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Abstract

This thesis looks at how black church communities address ongoing violence against transgender and queer people in the United States. It posits criticism of religious intolerance from transgender and queer perspectives do not always mean skepticism of Christianity itself. Criticism can, however, mean skepticism of the institutions that police gender and sexual normativity. The premise of this thesis rests on the idea that there is an inherent conflict between gender-queer identities and Christian ideologies that produce violence against queer people. My aim is to deconstruct this notion by analyzing differing stories, perspectives, and power-relations. I accomplish this first by looking at some experiences black transgender people recall growing up in black churches and how their religious backgrounds shaped their perspectives, political affiliations, and relationships. Next, I look at what black church leaders have said and done to either include or exclude transgender people from their theologies in response to criticisms about intolerance. And finally, I look at how to move forward as a community and what black churches can do to reach out to transgender and other gender non-conforming people in calling for radical political change regarding black people living in the United States.

Transphobia in Black Churches

by
Blake Anderson Garland-Tirado

B.A. Syracuse University, 2018

Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Religion

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Introduction

This thesis centers around the ongoing violence facing black transgender and gender nonconforming people in the United States, the tensions that arise between organized Christianity and queer life. I start by providing some contextual groundwork that investigates the personal experiences trans people have with organized Christianity, the problems those experiences entail, and then solutions trans and religious thinkers offer moving forward. Organized Christian churches reinforce heterosexual patriarchy as one of the moral functioning of racial capitalism, the system under which we all operate and how goods and services are distributed between whites and nonwhites. In doing so, black churches contributed to violence against transgender, gender nonconforming, non-binary, and other genderqueer members of the black community. I use these terms interchangeably and sometimes collapse them under the term “queer” or “trans” for brevity and to account for the nuances in these identity categories. I argue that while black churches have historically addressed major political issues facing black people in the United States, opening up avenues for some peaceful conflict resolution, ideologies structuring gender norms and hierarchies ultimately obstruct how black church communities interact with state authority. My thesis looks at how anti-trans violence could be more precisely addressed by black churches in terms of racialized and class connotations, as opposed to the moral arguments used by some Christians to construct binary sexual and racial identities against the poor and working-class. Moreover, I look at nondominant oppression within the black Christian community and how transanarchy, biblical reinterpretation, and art could offer hope for some black liberation projects.

This thesis does not argue in favor of “secularism,” or the separation between religion and government affairs. Instead I argue that non-standard ideologies already practiced in queer communities work best for those who value human dignity, mutually beneficial relationships, and the abolition of hierarchal institutions. I seek answers to questions regarding the relationship between normative and non-normative ways of living, institutionalism and anti-institutionalism, and whether

belief and spiritual community can be maintained while resisting oppressive state and church hierarchies. My attitude regarding religious institutions, when supported by the state or white-supremacist ideology, is that those institutions can be used for revolutionary change when those operating the institution collectively realize the power they hold as workers.

Methodology and Outline

I focus on literature and material from the trans and queer perspectives. These perspectives sometimes fall outside standard academic practices since trans and queer voices were for a long time isolated from higher education and normative discourses. I also focus on literature that identifies black and Christian interpretations of gender, sexuality, and class. My perspective is rooted in my queerness: I use queer examples and I cite black and queer writers and musical and visual artists; I draw from black and queer literature seeking understandings as to why Christianity seems intolerant of nonconformity. Although the terms “queer” and “trans” often overlap in common use, I will often deploy “queer” in place of “trans” when referring to individuals who express themselves outside binary gender labels unlike some trans-men and women who do. Black transness recognizes the geopolitics of an engendered racialized minority group with access to the state’s severe punishment apparatus, high rates of HIV positivity, familial and social isolation, broadly low-income status, sex work, usually pathologized as sexually malignant (or homosexual), and refused basic legal protections.¹

I organize my thesis around understanding Christianity and how it shapes racialized and colonized people’s ideological outlooks on sexual conformity in the United States. For the entirety of this thesis, I consider the U.S. to be a settler-colonial state with a capitalist economic system based on the enslavement of Africans and genocide of Indigenous peoples justified using Christian doctrine. I take this in part from Bruce Lincoln who in his essay “Conflict,” states:

¹ See “Understanding the Transgender Community.” Human Rights Campaign. <https://www.hrc.org/resources/understanding-the-transgender-community>

an important part of the state's ideological justification is the claim that it alone is capable of maintaining peace among the religious groups within its borders while exercising evenhanded power over them. This is the model developed in Europe during the Enlightenment, and designed to preclude the internecine slaughter of the wars of religion. Beyond its local usefulness, it also had advantages when European powers extended their reach...since it permitted them to aggregate local populations of widely different languages, religions, and cultures within a single colony (Lincoln 59).

I look at respectability politics and stories of black trans people to further draw in my conclusion. My engagement with the literature I've chosen allows me to examine complex relationships between heterosexuality, capitalist institutions, and organized Christianity which work alongside one another to reinforce cycles of racial violence against the poor and working-class. I express my ideas about anti-racism, the importance of racial and class solidarity, and decolonization through these concepts of settler-colonialism and racial violence.

I try my best to provide a substantial discussion about anti-trans racist violence without slipping into dichotomous victim/perpetrator narratives. To reword, I avoid positioning violence against trans people as the consequence of people who expressed hatred against trans people. Instead, I look at anti-trans racist violence from structural and institutional standpoints and how some policies permit violence against trans and queer people take place. I will omit some details, inevitably; my goal is to make a convincing case and create an interactive environment that prompts further debate on how anti-trans violence (or pro-heterosexual systems) should be addressed in religious spaces going forward.

In section one, I enlist the voices of trans people discussing their connections to Christianity, the main challenge for trans people facing come from nondominant oppression within their communities not from Christianity itself. The first section opens up the idea that transformation is needed in this regard. The second section looks at how black religious leaders and theologians respond to these challenges regarding gender and sexuality happening within their own communities. Some theologians argue that for the material and economic transformation of black

people to take place, there must be reinterpretations of normative gender and/or racial categories so that more people in church communities can internalize the shift in terminologies and recognize some of the pain they have caused their queer members. The third section offers the option of transanarchy, or resistance against the capitalist state and hierarchal institutions, as a way to reimagine our society. Artistic expressions, both in written and visual forms, allow us to imagine what that world could look like.

Theoretical framework

Decolonization and anti-racism, or the process of withdrawing oppressive systems, are at the core of my theoretical framework in approaching anti-trans violence. This thesis rejects language that, in any way, apologizes for violent acts performed by institutions resulting in and from the forced removal, disenfranchisement, or enslavement of racialized groups, namely black and Indigenous peoples. I also read class-struggle within various social relations and political contexts to make my point clear and avoid abstract racial arguments. Similar to what Angela Davis refers to in “Transnational Solidarities” (2016), “Our histories never unfold in isolation. We cannot truly tell what we consider to be our own histories without knowing the stories of others. And often we discover that those other stories are actually our own stories” (Davis 135).

Similarly, although I primarily speak discuss issues within the black community, Indigenous sovereignty is within my purview. Charles Long speaks to this as well in *Significations: signs, symbols, and images in the interpretation of religion* (1986) where he describes that understanding the “American experience,” requires understanding the exploitative relationship American settlers had with their natural environment. He states, “If Americans have exploited their world, it has been an exploitation of nature; if they have suffered, it has been through the forms of nature. It was precisely through theories of nature that the destruction of the Indian cultures took place, and a nation which at its inception proclaimed the equality of all humans beings was able to continue the institution of

slavery under the guise of nature” (Long 143). The connection Long makes between the occupation of Indigenous peoples’ lands and the enslavement of Africans as the basic theme to the “historical structure that would relate the American experience to its roots in the past of Western culture” (Long 143), makes my analysis of black discourse essentially links to Indigenous peoples’ discourse as well, even if it falls outside the scope of this thesis.

Queer theory also defines how I analyze institutional power and prejudices. I find these concepts reinforced and internalized through hierarchal institutions of power and, for the purposes of this thesis, through organized Christianity’s position in political movements, educational facilities, and popular culture. Much of the source material I draw from requires this interpretation anyways.

Key concepts

This thesis relies on three terms pertinent to this analysis: black religion (or black Protestant Christian churches more specifically), the state, and transness as defined by scholars and other voices in the field. These terms stand out to me because of how broad they are; they can be further defined or abstracted depending on the context of the conversation.

“Black religion,” for this thesis, concerns the religious outlooks found in the African diaspora. This makes it nearly impossible for me to cover them all, but that is my limitation alone. I premise my understanding of religion, in general, from Charles Long. “Black religion, then, cuts across denominational, cult, and sect lines to do for black people what other religions have not done: to assume the black man’s humanity, his relevance, his responsibility, his participation, and his right to see himself as the image of God” (Long 200). Black organized Christianity falls within this understanding too. Black churches that practice some form of Protestant Christianity are multidimensional institutions, but they share, more or less, this definition of black religion (Barnes

328).² According to Long historically, “black churches were often the center of social life for the community, by virtue of their ordering in terms of various Christian forms, all modes of black religion were not brought into the black church” (Long 200). Going forward, I provide greater context when needed, but for these purposes the “black church” is a rhetorical distinction I expand on later in section II to summarize black churches as a whole political category.

The black church, as Elijah G. Ward at the Institute for Health Research and Policy at the University of Illinois at Chicago describes in “Homophobia, Hypermasculinity and the US Black Church” (2005), constitutes a significant source that fosters fears about homosexuality and non-normative sexual behaviors using theology-driven homophobia. Homophobia can thus have damaging effects upon black communities as a whole if these sentiments reverberate. He argues, “The black church wields a potent influence, on many levels, in the lives of churchgoers (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, Douglas 1999). Church affiliation is strong among all socioeconomic levels of black people, and is often a significant element of the social lives and networks of blacks” (Ward 494). In essence, black churches have come to be viewed as significant places of black community, organized around political change and spiritual relief. They have made been crucial for positive contributions to black livelihoods, but they have also been a source of pain and silence. Most importantly, Ward understands homophobia as an institutional strategy stating, “homophobia is used as a strategy of domination by various individuals and groups—both in US society and within its black subculture—to define not only who or what a homosexual is, but even more importantly, who or what a *man* is not” (Ward 497).

For its part, the “state,” as defined by Max Weber in “Politics as a Vocation,” is a “human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory” (Weber, 1918). This definition applies, in the case of the United States government,

² Toniya Rawls specifically states in the essay, “Yes, Jesus Loves Me: The Liberating Power of Spiritual Acceptance for Black Lesbian Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Christians,” “Black worship typically occurs in the context of Black churches, which may be understood as both places of worship and as multidimensional institutions”

to the various levels of its bureaucratic functions, individual states, and the capitalist economy in which the state(s) operates. Relatedly, settler-colonialism, a term on which I base my understanding of the history of the United States, is “the founding of a state based on the ideology of white supremacy, the widespread practice of African slavery, and a policy of genocide and land theft” according to Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz in *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* (2014). Dunbar Ortiz, while speaking from an Indigenous American point-of-view defines settler-colonialism in terms of the United States and Canada, could also refer to states outside North America where Europeans settled, displaced indigenous groups, and instituted capitalism.

“Transness” risks falling into heterosexual categorization of binary gender. Often read as referring to “men who become women” or “women who become men,” this thesis understands transness from the perspective of black trans activists Janet Mock in her memoir *Redefining Realness* (2014), who I discuss in the first section. She understands transness as a blanket term for queer folks, transsexual, intersex, genderqueer, drag performers, crossdressers, gender nonconforming folks, and those living with gender variance (Mock 113). I prefer this rather *oblong* definition because it understands heterosexuality to be the constructed gender identity as opposed to “transness” which resists normative categorization. However, not all trans people resist categorization in the same way. This definition understands the human tendency to desire myriad gender and sexual modalities while the state attempts to construct normative gender and sexual categories in spite of these tendencies. My understanding of anti-transness is violence performed on people resisting or subverting constructed definitions of gender and sexuality. Transness refers to, “the lives and experiences of diverse groups of people who live outside normative sex/gender relations” (Gagné & McGaughey 481). To put simply, Transness is gender expression that differs from the sex someone was assigned at birth, and queerness is any non-heterosexual non-cisgender category under which transness can be included. So queerness takes into account the non-binary categories that transness may not refer to, but the two terms usually go hand-in-hand in common discourse.

I also borrow from the Layli Phillips and Marla R. Stewart's definitions provide in their essay "Nontraditional, Nonconforming, and Transgressive Gender Expression and Relationship Modalities in Black Communities."³ They state, "These concepts may overlap; they are, by design and in keeping with the variability in everyday life, not mutually exclusive. What distinguishes them is the standpoint and intent of the person making the distinction" (Barnes 18). To reiterate, I focus on anti-trans violence as an effect of heterosexual construction, reviewing hegemonic institutions that establish heterosexuality as the standard mode of sexuality after which all else follows. Focusing on institutions, however, does not absolve individuals who carry out violence on behalf of said institutions. Anti-trans violence, I later develop, can harm black people as a whole, even those who identify as heterosexuals (or homosexual).

Heterosexuality is the concept that sexual differences are organized around opposite bodies, producing an unequal gender binary in which men and women are attracted to one another is taken as the norm.⁴ Protestant Christianity often represents heterosexuality as the only moral way of living and has chastised people for not conforming to its heterosexual culture. My thesis seeks to widen the approach to how non-normative gender and sexuality are understood, not just with superficial discussions of queer experiences with religion, but by reaffirming heterosexuality as an institution working against itself. Since my thesis seeks to address anti-trans violence, we must also examine how heterosexual culture reinforced by hegemonic institutions allows violence to occur in the absences of heterosexual understandings of queer gender and sexuality.

Lastly, it would be disingenuous for me to neglect the affect the 2020-21 Covid-19 Pandemic has had on my relation to these terms, on time, my spacial relations, the global black community, the

³ See. Layli Phillips; Marla R. Stewart, "'Nontraditional' refers to gender expressions and relationship modalities considered 'outside the mainstream,' as defined by both insider and outsiders. 'Nonconforming' refers to gender expressions and relationship modalities in which people consciously go against the mainstream grain in the pursuit of personal authenticity. 'Transgressive' refers to gender expressions or relationship modalities in which people purposefully confront and contest mainstream conventions as part of a larger political agenda for social change" (Barnes 2010, p.18)

⁴ See Jane Ward *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality* p22

availability of resources, what I read, what I pay attention to, and my understandings of gender and sexuality in solitude. Although I attempt to look at this subject matter objectively, I simply cannot ignore the affects this major world event has (and I think many of us can relate) on the way I process the following information. In other words, how I collect and present vast amounts of visual and textual material on gender and sexuality.

Learning from Eisha Love's encounter with law enforcement

On March 28, 2012, a black trans-woman named Eisha Love was arrested in West-Side Chicago after she turned herself in for an altercation that took place at a gas-station involving herself, a friend, and a small group of men in the neighborhood.⁵ Love's story was shared with the world online in a short film produced by the ACLU & Little By Little Films studio called, "Eisha Love: A Trans Woman of Color in Chicago,"⁶ which was part of a larger series documenting transgender civil rights in America called *Trans in America*.⁷ As reports tell, the men hurled demeaning slurs at Love and her friend, making them feel they were in serious danger. Love stepped on the gas-pedal and, in a hurry to escape, struck one of the men which injured his leg. Love panicked and drove away from the incident. The injured man ended up in the hospital a year later where his leg was amputated. Love understandably felt a lot of remorse for the man's injury so she turned herself in at her local police station. From there, she became subjected to police terrorism and grave injustices performed on her by Chicago's judicial system. My take on this event runs a bit contrary to how most headlines concerning anti-trans violence usually go. That is to say, I do not engage in the menial conflict that arose between Eisha Love and the group of men given my preference for understanding violence as

⁵ See THEM. "What Is It Like to Be a Trans Woman? Eisha Love Answers Your Questions: 29-year-old Eisha Love is sharing her story with the world through the ACLU's short film series, *Trans in America*." Oct 23, 2018. <https://www.them.us/story/eisha-love-answers-twitter-questions>

⁶ See THEM. "Eisha Love: A Trans Woman of Color in Chicago." them. Produced by the ACLU & Little By Little Films. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tza8fQ4izgo&feature=emb_logo

⁷ See ACLU. *Trans In America: A Documentary Series*. In partnership with THEM. <https://www.aclu.org/issues/lgbt-rights/transgender-rights/trans-america>

an institutional monopoly. According to interviews, Love feared being mischaracterized by the police as a criminal given the incident was recorded by the gas station's CCTV.⁸ I gather she feared being seen as the perpetrator rather than as someone who reacted justifiably to a hostile situation and wanted a chance to explain herself. According to some reports Eisha Love, "eventually told them [the police] that she struck XX 'deliberately in self-defense.'"⁹ Other reports found that the men involved were completely in the wrong due to their use of transphobic slurs and threats of harming Love and her friend while inside a car. Love denied having known the men in the ACLU film, but this claim is unverified. While escalating conflicts such as these are never easy to resolve, this one could have been addressed in a manner that avoided police involvement since the police did nothing remotely constructive in this situation.

Had the judicial system used conflict resolution methods, Love could have avoided the prison system entirely. However, the grand jury of Love's case called what she did, "attempted first degree attempted murder without lawful justification with intent to kill" and sentenced her to 10 years in an all-male maximum security Division IX prison.¹⁰ In September 2014, an investigation into the case called into question the severity of the initial charges and the real reason behind the perpetrator's leg amputation. It was later uncovered by Love's public defendant that the, "amputation was as a result of numerous infections, reluctance to engage in physical therapy and a request to have it amputated as an elective procedure as opposed to a necessary procedure."¹¹ After four years in jail Love was released, but the damage was already done. Love mistakenly believed the police would fairly resolve her predicament and paid the unfortunate price too familiar in the trans community.

⁸ See Rachel Hammond, Gretchen. "Transgender woman released from jail after nearly 4 years without trial." Windy City Times. Dec 17, 2015. <https://www.windycitytimes.com/ARTICLE.php?AID=53720>

⁹ See Rachel Hammond, Gretchen (2015).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

The police are not trained to solve community-related issues; they are trained to arrest on behalf of the U.S. prison system and murder people.¹² Police involvement was as bad, if not worse, than the supposed crime itself. Love thought she could prove her innocence to the police, but time and time again the police prove themselves to be incapable of dealing with situations involving people of color.¹³ Newspapers reported Love’s unjust arrest as being, “arrested on false charges,” obfuscating just how arresting black people on false charges is standard operating procedure in law enforcement. Arguments attempting to justify state terrorism of black people would be disingenuous given people’s lives are at stake. Before continuing with this retelling of Love’s encounter with the police as a representation of an entire phenomenon, I will review some of the literature this thesis uses that will help us understand why anti-trans violence happens and where religion fits in to the equation.

Issues with heterosexuality and religious institutionalism

I presented a paper on Eisha Love’s story at a conference called “Religion and Abuse” at Indiana University back in February 2020. My original argument for that paper was that black trans women, primarily Eisha Love, encountered violence at the hands of the state due to negative stereotypes made about them from their communities at home. That the negative rhetoric permitted the state to use violence against trans people. I could not be more wrong and it was a very rudimentary argument at best, but I had only just finished my first year of graduate school. I identified black

¹² See The Washington Post’s log of every police murder updated as needed here:
[athttps://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/)

¹³ See. Leone, Hannah. “Transgender Chicagoans say police encounters can be dehumanizing. A new report says CPD is failing them.” May 10, 2019, “Mulligan said the report’s findings resonate throughout her work in Chicago, where the Police Department is under a federal consent decree to improve, among other things, its policy on dealing with transgender people. “The policy itself is inadequate to say the least, and harmful I think in many ways, but in my experience, the few protections that are in there are rarely if ever followed by CPD officers interacting with trans people,” she said...A survey published by the National Center for Transgender Equality showed how intimidating interactions with police can be. Over the course of a year, 58 percent of transgender people who interacted with law enforcement said they had been harassed, abused or mistreated, according to the survey published in 2016. About 57 percent of transgender people surveyed reported feeling uncomfortable asking the police for help...The report covers how departments determine and record gender identity and sexual orientation; how officers talk to transgender suspects and how they search them, transport them and lock them up; how departments prevent sexual misconduct by officers; how officers are trained; and how policies are written. None of the departments met all of the center’s standards. Nine failed to meet any. San Francisco came the closest, meeting eight. Washington, D.C., and Milwaukee each met seven.”

Christian communities as complicit in this ongoing violence through their implicit, and sometimes explicit, homophobic and transphobic rhetoric. Essentially, I saw these rhetorical tools echoed in Christian churches as oppressive towards trans people. My views on this have developed since then. If heterosexuality was understood by Christians to be the default and only moral way of living, then those expressing gender variation felt understandably ostracized by their communities.

Although this list is non-exhaustive and in no particular order, I will look at some of the following thinkers in gender and sexuality to better develop trans and gender nonconforming experiences with religion and the state.¹⁴

For some historical foundation, I employ *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* by C. Riley Snorton to help contextualize the history of black gender construction throughout U.S. history since trans identities have not always been articulated in similar ways to today. He states, “I am seeking to understand the conditions of emergence of things and beings that may not yet exist” (Snorton 2017, xiv). I believe *Black on Both Sides* is crucial for understanding how capitalist institutions, through violence, normalized heterosexuality and how one comes to be considered “black” or “trans” in our society. The book provides a lot of information on how institutional racism constructs normative gender identity, so I found it necessary for my reading of anti-trans violence.

Supporting this method, Cathy Cohen looks at anti-trans violence from a historically anti-black and class perspective. In “The Radical Potential of Queer?” (2019) Cohen explains, “being queer can be both an identity and a position relative to oppressive state power. These folks refuse to conform to a politics of respectability and instead practice Black feminist intersectional approach to organizing, highlighting the many identities that Black communities and Black bodies encompass, but with an eye on centering their work on those most marginal, Black women, Black poor people,

¹⁴ Janet Mock, Tonyia Rawls, Christi Cunningham, Dianne Stewart, Enoch Page, Elijah Ward, Marquis Bey, Jane Ward, Elis Herman, Eva Hayward, Jeanine Tang, Yves Laris Cohen, Cathy Cohen, C. Riley Snorton, and McKenzie Wark. For a religious studies/theological approach, I look at Judith Weisenfeld, T.D. Jakes, James Cone, Kelly Brown Douglas, Monica Coleman, and Max Strassfeld.

Black trans and gender-nonconforming folk, and Black gay, lesbian, and queer folks” (Cohen 143). This is all to say, some of the works I use, specifically the works by theologians James Cone and Kelly Brown Douglas, do not always address trans people using the same terms we have developed recently. But because their works focus on racialized and nonconforming gender and sexual identities in the black community, I find their works to still be useful when discussing the role of black churches in the lives of transgender people.

From Queer Experiences

Familiar to me are some of the harmful aspects of organized Christianity which I no longer practice, but still influenced by. My view on Christianity is personalized in that manner and I stay mindful that some of my close friends and family members have positive and complex associations with Christianity and their church communities. After all, I spent most of my youth going to church with my mother and grandmother at Trinity Baptist Church in the Bronx. I found that as I got older and started breaking my internalized heterosexual norms more and more, I developed queer expressions of desire that included a desire to disassociate with the ritual practices of Christianity altogether. Nonetheless, Christianity is the culture under which I was formed. This was a complex process for me and I saw Christianity by way of church as incompatible with my gender and sexual expressions. My church community avoided talking about queer identities openly, and actively promoted heterosexuality to its members. Not every queer-identifying person has same experience as I did however, and I can only account for other peoples’ experiences through interviews, their artistic expressions, and what I have been told personally in conversations with people I know.

Queer people are often conditioned by their church communities to stay silent on how we feel and are often discouraged from openly expressing gender variation since binary cisgender expression is viewed as the only legitimate form of gender expression. To avoid stigmatization, silence becomes internalized as pain and, like myself, we sometimes depict our church communities

as our external abusers. Since black churches play an active role in promoting and officiating heterosexual marriages for the middle-class, with many now recognizing gay and lesbian couples, other queer identities may feel unrecognized or even unnecessarily hated (Billingsley 131). Homosexuality, so long as it resembles heterosexual coupling, operates alongside heteronormativity to produce isolating scenarios for people who do not and cannot practice compulsory heterosexuality such as trans people, polyamorous relationships, gender-neutral folks, and so on. I understand homonormativity in line with what Roderick Ferguson describes, “white homonormative racial formations claim privileges to the detriment of those communities marginalized by normative regulations—regulations that are racialized, classed, and gendered” (Ferguson 53).

To look at similar experiences of black queer people in black churches, I turn to Sandra Barnes’ *Black Sexualities* (2009), an anthology comprised of essays exploring these contended relationships between black queer people and organized Christianity. The essays I pull, centering femme, queer, and black voices, specifically discuss the dangers of heterosexuality and how black church communities reinforce racial hierarchy vis-à-vis gender normativity. I use these essays to build my argument to varying extents throughout my thesis: “Yes, Jesus Loves Me” by Tonyia M. Rawls, “Black Sexual Citizenship” by Sean Cahill, “Black Mother-Daughter Narratives” by Sandra L. Barnes, “Nontraditional, nonconforming, and transgressive gender expressions and relationship modalities in black communities” by Layli Phillips and Marla R. Stewart, and lastly, “When Secrets hurt” by Robert Peterson.

Back to Eisha and moving forward

Eisha Love’s encounter with the police became the subject of many reports that framed “anti-trans” sentiments as the cause of her unjust arrest: *Eisha Love is serving jail time for defending herself while other Chicago trans women are being attacked* (Milan 2014), *Trans* woman claims self-defense in case* (Blickensderfer, 2014), *Transgender Chicagoans says police encounters can be dehumanizing. A new report says CPD is failing them*

(Leone, 2019). The first two claim Love as a victim of transphobic violence, but not as being subjected to terrorism by law enforcement based on false pretenses. The last article listed frames police encounters to be “dehumanizing” despite police encounters almost always being dehumanizing when black people are involved. Framing Love as a victim of transphobic slurs by random men misinterprets the experience Love had in the judicial system, how law enforcement escalated the situation, and how trivial her arrest was since nothing was resolved. The framing of Love being a victim of street-level transphobia, like these articles say, normalizes how society understands queer identities as abnormal and therefore deserving of special attention. Little attention is given to what has constructed these identities as “different” and what kinds of ideologies help perpetuate violence against them.

Conflict is Not Abuse (2016) by Sarah Schulman helps me break free of the reductive perpetrator/victim dichotomy we usually lean into to explain systems of injustice: That because trans people are subjected to street-level violence, they are therefore “victims” of purely intolerant bigots. But Schulman takes into account how governmental and capitalist institutions, such as law enforcement, create spaces of disadvantage and discriminatory practices that justify themselves as “neutral” third-party arbiters of justice. They often hold monopolies over where, when, and how force is used layered in official procedures.¹⁵ By focusing on how hierarchal institutions use force on black and trans people without oversight, we can follow elements of class relations specific to a U.S. context. Coupled with Schulman’s work, Jane Ward’s *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality* (2020) helps formulate my critique on heterosexual institutionalism in the U.S and how it creates cycles of domestic and institutional violence. I use Ward’s book to track how “race, culture, socioeconomic class, and religion produced specific forms of heteropatriarchy,” and hence, how Christian institutions help produce sexual standardization (Ward 10).

¹⁵ See Weber, 1918

As mentioned before, Janet Mock's memoir *Redefining Realness: My path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More* (2014), talks about her upbringing as a black trans woman and as a Christian in Hawaii. She describes not only cultural limitations to understanding gender variance citing her family's Christian worldview, but also the limitations of an entire heterosexual culture that could not conceptualize her gender expression. Her autobiographical account helps me understanding how Christianity interacts with communities of color to maintain heterosexual reproduction-oriented societies that ultimately serve capitalist production at the expense of black expressions of gender variance. Heterosexual expectations also promote integration to United States systems of forced occupation over North America and the Pacific. Mock writes from a colonized perspective. Having grown up in Hawaii, she understands transphobia not as simple intolerance of trans people, but as dominant forces exerting control over colonized bodies and over their traditional understandings of gender and sexuality.

In Love's case, the police exhibited how law enforcement dictates heterosexual understandings of binary sexual categories onto nonconforming people of color. Love described the police at the station to have been "hostile" towards her because they refused to acknowledge her pronouns despite presenting herself as a woman. The police judged, based solely on her anatomical features underneath her clothes, that he/him pronouns were best used. They defiantly referred to Love with he/him pronouns, patronizing her and reinforce their authority. The *Chicago Tribune* (2019) describes Love's experience with the police thusly,

"Being misgendered is extremely distressful for many trans people," Mulligan said. "Being referred to properly is not just a matter of being sensitive, it's not just a matter of someone having hurt feelings. ... It's extremely traumatizing, especially to endure something like that over and over."

The trauma becomes even more oppressing when inflicted by someone in a position of power, she said. It can erase a person's sense of self. Calling people by the wrong name and gender can also out them as transgender to other detainees.

When Eisha Love was in Chicago police custody, she said officers called her by a name she no longer uses and described her with male pronouns. "It feels like I'm being made a mockery," Love said. "I put so much time and dedication into becoming the woman I am today."

During Love's time in custody, she said officers teased her about her appearance and asked to strip-search her. At times, she was housed with men. Some female officers and nurses were kind to her, but most of the male officers made her feel ridiculed, she said (Leone 2019).

As with many trans people in the U.S., police brutality comes with the deal. Love's identity was not only invalidated by law enforcement, she was also completely humiliated from the beginning to the end of her case.

As I approach my final words on Eisha Love's encounter with law enforcement, I want to acknowledge that I do not know her entire life's story, but I can imagine it. I can imagine her experience with organized Christianity to be similar to mine; we both grew up as queer, as black, and as products of urban life, but we are still different people. There are multiple ways to analyze her story that I have not covered and may never get to. For example, the ACLU film talks a lot about how women in Love's immediate family learned to accept Love as a trans woman. It's a beautiful journey they uncover. I encourage watching the film and reading the reports to learn more about her story for yourself.

Why Focus on Anti-Trans Violence?

Lastly, despite increasing familiarity with anti-trans violence and awareness of homo/transphobia in organized Christianity, little attention is given to how black churches address anti-trans violence as a partial result of an intense campaign teaching heterosexuality as morally superior to queerness. Trans-affirming black Christian movements have emerged in recent years, yet prior to 2015 in-person church attendance was down overall (Barnes, 2010).¹⁶ The ongoing violence facing trans-identifying people requires a reckoning with black churches due to the historic role they play in normative family planning. Black churches have had, among other things, "proactive involvement in family, couples, and youth events, its involvement with issues specifically germane to sexuality has varied. Post-slavery, the historic Black Church validated the innate humanity of Blacks who had been

¹⁶ According to a Pew Research Center study on the religious composition of African Americans found here, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/racial-and-ethnic-composition/black/>

sexually exploited during slavery; sanctioned their marriages; and reinforced the value of all Black children” (Barnes 358). For the most part, black churches have not addressed trans issues because queer folk are considered adversarial in much Christian teachings. Cathy Cohen states in “Deviance As Resistance” (2014), “within established Black political organizations there is also reluctance to embrace those issues [of those defined as deviant] and subpopulations thought to be morally wanting or ambiguous” (Cohen 43). I want to shed light on the topic and offer a way forward that embraces the contentious relationship between organized Christianity and black people in the United States, while maintaining the dignity of black queer folk, like myself, who feel ambivalent about reconnecting with Christianity.

Section I: Being Transgender in the Black Church

I go to retrace myself back. You and I are not *we*, correct.

—Layli Long Soldier, “We”
Whereas

This first section looks at how transgender people reflect on their experiences growing up in Christian communities and how expectations of cisgender heteronormativity influenced their familial relationships. In terms of what some homophobic churches deem “respectable” behavior, transgender people find themselves at the focal point of multiple misconceptions surrounding gender and sexuality. Cathy Cohen writes in “Deviances as Resistance,”

respectability is used to categorize a process of policing, sanitizing, and hiding the nonconformist and some would argue deviant behavior of certain members of African American communities (Carby 1987, Gaines 1996, Higginbotham 1993). In this literature respectability is understood as a strategy deployed primarily by the Black middle class but also by other individuals across the Black class strata to demonstrate their adherence to and upholding of the dominant norms of society (Cohen 31).

The point of this section will be to clarify black trans experiences within religious spaces from their perspectives, how some black Christians expect black people to conduct themselves, the misconceptions between gender and sexually, and what transgender/nonbinary/nonconforming/genderqueer people expect from black churches in political solidarity. This last category discusses specifically what role trans people expect black churches to fill in their lives.

On growing up in Christian as transgender

Black trans activist, model, and actress Janet Mock reflects on the term “mahu,” the Hawaiian gender construction native to her homeland. As a black-indigenous woman, Mock defines mahu within the context of American imperialism that organizes Christianity to both absorb old gender constructions and assimilate new ones under the guise of “respectability” upon the colonized. In *Redefining Realness* she explains,

To be *mahu* was to occupy a space between the poles of male and female in precolonial Hawaii, where it translated to “hermaphrodite,” used to refer to feminine

boys or masculine girls. But as puritanical missionaries from the West influenced Hawaiian culture in the nineteenth century, their Christian, homophobic, and gender binary systems pushed *mahu* from the center of culture to the margins. *Mahu* became a slur, one used to describe male-to-female transgender people and feminine men who were gay or perceived as gay due to their gender expression (Mock 103).

Here, Mock describes an inherent repulsion black trans folks have to organized Christianity when juxtaposed besides clearly articulated systems of colonial domination. In her case, American military occupation was a clear contrast to her native Hawaiian and black cultures and languages. The same cannot be said for black communities located in the continental United States where the disparities may be less clear since black people are far more integrated into the American economic and political systems. So while Christian, homophobic, and binary gender systems seem “normal” to us, Mock’s experience shows just how stark American economic influence disrupts the logic of colonized peoples’ understandings of religion, sexuality, and gender identity.

Mock, through her experiences as a trans woman in a colonized setting, highlights to her readers how Christianity maintains harmful categorization systems by promoting racial-sexual standardization vis-à-vis heterosexual normativity. It constructs nonconformity, or people like Mahu, as undesirable and therefore irrelevant or non-human. Nevertheless, trans people like Mock herself want to *feel* connected to themselves, work towards a feeling of authentic wholeness, and have a sense of family and community, even if that means engaging with the settler-colonial state’s cultural imports. Walter Rodney even alludes to this phenomenon in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), where he explains how colonial institutions, such as organized Christianity, reconstructs established norms of the colonized thusly,

The Christian church has always been a major instrument for cultural penetration and cultural dominance, in spite of the fact that, in many instances, Africans sought to set up independent churches. Equally important has been the role of education in producing Africans to service the capitalist system and to subscribe to its values. Recently, the imperialists have been using new universities in Africa to keep themselves entrenched at the highest academic levels... (Rodney 32).

By importing Christianity, the colonizer, or in this case the United States, is able to uphold white supremacy by equating some traditional practices and terms with imported cultural practices featured in western political, cultural, and economic systems. Consequently, this uneven exchange in cultural practices influences how the colonized group interacts, not only with the oppressing system, but also with newly marginalized members in their own communities due to these new incongruities.

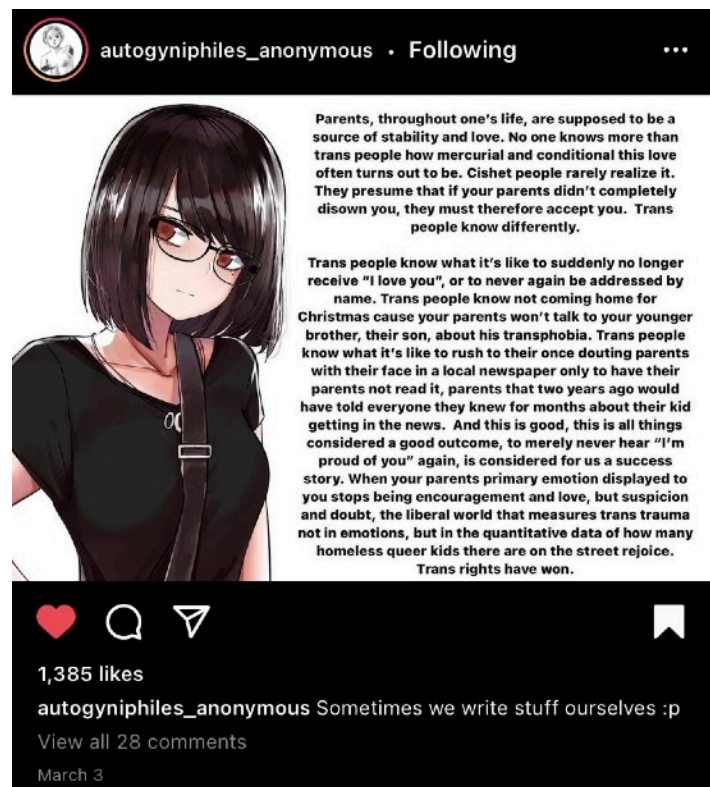
When I read Mock’s experience growing up as a black trans woman I am reminded of an account I follow on Instagram called *Autogyniphiles_Anonymous* (screenshot seen below). The

page is run by “a bunch of old tired trans wlw (women loving women)” according to the account’s bio. It is also an art page and most of the content they post resemble the screenshot featured on this page. Essentially, the anonymous organizers superimpose quotes regarding trans theory over or alongside images of anime characters and sometimes old movie clips.

The purpose is to provide short, easy-to-read, and captivating posts that visualize queer theory for anyone interested in reading. The particular post I show here,

“Sometimes we write stuff ourselves,” was written anonymously by one of the account’s administrators where she recalls what it is like to feel alienated from parents as a trans person in a (presumably) Christian household.

Similar to what Mock describes as a cultural appropriation of “mahu” by American Christian imperialists, this *Autogyniphiles_Anonymous* post demonstrates how transphobia from



“Sometimes we write stuff ourselves.” Posted to Instagram. March 3, 2021. *Autogyniphiles_Anonymous*.

within hierarchal systems (the nuclear family) is not simply the expulsion of transgender and nonconforming youth, but also the act of denying trans people a sense of love and family stability due to their gender nonconformity. By either mocking their identities, avoiding certain conversations, or ignoring their existence completely, white colonial systems of gender construction at the micro-level mirror that of dominant forces established through the violent acquisition of native lands, native peoples, and those peoples' culture at the macro-level.

Tonyia Rawls in "Yes, Jesus Loves Me: The Liberating Power of Spiritual Acceptance for Black Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Christians," interviews some black transgender people in their personal journeys searching for spiritual acceptance. Rawls specifically interviews members of Unity Fellowship Church (UFC) which is an lgbtq-affirming church located in Charlotte, North Carolina. Most of the respondents struggled at some point with homophobia by individuals in their church communities and with their own gender dysphoria due to heteronormative expectations. Not all of their experiences with intolerance were explicit; no one was barred from entering the church or physically beat for expressing nonconformity. Their reflections on the types of transphobia they experienced were often expressed through the denial of queer expression in sometimes implicit, although sometimes painfully obvious, ways.

Because gender and sexuality are often confused in some Christian communities, especially where homophobia is tolerated or taught, transphobia (the rejection of gender nonconforming and trans people) and homophobia (the rejection of same-sex desire) often go hand-in-hand. Rawls explains,

For Black gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (referred to hence as LGBT) people, homophobia in many Black churches challenges this overarching belief that God's unconditional love for all (Ward, 2005). Homophobic forces, combined with the politically motivated, antigay rhetoric of the Christian religious right, have led to the spiritual, religious, cultural, and social alienation of many Black LGBT people of faith. This alienation has resulted in physical, spiritual, and moral damage that robs believers of their community and faith, and robs the community of potentially strong contributors and members (Rawls 327).

Unsurprisingly, trans people who grow up around homophobic individuals in Christian communities will often understand early teachings against homosexuality as a corresponding indicator of transphobia. Although this is not always the case, young people who express gender variance often find it difficult to “come out” as transgender if their families or communities are homophobic.

One such interviewee named Sasha De’Janair, a trans-woman from Virginia, recalls her experience in the church growing up. “I was being pushed to go to church because my mother and father said we had to go to church—it was mandatory.” Accordingly, young people like De’Janair develop the idea that being Christian and heterosexual are the only acceptable ways to live and exist within a (black) community. The church that De’Janair attended with her family was also very homophobic. She states, “When growing up as a child, I was taught that being gay you’re going to hell; you’ll die and go to hell. It wasn’t right and people didn’t like [it]. Most Christians didn’t believe in homosexuality, that’s what I was taught” (Rawls 332). De’Janair’s particular situation growing up comes with its own complexities, as does everything, but the image we perceive of trans people growing up in an all-enclosed intolerant environment is a bit farfetched and reductive as we will see.

De’Janair’s mother had already known from an early age that her daughter was genderqueer and perhaps gay, but she just had no idea how to articulate that. Her mother seemed to express little issue with her daughter’s nonconformity according to De’Janair. It was De’Janair’s uncle, however, who violently attempted to enforce heterosexuality. She recalls, “My uncle took [me] through the greatest [difficulty]. He tried to physically beat me. He just didn’t like it. My mother asked what is wrong with it. [She asked my uncle,] ‘Why you want to dress him in those [men’s] clothes?’ [She would say,] ‘that’s my child’” (Rawls 333). It is important to remember that when analyzing Christian homophobia, especially the types of homophobia prevalent in black churches, to do so with a class-conscious perspective. A class-conscious perspective displaces the centrality of “the church” as an all-powerful oppressive force, and instead frames what we refer to as “the church” as being comprised of various individuals, families, relationships, and spaces containing various hierarchies

and ideological perspectives. In this scenario, the uncle may have internalized that his role as a man authorized him to enforce certain codes of ethic upon other males in his immediate family.

Experiences with religious intolerance are not uncommon within black church communities and within Protestant Christian households. As another black trans person interviewed by Toniya Rawls named Curtis Jacobs, a trans-man from Ohio, describes having grown up as a black Seventh-Day Adventist, “My parents helped to shape and frame my faith. My dad was instrumental in that... [I was taught at a young age that homosexuality] was a direct no-no. We didn’t even discuss anything like that, and as I grew up it was given a name in our household that it was a definite no-no. It was for people [who had] something wrong [with them]” (Rawls 335). Nevertheless, Jacobs knew that he was a boy from a young age and that he liked girls.

Being misread as a girl, Jacobs was thought to have expressed same-sex desire, but because he knew himself to be a boy, Jacobs did not regard his desires as identical to homosexual desire. Jacobs did not believe himself to be a lesbian. Being both gender variant and expressing same-sex desire were not mutually exclusive so the homophobia Jacobs received around him and it did not apply to his particular situation. He explains,

I was born female, but at that young age, I thought I was a little boy. From as early as I can remember, until about maybe seven. I didn’t know there was a problem... When [I was about seven], we started going to church; it was very strict for me. Back then in Cleveland, Ohio you could not wear pants to school. During that time is where I started getting a little foggy [about my sexual identity], but I learned to live in denial early in life. [I tolerated trying to be girl], but it was horrible. I remember my first day of school with those itchy socks with the lace and I didn’t understand why I had to get dressed up like that... And I was really confused. But I think the church atmosphere was more of an awakening to the fact that something was wrong here (Rawls 335).

Despite the inextricable link between gender expression and sexual orientation Jacobs’ story shows that even young people understand, and express in their behaviors, how sexual orientation and gender expression occupy different facets of people’s lives. Moreover, the experiences of these young gender nonconforming people demonstrate how homophobia kept them from developing an

authentic expressive self by the very same people in their communities who said they supported them. These authority figures placed themselves in positions of policing young people's sexualities and by proximity their gender identities as well. The direct connection between homophobia in black communities that uses Christian logic and the denial or confusion about trans existences otherwise indicate aspirations for family structures that resemble, at least in concept, white society's image of the nuclear family.

Janet Mock's, De'Janair's, and Jacobs' experiences with Christianity recognize the commonalities of dealing with homophobia and therefore transphobia in their upbringings in black communities around the country. They define the strong expectations some black Christians place on those within their own communities and families. Church-supported heterosexuality allows members to self-police how others are expected to live and express themselves, a form of nondominant expression. E. Christi Cunningham in "Creation Out of Bounds" explains it best,

The dissonance created by these norms constitutes nondominant oppression. Although controlled by the community rather than the hegemonic order, it is equally salient in impeding whole identity evolution... Normalized nondominant sexual identity is heterosexual and may be Black. Queer sexualities either do not exist or are products of 'the white man's' influence. They create dissonance from the normalized story that may be punished in ways such as physical violence, religious condemnation, and isolation (Cunningham 50).

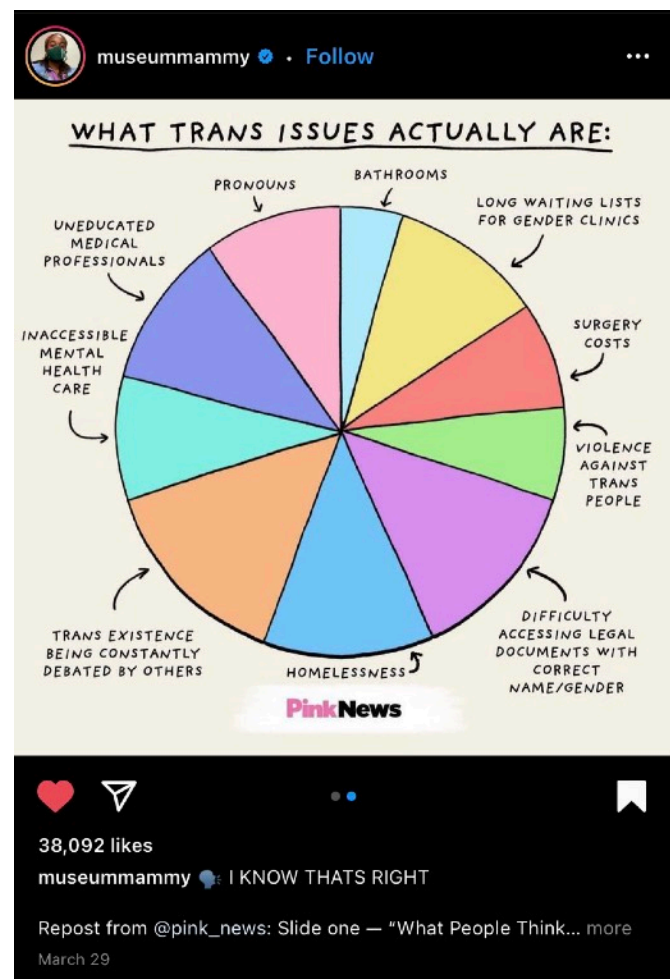
While this work does not make the argument that black churches are the primary oppressors of black trans people, I make it clear that oppression comes from the state, it does argue that some black churches utilize state resources (dominant narratives, access to power, etc) to reinforce systems of racial oppression by way of policing gender norms and sexuality.

Nondominant oppression shows us that black churches that promote heterosexuality as the standard mode of living reinforce quite literally the traumatic memory of racial oppression onto individuals within the racialized community itself. Even the utterance of hegemonic (white, colonial, binary) gender categories reintroduces the history of colonialism and racial slavery. Dianne Stewart in *Black Women, Black Love* (2020) states that when influential ideological devices like the Christian

Bible are used upon postenslaved individuals, “They establish Christian boundaries of moral behavior for husband, wives, and children and located the nuclear, patriarchal family within a heterosexual ‘household’ structure—the only legitimate basis for extended kinship networks. All previous arrangements that deviated from this model of Christian marriage and family would not be tolerated” (Stewart 67). So while Christianity itself may not be explicitly homophobic, transphobic, or heterosexist, homophobic and transphobic individuals may interpret scripture to justify their intolerance using the Bible. These individuals can be dangerous if they hold some access to power via capital, influence, or position.

Misconceptions regarding Trans issues

The issues transgender people face at both personal and societal levels are often unrelated to the doctrines and teachings of Christianity itself. One of the biggest misconceptions uninformed Christians have about trans issues fall within popular cultural debates concerning bathrooms and pronouns. While bathroom access and pronouns are unmistakably important for trans acceptability and safety, trans people deal with a multitude of structural issues involving state services, law enforcement, and access to healthcare. The pie chart posted to Instagram by Kimberly Drew (seen left) illustrates what “trans issues actually are” according to trans news site PinkNews. Not



“What trans issues actually are.” Posted to Instagram on museummammy. March 29, 2020. By Kimberly Drew.

only does this post articulate clearly the multidimensional issues of trans livelihood, but it does so in a way that positions violence, both by the state and in healthcare, as the primary causes of bodily harm. While pronouns and bathroom access are prioritized almost equally to the other issues, they are not the primary issues facing trans people. Pronouns for that matter require the least amount of disruption to dominant structures and institutions, and bathrooms, which I discuss much later, are hardly a debate about transgender access at all.

Not only does the misconception that trans issues revolve around dichotomous cultural debates (i.e. that trans people just want access to their bathroom of choice or referred to by their proper pronouns) highlight an area where churches can play a role in mitigating these tensions, it also calls attention to classism. Black people who downplay or ignore the conglomerate pertaining to trans issues, also often ignore the structural issues all black people in the working-class deal with as well. Tone-deaf medical professionals, high medical costs, homelessness, difficulty accessing social services, and law enforcement are already issues black people face as a whole, let alone what trans people face in particular. Black Christians who express intolerance of trans people often place far more weight on their supposed inability to accept transgressive identities culturally than they do on the reasons trans people are calling for disruptive change.

I suspect that the unwillingness to engage with trans issues constructively stems directly from the confrontation those issues pose against the hierarchal structures middle-class or middle-class oriented black Christians wish to maintain. According to Enoch Page and Matt Richardson in “On the Fear of Small Numbers,”

Regardless of their class positions, Black transpeople as a diverse and small segment of the United States and global population are questing for an elusive cultural citizenship in ways constrained by the state-imposed discipline of anti-Black transphobic and/or homophobic attitudes and actions. As Gilman argues, the Black female body becomes the past and present lens through which forms of deviant White female sexuality are viewed (Ifekwunigwe, 1999). This is significant because Black trans subjects generally transgress racialized gender boundaries by moving out of and/or into feminine forms of racialized gender expression...In whatever domain of social life it occurs, racial discipline normatively confines biological males

to expressing racialized masculinity and biological females to expressing racialized femininity.

Confirming this analytical model, Ferguson argues that “contemporary state formations lubricate the mobility of capital by enlisting middle-class minorities” through getting them to join the capitalist project that sustains White male supremacy. In the wake of signing on to varying degrees of Whiteness, the “minority middle classes ascend to power through appeals to normativity and thus become the regulators of working-class racial, gender and sexual differences” (Ferguson, 2004, pp.29,147) (Page 58).

So while some may argue that intolerance is simply a fear of transgender identity and non-normative sexuality, intolerance is most importantly a fear of losing out on normative middle-class American citizenship for black individuals.

Black churches have never shied away from discussing sexuality, that is they have never really shied away from discussing heterosexuality and promoting heterosexual monogamous marriage. Throughout American history, black churches have officiated heterosexual marriages and observed nuclear heterosexual family structures for the purpose of promoting black respectability and access to normative citizenship and rights (Barnes & Bynum, 2010). Dianne Stewart states that after the Civil War period, “Legally recognized marriage was a central portal to citizenship rights and responsibilities. Consequently, African Americans’ admission into free society was conditioned on acceptance of an inflexible patriarchal family structure and gendered division of labor and space” (Stewart 73). Homophobia, in that vein, not only articulates nonstandard relationships as non-American, in promoting heterosexuality, homophobia also replenishes and normalizes white supremacy institutionally. This effectively maintains an ongoing disruption of traditional forms of relationalities lost by those of African descent in the United States, as well as producing an unequal relationship between black communities, their religious organizations, and the state.

Elijah Ward in “Homophobia, hypermasculinity and the US black church” (2005), affirms that homophobia negatively affects all black people living in the United States, stating, “As in wider US society, homophobia shores up versions of hegemonic masculinity prevalent in black

communities. Black masculinity in the USA is in a state of crisis. hooks (2004:xii), reminds us that the core imagery with which the black male is constructed is that of the murderous, rapacious brute —‘untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling’. Racist, capitalist patriarchy, she says, will never allow the full empowerment of black men” (Ward 496). As is often the case, homosexuality is misunderstood as and conflated with those who express nonstandard gender identity in religious spaces. So by addressing homophobia and hegemonic masculinity in black communities first with theological reinterpretations of acceptable sexual behavior, the influence of capitalist logic and U.S. hegemony could be radically disrupted and lessen the negative associations with nonconformity.

According to a study conducted in 2016 by the Pew Research Center called “Views of transgender issues divide along religious lines” (2017), 59% of black Protestants said that a person is a man or a woman based on their sex determined at birth, compared to 36% of black protestants who said that gender is not determined by sex at birth (Smith, 2017). Although this study does not identify regions, economic class, or specific denominations, it does show that a significant number of black Christian Protestants do not hold transphobic views as much as we believe to be true of Christians in general. Moreover, homophobia in black Christian communities is hardly an issue for queer people already marginalized by homophobic Christians. Like myself and those who attend Unity Fellowship Church in Charlotte, gender-queer people either leave intolerant denominations, join independent queer-inclusive churches, or make other decisions to avoid uncomfortable environments altogether.

In essence, while intolerance indeed exists generally within black Christian church communities (and addressing this intolerance is important for the wellbeing of trans people), the issues facing trans people structurally supersede the powers individual black churches and black Christian households have to make effective change. The problem concerning the role of black churches in the lives of trans people is in what the churches can do to help trans and gender nonconforming people to live freely and feel safe. So the question I posit is, what are the problems

facing church leaders in order for trans people to grow up feeling loved and stable in their communities while also focusing on long-term strategies for large-scale structural changes?

Problems facing the black church

Historically, black Christian movements flourished in major urban centers around the United States. According to Judith Weisenfeld in *New World A-Coming* (2019), “Northern cities were transformed during the Great Migration through the dramatic increases in the number of black residents and by the religious, cultural, and political creativity black migrants generated” (Weisenfeld 8). Within these urban developments, charismatic Christian leaders found many opportunities to extend their ideological reaches. Between abject poverty, social deprivation, and the ire of state institutions, the black working-class and poor demanded a sense of hope that these aspiring religious leaders hoped to meet. Charismatic movements sought to transform the conditions of black people using alternatives to traditional black Protestantism. Sociologist Ira De Augustine Reid, Weisenfeld notes, turned his attention to this emerging form of prosperity gospel, writing in a 1926 National Urban League journal article, “The whole group is characterized by the machinations of imposters who do their work in great style. Bishops without a diocese, those who heal with divine inspiration, praying circles that charge for their services... new denominations built upon the fundamental doctrine of race—all these and even more contribute to the prostitutions of the church” (Weisenfeld 11).

The racio-religious movements, designed by charismatic leaders, were associated with the daily performances of black self-identification. “These self-making performances were directed outward and aimed at exposing the Negro as a political and social construct. They were also directed inward and worked on the individual level to call forth what adherents believed were essential identities,” including, but not limited to, monogamous heterosexual identity as well (Weisenfeld 92). These movements further communicated to their followers the leader’s expectations of moral living. They stressed the importance of heterosexual marriage and the nuclear family in order to better

assimilate black people culturally into (white) American society while still keeping them oppressed economically and politically.

One of the issues facing black churches today is how to divorce the positive ways black religious movements foster community from the damaging ways black charismatic movements exploited the black working-class and decentralized traditional black gender formations. In *The Tragedy of Heterosexuality* (2020), Jane Ward describes how the United States coerced black people into implementing heterosexual normativity for access to “respectable” American citizenship,

While white physicians described nonviolent, affectionate heterosexuality as a difficult but necessary component of the stability of white families, African American physicians and social reformers declared it a social and political right—one that Black men and women had been denied under the conditions of slavery and poverty and that held the key to African American survival, freedom, and respectability. Marriage, and the ability to choose and remain with one’s sexual and familial partners more generally, was of paramount importance to former slaves and their descendants following centuries of brutal rupture of enslaved families at the hands of white slave owners. As the legal scholar Katherine Franke has shown, many abolitionists in the United States viewed marriage as central to the experience of emancipation, thereby laying the groundwork for marriage to be reconceptualized as a freedom, rather than an economic obligation or necessity, in the twentieth-century American imagination... African American reformers focused on the ways Black sexual respectability was best achieved through Black women’s freedom of choice.

But the American construction of modern heterosexuality was inseparable from white-supremacist gender norms. White male social reformers, who possessed far greater power and authority than civil rights and feminist activists, defined healthy heterosexual marriage in their own image and according to their own interests... ensured that modern heterosexuality served the interests of white supremacy (Ward 45-46).

Ward describes heterosexual marriage as a white supremacist institution, and there is some validity to that because it conceptualizes racial and class dominance by way of gender and sexual manipulation. White supremacy institutionalizes religious ideologies like Christianity to help integrate subjugated populations into the spiritual mindset of the conquering nation since, evidently, heterosexual marriages are officiated in churches or by clergy members. Christian interpretations of proper

marriage further establish limits to moral living and legitimizes whiteness as the dominant ideology to which everyone is expected to adhere.

Whiteness/white supremacy/white racism bases itself on specific categorical understandings of race, geography, and sexuality in the form of heteronormative gender constructions. structures how we, as colonized folks, understand divisions of labor, education, governance, and relationships thereby othering those who express themselves contrary to those established modes of behavior. According to Dianne Stewart, whiteness/white supremacy/white racism, “have nurtured batteries of state laws and shared American social norms proscribing romantic and sexual liaisons across Black and White racial lines. The policing and punishing of romantic relationships that transgress the Black-White racial boundary are powerful tropes in America’s collective consciousness” (Stewart 7). Although heterosexual desire is not necessarily a product of whiteness, the specific type of monogamous heterosexuality taught and reinforced by the United States is due to its racial overtones.

Cultural norms also shift under this system of oppression since whiteness learns to incorporate formerly “othered” modes of living so long as they are incorporated into the heterosexual logic of whiteness. Homosexuality, like white heterosexual normativity, is easily perceivable to heterosexuals because homosexuality operates within a binary understanding of sexual relationships centering around a dominant male or masculine figure. Treva Ellison describes the flexibility of whiteness in, “The labor of werqing it: the performance and protest strategies of Sir Lady Java” as follows,

As a logic that underwrites the articulation of subjectivity, flexibility is, in part, a response to the long arc of anti-imperialist and Black freedom struggles in the US that threw the abstract citizen-subject of the US racial state into crisis. Flexibility [of whiteness] is itself an abstracting logic because it repositions the racial state as the purveyor and guarantor of racial, class, gender, and sexual citizenship and demands a constant forgetting of the exclusions and erasures that imbue race, class, gender, and sexuality with the appearance of stability and coherence. (Ellison 4)

Whiteness not only demands idealization in order to sustain racial and class hierarchies, but also requires racial and class hierarchies to sustain this idealization. Any system of hierarchy that gives power to individuals over others, like in education and organized religion, reinforces racialized, classed and gendered structures since more people are left out the higher one climbs the chain of command. Hierarchies are necessarily exclusive in that way and black churches that seek black liberation must also fight against hierarchies.

To put it plainly, the problem facing black churches for trans people is how to avoid reproducing the dominant binary logics of gender and sexual formations that necessarily omit the particular issues facing the working-class and the poor.

Section II: Challenges for Black Churches

Times have changed and the current situation demands a language appropriate for the problems we now face.

—James Cone
Preface to *Black Theology and Black Power*

In this section I reflect and build upon what I discussed in the previous section on the struggles black queer and transgender face growing up in church communities. I argued that while transphobia, by way of homophobic beliefs supported by some Christian teachings, negatively affects the experiences queer people tend to have in black Christian communities. Religious intolerance of this sort tends to be concentrated around the most vocal (men) in positions of authority or high regard. However, this is not always the case. Some black Christian thinkers in positions of power or significance seek to transform how churches interact with queer and trans people of color for better inclusion.

Key to this section lies in there being no theological justification for transphobia, so the perspectives by theologians and church leaders to gender-based intolerance vary wildly. Depending on the denomination and clergy, the Bible, which was translated into English from Hebrew, Latin, and Greek centuries ago, can be used to interpret contemporary gender categories based on the social and political needs.¹⁷ In a video by Reginery29 published to Youtube called, “What Happens If You’re Transgender in The Church,” Rev. Jacqueline J. Lewis, Ph.D senior minister at Middle Collegiate Church in Manhattan, the first black woman to head the oldest Protestant church in North America, strongly supports transgender inclusion into the church. She states, “When I imagine a trans child coming to understand ‘I might be a girl in this boy body,’ I’m like ‘thank you God that the child is becoming aware of who they are.’ And our job as a culture, as a society, and as a church is to make safe spaces for people to be.” As Reverend Lewis points out, transgender

¹⁷ See Kukla, Elliot. “Terms for Gender Diversity in Classical Jewish Texts.”

Christians deserve safe spaces where they can reflect and practice their faith away from the multitude of structural inequalities discussed in the previous section. It is simply unreasonable to demand structural changes from within the existing United States government while also dealing with transphobic sentiments from your own community. Structural changes to the state, or whatever that might entail, must start with a radical shift in ideology that fundamentally reimagines how political order operates.

In this section I will look at some theological interpretations of gender nonconformity in order to clarify the ideologies some black churches are guided by. First I offer insight into how some charismatic leaders, using Pastor T.D. Jakes as my primary link, interpret gender and sexuality to negatively influence how his followers understand “proper” black sexual modalities. Following that, I look at how the more positive reinterpretations of scripture demand radical changes to the American political and economic systems and how black theologians like Kelly Brown Douglas and James Cone wish to go about calling for safer churches for transgressive, sexually nonconforming, and nonbinary identities. Although there are many examples of theological interpretations of queer tolerance and intolerance I could have offered, Jakes, Douglas, and Cone are prominent and well-known. Thus, their voices carry much weight in black Christian discourse.

The following considers how heteronormative gender and sexuality are either supported or rejected by institutions of faith depending on one’s relation to western capitalism. Working against the harsh realities of capitalism, black churches play a crucial role in addressing systemic inequalities by manipulating the tools of the oppressor, or a reinterpreted Christian ideology, to demand changes to the existing system that negatively affect all working-class people of color.

T.D. Jakes, popularizing theological intolerance

T.D. Jakes is a popular bishop and senior pastor of a multi-city network of churches he calls The Potter’s House. Jakes has thirty-six books published in his name, he hosted two television shows,

appears quite often on Oprah’s network, had/has a working relationship with President Obama, 68



Jakes’s Lakewood Church. By The original uploader was ToBeDaniel at Italian Wikipedia. - Transferred from it.wikipedia to Commons., CC BY 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=38716905>

million followers on Facebook, an iPhone app, and his net worth is estimated around \$20 million.¹⁸ Jakes promotes heterosexual marriage and offers many self-help books aimed at molding men and women into respectable God-fearing heterosexuals, most notably, *Destiny: Step into Your Purpose* (2016) and *Soar! Build*

Your Vision from the Ground Up (2017). Both of these works, but also his ministry in general, call for young black Christians to aspire towards tidy nuclear families based around a strong husband/father figure, a submissive and loving wife, children, the accumulation of wealth and material assets (such as private property), and the belief that faith in Jesus will help escape poverty. In this section, we will only unpack some of what he outlines in *Soar!*, but much of Jakes’s ministry ignores the ways in which dominant black culture, sexuality, and religion was shaped in response to attacks on black traditions. Either that or he willingly plays into dominant cultural principles, effectively erasing black working-class realities and cultural histories for his benefit.

Following the legacy of charismatic leaders before him, Jakes exemplifies one way some Christian leaders promote race, class, gender, and sexual hierarchies to middle-class blacks. According to Judith Weisenfeld, “many religious traditions address these same concerns [family,

¹⁸ See *Bishop T.D. Jakes’s Presidential Counseling | Oprah’s Next Chapter* | Oprah Winfrey Network, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-fg8fw8a6dU>; *T.D. Jakes Drops Gems On Helping Our Communities, STEAM program, Obama & Therapy, HOT 97*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zl4UVjDFLTA>; and <https://www.celebritynetworth.com/richest-celebrities/t-d-jakes-net-worth/>

community, place, and nation], enjoining members to configure their social relations and political perspectives according to specific rules and values. As such, the religio-racial movements offered members frameworks that, in their rough outlines, resembled those of the Christian traditions many new members had left” (Weisenfeld 168). Likewise, T.D. Jakes filters his ideology through biblical messaging and he also does not hide that his ministry revolves around his own personality. He makes these two things very clear. The welcome page on The Potter’s House official website states,

Our vision at The Potter’s House (TPH) is for God to mold you into a purpose-filled vessel, pointing all grace and glory back to Him. It’s our prayer that His Spirit will fully illuminate you on this heaven-bound journey, through every trial and victory. And as He empowers you to persevere through life’s struggle, may you confidently communicate God’s vibrant hope to others — shining His eternal light on their lost.¹⁹

He sells his vision of prosperity gospel to an upward-looking “multicultural” and black working-class audience. By the 1990s, “many middle-class blacks had experienced the spiritual emptiness of financial success, the continued difficulties of latent racism, and a ‘cultural uncertainty’ of what it meant to be black” (Billingsley 131) Scott Billingsley explains in *It’s a New Day: Race and Gender in the Modern Charismatic Movement* (2008). Consequently, many turned to charismatic movements for a sense of community and moral uplift. On the other hand, charismatic leaders saw financial opportunities in exploiting whatever money black people were willing to give to fulfill this need. Billingsley continues, “Independent charismatic ministries were not only in a position to fulfill the physical needs of poor blacks but also offered the emotional healing and social connections that many people wanted,” (Billingsley 131) and much of the middle-class were willing to provide the financial support to keep large ministries afloat. T.D. Jakes’s ministry relies on the financial and ideological support of (mostly) black middle-class Christians to continue growing.

Jakes is unapologetically heterosexual, homophobic, and misogynistic; his ministry is not marketed to be an inclusive space for gender and sexually nonconforming individuals. In one such

¹⁹ See. “Welcome to the Potter’s House.” <https://www.thepottershouse.org>

web-sermon he gave with Dr. Myles Munroe called “Why Distracted Women Discourage Men,” Jakes argues that empowered, working, and financially stable women pose a threat to men who are discontent with seeing working women. In this sermon, empowered women possess a “demon” which he attributes to working women’s “inner lesbianism” used in the pejorative. He states, “these scientists have been working in laboratory because, quite frankly, men are going out of style; there are women today who think they don’t need a man.” He then doubles down on his criticism of arguably self-empowered queer women, “You got women today talking about ‘I’m having a baby, but I don’t want a husband because I don’t need a man for anything. What can he do for me that I can’t do for myself?’ It’s a lesbian spirit. It needs to be driven out of the house of the Lord.” Nevertheless, Jakes’s worldview understands female empowerment and homosexuality incompatible with his interpretation of Christianity. Queer femme agency is antithetical to the heteronormative version of Christianity Jakes tries to promote. He gives little space for opposing views. He tells people in his audience who disagree to “get out” and as far as my research shows, no lesbian has yet to be driven out of Jakes’s ministry since much of it happens online or on television.

Jakes argues in his book *Soar!* that poor people can “make it” into a higher economic class and avoid poverty if they work hard and make fiscally responsible decisions. The book disregards systemic inequalities in that vein. Jakes writes about the importance of “relentless” determination in order to make more money in the introduction to the book,

The Wright brothers knew the laws of gravity worked against them. They knew that people thought they were crazy for even trying to create a flying machine that could soar through the skies above everyone else. However, they defied the odds—and gravity—by refusing to give up until they discovered new laws, principles of aerodynamics that enabled a craft of a certain weight traveling at a certain velocity to gain momentum and catch flight. These pioneers of the skies created a new normal, a paradigm shift so life-changing that it transformed the way we travel, transact business, and conduct warfare.

Now maybe you aren’t interested in building a flying machine. But in essence the Wright brothers’ endeavors is the goal of every entrepreneur. What do you need to build in order to get up there into the sky of economic viability? How can you take

what you have and escape the gravitational pull of a salary that limits your ability to escape from living paycheck to paycheck?

At the end of the day, the same innovative, relentless tenacity that fueled the Wright brothers determines the direction of your own dreams. It is the power of one transformative belief held firmly in the place, the daring idea that say just because I haven't seen it modeled in my past doesn't mean that I cannot create something that changes the trajectory of my future. Simply put, it is the power to make the seemingly impossible become your new reality (Jakes 10).

Clearly, Jakes targets straight men and women in his messaging; it is not meant for “independent” women or queer folks. “Living paycheck to paycheck,” is viewed as a personal failure every man should avoid. Capitalism, however, functions contrary to Jakes's understanding of the world in which we live. Although a broad range of men can receive his message, an economic system based on hierarchies and private ownership of land simply cannot accommodate mass accumulation of wealth. The assumption that every man who could work can work for himself and by himself is a fantasy Jakes himself does not even live. The success of Jakes's ministry relies on church attendance and donations, so he appeals to what his audience wants. Jakes is not calling for his black middle-class audience to consider systemic inequalities because that is not what his audience demands. He instead embodies an assimilationist and pro-heterosexual ideology, using Christianity, to instill ideas that it is acceptable to marginalize cis-women, definitely trans women (although he never recognizes gender variance), queer people, and the poor.

Breaking the Religious Gender Binary

Contrary to T.D. Jakes's homophobic ideology, there is no inherent conflict occurring between his ministry and trans people. They exist in separate spheres both online and in real life. Nonetheless, homophobia in religious rhetoric still makes life difficult for trans people when your peers and family members internalize those ideas and feel empowered to reinforce that intolerance (i.e. nondominant oppression). Essentially, the problem does not lay in questioning whether “Christianity is homophobic” or not, but how Christianity has been and can be used to mold cisgendered subjects

and spaces that express hostility towards queer identities. That is a fundamental question to this project. According to Max Strassfeld in “Transing Religious Studies,”

I am not just interesting in asking about the all-too-familiar ways that religion is hostile to trans people, a question that seems to assume conflict. Rather, I ask us to consider the *processes* by which white religious subjects, traditions, spaces, and communities are cisgendered—in other words, are both rendered hostile to trans people and articulated through cisgendered logic (Strassfeld 44).

Feelings of discomfort, through the expressed articulation of cisgendered bodies, in religious spaces and rhetoric can still have negative effects on trans identity formation and wellbeing. That is, rather than expressing hostility towards trans people, many religious spaces ignore the possibility of queer identities completely by designing them according to cisgendered logic of space-making. Furthermore, context must also be taken into consideration when articulating how religious spaces and discourses ignore trans and gender nonconforming identities. Whether precise vocabulary is unavailable or hierarchal factors restrict certain types of speech, the operations of the space and those in discussion matter the most for racial and class solidarity. The struggle for black trans liberation over the years was less a struggle for participation in dominant spaces and hierarchies, and more a struggle for articulation and visibility in nondominant discourse against oppressive structures.

Kelly Brown Douglas, a theologian, in *Sexuality in the Black Church* (1999), discusses power and how it functions within black churches and the state institutionally. Furthermore, Douglas understands institutional power not as top-down, but as lateral systems in which each participant negotiates how much authority one gives and receives. However, these power negotiations are not always equal. Citing Michel Foucault, Douglas approaches disciplinary power, or how one exercises “constraints over body and conscience of individuals... compels people to behave in certain ways” (Douglas 21). The institutional production and enforcement of rules and regulations, justified using ideologies, could therefore realize power at various levels of society. She describes how institutional

discourse management, or what can be said, operates hierarchal systems of dominant (white) power:

Power is realized through the production of certain forms of knowledge—a process Foucault calls the “will to knowledge”— and the careful deployment of this knowledge through public discourse. Discursive power is crucial to Foucault’s analysis. What is considered proper or improper conduct, licit or illicit behavior, is communicated through discourse. Such social discourse is transmitted through educational, family, religious, and other social institutions. Discourse has two interrelated tasks. It not only establishes proper conduct, but it so doing implies that those who fall outside of acceptable behavioral standards are at best pariahs, at worst inferior beings (Douglas 22).

In this regard, managing and manipulating discourse, by enforcing the rules of such discourse through weak labor laws, allows actors within hierarchal (capitalist) institutions to have greater say in what can and cannot be permitted within those systems. Queer people, as a matter of having always existed in black churches and black communities, lacked the power to influence or question openly gender binary and heteronormativity because homophobia was often enforced using physical violence, the penal system, or mental health institutions. All of which are powers centralized in the state either through tax-payer funding, tax incentives for private companies to carry out state functions, or through absences in legal protections for queer folks.

Extracting further from Douglas’s writing, we see that effective change in religious discourse questions *why* religious spaces uphold the gender binary, applying a “bottom-up” approach to the ways in which people shift religious ideology. “If the way persons relate to one another on the microlevels of society is altered, then the way power is institutionalized will also be changed” (Douglas 20). Indeed, here Douglas seeks to fundamentally dismantle how theological interpretations of gender and sexuality uphold systems of racial supremacy at the group and local levels. She offers an alternative to the intolerance sexually transgender and gender nonconforming people face from homophobic members in black communities as they also deal with the structural violences caused by the state.

Even when we talk about engendered religious spaces, whether maleficent or benign, we open up the discussion to criticism. How can we expect everyone to understand all relevant cultural developments when everyone has individual lives facing different abilities and problems on their own? Maybe some well-intended people lack the time and resources to learn everything there is to know about gender and sexuality. In the context of Protestant Christianity, the interpretation of binary gendered logic in the Bible has persisted for so long that those steeped in Christianity may not fundamentally understand how transgressive gender identities work. But that does not mean they are intolerant. Nevertheless, the original logic still makes it into religious spaces because it is internalized as status-quo, and change is difficult when everyone not is on the same page regarding a particular matter. This is what constitutes the hegemonic order also understood as whiteness.

The liberal train of thought often places the burden on “well-intentioned” cisgender folks to articulate, and articulate well, the vocabularies of transgender identities in spaces meant for spiritual contemplation away from day-to-day life. But for the reasons mentioned before, homophobic Christians tend to voice their intolerance much louder and engage in capitalism more than anti-racist Christians who are open to constructive debates about gender when confronted with slight discomfort. This situation poses another problem completely. How do we bring to the forefront those willing to expand old interpretations of gender, but unwilling or unable to seriously question the logic of binary gender categories? Ryki Aoki delivered this statement at the 2016 AWP (Association of Writers & Writing Program) on Magical Realism, Magic, and Trans identity,

Existing religions, however, do not do a very good job of explaining why sex and gender exist. God creates man, then woman, But *why*? Somewhere between “and then there was light” and “yo, don’t eat pork, and go circumcise yourselves” was the man and woman thing. Male and female happened—but WHY do they happen? Cis folks don’t really notice this omission—since they don’t tend to question their gender so much. Even if we are not actively questioning, trans bodies themselves are artifacts of a paradox—an omission—that indicates an extraordinary deficiency in these religions—for to account for trans and genderqueer identity requires a more nuances origin tale than merely acknowledging dichotomy. Why were we made? (Aoki, 2016)

As Aoki so precisely articulates, many Christians fail to scrutinize the existence of the gender binary because they remain limited to their own logic. It therefore omits any possibility of even approaching something other than what it has established for itself. There is a discrepancy, however. Different religious thinkers and leaders have different tools available, so it is important to understand the cultural and class context in which the individual operates. Trans scholars in religion, who also exist in cultural and political society, not only call for trans-inclusive language but for fundamental changes to the way gender itself is spoken about and understood in spaces meant to be inclusive. This begins primarily when black cisgender men and women question the gender constructions they mold onto themselves and grapple with the meaning of binary gender formations on the colonized and enslaved.

Ultimately, fundamental changes to the way gender and sexuality are understood and imposed in black churches offer a positive contribution to the black community as a whole. Since homophobia and intolerance arguably affect everyone negatively—men, women, gay, straight, and trans—the risk of radically shifting gender vocabulary away from just “man” and “woman” in religious spaces would also mean radically shifting the way black people interact with one another and understand difference. It would better pronounce class inequalities as oppose to dividing people of the black working-class with cultural differences. Jane Ward explains it thusly,

Let me be clear. Homophobic violence happens—to young people and adults, to women, men, and trans people. It happens to straight people when they are gender variant and/or are presumed to be queer. And it happens most harshly to queer people of color and poor and working-class queers. In all cases, it is tragic. The ideas behind the popular 2010 “It Gets Better” campaign—namely, that queer kids can expect to grow up, become autonomous, make money, and discover their entitlement and civil rights—were critiqued, for good reason, for eliding the persistent race, class, and gender disparities that shape the lives of many queer people. (Ward 5).

Breaking from binary gender vocabulary in religious spaces, and in society in general, poses a threat not only to homophobic individuals, but also to nondominant oppression. It disrupts the logic pertinent to homophobia more generally because gender variance inherently obfuscates the

hierarchical nature of sexual categorization. Concurrently, capitalist institutions and the state incorporate trans vocabularies alongside cisgendered ones, but they will almost always do so only including (white) trans people into the existing hegemonic order.²⁰ This could breed more discontent between class and racialized groups since economic inequality still exists. Theological reinterpretations of gender and sexuality would at least abrade the extent to which new forms of intolerance going forward reaches back into the black community. Softening the socially constructed differences between people of the working-class could further highlight the political and economic differences between political and economic classes.

On Addressing Black Death from within the Black Church

Theologians such as Kelly Brown Douglas and James Cone, to name a few, often cite the “black church” in reference to the version of organized black Christianity they criticize for not addressing black death properly, but they do so in different ways.²¹ Black death, or the ongoing violence targeting either directly or indirectly black people that often result in immediate death or long-term health issues, is often justified in the United States by law enforcement and other racists. The black church, as a categorical distinction, can be deployed euphemistically as an ideal political coalition amongst black churches against white hegemony over Christianity. Every black Christian church leader or thinker who sets out to address black death does so using the tools they have at their disposal.

According to Elijah Ward in “Homophobia, Hypermasculinity and the US Black Church,” the idea of a unitary “black church” can also generate negative stereotypes about black people: that black people are homophobic, religiously single-minded, and generally intolerant of progress when

²⁰ See “Trans troops, recruits celebrate new Pentagon rule allowing them to serve openly.” PBS News Hour. March 31, 2021. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/trans-troops-recruits-celebrate-new-pentagon-allowing-them-to-serve-openly>

²¹In this regard, the “black church” is actually plural and can understood to be the predominantly black churches where black Christians interpret their grievances, find common identity with one another, and generate community-based dialogue, amongst other functions.

deployed by anti-religious or anti-black proponents (Ward 495). T.D. Jakes, and his virulent homophobia and misogyny, represents a negative stereotype of this concept. Douglas and Cone on the other hand represent a break to the negatives stereotypes because they seek to bring what they saw as marginalized identities at the time and radical politics to the foreground of their work. Although some theological interpretations of gender and sexuality may lack the specific terminologies of trans identities, as varying contexts demand sympathetic readings, their solutions to black death almost always consider class power dynamics. It would be unreasonable to assume that black theologians who understood their message to be constructive and radically transformative were also intolerant of nonnormative gender identities, or if they were, that their opinions on gender mattered.

For example, Douglas responds to womanist theologians who failed to confront homophobia and heterosexism in black religious communities. She places her criticism within context of the deadly HIV/AIDS epidemic following the passing of her close friend Lloyd who died from HIV/AIDS complications. Moreover, the response she was given by some black preachers was that homosexuals, “have no business engaging in the sinful behaviors that lead to AIDS” (Brown 3). Douglas describes Lloyd as a “sissy,” someone who had different interests compared to the other boys in their community. Lloyd could have been gay or, from Douglas’s description, he could have also been trans, non-binary, or gender nonconforming, but that language had not become standard at the time of her writing. By the time Lloyd died, they had become alienated by their church community and by their black community in general due to having the stigmatized status of HIV/AIDS. Stigma, Robert Peterson points out in “When Secrets Hurt: HIV Disclosure and the Stress Paradigm,” “is a social force that often causes strong emotional reactions associated with disgust and fear that affects persons’ lives... Attitudes regarding stigma are often internalized, adapted, and realized by individuals. As a result, individuals in highly stigmatized

groups are more likely to experience low levels of integration and higher rates of stressors—which, in turn, increase levels of nondisclosure and result in negative well-being” (Peterson 300).

The lackluster response from the black community on Lloyd’s death was unsatisfactory for Douglas, and rightfully so. She demanded some type of reckoning with the black church’s widespread homophobia at the time. She states,

Because Lloyd was quite simply one of the best human beings I have ever had the pleasure of knowing, I can no longer sit quietly by and let him be ridiculed or castigated. I can no longer use childhood as an excuse for being silent when others slur his name by association, and impugn his worth as a human being. I cannot be a silent bystander and permit Black church people to condemn him and other gay and lesbian persons, consigning them to death by way of AIDS. That I had to break my theological silence on this matter... (Brown 3).

Douglas’ theological journey took into account her place within the church hierarchy and the challenges contingent with seeking change within “the master’s house.”²² I believe that even though Douglas did not directly orient her message for trans people, similar to our earlier discussion linking homophobia and transphobia, her work opened the door for the kind of analysis I do here. She was nevertheless doing that work before more precise language of queer terminologies became culturally mainstream. She expressed an early willingness to deconstruct the black church’s binary gender construction, reinforcement of dominant categories, and racial expectations that ultimately damage all members in the black community. In fact, Douglas directs her criticisms towards heterosexism and heteronormativity, which is very much in line with where trans scholars today direct their criticisms.

In comparison to Douglas’s attempts in the 1990s to transform church logic, James Cone in *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) wrote about black liberation from a class-conscious perspective. The problem he reflected on in the preface to the 1989 edition (amidst the HIV/AIDS epidemic) states,

²² Douglas borrows this phrase from Audre Lorde’s full quote, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” (Douglas 19).

As in 1969, I unfortunately still see today that most white and black churches alike have lost their way, enslaved to their own bureaucracies with the clergy and staff attending endless meetings and professional theologians reading learned papers to each other, seemingly for the exclusive purpose of advancing their professional careers.... African-American ministers and theologians should know better than lose themselves in their own professional advancement, as their people, especially the youth, are being destroyed by drugs, street gangs, and AIDS. More black youth are in jails and prisons than in colleges and universities. Our community is under siege; something must be done before it is too late. If there is to be any genuine future for the black church and black theology, we African-American theologians and preachers must develop the courage to speak the truth about ourselves...(Cone xxvii)

It would be hard to argue against Cone's radical claims and what he calls black church leaders to do in response to the ongoing black death he sees going on around him. Cone's call to radically change how the black church functions at a fundamental level marks an early effort to deconstruct standard church teachings. In the 1989 preface, he even admits to being limited by the language available to him at the time of writing his original work, "I recognize today, as I did then, that *all* attempts to speak about ultimate reality are limited by the social history of the speaker. Thus, I would not use exactly the same language today to speak about God that I used twenty years ago. Times have changed and the current situation demands a language appropriate for the problems we now face" (Cone xxvii).

Cone also later admits to using sexist language in *Black Theology & Black Power* in the 1989 preface and he apologizes profusely. He states, "When I read my book today, I am embarrassed by its sexist language and patriarchal perspective. There is not even one reference to a woman in the whole book! With black women playing such a dominant role in the African-American liberation struggle, past and present, how could I have been so blind?" (Cone xxvii). I struggle to critique Cone for originally omitting queer-inclusive language in his 1969 classic because he corrects himself later on and expresses much regret. Him being open to changing his own beliefs reminds us that critical thinkers and established ideas are fallible, but not inflexible. These omissions alone do not constitute abandoning someone's ideas outright. In fact, ideological growth is essential for combatting nondominant intolerance and including more people into black liberation projects. Cone continues,

“We must never forget what we once were lest we repeat our evil deeds in new forms. I do not want to forget that I was once silent about the oppression of women in the church and the society” (Cone xxix). This statement alone should represent how black churches could come to terms with their history of silence on gender variation going forward.

I recognize too that criticism of an individual and critique of an individual's ideas, assumptions, and theological positions perform affectively different tasks. Criticism denotes negative judgement of someone's character; while critique provides a descriptive and balanced judgement on someone's analysis of an idea and its limitations. Regarding James Cone, I as a non-Christian, disagree with his Christian-centric positions, but I recognize the merits his position has for many black people who are Christian, including queer and trans people. He has also been critiqued for over-generalizing the impact Christianity has in the pan-African context. According to one such critique of Cone's work by theologian Jakub Urbaniak,

in his theological thinking, Cone fails to privilege African people, in their actual existential conditions, as subjects of history. There is no doubt he associates context and theology (Antonio 2018). But he falls short of his own standards when it comes to bringing to the fore and doing justice to those cultural and religious aspects of Africanness that connect the transatlantic contexts in which black people's humanity is denied and commodified. Telling in this context is the fact that indigenous culture and religion do not feature in Cone's (1979:179) understanding of the oneness of the 'black world' and its common historical option. Reading between the lines of Cone's black theology (BT), one gets the impression that while Christianity, including the preferential option for the poor and the promise/task of liberation, has a universal potential to unite, culture (Africanness) constitutes the principle of individuation, if not division. (Urbaniak 3)

I think that if his ideas are to be adapted to a much broader audience, one needs to consider his inability to seriously conceptualize non-Christian, gender-queerness and non-heterosexual sexuality in any of his most recent works published up to the 2000s before he died.

Theologians like Douglas, Cone, and many others (Victor Anderson and Monica Coleman for example) who are troubled by racial violence and speak from where they are, do so to combat white supremacy. So I would not categorize their trans-exclusive language as explicit. Unlike religious

leaders like T.D. Jakes who are explicitly intolerant of nonnormative identities, class-conscious religious thinkers on race ultimately account for trans bodies regardless of how they deploy specific vocabularies. I would argue that there is a hard difference in the way omission is being deployed since both groups have rather different (very much opposite) political projects. The two camps speak differently, and class plays a major part in shaping how their ideologies influence that language. T.D. Jakes is worth financially much more than Douglas and Cone combined.²³ He speaks to black people interested in attaining wealth and remaining uninterested in criticizing existing economic and political systems. Theologians like Douglas and Cone, on the other hand, speak from a working-class background to those searching for black liberation and the destruction of capitalist hierarchies installed by the United States political system.

Although Douglas and Cone are institutionally backed, both located at Union Seminary and affiliated with large Protestant denominations, I could not critique them for their criticisms of institutions.²⁴ I even struggle critiquing Jakes since he is very honest about what he promotes in his sermons. He also does not mislead his followers. They are all objectively “institutionalized,” in that they are financially supported by institutions, they are not the sole proprietors of the institutions in which they operate. I disagree with much of what Jakes says in particular and some of what Douglas and Cone write too, but I avoid undervaluing what any of them have contributed to their respective communities. All of these individuals represent themselves within a hierarchy based on white supremacy, but they are not individually responsible for systemic racism or intolerance. And I think a similar sentiment can be applied to other black figures or activists calling for change on behalf of the black community. I think that by expecting individuals to be perfectly ideological complicates what one person can reasonably accomplish. For example, T.D. Jakes, a misogynist and homophobe,

²³ In fact, as of March 2021, T.D. Jakes is getting ready to purchase 132 acres of land outside Atlanta for a private real estate venture. See, “Pastor T.D. Jakes in negotiation to buy huge amount of land in Atlanta.” WSB-TV2 Atlanta. March 19, 20221. <https://www.wsbtv.com/news/local/atlanta/pastor-td-jakes-negotiation-buy-huge-amount-land-atlanta/MDU4QNMSMNGSPCE4DVA6VX5WVM/>

²⁴ Douglas is Dean of Episcopal Divinity School at Union Seminary and priest in the Episcopal Church, and Cone was a professor at Union Seminary and priest in the African Methodist Episcopal Church

runs an outreach programs aimed at testing, treating, and offering counsel to people with HIV/AIDS through his Potter's House Ministry.²⁵ Not that this compensates for his homophobia, but we must ask how we judge people for their actions versus what they say.

Considering the general economic and social contexts of black people living in the United States, especially those of the working-class, then we also have to consider the lengths to which anyone in their position would go to ensure they have a better life for themselves and their families or risk falling behind. So I cannot critique Douglas and Cone for working within a racist institution since they too are limited to the options offered to black people in a white supremacist society. Their seeking professional stability within these institutions corresponds with them also speaking truth to said power in the best way they can, through their writing and through teaching. Critiquing their individual ideologies, or what vocabulary limits them, are rather unimportant since organic grassroots activism is arguably the most important part in building radical political struggles (Davis 4).

²⁵ See. "T.D. Jakes Opens Potter's House For Free HIV Testing On World AIDS Day." Atlanta Daily World. Dec 4, 2013. <https://atlantadailyworld.com/2013/12/04/t-d-jakes-opens-potters-house-for-free-hiv-testing-on-world-aids-day/>

Section III: Resolutions To Be Made Together

Get the fuck off my block
 You're raising my rent prices...
 Wearing the death of my ancestors
 On your breath like vultures

—Bianca Guzman, “Gentrification”
BX Writers Anthology Vol.1

Erasure from public spaces and discourse manifests differently for each black transgender person based on how one is perceived in gendered spaces. Exclusive religious rhetoric, gender-segregated bathrooms, misgendering, and exclusion from public policy are all methods by which state and capitalist institutions further exclude already marginalized black bodies. By promoting heterosexuality and binary gender constructions as normal, these existing systems demand greater attention and resources since they are seen as the only legitimate modes of living. Although concrete micro and macro changes have been achieved by trans activists in attempting to redefine exclusionary spaces, violence targeting black trans people continues on an upward trajectory (Huag, 2021). In part, this phenomenon is due to state policies that make it acceptable for transphobic individuals to cause harm to trans people without facing accountability. This section offers solutions to these problems that could be made by transgender, genderqueer, and nonconforming folks through anarchism on the ground level along with key interventions black churches could make in support of queer livelihoods and political action against the state.

Elis L. Herman in “Tranarchism: transgender embodiment and destabilization” defines anarchy as “a political philosophy of opposition to the state, capitalism, and the hierarchy and inequality begotten of these institutions.” Also, “opposition to all forms of systemic and individual oppression and coercion, which are ultimately products of state and economic dominance” (Herman 76). Some anarchists live gender-queer/transgressive lives and some transgender people identify as anarchists. So when discussing anti-trans violence in “public” spaces it is important to

consider how the state and capitalist institutions construct our environments to produce discrimination and violence against particular groups and identities. Anarchistic societies, or spaces separate from capitalism, do not exist in the United States longterm or successfully because they are suppressed by state and economic institutions either violently or through manipulation of auxiliary factors such as supply chain disruptions or criminalization of nonstandard living.

In order to examine the relevance of transgender relations to religious spaces meant for community organization, one thing must be made clear. Although not all transgender people identify as anarchists, in order to live their preferred gender identities, transgender people “interact with psychomedical and legal institutions in specific ways that non-transgender (‘cisgender’) individuals do not” (Herman 80). This can be read as a form of anarchism in its embodied opposition to the state, but even this claim is a generalized reading. For instance, it does not consider the interests of trans and non-binary sex workers who may not be as interested in dismantling the state. Nevertheless, “anarchy,” in this reading, is less a self-identifying political category and more akin to a lifestyle individuals fall into when left outside the state’s ability to articulate them,

Cisgender people typically move through their lives without finding it necessary to question or alter gender information on identification documents such as birth certificates, passports, or driver’s licenses. In contrast, transgender people must negotiate complex, contradictory requirements of various levels of government to achieve congruence between gender presentation and legal documentation of sex. And for ‘non-binary’ people whose gender identities and expressions lie outside of the two legal options, documentation remains unchangeably inaccurate. These issues, as uniquely common to trans lives, are fundamental to examining the relationship of gender to the state. (Herman 78).

Much of black Christian discourse in that way, while not holding the powers of the state, still operate with the belief in the existence or significance of supernatural beings, thus a belief in a hierarchy based on human and divine authority.

But as Nicolas Walter lays out in “Anarchism and Religion,” “Beliefs about the nature of the universe, of life on this planet, of this species, of purpose and values and morality, and so on, may

be independent of beliefs about desirability and possibility of liberty in human society. It is quite possible to believe at the same time that there is a spiritual authority and that there should not be a political authority” (Walter 280). As demonstrated in the previous section, transgender individuals and groups against oppressive state and capitalist systems can work alongside black church leaders to demand or force change given they have similar anti-statist goals. Although anarchy rejects hierarchies and capitalist states, individuals with similar interests can organize and together so long as political movements are clearly articulated through class solidarity that makes universal policies to benefit all the poor and working-class.

Trans erasure from public spaces and discourse can therefore be read not only as an act of intolerance based on religious interpretation of proper sexual behavior, but also an act of political and economic interest depending on the circumstances. From an economic austerity standpoint, the erasure of trans identities means institutions would not have to expend resources accommodating the specific needs of transgender people. Erasure, while not directly harmful, erodes an individual’s personal identity and how they relate to spaces designed for conformity. Erasure is not a trivial matter. When given proper grease, churches can make positive ‘checks’ to state abuses of power against marginalized people, as it has often done (Walter, 2015).

The continued engagement between black trans people and religious institutions, even in anti-institutional and sometimes anarchistic projects, embodies a sense of desire to maintain an organized spiritually-minded counter-balance to state and capitalist institutions. But the church must be checked too. As Kelly Brown Douglas writes,

The Black church must move toward a ministry that is more responsive to the complex issues of Black living. Such a ministry is not based upon the charismatic personality of one individual. Instead, it empowers the community it serves to actively participate, sharing the skills, in a ministry of life and wholeness for Black men and women. (Douglas 140)

How do we take into account some of the holistic ways black churches can positively extend themselves to trans people while doing the cellular work to shift overall theological interpretations

and undo years upon years of exclusionary biblical language? I say, not coming from the perspective of a theologian, black churches at the micro-level must help mediate conflict between families torn apart by homophobia and exclusionary interpretations of biblical text. As community-facing entities churches must also reckon with the hidden prejudices, those disguised in “morality,” that may not be so apparent to the public. And lastly, black churches must accept some of the damage it has caused to queer individuals in general, especially as they gain mainstream visibility. Churches must also avoid misinterpreting genderqueer and trans artistic expressions involving religion as a sign of confrontation against religion itself which could further develop cultural divisions amongst the black working-class.

Bathrooms Bills, another place for church intervention

The “bathroom bills” debate on transgender bathrooms access, of which there are two opposing camps, embodies the convergence of state and capitalist systematization, policing, and calls for respectable “morality.”²⁶ The debate also functions from a liberal perspective as a rallying cry against conservative identity politics, but not against capitalist economic policy. Particularly liberal absorption and regurgitation of leftist politics dilutes and launders what is actually being called for and I caution black churches from organizing around liberal versions of inclusionary politics that privileges dominant voices. McKenzie Wark states in an editorial on e-flux,

Nothing ever comes of “debate” with those who think we aren’t people. Nothing except a hardening of identities on both “sides,” premised entirely on opposition to being negated by the other. Worse, the politics of a reactive transphilia then yokes “us” together as trans people so that our differences among ourselves are suppressed in the name of opposition to a common enemy, and so only the dominant forms of trans-ness end up being acknowledged. Bourgeois culture loves a clash of representatives. And it loves to present the “sides” to the “debate” as equivalent. It’s always about representatives speaking for others, in “debate” with other representatives, speaking for the other to those others. Those of us merely

²⁶ See The phrasing of “bathroom bill,” is a highly contentious phrase. Strassfeld notes, “I am not the first to critique the phrase “bathroom bills.” The ACLU refers to these bills as anti-transgender bills. ACLU, “Anti-LGBT Religious Exemption Legislation across the Country,” accessed July 3, 2016” (Strassfeld 39, footnote 10).

represented become a market segment. Entire platforms are now designed to monetize this. (Wark, e-flux)

To avoid playing into the politics of representation, I propose black churches really reach out and engage with transgender, gender nonconforming, and non-binary identities to form coalitions that reject state and capitalist institutions from undoing progress through cooptation. It is not enough to teach tolerance in the church, people in black church communities must engage and communicate with trans people so that they are seen as real living people, not just abstract concepts or bodies to be incorporated into church politics.

The black-and-white nature of the debate is not an unintentional byproduct of black-and-white politics, but a necessary discourse that hierarchal institutions such as universities, companies, and state governments deploy to position themselves as legitimate third parties (or social or civil institution intended to mediate between individuals, communities, and the state) with decision-making powers. Scholar in trans theory Marquis Bey in *Them Goon Rules* (2019) provides the leftist position of the bathroom debate thusly,

The bathroom debate makes it plain that the public toilet is a fertile political site because it is a unique space in which many social regimes converge: regulation of the gender/sex binary, disciplining of disability, regulation of bodies of Color, and, broadly speaking, dictation of who is welcomed in public space... The discourse often goes, “We need to stop these predatory men in dresses from preying on our daughters, wives, and mothers.” The crux of the backlash to more inclusive restrooms is the sanctity of (white) cis womanhood...In other words, here’s the deal: the conservative, right-wing mania about trans women gaining access to women’s bathrooms to sexually harass or terrorize cis women is bullshit because the overwhelming majority of the violence done to women, sexual and non-sexual, occurs in the home at the hands of cis men, and trans women are far more likely to be the ones harassed. The fantasy of the trans predator is one conjured by the dominant narrative of how we understand a masculine propensity for violence, and is an indication of our inability to imagine trans women as women who are subject to many of the same kinds of sexual and gendered vulnerabilities as the very women folks are railing about. The fixation on safety, while surely we want a safer world for women who have a history of being subject to gendered violence, is disingenuous and obscures the pervasiveness of violence against queer, trans, and femme people, *overwhelmingly committed by cis men*, that occurs outside the politically charged space of the public restroom (Bey 89).

In a study conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality (2015), 12% of transgender people were verbally harassed in public restrooms, 1% were physically attacked, 1% were sexually assaulted, and nine percent were denied access completely.²⁷ Inaccessibility could also lead trans people to attempt suicide by up to 45 percent (Lopez, 2015; Khazan, 2016).

I would expand on Bey's remarks by also considering class dynamics and how capitalist and state institutions pool resources in ideological "debates" like these to soften radical demands. Liberals, who must reactively respond to conservatives, distinguish the bathroom "debate" itself as an isolated matter because the discussion is not held constructively with the Christian-right anyways. Instead, the debate is held with administrators who condescendingly never seem to have the power nor the resources to make the changes that are being demanded.

The left-vs-right dichotomy in public discourse ignores the many ways in which top-down hierarchies succeed in diverting attention away from their abusive patterns especially regarding spaces regarding essential functions. The hardest part in making these spaces more inclusive does not originate in convincing homophobes to be more tolerant, but in focusing on the means by which intolerant voices are given unequal decision-making powers. In many instances, these voices are given the powers of the state, such is the case with Mississippi HB 1523 (also called the Religious Liberty Accommodations Act or Protecting Freedom of Conscience from Government Discrimination). "The language of Mississippi HB 1523 invokes religion both obliquely and explicitly...The conflation between conscience, morality, and religion implicitly characterizes those



An image I took of the "All Gender" Restroom located just outside the office I wrote my thesis from, located in the Syracuse University Native American Building. It is also the only restroom on the floor

²⁷ See Trotta, 2016

that oppose the bill as lacking morality or conscience (and by extension, religion). In the opposition between trans and religion, therefore, trans bodies become inherently amoral or irreligious” (Strassfeld 41,42). Conversely, bills like Mississippi HB 1523, when given such broad language position “religion,” or Protestantism more specifically, as anti-trans which then leads to the assumption that religion is inherently intolerant. Unless black churches distinguish themselves explicitly from this politically-driven rhetoric, those seeking structural radical change will continue to view black churches as part of the overall structural problem.

By normalizing such debates from the left as inherently anti-conservative, instead of anti-institutional, are we then *surprised* when ideologically conservative men and women are unable to contextualize and constructively engage with the issue if they view it as an attack on their livelihoods (Ward 2020, p.72)? Strategically speaking, no. Hierarchical institutions pose an even greater threat to radical politics due to their ability to absorb discourse and deploy power in determining how reform takes place. As Yve Laris Cohen states in “Models of Futurity,”

The bathroom is one of the primary sites where I’ve experienced violence as a trans person; I haven’t been incarcerated or deported or homeless, for example. I can see how bathroom accessibility might be a very low or non-priority for many of my transfeminine and people of color comrades who experience regular, systemic threats to their lives through many other vectors. Additionally, waging an all-gender restroom campaign almost invariably involves heavy engagement with an institution—be it a School, a museum, or a local government. In many cases, heavy engagement means heavy begging (e.g., “Please allocate resources in next year’s budget to build an all-gender restroom with wheelchair accessibility). (Spade 327).

Since these decisions take place in the form of neoliberal inclusionary politics pretending to be the product of general consensus, discrimination and anti-trans violence is still allowed to take place but without all the critical feedback; where dissatisfaction is directed at the slow bureaucratic process, not the reasons why they move so slow. Moreover, even when institutions make space for all-gender restrooms, they look less like invitations to transgender and nonbinary people (many of which are poor, undocumented, or incarcerated) and more like performances of inclusivity that allow institutions to avoid making access more affordable to transgender folks at a structural level.

While transgender people are specifically targeted by anti-trans bathroom legislation that cite religion or morality, non able-bodied and other vulnerable populations are also negatively affected by pro-heteronormative (often neoliberal) politics.²⁸ Vulnerable populations that intersect with trans bodies, such as homelessness and disabilities, are often pushed to the sidelines of liberal anti-trans bathroom debates since calls to construct truly all-inclusive bathrooms would require lasting structural changes that would demand significant resources, especially if they are going to genuinely accommodate people of all abilities, class, and religious practices. As Yve Cohen states,

In the early 1990s and early 2000s, trans bathroom organizing wasn't entwined with mainstream trans visibility and media representation in the way it's now become so deeply enmeshed in less than a year's time. We used to be on the offense, pushing for lasting architectural changes to our institutions. Now, anti-trans bathroom legislation is a de facto legal avenue for conservatives to go after us. And this is where we find ourselves in a neoliberal trap. We're on the defensive, asserting our *right* to use whichever existing gendered bathroom "fits" us best. The bathroom fight is no longer about willing a radical futurity, building new spaces for our shit and cum and piss that look and feel different from the old ones. We're assuring lawmakers and voters that we—particularly transwomen, who are *always* on the front lines—are not a threat to the safety of cis children in these shitty existing bathrooms. "Safety" has always been about the maintenance of white supremacy. (Spade 328).

I argue that engagement with state and capitalist institutions over the inclusion all-gender bathrooms, if also excluding how these institutions contribute to poverty, will only ever reach to the level of representation that privileges able-bodied interactions with essential spaces. Institutions that create the illusion of inclusivity, relegating trans people to a space, still accommodates binary colonial gender categories that elicit the logic of white supremacy.²⁹ In order to build real "trans-inclusive" spaces from the ground-up, we must find ways to dismantle binary gender categories completely, or risk falling into the endless trap of fighting for surface-level representation.

²⁸ Capone, Drew. "Water and Sanitation in Urban America, 2017-2019." *AJPH Open-Themed Research*, 1567.

²⁹ I make this claim in accordance to C. Riley Snorton. He states, "Masculinist sensibilities that would figure Afromodernist literature, according to the tenets of manhood rights, necessitated a symbolic rearrangement of black women's figurations. From this view, 'black modernity,' a phrase that adjoins modernity to its defining negation, constructing blackness as antimodern and as its capacitating void, also carries a distinctly trans dimension, revealing how gender for the black and blackened takes on an anagrammatical quality, subject to reiterative rearrangement. Reading invocations of the black maternal in *Three Negro Classics* highlights the transivities of blackness, 'sex,' and 'gender' in the afterlives of slavery, even as it also indexes the persistent relevance of flesh within modernity's 'cruel ruse' in which, as Alexander Weheliye had argued with regard to modern law, 'subjects must be transformed into flesh before being granted the illusion of possessing a body.'" (Snorton 2017, p135)

The area where black churches can critically intervene is in radically shifting biblical interpretations of gender in order to subvert anti-trans legislation that incite intolerance citing religious freedom. In so doing, black churches interested in dismantling white supremacy can distinguish themselves from intolerant proponents and hierarchal systems that cater to (white) heteronormative expectations of black respectability. Religion does not have to be cisgendered to achieve radical change. As Strassfeld states,

Must religion be cisgendered? If we accept the underlying assumption that religion and trans bodies are in some way mutually incompatible, we inherit a deeply impoverished discipline and collude with the same logics that govern the regulation of trans bodies; the creation of publics as white, able-bodies, and sex-segregated spaces; and cosmologies that write trans people out of existence... If trans/religion is an oxymoron, we recapitulate religion as anachronistic, hostile to women, and solely misogynistic, thus preserving secularism as the realm of neoliberal choice and “progress.” In short, if we do not trans religion, we remain complicit in a logic that diminishes the possibilities of how we understand both trans and religion. (Strassfeld 53)

My point being that organized religion and trans politics can work together towards dismantling racial hierarchies even when religious language has been and is currently used to maintain such oppression. Rather than simply trying to include trans people into religious spaces and reinforcing the narrative of representation, “transing,” or invoking radical changes to gendered language within theological interpretations may prove more effective in shifting what can be accepted from the bottom-up. Ending with a quote from Walter Nicolas, “The true anarchist attitude to religion is surely to attack not faith or the Church so much as what it is in so many people that needs faith and the Church” (Nicolas 285).

Artistic Expression

In his most controversial music video “Montero,” black rapper and queer-icon Lil Nas X depicts himself in various gender non-binary forms: not completely masculine, but not completely feminine either. The music video itself deals with a lot of fantastical Roman-like, Greek-like, and Christian-

like symbolisms such as the garden of eden, a serpent, epithets written in Greek, a faun, romanesque statues, and a colosseum. Towards the middle of the video, lil Nas is depicted ascending into heaven as an angel right before descending into hell on a stripping pole. The allusion of this scene to the Harrowing of Hell when Christ descended into Hell to bring salvation to the righteous before ascending to heaven, is indisputable. Ordinarily, many on the Christian Right found the music video offensive.

Ashon Crawley in “I Grew Up Afraid. Lil Nas X’s ‘Montero’ Is the Lesson I Needed,” featured on NPR, discusses how the video’s enthusiastic embrace of Satan-as-queer helped him to reimagine his relationship to queer sexuality and black religion. He describes queer artistic expression as a political strategy thusly, “Lil Nas X works with, really metabolized and thinks with, fear. Fear that is the theologically produced and doctrinally maintained practice of power, authority, control” (Crawley, 2021). Queer artists like Lil Nas X use art to express who they are devoid of any shame. The lyrics and nondominant intentions behind the song, for example, was enough to provoke the religious right. Responding to some of the backlash, Lil Nas X tweeted on May 27, 2021,



With little room for interpretation, Lil Nas X’s tweet spoke to the heart of what happens when homophobia in black churches meet popular black queer artistic expression. Whether explicit or not, black queer expression in the art world speak from a place of internalized homophobia often

preached in churches due to theological misinterpretations of the Bible. As Don Abram put it in the article “Lil Nas X is inviting the Black church in with ‘Montero,’” on Religion News Services,

Hell is often the assumed destination of my soul as a queer Christian. According to misguided theologians, my romantic and sexual orientation is an “abomination” that warrants eternal damnation. Black preachers have asserted that torture gleefully awaits my soul — flattening my multi-dimensionality and discarding my worth beyond my failure to conform to heterosexism. Their ongoing and ominous threat of hell, weaponized for the sole purpose of forcing my conformity to heterosexuality, often left me wondering whether God loved me at all.

Essentially, straight black Christians who feel offended by such expressions have misunderstood the power dynamics. Queer art is not an attack on religion, but a defense against intolerance, discrimination, and persecution prevalent in many church teachings. Black churches should instead view these interactions as an opening because they show a willingness for queer people to continue interacting with theology and religion in transformative and creative ways. Especially due to Christianity’s strong associations with homophobia and its even stronger associations with cultural colonialism.

Criticism of religious intolerance in queer art does not necessarily mean skepticism of the supernatural or of Christianity itself. It can however mean skepticism of religious institutions that police people’s sexualities.³⁰ Transgender people, those expressing nonconformity in established black organizations such as the church, are primarily interested in fundamentally rearranging the relationship between gender and the state, not in dismantling their own community organizations. Cathy Cohen writes, “These individuals are not fully or completely defining themselves as outsiders or content with their outsider status, but they are also not willing to adapt completely or conform. The cumulative impact of such choices is possibility the creation of spaces or counter publics,

³⁰ From Page, Enoch, “The fact that this refinement called civility emerges during the bourgeois-managed slave trade is no accident. One of its political economic aims was to emotionally distance resource-entitled European colonizers from disenfranchised, untitled, and racialized non-Europeans. Given this history of resource exploitation and the controlled expression and sexuality of racialized labor in the West, today’s expanded existence of Black transgenders, transsexuals, intersexed, and other gender-variant persons flies in the civil face of Western conventionality. The imposed Western standard of civility generally produces Whited national subjects who today still largely share the expectation that, in exchange for civil rights, Blacks should be disciplined by an enforcement of civility more than Whites. Such expectations and enforcement aim to trim back the political edge of Black emotional excess with razor-sharp White cultural practice” (Page 65).

where not only oppositional ideas and discourse happens, but lived opposition... is chosen daily” (Cohen 43).

Through artistic expression, trans people can feel connected to themselves, work towards wholeness, and identify with a like-minded community without all the baggage of colonial and theological persecution. Cunningham posits,

An evolutionary perspective strategizes transformation and movement regardless of whether redress is ever sought or obtained from an assailant, offender, discriminator, or abuser. An evolutionary perspective opens individual and social meaning to boundless creation, such that art, ritual, politics, community rules, and self-perception can escape hegemonic norms into wholeness (Cunningham 2010, pp. 51,53).

The evolutionary perspective in art speaks to one’s relation to hegemonic orders that both reappropriates the established order’s language while creating new cultural systems in the process. So there is some hope in the matter of representation. Art as a queer strategy of resistance not only presents tangible manifestations of what dismantling well-established power structures could look like, but art also demonstrates the malleability of what is perceived as fixed and unchangeable in dominant institutions. In the case of Lil Nas X, “Montero” shows that one could playfully interact with images and concepts considered “evil” in mainstream Christian ideology like hell and the devil. Black churches, instead of fearing what queer artists have to offer, should view queer art as an opening to engage with marginalized people who continue to interact with and offer critiques on Christianity despite being negatively affected by intolerant theologies. Black churches must come to terms with the mainstream emergence of queer art and the fact that many queer artists come from homophobic Christian backgrounds if they wish to engage in radical transformation of the state and its institutions.

However, even contemporary art proves to not be completely untethered from oppressive and racialized capitalist systems. Jeannine Tang in “Contemporary Art and Critical Transgender Infrastructures,” notes,

Today's institutions of contemporary art demonstrate a convergence of artistic position and information profiling, in which the administrative systems of artistic professional support and the production of artistic identity are reliant on forms of biopolitical population management that distribute professional life chances along gendered, racialized, national, and economic lines. The disparities of this distribution are themselves racialized patterns of systemic transphobia with which cultural infrastructures are fully interdependent. When we consider that transgender youth—especially transgender youth of color—are disproportionately homeless and experience higher levels of violence, eviction, deportation, and incarceration, we can better understand the comparatively small number of trans artists of color applying to, being admitted to, and completing art school—and subsequently gaining mainstream visibility—as symptomatic of institutional and systemic transphobia and racism. (Tang 368-369).

The use of art to call attention to unbalanced power structures, does not evade the ways hierarchal institutions use queer artists as representational pieces that still reinforce racial and gendered systems of oppression. It is much more fiscally responsible for art institutions (meaning any institution that displays art or in which art is produced) to incorporate a few impassioned transgender/genderqueer artists than it would be to fundamentally produce long-lasting change to their own organizational infrastructure. Although art can provide us a blueprint for creative imagination, as it now stands individual transgender, gender-queer, non-binary, and nonconforming artists cannot enact systemic changes without wide-scale efforts to dismantle or restructure the same oppressive institutions that brought them in.

Black churches, when they reflect oppressive hierarchal institutions, must also play a part in restructuring how they engage with queer and transgender people within their own communities. In *Making a Way Out of No Way* (2008), Monica Coleman makes it clear what black churches must do to come to terms with the realities of queer discontent with organized and oppressive Christian theologies,

When black churches condemn homosexuality, they erode the self-esteem of black gay and lesbian Christians... These churches represent a way of destruction that does not affirm a vision of justice, health, inclusion, or diversity.

Communities that affirm the religious acceptance of black gays and lesbians can function as destructive communities if they reject other types of sexual diversity. Like other areas of American society, gay and lesbian communities can be divided by race, class, gender, ability, sexual identity, and so on. Referring to transgender and

intersex individuals, [Kathi] Martin addresses a primarily black lesbian audience with these words: “It often baffles me when those of us who are already on the margins continue to divide ourselves from one another rather than celebrate and support the diversity and freedom of expression that exists among us”(Coleman 156-157).

Black Christians who condemn homosexuality in response to transgender people do so not in protest against racist institutions implicitly, as they may believe. Christians in black communities who are intolerant of difference instead hold an inaccurate perception of who the central figure to their religion actually was. In an article published in the Washington Post by religious studies scholar Reza Aslan titled, “If Rush Limbaugh and Sarah Palin don’t like the pope, they won’t care much for Jesus,” he states, “Jesus’s teachings were so revolutionary that were he to preach today what he preached 2,000 years ago, many of the same preachers and politicians who claim to promote his values would be the first to call for him to be silenced... He preached the complete reversal of the social order, wherein the rich and the poor would switch places.”

Coleman believes that black churches, in their quest for social and political justice, should also include the struggle against heterosexism with a focus on transforming theology to one that centers on black queer acceptance. The creative transformation of church theology, or “the process of teaching, healing, and loving” (Coleman 162), requires a community-led effort to demand fundamental change to our own institutions. She does not advocate for these changes to be led only by “saviors,” but through decentralized community efforts. As Coleman states,

Salvation does not come to an individual. We cannot wrestle with loss, evil, and pain on our own. We cannot attain wholeness, health, peace, and justice as individuals. Although Saviors are the individuals who lead our communities of creative transformation, a way out of no way is too much for any one woman. Saviors can rest, retire, or participate in new communities. Or perhaps the communities will outlive them. Making a way out of no way is not the Savior’s job or responsibility. The responsibility lies with all of us (Coleman 167).

Her approach is antagonistic towards the oppressive church hierarchies that exclude and preach conformity to patriarchal norms similar to the type of transanarchy defined by Herman.

Advocates of structural change and the dismantling of institutions must understand, as Coleman pointed out, how exactly black churches have already irreversibly damaged and alienated black transgender Christians in past years, the resulting generational trauma, and then come to terms with that. The notion that heterosexual black Christians need to “accept queer identities,” as opposed to heterosexual folks learning to examine the paradoxes and heterosexuality when defined by white settler-colonial social and institutional norms, places the burden of repair upon those in black communities who internalize such teachings. Instead, preachers and those administering hierarchal power structures must examine their own complicity and how they uphold hierarchies that will inevitably preserve oppressive theories of civility. Because transgender and gender nonconforming people who manage to achieve cultural visibility are given the tools and resources to criticize religious intolerance, it is now up to black churches to make up the difference and seek political solidarity or risk these criticisms falling into a secular neoliberal movement that avoids fundamentally challenging capitalism and the existence of settler-colonial states. Ultimately, if black churches wish to dismantle racist institutions, it would be in their best interests to engage rather than become irrelevant.

To conclude, we must continue asking ourselves why we seek the continuation of organized Christian institutions historically rooted in settler-colonialism and respectability politics in the United States. Given the ideological proximity organized Christianity has to capitalist institutions and the state, both of which possess the resources to make structural changes, we must continue investigating the power churches hold in constructing standard identities, its willingness to incorporate identities it once rejected, and how the inherent power dynamics found in organized Christianity uphold harmful, and flexible, state objectives. Can there be a world with Christianity and Christian communities, but without church hierarchies?

Conclusion: Moving Forward Together

How I wish to conclude my thesis is by not offering any easy solutions to the tensions between black queer identities and black churches; I believe that solutions are manifold and far too complicated for the scope of this paper. Instead, I offer a conceptual argument for looking at this issue as a project requiring creative and constructive solutions, some which are already in practice. The problems black transgender and gender nonconforming people face particularly against theological homophobia, but also against institutional disparities more generally, demand solutions that reinterpret existing ideologies for comprehensive mobilization against capitalism and its institutional proponents. Conceptualizations and visualizations of resistance in writing and in art can become realities, but these resistance efforts also risk being absorbed by cultural institutions that distribute economic resources to scholar-activists and artists alike. Obviously, there will be contradicting interests with any movement involving multiple groups and ideological perspectives, but I would not dismiss resistance taking place within the current system as ineffective.

The idea, that an ideological revolution depends upon the material revolution (destruction of state and institutional infrastructure under capitalism) is also in accordance with Karl Marx's anti-capitalist ideology. Marx stated in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) that,

With the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed. In considering such transformations a distinction should always be made between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, aesthetic or philosophic—in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as our opinion of an individual is not based on what he thinks of himself, so can we not judge of such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained rather from the contradictions of material life, from the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production.

Likewise, there are many contradictions to this issue of queer expression of religious oppression and resistance through art: administrative systems of artistic professionalism, systemic transphobia and racism, as well as access based on gender, race, nationality, and class all present very real barriers.

I am particularly drawn to a piece by queer Indigenous artist and Bronx native Leito Navarrete called *Sunday School* (2020) because it imagines chaos, or temporary disorder, as a beautiful demonstration of possibility in the brief absence of bureaucratic stability. Gender non-conformity, represented by the image of the child on the goat skull, signals positive transformation and something new forthcoming.

Sunday School not only visualized my sentiments on the queer artist's integration of political resistance and religion, but also the skills rooted in a queer rejection of established rules and beliefs in what art should represent. What is the relationship between queer artists and socio-cultural systems such as religion and the state? According to Jeannine Tang, "It is the oeuvre, or the conjunction of life and art—the fabric that folds artists into cultural systems of identity management, reproducing both the circulation of art and the life of the artist" (Tang 366). Paradoxically, queer artists, while upheld by an economic system that concurrently exploits their labor for profit and tax avoidance, might also account for the "emergent *other* worlds" (Tang 366) that the artist creates.

Sunday school visualizes Christian symbolisms colonized and postenslaved queer people of color embrace in order to represent their struggle within multiple systems of state and nondominant



Leito Navarrete. *Sunday school* on canvas using oil, spray paint, and acrylic. 2020. Syracuse University. Self-Photographed

oppression. Similar to what I strove for in my thesis, queer and transgender people can reject normalized modes of relating to order, embrace chaos and instability, demonstrate a willingness to reconstruct established norms, and reinterpret religion in unusual ways to arrive at an ideally better destination. Perhaps black churches can do the same. I cannot offer any concrete steps to overcoming how religious institutions police people's gender expressions and sexualities, but what I can offer with this thesis some assurance that things may turn out okay when we decide to reorganize the possibilities of religious functions in resisting capitalism and the oppressive state.

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Vita

Blake Garland-Tirado is a Master's of Arts student at the Syracuse University Department of Religion. They graduated in 2018 also from Syracuse University with a Bachelor's of Arts in International Relations with minors in Political Science and Jewish Studies, and completed their intermediate CEFRL French Language Certification in 2016 at l'Université de Strasbourg. Blake continues their doctoral studies in Religion at the Indiana University Bloomington beginning Fall 2021.