theology & Sexuality* 2000, no. 12 (January 1, 2000): 88–100, <https://doi.org/10.1177/135583580000601206>.

³³ "Legacy Denied: African American Gay Men, AIDS, and the Black Church - ProQuest," accessed June 12, 2020, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/215268611?pq-origsite=summon>.

³⁴ Guy-Sheftall and Betsch-Cole, *Gender Talk: The Struggle For Women's Equality in African American Communities*.

³⁵ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, A Delta Book (New York: Dell, 1968).

permitted in church congregations if they hide their sexuality.³⁶ However, homophobic language is still used in Black churches, and they even use campaigns against homosexuality in more extreme cases.³⁷ These attitudes are carried outwardly from the church and into other aspects of life, including HBCUs.³⁸

Many Historically Black Colleges were and are funded by the Black African Methodist Episcopal churches and the Black Baptist Association.³⁹ Their funding gave the Black Church a significant amount of input into the way HBCUs are run, and some of their traditions and values have remained in HBCU culture long after the churches directly left. Both Spelman and Morehouse still have required pseudo-church services, called convocations, which are weekly for all freshmen and sophomores as part of credit completion. They follow the structure of a church service and include similar aspects, such as hymns and sermons.

As a result of their connection to the Black Church, HBCUs have also received the label of being culturally homophobic. The label of being culturally homophobic prevents students from coming out for fear of rejection at the schools. Sometimes student support groups can mitigate fears of coming out among queer students as they provide a safe space for students as they matriculate through their identity formation process.

Student Support Groups

Mutual support groups are an important part of improving the experience of marginalized students. They are defined as a group of "members who share a common condition, situation, heritage, symptom, or experience. They are largely self-governing and self-regulating."⁴⁰ The political organizing within student groups can also assist in "building a collective consciousness among LGBT students that reduces the tendency to individualize social injury."⁴¹ Afrekete, Spelman's queer student group, functions in this regard,

³⁶ Elijah G. Ward, "Homophobia, Hypermasculinity and the US Black Church," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 7, no. 5 (September 1, 2005): 493–504, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691050500151248>.

³⁷ Angelique C. Harris, "Homosexuality and the Black Church," ed. Gary David Comstock et al., *The Journal of African American History* 93, no. 2 (2008): 262–70.

³⁸ Williams, "Women's Studies and Sexuality Studies at HBCUs."

³⁹ "Echoes of Faith: Church Roots Run Deep Among HBCUs," *Diverse*, July 31, 2012, <https://diverseeducation.com/article/17259/>.

⁴⁰ I.I. Dow, review of *Review of Rethinking school improvement: Research, craft and concept*, by A. Lieberman, *The Journal of Educational Thought (JET) / Revue de La Pensée Éducative* 21, no. 3 (1987): 171–74.

⁴¹ Jacqui and Guy-Sheftall, "Breaking Silence."

and helps to mediate the “social injury” of queer students, which is also defined as trauma. Mutual support groups bring a sense of community, reduce the sense of isolation, and provide advice and information.⁴² People who are looking for these traits to support groups find places such as Afrekete.

Information about the student support groups is useful to my research because these resources play a key role in the identity formation of queer students at Spelman College. It shows the inadequate steps the college has taken to support queer students, allowing the analysis of how, despite these few efforts, homophobia still exists on campus and within the college institutionally. It also highlights the support work for queer students is student-led and the college itself does not take part in much of these efforts.

Trauma

The effects of homophobia and heteronormativity are oppressive and need to be addressed, but they are also traumatizing to queer students who are trying to figure out their identities. My study tries to understand how this structure of respectability and homophobia impacts students at Spelman and connects to the trauma they experience.

Trauma is generally defined as “the result of an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and has lasting adverse effects on an individual’s functioning and mental, physical, and social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.” At least 51% of women report exposure to one or more traumatic life events.⁴³ Applying the statistic to Spelman, approximately 1,071 current students have experienced traumatic events.

There are three types of trauma I expect to see in my interview subjects: acute, chronic, and secondary traumatic stress. Acute trauma is trauma experienced as a one-time event. Examples of this type of trauma are car accidents, or random acts of violence.⁴⁴ Chronic trauma is another aspect that may be experienced by students who continuously face trauma on campus. Chronic trauma is recurring trauma experienced over a period of time. Examples of chronic trauma include living in a violent community,

⁴² Center for Mental Health in Schools, “A Technical Aid Packet on School-Based Mutual Support Groups (For Parents, Staff, Older Students),” 2003.

⁴³ Dr. Brian Bride, *Trauma 101 - Providing Care for Yourself and Others from a Trauma Informed Perspective*, accessed June 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acoSREdMdUU&feature=youtu.be>.

⁴⁴ Bride.

staying in an abusive relationship, or experiencing war-like conditions for an extended period of time.⁴⁵ Finally, I expect to see the emergence of secondary traumatic stress in my interview subjects. Secondary traumatic stress can occur from indirect trauma, which is a result of learning a relative or close friend experienced trauma, hearing about the trauma, and/or imagining the trauma. These symptoms of secondary traumatic stress can mimic symptoms of PTSD.⁴⁶

Specifically looking at queer people, there are many instances of trauma which occur more frequently in this community. Queer people are often targets of hate crimes and are bullied more frequently. They constantly experience microaggressions that include denial of human and civil rights, hate speech fueled by religion, and political campaigns attacking their sexuality or gender identities.⁴⁷ These daily attacks on queer identities can take a psychological toll. Some of the long-term effects of trauma include negative self-view, changes in beliefs and worldview, relationship issues, detachment from trauma, emotional regulation issues, the preoccupation of trauma or abuser, and behavioral/physical health problems.⁴⁸ I expect to see some of these long-term effects show up in relation to my interview subjects.

Resiliency is one's ability to thrive despite stress and adversity.⁴⁹ Resiliency is a trait which many queer students have been forced to develop to survive in the world and at Spelman. It is essential to note one's sense of safety provides individuals with the ability to bounce back from traumatic events.⁵⁰ The ability of Spelman to create a safe space for queer students has an effect on their ability to deal with traumatic events. One's ability to be resilient shows the importance of access to supports and buffers, which are coping mechanisms and tools that help strengthen queer individuals' resilience.⁵¹ I also expect to see traits of resilience in my interview subjects.

⁴⁵ Bride, *Trauma 101 - Providing Care for Yourself and Others from a Trauma Informed Perspective*.

⁴⁶ Bride.

⁴⁷ Laura S. Brown and David Pantalone, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Trauma Psychology: A Topic Comes out of the Closet," *Traumatology* 17, no. 2 (2011): 1-3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534765611417763>.

⁴⁸ Bride, *Trauma 101 - Providing Care for Yourself and Others from a Trauma Informed Perspective*.

⁴⁹ Dr. Brian Bride, *Trauma 101 - Providing Care for Yourself and Others from a Trauma Informed Perspective*, accessed June 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acoSREdMdUU&feature=youtu.be>.

⁵⁰ Wendy Ellis, Interview with Wendy Ellis, June 24, 2020.

⁵¹ Ellis.

Protective factors for those who experience trauma are important to consider within discussions related to helping queer students who face trauma on Spelman’s campus. Some protective factors are empathy, social support, organizational support, self-care, and compassion satisfaction, which is pleasure derived from one’s work.⁵² Student support groups and other factors that lead into resilience come into play here. Spelman can work to provide protective factors for the queer students who are targeted on campus.

Furthermore, one report suggests that queer people experience higher rates of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to traumatic events based on their sexual orientation.⁵³ They also experience high rates of depression, substance misuse, and increased suicidality.⁵⁴ Due to these statistics, the article concludes with the suggestion that, “there is an urgent need for public health interventions aimed at preventing violence against individuals with minority sexual orientations and providing follow-up care to cope with the sequelae of violent victimization.”⁵⁵ Since there have been hate crimes against queer people on Spelman’s campus, preventative measures are something they should take into account.

Concluding the section on trauma, a quote from Laura Brown is particularly applicable. She writes, “As long as the majority of cultures and contexts define non-heterosexual desires as deviant, sinful, or illegal, LGBT people will experience normative traumata arising from the experiences of being alive and queer.”⁵⁶ This indicates the necessary task of changing overt heterosexist culture at Spelman to be more inclusive of all people.

Research Question

The main research question I am investigating is, *how are the identities of queer individuals formed and regulated at an all-women’s HBCU?* Within this question, I am exploring the following sub-questions: *How do queer people create safe spaces at an all-women’s HBCU? How do queer people decide if/when to come out at an all-women’s HBCU? How do the identities of queer individuals change when exposed to*

⁵² Bride, *Trauma 101 - Providing Care for Yourself and Others from a Trauma Informed Perspective*, 101.

⁵³ Andrea L. Roberts et al., “Pervasive Trauma Exposure Among US Sexual Orientation Minority Adults and Risk of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder,” *American Journal of Public Health* 100, no. 12 (December 2010): 2433–41, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2009.168971>.

⁵⁴ Gio Iacono, “An Affirmative Mindfulness Approach for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth Mental Health,” May 3, 2018.

⁵⁵ Roberts et al., “Pervasive Trauma Exposure Among US Sexual Orientation Minority Adults and Risk of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.”

⁵⁶ Laura S. Brown, “Sexuality, Lies, and Loss: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Perspectives on Trauma,” *Journal of Trauma Practice* 2, no. 2 (January 1, 2003): 55–68, https://doi.org/10.1300/J189v02n02_04.

oppressive communities? Finally, *how does the trauma inflicted during identity formation affect queer students?* These questions will allow for an evaluation of the culture Spelman creates for its queer students and record first-hand accounts of their experiences. It is essential to address sexuality issues at Spelman because, as an elite HBCU in the deep South with ties to the Black Church, Spelman provides insight into a more substantial understanding of heteronormativity and homophobia in the Black community. These understandings include illuminating how Black culture's adherence to respectability politics and religious values create hostile attitudes toward non-heteronormative queer people.

Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis

In my analysis, I believe a symbolic interactionist framework, social conflict perspective, and minority stress model are essential in explaining these social phenomena and individual behavior patterns. These frameworks fit into the discussion of how identities of queer individuals are formed and regulated at an all-women's HBCU. This section explains how a symbolic interactionism framework, social conflict perspective, and minority stress model apply to the research question.

Symbolic interactionism is a theoretical approach developed by Herbert Mead which emphasizes the role of symbols and language as core elements of human interaction.⁵⁷ Within symbolic interactionism, the concept of face work emerges. Face work is the process of outwardly performing one's self-image "that is supported by judgments and evidence conveyed by other participants."⁵⁸ Face work occurs with queer students who are straight-passing or pretend to be straight in a heteronormative and/or homophobic environment. The shielding of identity through face work is used for safety, for opportunities, or even unintentionally. Sometimes being queer is dangerous for students, who may face violence from their families or other Spelmanites. Possibility of violence forces queer students to remain silent, and perform face work to pose as heterosexual. Other reasons include the discrimination of queer people for opportunities, including the tradition of pageantry because they are not an accurate "face" of the school. And finally, some students do not say they are queer out loud, so they unintentionally stay in the closet or

⁵⁷ Anthony Giddens, *Essentials of Sociology*, Second (W. W. Norton, 2008).

⁵⁸ Goffman, "On Face-Work."

are considered “straight-passing”. These practices encourage face work that makes the students appear within the binaries Spelman upholds.

Another aspect that makes symbolic interactionism applicable to my research question is the extent to which other students participate in the regulation of queer students' identities. Queer students may change their attitudes towards identifying their sexuality if their peers have adverse reactions toward queer issues. They may be more comfortable showing this part of themselves to certain people depending on their social interactions.

Social conflict theory is another framework that applies to this research question. Intersectionality, an integral part of social conflict theory, takes the many identities of a person and addresses how they intersect, determining the types of oppression people experience.⁵⁹ Intersectionality provides the lens to evaluate how identities of queer students are regulated every day because of the intersecting identities in the subjects of study. The interviewees and other Spelmanites hold intersecting identities of Black, queer, women or non-binary people, identities that each carry specific forms of oppression and intertwine under the theory of intersectionality to create specific valves of oppression. Circling back to my research question, the main reason it fits into conflict theory is that students who hold identities outside the binaries set by Spelman are marginalized in our environment.

The final model I would like to include as a framework for this paper is the minority stress model. The minority stress model says marginalized groups may have higher levels of mental health problems due to stigma, prejudice, and discrimination, which cause a “hostile and stressful social environment.”⁶⁰ Some of the stressors for queer people include “prejudice events, expectations of rejection, hiding and concealing, internalized homophobia, and ameliorative coping processes.”⁶¹ The stressors can cause a lower self-image and overall unhappiness in queer students. I expect to see these in the interview subjects and will be discussed in the interview analysis section in relation to trauma and anxiety.

⁵⁹ Devon W. Carbado et al., “Intersectionality,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 10, no. 2 (2013): 303–12, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X13000349>.

⁶⁰ Ian H. Meyer, “Prejudice, Social Stress, and Mental Health in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations: Conceptual Issues and Research Evidence,” *Psychological Bulletin* 129, no. 5 (September 2003): 674–97, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674>.

⁶¹ Meyer.

Justification for Study

This research is different from similar studies because of the culturally homophobic environment that exists on this campus. The cultural homophobia evident in Spelman's environment emanates from the fact that the college is in the deep South, as well as the school's Christian religious roots, which "creates a more conservative climate around gender and sexuality issues."⁶² In addition, there are no other women's colleges with an all-male college nearby. Revisiting Spelman's proximity to Morehouse, the brother-sister relationship creates a specific culture. The dichotomy that exists between the two schools enforces the stringent gender binary and standards of heteronormativity policed both culturally and structurally. Morehouse specifically teaches men how to interact with Spelman students through the eyes of dominant patriarchy, which subjugates women to a position of service for men. The male presence and gaze differentiate Spelman from other all-women's schools because men are present on the campus, attend classes, and have prevalent attendance at some events.

Anthony L. Pinder discusses how Morehouse men are conditioned to treat Spelman women by enforcing patriarchy when one of his interview subjects admitted,

Heterosexuality was definitely the "normal" and "prescribed" orientation at Morehouse. The 24/7 mantra was all about being the "Morehouse Man" and representing the College, manhood, and the Black race in positive and uplifting roles. I was instructed and disciplined on how to and not to treat our Spelman sisters and other women. It was implicit that we were superior because we were men- Morehouse Men!⁶³

Morehouse's mindset and teaching convey an assumption of assumed heterosexuality onto the men and women at the two institutions. And although Morehouse College has many gay men and non-binary people, and it seems they would be advocates instead of imposing dominant patriarchy, this is not the case. The "ideal" Black man follows those teachings of the Black church: anti-gay, physically strong, maintaining sexual prowess, and Christian.⁶⁴ Morehouse's mission includes enforcing these identities on their students. They teach the men to assume all Spelman women are straight, and those ideal characteristics are what they

⁶² Williams, "Women's Studies and Sexuality Studies at HBCUs."

⁶³ Anthony L. Pinder, "Lost in Reverie: Gay HBCU Alumni Look Back," in *Facilitating HBCU Campus Climates of Pluralism, Inclusivity and Progressive Change*, n.d., 97-112.

⁶⁴ Guy-Sheftall and Betsch-Cole, *Gender Talk: The Struggle For Women's Equality in African American Communities*.

need if they want to pursue the women. Pinder also discusses the image of gender at HBCUs being "overwhelmingly heterosexual" because of the messages they push.⁶⁵ This point calls for a return to Alexander and Guy-Sheftall's argument that "HBCUs are a microcosm that have not caught up with the real world."⁶⁶ Grounding HBCU culture in the past indoctrinates students to reproduce the antiquated sentiments that depend on respectability politics when they graduate and shape the cultures of their larger communities.

Although past work has been done on similar topics, none of the existing works have focused on an all-women's HBCU with similar cultural markers to Spelman. Past works done on the subject matter include: "The Past and Future Diversities of HBCUs: Queerness and the Institutional Fulfillment of Black Studies" by Roderick Ferguson, which focused on co-ed HBCUs; "Lost in Reverie: Gay HBCU Alumni Look Back" by Anthony Pinder which focuses only on men; "Their Goodness Followed Their Horizon's Rim: Lesbians in HBCUs" by Ruby Sales which focuses on lesbians who graduated from HBCUs and their roles in the wider community; and, "Examining Circumstances/Opportunities that Facilitated/ Hampered LGBT Friendly Climates at an HBCU: A Case Study" by Anthony Pinder which also focuses on coed schools. These works do provide some insights into the topic of being queer at an HBCU, but all aspects cannot be applied to the current study.

The three factors mentioned prior: Spelman's location in the South, historically religious views, and proximity to a male-dominated institution that enforces dominant patriarchal views provide a unique lens through which to study my primary research questions that differs from work done in the past. Ultimately, my research inquiries beg to question how being at an all-women's institution affects the development of the queer students who attend these schools.

Methodology

The methodology for this research project includes three parts: autoethnography, semi-structured interviews, and evaluation of Spelman on the Campus Pride Index. On the topic of autoethnography, I cannot accurately recount the stories of queer Spelmanites without including aspects of my own experience.

⁶⁵ Pinder, "Lost in Reverie: Gay HBCU Alumni Look Back."

⁶⁶ Jacqui and Guy-Sheftall, "Introduction."

I am a current member of *Afrekete* and have unfortunately experienced the various oppressions the school places on queer students. I added my experiences throughout this paper. In addition to the autoethnography section, I interviewed ten queer students at Spelman about being queer on campus. I conducted the interviews on Zoom, and the typical meeting lasted 15-30 minutes, was auto-transcribed by Zoom, watched over again, and I edited mistakes. Interview format and questions are listed in the Appendix under Section I, and I hypothesized finding evidence of trauma, anxiety, and resilience that directly connected to the students' identities. Finally, I use the Campus Pride Index, which is a forum campuses use to measure their current queer-friendly status and find solutions to make progress in the future.⁶⁷ I evaluated Spelman with the Campus Pride Index Report Card to vet our services for queer students. The Campus Pride Index also helped inform some of my interview questions.

Interview Analysis

The interview subjects ranged from ages 18-21 and are classified as rising sophomores to rising seniors. They are geographically located all over the country. The sexuality demographic was four bisexual, four lesbian, one queer, and one pansexual. The gender demographic was one non-binary student, one female/non-binary student, and eight cisgender female students. All names have been changed to pseudonyms to protect the privacy and ensure the safety of these students. From the information gathered during these interviews, I was able to identify several common themes that correlated with the findings from sources in the Literature Review.

One common theme participants named is Spelman's performative actions in regard to respectability politics. One participant, Brielle, said:

At Spelman, it feels like queer people are being celebrated for the brand...and that the institution is putting more energy into supporting queer people because they know to be at the forefront of all these colleges that's what they need to do.

And in relation to the queer subjects taught on campus, Lola said:

It's not something students think they have to take it seriously... They feel like it's something they are being forced to learn, not like it's something they should know as a therapist, as a doctor, as a lawyer. These are things that you should know and you should care about...Like in science and all

⁶⁷ Campus Pride, "Campus Pride's LGBT Friendly Campus Climate Index," in *Facilitating HBCU Campus Climates of Pluralism, Inclusivity and Progressive Change*, n.d., 225-37.

these things, they can acknowledge how racism intersects with their future careers, but they can't acknowledge how homophobia and transphobia intersect with their future careers? And I don't think Spelman cares to make that a priority or make that an urgent point of discussion.

Both of these quotes recount feelings of how Spelman only works to support queer students in ways that make it appear that they are doing so to the outside world. Performative work is done instead of directly implementing what queer students need, or educating all students to go into the world and accept all people. The performative media statements are part of Spelman's face work to show an accepting outer image. To people not experiencing the oppression, Spelman seems accepting of queer students. But, this image is not internally consistent based on the experiences of my interviewees.

Another key theme is the evidence of compulsory heterosexuality pushed by Spelman's culture. One of the significant similarities I saw between two of the students who mentioned compulsory heterosexuality is that they formerly had the identity label of bisexual in their freshman year. This experience relates to the common theme in their interviews that they used to talk about men with others in freshman year to fit in and bond. As they got older and did not feel the need to bond over men anymore, they transitioned their identity label to lesbian. Heterosexuality and discussion of Morehouse's men is a hot topic, especially during New Student Orientation (NSO) week. The most highlighted event of NSO is the Brother-Sister Exchange, instead of the week of activities with our new sisters. One of the interview subjects, Brielle, said:

The people who come to Spelman, they expect that they're going to meet a Morehouse man, and that's what people talk about at New Student Orientation and things like that, so coming out isn't as easy when these are the discussions being fostered in the beginning.

Once these two subjects no longer felt the need to speak about heterosexual topics to bond with others, they felt comfortable adapting the identity label of lesbian. Another interview subject, Ty, discovered through their freshman year that their attraction to men was compulsory heterosexuality. They realized they could not even tell when a man was attractive themselves. Their identity label changed to lesbian once they found out. All three students' perceived and former attraction to men indicates the heterosexist practices Spelman integrates into the school environment and general culture.

Also, on the subject of heterosexist culture, the visitation policy makes many queer students feel unseen. Only male visitors are required to sign into the residence halls and leave their identification card and phone number at the visitation desk. Arya recounts the feeling of being unseen when she says:

They don't even take us into account of the fact that there could be someone living in the dorms that is going to bring in a partner that is a woman. Or, you know, whatever. And so, it's frustrating to know that the majority of the administration and... I'll just leave it at administration... Doesn't see us and doesn't try to see us... [In freshman year] our RD was like, you know if you're part of the LGBTQ community, you know, be mindful of the fact that if you're sneaking in your whatever, your sisters aren't going to be grateful of that because, you know, or whatever, because they can't bring their man so you should not bring a girlfriend in.

Spelman collects visitors' information to ensure the safety of its students. But, the administration does not even consider addressing that non-male visitors should sign in when entering the residence halls. They do not see queer relationships as a common enough occurrence to add it into official policy. It is worth recognizing that students will bring in non-male visitors, mainly to increase safety measures and record visitors in the dorm. This seemingly harmless action lets queer students know they are not a priority.

One of the potential issues with coming out and another common occurrence within the group of interviewees is the face work, or false presentation of self, involved during the process. This type of symbolic interactionism is known as the "performed self" because people adapt who they are depending on the people they are interacting with. Brielle said, "if other people came out, I would also come out. But if no one said anything, I wouldn't come out." This discretion is a recurring experience among interviewees, and it is an example of controlling and staging how they appear to others. In the case of coming out, it is for safety and comfortability. When unsure if interacting with a homophobic person, staying quiet can sometimes be the safest choice until they make their queer or ally status known.

Concerning trauma and anxiety, eight out of ten students mentioned traumatic experiences without prompting. These experiences coincide with some of the factors of the minority stress model. Some of the traumatic experiences occurred on campus, and some were with family. Two students were not out to their families, six students were out, and two students were out to some members. One of the students who is not out to their family members is not out for fear of backlash, or the possibility of traumatic events. On the topic of families, Jessica mentioned:

There's gotta be at least a bunch of people who are queer, and who are either on campus out, and not out at home, or just starting to, by being on campus, be comfortable with their gender expression, identity, or sexual orientation. And now that's been ripped away... but you won't catch Spelman trying to help with that... and that's still harmful to someone's mental emotional well-being.

Spelman is leaving students to potentially face trauma by not providing the support they might need through the current time of COVID-19, further showing their disregard for the queer community.

In the interviews, various types of trauma were identified by interviewees' responses. Logan mentioned one example of acute trauma by saying:

Now that I think about it, the one time I came out was actually kind of violent. But, I remember one time... all of the students were going around and being like, you know, "We have to practice tolerance because even if we don't agree with certain people's lifestyles, we have to accept the fact they just want to do what they want to do with their bodies." And it was almost like they were giving themselves a congratulatory pat on the back for being, like, tolerant. And I was like, this is literally on the heterosexual privilege checklist. There was a lot of bigot things being said, like one girl was coming with this pseudo-history about like, Black people are only gay because of slavery. It was just like all these crazy things that were happening, that I was just like, I don't understand why the professor isn't checking this.

Similar experiences often occurred from interviewees' responses regarding African Diaspora and the World (ADW), Spelman's mandatory class which offers a "gender-informed, interdisciplinary study of the histories and cultures of Africa and its diasporas."⁶⁸ Professors are not adequately trained on how to handle conversations on gender and sexuality, which Spelman should consider to ensure safety in the classroom.

An example of secondary traumatic stress is also named by Logan when she said:

My freshman year, when Spelman implemented the trans policy, and, just like, the blowback from alumnae, students, administration, it was just like... so hard to be an LGBTQ student that second semester my freshman year. It was just so hard because it was so heartbreaking just to see how unwelcoming we could be, you know, as Black women, that was disappointing.

And corroborated by Ty when they said:

I remember the year before we came, there was a lot of like, real-life violence taking place on campus toward queer students. And then also people who don't present exactly as like, the high feminine woman, at Spelman are definitely treated differently and targeted by public safety in a way that super feminine women aren't. So the whole idea of watched and being surveilled extra has definitely limited my gender expression in different ways.

⁶⁸ "African Diaspora & the World (ADW) Program | Spelman College," accessed July 19, 2020, <https://www.spelman.edu/academics/special-academic-programs-and-offerings/african-diaspora-the-world>.

This quote is evidence of secondary traumatic stress response, as hearing about and witnessing traumatic experiences can cause fear in others. The physical assault of the transgender student in 2018 was widely associated with anxiety in interview subjects, even in those not on campus. The lack of response by the administration and Public Safety also contributed to these feelings of secondary traumatic stress.

Queer students also showed traits of anxiety in their interviews resulting from the heterosexist culture at Spelman. Anxiety can prevent students from behaving or expressing in specific ways. When other Spelman students make statements such as, "don't look at me, don't talk to me if you're gay." Or "I don't want to be in the same general vicinity as you. I don't want you to look in my direction," feelings of anxiety are evoked. We can classify the heterosexual students' statements as microaggressions, under the minority stress model, which are "brief, daily assaults on minority individuals, which can be social or environmental, verbal or nonverbal, as well as intentional or unintentional." Microaggressions are not always seen as discriminatory by the perpetrators, but the victims may experience psychological distress.⁶⁹ Connecting the theory of intersectionality to the current section, people who experience microaggressions due to being both a racial and sexual minority might be more susceptible to poor mental and physical health, such as higher levels of anxiety and depression.⁷⁰ Applying these racial and sexual markers to Spelman students, and specifically to the interviewees, who identify as Black, women or non-binary people, and as sexual minorities, this outcome is particularly apparent. These identities combine to create specific forms of oppression under the theory of intersectionality. Microaggressions are also often seen when heterosexual students assume a queer student is also heterosexual. Madison said the homophobia is as follows:

Less than direct. Because I'm bisexual, so there's the "invisible privilege" so I can be presumed straight. And also, I do have a boyfriend right now, so of course, then, even more so I'm "presumed straight". But for people whose identities are more overt, obviously it's just the outward and overt expression of discrimination. But then personally for me, it's the microaggressions and the sort of, condescending things people will say, along the lines of "Oh, well, I don't want a gay roommate, or I don't want a this or that."

⁶⁹ Kimberly F. Balsam et al., "Measuring Multiple Minority Stress: The LGBT People of Color Microaggressions Scale," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 17, no. 2 (April 2011): 163–74, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023244>.

⁷⁰ Balsam et al.

Heterosexual people are often more comfortable making homophobic remarks when in the presence of people that they assume are also heterosexual, which comes at the detriment of queer students, especially those who are “straight passing” at first glance. Microaggressions are also delivered in a joking manner.

Joya, who is on the dance team, recounted one of her experiences when she said:

Sometimes jokes are made... just how, “oh, [Joya’s] with boys and with girls. Like, wow, you’re out there!” Like, yeah, girl, I’m out there... But I was definitely the only gay girl. The only gay anybody.

Some people assume since they deliver these microaggressions as jokes, they are not hurtful to those they are aimed at, but over time these “harmless” jokes can take a toll on the marginalized group. Other feelings of anxiety are evoked because of potentially being seen as hypersexual and predatory, characteristics which are commonly attached to queer people.⁷¹ Arya says,

That’s something that I struggle with sometimes, is feeling like a creep when I look at women. And I know it’s fine but like, what if they don’t like me looking at them because they’re straight?

Whenever Arya looks at women, she feels uncomfortable because of past homophobic statements by heterosexual students and internalized homophobia. Other students are fearful when they are in their rooms, which are supposed to be their safe space. Lola said:

L: I didn’t tell my roommate until later in the year. But everybody else besides her knew.

A: And why didn’t you tell your roommate?

L: Hahaha. I suspected she was homophobic, so I just kept it on the down-low. And at the time I identified as bisexual, so I just talked about men. I don’t think she ever suspected anything.

Anxiety in your living space adds a severe level of stress on a person’s overall experience. Lola was inconvenienced and harmed by having to hide this part of herself for such an extended time. Others recounted experiences of anxiety around faculty and staff. Laine said:

It was just another layer that I was aware of my identity, always. And how that was being perceived by other people. So, it just added like a little layer of anxiety and angst in a lot of situations. Like I had a class with my former partner, and whenever we would go see professors or faculty members together, I was always conscious of wanting to be perceived as really close friends and not as in a relationship.

⁷¹ Jeffrey T. Parsons et al., “Hypersexual, Sexually Compulsive, or Just Highly Sexually Active? Investigating Three Distinct Groups of Gay and Bisexual Men and Their Profiles of HIV-Related Sexual Risk,” *AIDS and Behavior* 20, no. 2 (February 2016): 262–72, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-015-1029-7>.

Sexuality does not correlate to a person's intellect or academic abilities, so it is inappropriate students have to fear those in higher positions, due to an unchangeable aspect of their identity, to ensure equal treatment

Although many students exhibited traits of trauma and anxiety, they also exhibit resilience. Qualities of resilience are necessary for queer students to thrive despite the trauma inflicted. The main ways interviewees spoke about resilience were in social/organizational support, otherwise known as building community. Nine out of ten interviewees answered yes to the question, "Do you have a queer community at school?" Most participants shared space with queer people in their main friend groups. The majority of participants at least attempted to find community by attending Afrekete meetings at some point in their enrollment at Spelman, showing the importance of student support groups in their on-campus experience and journey to find community. Afrekete is often the first place people turn to when looking for support. Besides Afrekete, Ty mentioned that they find community with older queer faculty members through conversation. Logan builds community and sisterhood with other masculine-presenting women and non-binary people on campus. Jessica keeps a tight-knit community by ensuring that her circle does not include any oppressive parties, which is also an indication of the self-care aspect of resilience. Part of Jessica and other interviewees' community is the Women's Research and Resource Center. The Women's Center is the closest thing interviewees mention to having an on-campus office for queer issues, and it is another place where queer students look for an informal community. It houses the Comparative Women's Studies Department (CWS) and faculty, who Jessica says are the "kind of people who study this, and who understand, and who are working to make a culture that is understanding." Finding supportive faculty in the CWS department fits into Jessica's statement that she has "found people who support me as a queer student, but the institution hasn't really done that."

On institutional support, nine out of ten students felt unsupported by Spelman as queer people. This statistic is quite alarming for a school explicitly made to fill the needs of Black women, and it is a call to action for the school to do more. Ten out of ten students listed more drawbacks than benefits when asked, "Are there any benefits or drawbacks as a queer student attending an all-women's HBCU?" This statistic is

also disparaging, as none were able to identify more than three benefits. The benefits mentioned included being surrounded by women, feelings of safety on a women's campus, and sisterhood. Besides these statistical calls, some consistent calls for improvement from interviewees were for Spelman administration and staff to do the work and not leave all the support work to be led by queer students. Although the students who are doing the work are doing an excellent job with the resources they have access to, we have a paid campus LGBTQ+ Liaison who should be doing the work and advocating on behalf of queer Spelmanites. Some of her work can include building safe spaces other than Afrekete in order to cater to the needs of queer students. Ava expressed her thoughts on the subject:

They need to have events outside of Afrekete. Like, Afrekete can't be the only place where queer students have a place to be... like I get it we have a safe space, but that can't be the ONLY safe space on campus.

Despite its services, Afrekete is not a panacea for all queer Spelman students. Some may not be fans of the group's leadership, but since there are no other safe spaces for queer students on campus, they are left to settle for Afrekete or attempt to build their own support system. There are no counseling groups and no additional student support groups to assist. Some interviewees mentioned the Social Justice Program as an informal queer space, but this is a program to which you must apply for entry and is not accessible to all, as only a certain number of students are admitted each year.

Furthermore, interviewees cited a general need for education. Logan revealed that when Spelman introduced the new transgender policy and failed to include any campus-wide education or support for current queer students in the release plan, she was dismayed. That may have been one reason why the Spelman's transgender policy evoked such widespread resistance. In addition, none of the interviewees who mentioned the ADW gender and sexuality unit thought it was created safely or covered the topic extensively, as mentioned in Logan's interview above. Increasing education is one small change that could make a significant difference in the lives of students, but for queer students to truly feel safe, Spelman must actively work at creating a climate that is accepting of all identities.

Campus Pride Index Analysis

Finding the answers to the Campus Pride Index was not a simple task. Spelman is unlisted on the Campus Pride Index website, which means either the organization did not analyze Spelman, or we have chosen to hide our school on the site. And although Spelman has an LGBTQ+ Liaison, her full job title is Student Engagement Program Manager and LGBTQ+ Liaison. Her responsibilities include Miss Spelman and Court, Family Weekend, SPELLINK, GATE (Get Away to Explore), LGBTQ+ Liaison, and Sophomore Class Council. Each of these responsibilities is close to a full-time job. I inquired about why we unlisted on the Campus Pride Index website, and she did not know the answer. Nor did she know the answer to many of the questions on the Report Card, which are questions about the school's resources for queer students and efforts to support queer students. The entire report card with Spelman's score is in the Appendix under section II. To find the answers to these questions, I emailed and called various faculty, staff, and public safety members, who provided me with the information they knew.

Spelman scored a 22/49 on the index, which is less than half, at 44.8%. This would give Spelman an overall rating of fewer than 2.5/5 stars. If a student were to look on the Campus Pride Index website and see Spelman's rating, it might affect their decision to attend the school.

The Campus Pride Index is an already compiled list of a baseline of services to provide to improve the school's queer culture. Spelman's decision to ignore the Campus Pride Index is another example of blatant disrespect. It shows they choose not to care for their queer students, especially after the Facilitating HBCU Campus Climates of Pluralism, Inclusivity, and Progressive Change project conducted on Spelman's campus, which included the index.

Conclusion

With one of the repeated themes from the interviews being that Spelman needs to reevaluate how they treat queer students and provide resources, I would like to pose a question. Before I pose the question, it is important to read Spelman's mission, which states as follows:

Spelman College, a historically Black college and a global leader in the education of women of African descent, is dedicated to academic excellence in the liberal arts and sciences and the intellectual, creative, ethical, and leadership development of its students. Spelman empowers the

whole person to **engage the many cultures of the world** and inspires a **commitment to positive social change**.⁷²

Thinking about Spelman's mission statement, I want to pose the following question: how can Spelman claim to "engage the many cultures of the world" and be committed to "positive social change" while our queer students are ostracized every day?

The trauma experienced by queer students should be a wake-up call for anyone who claims to care about students. Through these ten interviews, I saw instances of acute trauma, chronic trauma, and secondary traumatic stress, all of which interviewees experienced on Spelman's campus. Black women widely regard Spelman as a utopia. However, there is additional work for Spelman to do in order to earn this perfect status. With my research, I have studied identity formation methods for queer students and analyzed the trauma incurred during their time at Spelman. Finally, I developed solutions to work toward a more queer-inclusive environment for Spelman, which can potentially be adopted by other historically Black colleges and universities. I will propose these solutions to Spelman with the goal of helping to prevent continued harm to queer students in the inevitable identity formation process that occurs during college. I have based the solutions I provide below on the Campus Pride Index and responses from my interviewees. Some solutions I will propose to the college include:

- Curriculum rewrite by queer scholars on the gender and sexuality section for the mandatory African Diaspora and the World (ADW) course.
- Culturally relevant pedagogy training in the gender and sexuality section for professors who are teaching ADW.
- Title IX office rework their procedures for sexual assault between queer students.
- Hire a queer counselor to provide counseling and support services to queer students.
- Form a counseling support group for queer students
- Form a specific resource center/office with responsibilities for queer students
- Alumni Affairs Office should develop a queer alumni group.

⁷² "About Spelman College | Spelman College," accessed July 3, 2020, <https://www.spelman.edu/about-us>.

- Create resources within the Career Center, specifically for queer students.
- Public safety should actively reach out to queer student groups.
- Formulate a queer mentoring program to help new students in navigating the Spelman space.
- Provide students with a trans-inclusive student health insurance policy that covers ongoing counseling services and hormone replacement therapy.
- Hire a specific LGBTQIA Liaison whose sole position is to advocate for queer students.
- Formally assess Spelman on the sections of the Campus Pride Index.

Implementing even one or two of these solutions could exponentially improve the lives of queer Spelmanites. This project exists so the generations of students who come after us never have to face the same challenge we have had. Queer Spelmanites exist, and we refuse to be disregarded. We are not less qualified, we are not less capable, and we refuse to be brushed aside due to the antiquated ways of thinking under which people have been comfortable for the last century. A Luta Continua! The struggle continues.

Appendix

I. Interview Format

Informed Consent Blurp:

This project is for the Moore Undergraduate Research Apprenticeship Program, for which I will be producing a 20-25 page research paper. Your statements may be reproduced in this paper. Do you verbally agree to take part in this interview to be used as qualitative data for my research project at this point in time?

And finally, before we begin, would you prefer to be anonymous? I can assign a number or pseudonym to you if this is the case.

Demographic Info:

- Please introduce yourself with your Spelman Intro. (if requested anon, let them know this is for my purpose)
- How old are you?
- What are your gender and sexual orientation?
- Pronouns

Interview Questions

- What was/is your coming out process at Spelman?
- Describe your experience and perceptions of being queer and Black attending an HBCU.
- Reflecting on your previous response, do you feel that these experiences might be different if you attended a predominately white same-sex liberal arts school? How or why?
- Are there any benefits or drawbacks as a queer student attending an all-women's HBCU?
- Do you have a queer community at school? If so, how did you find it?
- Do you feel that the college adequately supports you as a queer student?
- Are you out to your family? If so, how would you describe the coming out process within your family?
- Why did you participate in this study? What were you hoping to gain or contribute by participating?
- If there's anything else you would like to add, please feel free to!

II. Campus Pride Index: Campus Pride Report Card

Table 1.1: LGBTQ Academic Life

LGBTQ Studies Program	No*
LGBTQ Specific Course Offerings	Yes
Actively recruit faculty for LGBTQ-related academic scholarship	No
New faculty/staff training opportunities on sexual orientation issues	Yes
New faculty/staff training opportunities on gender identity issues	Yes
LGBTQ faculty/staff organization	No

*Some funding has been offered for a Queer Studies Department, but more funding is needed to officially establish the department.

Score: 3/6

Table 1.2: LGBTQ Student Life

LGBTQ & Ally student organization	Yes
LGBTQ & Ally graduate student organization	N/A*
LGBTQ social fraternity/sorority	No
Regularly plans LGBTQ social activities	No
Regularly plans educational events on transgender issues	No
Regularly offers educational events surrounding intersectionality of identities for LGBTQ people	No
LGBTQ-inclusive career services	No

*Spelman College does not have a graduate program.

Score: 1/6

Table 1.3: LGBTQ Campus Safety

Procedure for reporting LGBTQ related bias incidents and hate crimes	Yes
Active ongoing training for hate crime prevention	Yes
Active outreach to LGBTQ students and student organization	No
Trains campus police on sexual orientation issues	Yes
Trains campus police on gender identity/expression issues	Yes
Supports victims of LGBTQ sexual violence and partner violence	Yes

Score: 5/6

Table 1.4: LGBTQ Counseling & Health

LGBTQ counseling/support groups	No
Trans-inclusive trained counseling staff	Some* (.5)
Free, anonymous and accessible HIV/STI testing	Yes
LGBTQ-inclusive health information and safer sex materials available	Yes
Trans-inclusive student health insurance policy which covers ongoing counseling services	Yes
Trans-inclusive student health insurance policy which covers hormone replacement therapy	Case-by-case basis (.5)

*Every two years, the counseling center staff have mandatory training for their Continuing Education Credit (35 hours). The training ranges in subjects it covers, and it does not always include trans-inclusive subjects. Additionally, the staff is encouraged to take other diversity training on a subject of their choice.

Score: 4/6

Table 1.5: LGBTQ Policy Inclusion

Non-discrimination statement inclusive of sexual orientation	Yes
Non-discrimination statement inclusive of gender identity/expression	No
Health insurance coverage to employees' same-sex partner	Yes
Accessible, simple process for students to change their name on university records and documents	Yes
Accessible, simple process for students to change their gender identity on university records and documents	No
Students have the option to self-identify sexual orientation on the admission application or post-enrollment forms	No
Students have the option to self-identify gender identity/expression on the admission application or post-enrollment forms	Yes*

*Spelman uses the Common App for applications, under which it is listed as a “female-only” college. The Common App requires students to indicate Sex as Male or Female in their personal information, and underneath this question, they list an option to name the applicant’s gender identity. But, if your biological sex is listed as male, the Common App will not let the applicant add Spelman to their list of applications, as it is listed as a “female-only” college.

Score: 4/7

Table 1.6: LGBTQ Recruitment & Retention

Annually participates in LGBTQ admission fairs	No
LGBTQ student scholarships	No
LGBTQ mentoring program to welcome and assist LGBTQ students in transitioning to academic and college life	No
Special Lavender or Rainbow Graduation ceremony for LGBTQ students and allies	No
Admission counselors receive LGBTQ-inclusive training and resources	Yes

Score: 1/5

Table 1.7: LGBTQ Support & Institutional Commitment

Resource center/office with responsibilities for LGBTQ students	No
Paid staff with responsibilities for LGBTQ support services	Yes*
Ally program or Safe Space/Safe Zone	No
Actively seek to employ diversity of faculty & staff including visible, out LGBTQ people	No
Standing advisory committee that deals with LGBTQ issues	No
LGBTQ alumni group	No

*One staff member whose position is “Student Engagement Program Manager and LGBTQIA Liaison”. Her responsibilities include Miss Spelman and Court, Family Weekend, SPELLINK, G.A.T.E (Get Away to Explore), LGBTQ+ Liaison, and Sophomore Class Council.

Score: 1/6

Table 1.8: LGBTQ Housing & Residence Life

LGBTQ living space, theme floors and/or living-learning community	No
Roommate matching for LGBTQ students to find LGBTQ-friendly roommate	Yes
Gender-inclusive housing for new students	No*
Gender-inclusive housing for returning students	No*
Gender-inclusive/single occupancy restroom facilities in campus housing	Yes
Gender-inclusive/single occupancy shower facilities in campus housing	No
Trains residence life and housing staff at all levels on LGBTQ issues and concerns	Yes

*Not specifically offered, all living spaces are the same.

Score: 3/7

Total Score: 22/49

*One marker removed due to Spelman not having a graduate program

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