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Life Histories of BlackQueer Adults: Why and How They Support
BlackQueer Youth

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate School at the University of Missouri- St. Louis
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in
Education with an Emphasis in Educational Leadership & Policy Studies

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Dedication

To my angel: Marilyn Venise Webb

You are constantly on my mind and in my heart, guiding me through this thing called life
and I am forever grateful for your guiding light.

To my ancestors.

To my future child(ren), I love you and I cannot wait to meet you earth-side.

- To those who are Queer and cannot live your truth out loud, I see you and hold space for you.
- To those who are able to live authentically in your Queerness, I see you and hold space for you.
- To those Queer people who felt that the only way out of the pain was to commit suicide, I see you and hold space for you.
- To those who are Queer and have felt that the only way to endure was use addictive substances to cope, I see you and hold space for you.
- To the parental figures of children, young adults, and/or adults who were pushed away because of their sexual orientation: my heart aches for you. May you one day be able to reconcile before it is too late. I see you and hold space for you.
- To the children, young adults, and/or adults who are bullied and ostracized because of your gender expression, Transness, and/or identity, I see you and hold space for you.

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Where do I start?

God, I thank you.

The strength that I gained during these past 4 years had me calling on you more than I ever have, my faith is stronger and even more durable because it seems you were the constant denominator in getting me to this stage, it was already set in stone. Amen and Ashé.

In high school, I constantly wrote and scribbled Dr. Jvania M. Webb in my notebook and smiled because I aspired to be like my auntie, Dr. Gwendolyn C. Webb. At the start of my journey, I was told by my assigned college ready counselor in my high school that I was not smart enough to go to college let alone get my doctorate, and that I should get a simple job right after high school. My college counselor reluctantly placed me into AP standing courses after my aunt Gwen came or called up to my high school when I reported why I was not placed into certain courses. 18 years later, I have completed all of the required standards in order to be awarded with the highest degree in the world.

My grandmother Carolyn Ruth Webb gets the glory as well, she took me in when she did not have to, she was newly retired and had already raised her children, but she could not stand by and allow me to stay in foster care, well strangers homes. She along with my three paternal aunts helped to raise me.

To my grandmother (heyyy bbbbaaabbbbyyyy), brothers, sistas, TTs Babies (nieces and nephews), aunts, uncles, cousins, little cousins, friends, and coworkers; I pray that you

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understand in your heart that during this process you all helped me more than you could have known.

It was always given at the right moment and most of the time neither of you knew what I needed. I love you all.

To my maternal family, I love you and pray that one day we can alllllll get together to celebrate family members and ancestors. You all are often thought of. Auntie Nikki, thank you for being the backbone.

The start of my doctoral career would not have been possible without the support of my peeps in the Office of Accreditation Educator and Effectiveness & the College of Education for awarding me with funding during the first three years of my program; Kimberly Schroeder, Dr. Mike Bhar, Melody Zamachaj, Brian Huxtable and John Doyle. To the office of Student Enrichment & Achievement, thank you for brining me into your office for my last year, I learned so much and this will forever be entrenched in my spirit.

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me and thank you for stepping in to help me along my journey and to push me through while always being that voice of reasoning for me. Thank you for also helping me to use my voice to advocate for my needs.

I am super thankful for my committee members: Dr. Kimberly Welch, thank you for standing in the gap for me, I am forever indebted to you, and you'll have a hard time getting rid of me now! Dr. Phyllis Balcerzak, thank you for helping me to speak out my thoughts and ideas in a way that helped me and my brain understand while processing what I needed to do. Dr. Chamara Kwayke, thank you for being open to me academically stalking you and taking the time to talk me off of the ledge and for consciously reminding me that I am in charge of my destiny and how my work should look. I developed special relationships with each of you and I am forever grateful for the guidance and challenges that pushed me to my fullest potential. I thank you for all of the hard talks and nights of edits. It has turned me into a great scholar. My writing is 100000000000 times better.

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To my Social Justice Cohort, we're still ten toes down, congratulations to you all. WE

MADE IT!!

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ground when I felt like it needed to stay there and making sure to give positive reinforcements as well as constructive criticism so that I would be able to grow into my own as a scholar. Thank you for sharing your village and colleagues with me, I love you wife; you are one of my favorite persons.

To those who are reading this because you are looking for relief or respite, I thank you and I love you.

I am here.

I was already here.

Let me introduce you to Dr. Jvania Michelle Webb

Abstract

To set the tone for this qualitative study and the enriched data discovered, bell hooks (2001) says, “if we love each other and embrace our diverse sexualities, we create an environment where there is no sexuality that cannot speak its name” (p. 207). This critical narrative analysis portrays the reasons why BlackQueer adults choose to mentor and embolden BlackQueer youth. Life History methodology brought their experiences to life. Lesbian, Gay, and Gender Nonconforming (LGGNC) youth learn to conceal certain attributes associated with being Queer. They are compelled to consider and give context to their family, K-12 school personnel, and community leaders using eyes, that do not embrace their truth. Striving to attain acceptance is a matter of significance. LGGNC individuals are often subjected to a greater level of surveillance, and Black bodies have been specifically targeted (Browne, 2015; Hartman, 2019).

BlackQueer adults and youth seem to be responsible for finding their own community to belong to, while having to experience self-love and navigate relationships alone until they find other people in their community. They also have early responsibilities that other youth may not have in order to negotiate in their quest for acceptance. This study engaged Black Feminist Thought theory (e.g. Hill-Collins, 2001), to explain what it means to be Black and Queer in regards to race and gender, and the Black Queer Identity Matrix, (e.g. Howard, 2014), to give insight on sexuality and what it means to be Black and Queer in this society. Using this combination allowed me to speak and interact with foundational research, while sharing the life histories of my participants. Relearning boundaries and seeking approval from themselves instead of outside influence

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is what my participants experienced. I illuminate gaps in present research, while allowing the voices of BlackQueer youth to stand tall in their identities.

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Chapter One: Why BlackQueer Adults & Youth

BlackQueer youth in the Midwestern United States, particularly Missouri, who self-identify as Lesbian, Gay, and Gender Nonconforming (LGGNC) have been ignored, erased, and left out of suicide, homeless, drugs and alcohol data used to help organizations shift supportive programming (Rice, 2018). For example, the Children's Advocacy Day is a yearly event in Missouri where advocates, state representatives, community organizations, students, school administration, and teachers come together to learn about how to better serve local youth. Different organizations submit reports for their programs; the reports detail how their services contribute to and strengthen youth development. The data that is collected goes into the Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data, which is made up of demographics of education, family and community, economic well-being, and health (Rice, 2018). These are gathered through secondary data from various non-profit organizations and K-12 schools around Missouri. Before starting my doctoral program, I worked as support staff for an organization stationed in elementary schools, which enabled me to learn of and attend the Children's Advocacy Day event at Missouri's State Capitol. This led to my discovery that LGGNC youth, regardless of race/ethnicity, were not included demographics in the data. Meanwhile, the suicide, homicide, drug and alcohol abuse, and student dropout rates were extremely high for Black and Brown students across the state of Missouri, and particularly high in the two major cities of the state (Rice, 2018). After learning this information, I decided that I needed to look deeper into the BlackQueer demographic to see why their numbers have been disproportionately high. After I interviewed BlackQueer young adults, I learned that

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they often felt unsafe in their environments, which further explained why many were turning to various unhealthy coping mechanisms to get them through those difficulties.

According to the visual map of the United States, the city in which this research will be conducted is located at the top of the Southern states and the bottom of the Northern states, making it a complex city for the Midwestern region. This is an area where racial disparities are still severe, racism is covert enough to not cause daily problems, and the climate is full of crisis that is yet to be resolved at its root (Gordon, 2008). There is a dearth of BlackQueer youth research in the Midwestern and Southern regions of the United States, while it is plentiful on the West and East Coasts. However, white Queer youth are the subjects of the majority of research undertaken on Queer youth in general (McCready, 2004). While looking for research to help complete this study, a brick wall was hit, due to a scarcity of scholarship on BlackQueer youth, locally, nationally, and internationally.

Being a traditional teacher was never something I wanted to do; thus I chose a different path and have been a social worker at heart my entire life. Even though I majored in Sociology at Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville, the moment I stepped into a Public School, I knew that I was in the right place to be an Educational Cultural Negotiator (ECN) (Warren-Grice & Parker, 2017). An ECN is someone who advocates for students behind the scenes, often stepping in when their parents are unsure how or when to intervene. As a support staff, I was able to support children without being relegated to the classroom. I spoke up and advocated for children who were being singled out for having behaviors that evoked stereotypes associated with being Queer. While advocating for children daily as an ECN, I participated in various educational school

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meetings with parents to provide support. This school was in an urban area where the majority of Black students required additional attention and care. While doing this research, I shifted my perspective from being an ECN to what it means to be an Educational Cultural Visionary (ECV), which is Queer-specific. An ECV is a BlackQueer person that has chosen to help and support BlackQueer youth in more of a familial role, which is beyond what a typical mentor would do. They also advocate to change policies and laws that intentionally harm BlackQueer people.

Definition of Queer specific for this project

Recently, the term *BlackQueer* was introduced into scholarly work, and its purpose was to clarify that this identity was more than the surface of simply being Black and Queer, (Callier and Hill, 2019). Throughout this study, the term BlackQueer (Callier, 2018) will be used to refer to Black people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, or Gender Nonconforming (LGGNC). The intersectionality that meets these two terms show how BlackQueer people are multifaceted (Callier, 2018). This term points to the difference between Blackness and Queerness, signaling that they are both marginalized groups individually, and collectively one cannot ignore their Blackness or Queerness—they coexist. It is also important to note that the word Queer was originally used in society to refer adversely to Black women. Their unique bodies, big breasts, and enlarged buttocks did not conform to the stereotypical image of beauty of slender white women or to what white patriarchy values defined as human (Haley, 2016). Therefore, whites degraded Black women, described and viewed them as different to feel better and more superior than themselves (Green, 1998 & Yang, 2020). Later, the word Queer was used to

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describe the sexual relationships of white Gay men (Howard, 2014), and subsequently, while all people were on the front lines fighting for injustices, the movement became focused and centered on white women (Howard, 2014).

In Queer Phenomenology (Ahmed, 2006) goes through the history about how the word homosexual was historically intended to be used as a pejorative term for people who did not belong to a heteronormative society. As a result of this, individuals began to conceal their identities for fear of being shunned by family and society. The meaning of the words Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and/or Asexual (LGBTQIA) have a variety of societal connotations, however whiteness predominates in the Queer community.

To be white and Queer offers the privilege of society being tilted toward the needs of white men and women only, as evidenced by the fight for marriage equality as opposed to the fight for safety and inclusive housing for Black and Brown Queer individuals (Ahmed, 2006). Additionally, when it comes to being Black and Queer, women are most often left out of the equation (Howard, 2014). As such, this study seeks to fight against the white, patriarchal, heteronormative society that BlackQueer people have always faced. One of the ways that patriarchy harms Black and Brown Queer people is through the perception of them being abnormal and deviant (Ahmed, 2006). BlackQueer people are constantly attempting to fit into heteronormative situations and spaces to be considered and regarded as normal (Ahmed, 2006).

When Queer people decide to let others know about their sexual orientation or gender expression, it has often been referred to as “coming out” (Davis, 2021, p. 74). However, another term has been introduced for those who don’t feel it necessary to put

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their personal lives on display, called *inviting in* (NBJC, 2020). This phrase counters the *coming out* narrative and helps create boundaries for Queer people to only invite those in who help them feel safe and supported (NBJC, 2020). Overall, this study aims to be a support tool for society to start viewing BlackQueer people as human, without them having to beg for it. Youth who self-identify as Queer need to know and understand that they are equally important to those who are heteronormative.

Purpose of Study

To address Black women and men that support Black youth who self-identify as Lesbian, Gay, Gender Nonconforming (LGGNC), Life History was the best fit among other important methodologies. To explore this, several individuals were interviewed regarding how they managed to work with the Black LGGNC youth brave enough to be visible in their sexual orientation, as well as youth who need help or comfort around their feelings and emotions, and youth who deal with feeling like they were born in the wrong bodies. Society has not protected Black LGGNC youth from being demonized and ostracized (Pritchard, 2013). Therefore, it is important to hear how and why those that engage with this demographic work with this particular subset of youth. By sharing their own life stories and being able to do so in their most comfortable settings, to gain insight about how they regard themselves and their lives.

Theories used to explore this study include intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, Hill-Collins & Bilge, 2016), Black Feminist Thought (Hill-Collins, 2001), and Black Queer Identity Matrix (Howard, 2014). Each theory highlights an important aspect of the LGGNC community. These theories formed a basis through which the life histories of

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adults leading the charge in helping BlackQueer youth in an urban Midwest city will be explored. Additionally, the study examined how these adults work with BlackQueer youth in K-12 schools and communities, advocating for and protecting both themselves and the youths. Research showed that these youths having just one adult in their life who they can relate to can help reduce the suicide rates among them (Weiston-Serdan, 2017). Black Queer youth are constantly being gazed upon (Callier & Hill, 2019) to see or determine if they are good enough to be measured up against other students who are deemed special. Dying by suicide is the second leading cause of death with Black teens suicide increasing 4.82% in 2017 (Coleman, 2019). In this qualitative life history study, BlackQueer adults have been interviewed to gain an understanding of why and how they choose to mentor and invest in this particular demographic.

Additionally, this dissertation explored BlackQueer adult mentors' self-reflections on their own experiences from youth and their mental health. To support this research, Black Feminist Thought theory (Hill-Collins, 2001) encompasses intersections of what it means to be Black in terms of race, gender, and class, while Black Queer Identity Matrix provides insight into sexuality and what it means to be Black and Queer in this society (Howard, 2014). Interacting with the research of senior scholars while being inclusive of this subject area brings light to the research gap and need for future explorations of how BlackQueer youth are standing in their identities. This research is meant to inform the implementation of safe spaces, inclusive curriculum, and bullying policies for Queer students in K-12 schools.

Problem Statement

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Research focusing on BlackQueer youth in the Midwest and South is limited, while the East and West Coast has groundbreaking research. However, there are some questions about whether this existing research includes or is relevant to the Midwestern and Southern states' BlackQueer youth. Therefore, this study is focused on an urban city in the Midwestern United States. Brokenbrough (2013, 2016) has been one scholar working on the East Coast to change the conversation around BlackQueer youth. This topic and demographic are a major part of my own life's work, as I started an organization designed to mentor Black youth in Missouri that identify as Queer, titled You Are Worthy, Incorporated (YAW Inc). In the search for scholars who previously researched this demographic, findings were limited (Woodson, 2017). Through my own research I also recognized that I had been looking at mentorship from a deficit perspective; I had been trying to save Queer youth, instead of empowering them to become leaders (Callier & Hill, 2019). The organization and my work were meant to provide tools to show these youths how to save and support themselves.

In 2019, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) released a national report on Black LGBTQ youth. The report findings illustrated the magnitude of what BlackQueer youth are going through because of their sexual orientation, such as being ostracized, bullied, and/or ignored. The report highlighted that 46% of youth did not feel secure discussing their sexual orientation at home or school, 50% of transgender youth did not feel that the bathrooms they used were aligned with their identified gender, and 29% of youth felt that the way they dress reflected their identity (HRC, 2019). Some Queer youth conceal their identities out of fear of rejection or mistreatment, while others come out to their family and friends and may never have serious problems with their sexuality being discussed.

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This study identified solutions for BlackQueer youth, as well as illustrated that if this demographic is not supported emotionally and mentally, then their grades, ability to self-advocate, mental health, and livelihood will suffer over time.

Historically, Black youth have been overlooked because of the color of their skin and faced harsher disciplinary actions for school-related misbehavior than their white peers (Morris, 2016). Youth who have identified as LGGNC at school have faced similar challenges. At times, these youths are being ostracized and/or bullied for who they are and sometimes to the extent that they die by suicide (King et al., 2018). An outcome of this study provided strategies and suggestions on how adults in the school, family, and community can support youths who openly identify as Queer to help prevent and lower the rates of suicide, homelessness, and drug/alcohol abuse.

Critical Research Questions

1. Who protects and supports BlackQueer students, and what role do they play as advocates?
2. In what ways can BlackQueer adults increase liberation for BlackQueer youth?
3. In what context does intersectionality arise for Black Queer youth, and in what ways will it be helpful or harmful?

Significance of this Study

In this study, the desire is to see Blackness and Queerness celebrated, talked about, portrayed and explained in ways that may not have been previously witnessed in the Midwestern United States. Early on for many Black youth raised in Christian families, being gay is considered to be wrong and a sin against God. The Black family structure

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and Christianity carry significant weight in the Black community (Mattis, 2000). Some Black families attend church more than once a week, and when at these services, lessons from the Bible are taught with the assumption that everyone believes the same things (Mattis, 2000). Furthermore, the majority of Black families are being led by the mother (Hill, 2001), and studies show that prayer and faith are important to mothers and female adolescents (Mattis, 1997). This could mean that on top of what is taught in church, if “Mom” says that being Queer is wrong (Lewis, G. B., 2003), those in her household must abide by that. As a result, BlackQueer youth and young adults frequently deal with the internal pressures of not wanting to disappoint their mothers or maternal figures (Waldner, L. K., & Magrader, B., 1999).

In the first phase of this study, the Life History methodology was used to explore my personal journey, where details were provided about how I was raised. It was critical in this methodology that I talked about my life phases as well, because both the trauma and experiences can be used to help inform this research and analyze my participants' life stories (Callier & Hill, 2019). In the second phase of the study, I conducted one-on-one interviews with six BlackQueer participants who I personally know or have been introduced to, the purpose was to gain a better understanding of how their lives changed as a result of being Queer and how the adults in their lives supported or did not support them. The third and final phase involved the conducting of two different focus groups, the first one with BlackQueer adults, aged 26+ years, to further discuss the methods that they used to support BlackQueer youth, and the second focus group with BlackQueer young adults, aged 18-25 years, to gain a deeper understanding of what they need. Their voices for this project are extremely important, because recommendations could not be

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ethically made without them. To clarify, the individuals who have been interviewed in this study are not a monolith, nor do they speak for the entire population of the BlackQueer community.

Additionally, Powell & Henry Jr. (2017) offered seven great suggestions on the actions educators could take to help support LGGNC youth:

1. Educate yourself about the ways heterosexism and heteronormativity show up in your school, classroom, and pedagogical practices.
2. Reframe the narratives used to explain LGBTQIA students' experiences in schools. While it is certain that LGBTQIA are bullied and face challenges in schools, those experiences are not the sum of who they are or their experiences.
3. Determine whether current school-wide policies and practices help stamp out heterosexism, heteronormativity, and trans-antagonism.
4. Create gay-straight alliances that are attentive not only to sexuality, but also to issues of race, class, and gender.
5. Connect LGBTQIA youth with community resources around areas such as housing, healthcare, and jobs.
6. Advocate on behalf of LGBTQIA individuals, particularly in the face of bullying, debasement, or shaming.
7. Connect with local grassroots and national organizations that fight to overturn policies that marginalize, stigmatize, and ostracize LGBTQIA youth, teachers, and communities.

These seven tasks are what teachers, administrators, family members, and community leaders can start doing now in order to support and embrace BlackQueer Youth.

Practicing this is a way to embody safety for everyone that one comes in contact with, especially in schools. This study demonstrated ways through which BlackQueer adults can be positively responsive towards BlackQueer youth.

Limitations and Delimitations

Because of the sensitive nature of this study, there was a possibility that participants may not be completely honest, depending on their level of closeness with me. There are a variety of reasons for this, including a lack of confidence in telling me what they've been through, or altered perception from reliving traumatic moments. There might also be some residual risks and emotional distress from the questions that will be asked. However, the participants were able to opt out of the interview or not answer questions if they become uncomfortable at any point. Additionally, every participant was given a list of resources for dealing with their mental health. There were no repercussions for any participant who chose not to respond for any reason.

For the validity of the research study, I participated in member checking, which allowed the participants to read how I described them, chose to depict them with songs, and my interpretations of their stories. Doing this offered them the opportunity to co-write and weigh in on whether they feel their expressions were accurately portrayed. All participants were able to make suggestions or changes that they read about themselves. Although they all were given a choice to make corrections, only three of my participants chose to do so. Member checking also allowed my participants to reflect on their story with additional time and space. This practice is also a Feminist research process, and therefore fits within the overall intent for this project.

Conclusion

BlackQueer youth and adults deserve the same level of respect that Black heteronormative people receive from their peers and families. BlackQueer people have

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made significant strides and have protested on the front lines for their straight Black brothers and sisters (Ferguson, 2004). Now, it is time for them to turn around and do the same for their Queer counterparts. Audre Lorde (1983) stated that “Any attack against Black people is a lesbian and gay issue because I and thousands of other Black women are part of the lesbian community” (p. 1). This research explored how BlackQueer youth could be supported and seen as equal. The lack of support among BlackQueer youth by family and the community has caused a significant increase in suicide rates and substance abuse (GLSEN, 2017). Research has shown that this generation of youth is more open about their sexuality to peers, but this can come at a cost (Harvey, R. G., & Stone Fish, L., 2015). Therefore, it is time to rally together to support BlackQueer youth. Consequently, Patricia Hill Collins spoke about Maria W. Stewart who, in 1831, was considered a rebel because she challenged women to reject the stereotypical narrative for Black women and to instead come up with their own definitions and ideals about what it meant to be a Black woman in those times (Hill-Collins, 2002, p. 1). Because of Stewart’s stance on Black women needing to survive and take their lives into their own hands, she did not make positive leeway in the eyes of white men and women, and was even considered crazy by Black men. Women, both white and Black, were supposed to *stay in their place*, and speaking out was not customary. The bravery that Stewart displayed is the same bravery that I would like for all of my brothers and sisters to display in the eyes of oppression and adversity, fighting to make life equitable for everyone who is Black, which includes the Queer community. If any non-Black person does not understand why Black people are exhausted and still fighting for change, then they are choosing to remain ignorant. Observing through the lens of BlackQueer

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Feminism is also important because there have been times where Queerness was ignored by heterosexual Black women.

Throughout this study, I used the terms Lesbian, Gay, and Gender Non-Confirming (LGGNC), BlackQueer and Queer interchangeably, where appropriate. While the terms are meant to describe the same demographic, the need may arise for a different word, depending on the context being used. In the appendix, definitions are listed to explain the LGGNC community. 95% of this list is compiled and expounded by the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) Networks, which is an organization that deals with policy and Gay-Straight Alliance programs in high schools nationally.

This was a qualitative life history study, where a total of six BlackQueer adults were interviewed to gain an understanding of why and how they chose to mentor this demographic of youth. Additionally, this study explored the adults' self-reflections on their mental health and experiences as youths. Chapter 1 delved into a brief history of BlackQueer people in the United States, what it has meant to be Black and Queer, as well as an explanation of what it feels and looks like today. The chapter has also presented an overview of the foundation that BlackQueer youth have been accustomed to receiving thus far. Chapter 2 provided an overview of the literature to support the argument that BlackQueer youth are being pushed out of the K-12 education system, ostracized, and require additional support to prevent them from developing negative coping mechanisms that have lasting effects on their lives. Chapter 3 demonstrated the Life History methodology, and a Critical Narrative Analysis was used to epitomized why this particular methodology was chosen to explore the lives of the participants. The next two chapters are organized based on the research questions guiding this study to provide

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effective answers. Chapter 4 expanded on my personal life experience, as it felt necessary for me to go through the same process as the participants. This chapter also addressed the following questions: *Who protects and supports Black students who self-identify as Queer, and what role do they play as an advocate?* and *In what ways can BlackQueer adults increase liberation for BlackQueer youth?* To address these questions, the data and participants were analyzed in the following manner: profiles and song created for all research participants (adults and young adults). In this chapter along with chapter 5, there are song lyrics that set the tone, these songs were chosen thoughtfully based on what each participant was going through at a particular time in their life. Finally, Chapter 5 focused on the last research question: *In what context does intersectionality arise for BlackQueer youth and in what ways will it be helpful or harmful?* Towards the end of chapter five, I start to refer to the adult participants as Educational Cultural Visionaries (ECVs), which is a term I have developed after analyzing and combing through the data. Two different focus groups was conducted; one with the six ECV participants, and another with three BlackQueer young adults, to capture their voices and develop a blueprint for them. These findings helped me illustrate what BlackQueer youth need, as well as give suggestions on how to obtain and receive help. The findings in this study also lead to the coining of the term **Educational Cultural Visionaries**, which referred to those who stand in the gap for BlackQueer youth by being someone they can depend on, while also being able to acquire support and resources. Some BlackQueer adults have chosen to become the role model that BlackQueer youth and young adults are in search of. This chapter presented recommendations, limitations, and future research to support BlackQueer youth.

Chapter Two: Queer History of Not Belonging

Literature Review

In the Midwestern United States, perceptions and ideologies regarding Queer people, regardless of race, have been different than those on the East and West Coast (Arnold, E. A., & Bailey, M. M., 2009; Prock, K. A., & Kennedy, A. C., 2017); individuals on the coasts tend to be more lenient and liberal-minded than the Midwest (Overby, L. M., & Barth, J., 2002). Research showed that international viewpoints on LGGNC often bring a more extreme perspective, as in some parts of the world people still get killed for being Gay (Kretz, 2013). Finding research centered on the Midwestern U.S. was a challenge. A few different scholars: Durrell Callier, Ed Brokenborough, Latrice Johnson, Chris Mayo, and E. Patrick Johnson have each made it clear that this research is important, and that Queer youth generally needed support. They have also noted awareness that when BlackQueer youth are added to the equation, they are ignored and/or pushed out for white Queer students (Green, 2017).

BlackQueer youth of color need support from family members (Lynch, J. M., & Murray, K., 2000), community members, teachers, staff, and administrators (Arnold, E. A., & Bailey, M. M., 2009) in order to limit drug & alcohol abuse, reduce suicides/attempts, and homelessness (Lewis, G. B., 2003; Robinson, B. A., 2017).

Although there are other methodologies that are equally important, for the purpose of this study, addressing Black women and men that support Black youth who self-identify as Lesbian, Gay, and Gender Nonconforming (LGGNC), Life Histories was determined to be a better fit. The purpose of completing this Life History & Critical Narrative research design was to go in-depth with these participants about how they came to work with

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Black LGGNC youth: those brave enough to be transparent about their sexual orientations, those needing support around their feelings and emotions, and those who may feel as if they were born in the wrong bodies.

Theoretical frameworks

Black Queer Identity Matrix is an emergent framework which focuses on being inclusive of the Queer community through the lens of Black Lesbians, in regards to the thought that those who have been marginalized due to their gender, sexuality, and Queer identities have insight and scholarship which continually get overlooked (Howard, 2014). This framework is a combination of the Matrix of Domination (Collins, 1990), Standpoint Theory (West & Turner, 2010), and Afrocentricity (Asante, 2003). These three theories combined effectively move “toward a more integrated analysis of the complexities of race, gender (and gender expression), and sexual orientation by taking cultural hegemony (culture specific power dynamics) into consideration as a significant variable as it relates to queer of color identity (Howard, 2014, p. 70)”.

Queer of Color Critique is another budding theory which focuses on the social heterogeneity in the African American culture, in relation to gender and sexual variation (Ferguson, 2004). There have been Lesbian, Gay, and Gender Nonconforming people around for years, yet it has not been talked about directly because homosexuality has been considered a taboo subject (Ferguson, 2004). Another theory, Intersectionality, was not meant to fix all problems for Black women in the United States, according to Crenshaw (1989), but instead to bring awareness to how discrimination has existed in multiple lanes for marginalized individuals. Intersectionality has been used by different

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scholars to engage in research for Queerness, and more specifically Black Queerness.

Hill-Collins and Bilge (2016) wrote a book on intersectionality, which was a continuation of what Crenshaw wrote, bringing in social, interpersonal, and cultural aspects of what this broad word actually means. Their definition for intersectionality is “a form of critical praxis ... in which people, either as individuals or as part of groups produce, draw upon, or use intersectional frameworks in their daily lives – as everyday citizens with jobs and families, as well institutional actors within public schools, colleges and universities, religions organizations, and similar venues (Hill-Collins and Bilge, 2016, p. 32)”.

Different identities that Black people have, such as being a woman, mother, and daughter are somewhat normalized in society. Yet, when Queerness is an added intersection, people are often willing to see that BlackQueer person’s color but erase or ignore the Queer part of their identity (Hill, 2017). Conversely, the person who holds a Queer identity cannot ignore it. Being Queer is a fundamental part of one’s life, and not something that can be taken off like yesterday’s clothes (Hill, 2017). One must take their Queerness and carry it along, just like they do with their other intersectionalities that they belong to (Hill, 2017). Similarly, Black Feminist Thought encompasses intersections of Black women: their sexuality, race, gender, class, and nationality. Sexuality can be a double entendre for Black people, especially women, because if one identifies as Lesbian, straight, or Transgender, then those identities add even more layers to the already layered Black woman and effeminate Black Gay man. The layers denotes the intersectionality of these individuals which are not always visual and you have to know them to or have experienced what they have to know just how deep these layers can be peeled back. If there is a Gay or Lesbian issue with Black people, then we all have concerns collectively

because one is not more important than the other, they are both equally important (Lorde, 1983; Hill-Collins, 2002).

This study centered Black voices and Black experiences because as a whole, we are inundated with white voices, and the support they receive looks quite different than for that of Black voices (hooks, b., 2001; Kiesling, E., 2019; Lewis, G. B., 2003).

BlackQueer youth are continuously ignored and overlooked no matter how many times they speak up or ask to be included (Green, M., 2017). As the chosen contextual

viewpoint here, this study will be looking through a Black Feminist theoretical lens.

Black Feminism in Education has been prevalent with BlackQueer work, both scholarly and community based. Dr. Cynthia Dillard coined *Endarkened Feminism* in 2003, and she developed seven key tenants to utilize when choosing to look through this lens:

1. Endarkened women scholars' ideas, conceptualizations of the social world, and aesthetics are grounded in a historical and/or global Black feminist thought.
2. A Black feminist epistemology culturally and ontologically differs from traditional White feminist thought.
3. A Black feminist epistemology is located in Black women's existence at the intersections of race, class, and gender oppression in a society that privileges whiteness, maleness, and wealth.
4. An endarkened feminist epistemology challenges, and at times necessarily rejects, Eurocentric Western canons and research methodologies.
5. An endarkened feminist epistemology is purposefully activist and community engaged.
6. Spirituality is an underlining theme of a Black woman's scholarly identity and is connected to the types of research and relationships one seeks out in (and outside) academe.

7. An endarkened feminist worldview is connected to a transnational identity that exceeds boards and connects histories, cultures, and ways of being in the social world.

Patricia Hill-Collins, 2002, points out that “Black women intellectuals are central to Black Feminist Thought for several reasons ... Black women intellectually both inside and outside of the academy are less likely to walk away from Black women’s struggles when the obstacles seem overwhelming or when the rewards for staying diminish (Hill-Collins, 2002, p. 35)”.

Audre Lorde explained, “There is no hierarchy of oppression” (Lorde, 1983, p. 1). This applies to the intersections of issues that Black women and men experience; there are no issues more important than the other, when working to help Black people, they all must be helped, there should not be an issue more important than the other because they all need to get help. Lesbian, Gay and Gender Nonconforming individuals should be taught how to accept themselves, the same way heterosexual individuals are taught how to accept themselves from a young age.

Belonging & Self-Love

Research shows that having a “sense of belonging is important, and it takes on heightened importance in contexts where individuals are inclined to feel isolated, alienated, lonely, or invisible (Strayhorn, 2019, p.19)”. Once one publicly identifies as Queer, there are some who are ostracized (Clarke, 2011), pushed away and ignored because of their sexual orientation (Coenen,1998), and the life that they once knew might become obsolete (Coleman, 2019). The high school and young adult years are a developmentally formative time for Black and Queer students (Brockenbrough, 2013;

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Callier and Hill, 2019), and when they are already marginalized (Ahmed, 2006), losing that sense of belonging is extremely difficult (Overby, & Barth, 2002). Belonging/love is the third most important level of Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs," and not having this affects one's mental health, motivation, behavior, sense of identity, and how they engage with others (Strayhorn, 2019). In "Belonging: A Culture of Place," by bell hooks, (2009), discusses how she grew to understand what belonging meant to her, and how her hometown would unexpectedly become where she found her sense of belonging.

It can be a spiraling effect for young adults to lose their sense of belonging which then impacts their self-love. BlackQueer adults and youth both especially need to know that it is possible to heal after heartbreak although it can seem impossible during the difficult moments. In *Salvation: Black People and Love*, hooks wrote about how relationships and love were important to us as a community. She stated, "letting all Black people and the world know... we have been wounded in the place where we would know love (hooks, 2001, p. 15)." The place being our heart, where we would be able to feel the sense of belonging needed to help with our healing after we have been hurt (hooks, 2001).

BlackQueer History

The history of BlackQueer advocacy suggests that there has been division between white and Black people because of the differences of their needs (Kiesling, 2019; Sherouse, 2013; Smalls-Paradigm and Powell, 2019). The BlackQueer movement stretches back to the early 1900s (Poehlmann, 2017), during the 1920's – 1940's, when Black Transgender women began to rally together to advocate for acceptance and to

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proudly live out loud, but in the media, only white middle class Gay men and Lesbians were shown to be at the forefront of protests. Despite this, the mainstream awareness is that the late 1960s riots were the beginning of the protests (Poehlmann, 2017). In reality, Marsha P. Johnson, a Trans woman, was one of many Black members who led (Worthen, Biography) the marching, advocating, and demanding justice for Queer rights and needs is what led to the Stonewall Riots (Miminoshvili, 2016).

The main demographic of the club Stonewall was white Queer people, though it was also occupied by different races. In New York City, there were businessmen who were a part of the Mafia criminal organization who acted as silent partners or banks for Gay clubs that did not have the enough funding to operate on their own. This was an easy partnership for both parties because those who attended did not require much, besides a safe space to party and hang out with friends and lovers, and the businessmen needed places like this to “clean their dirty money” and conduct business dealings (Poehlmann, 2017). In the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, when the Black radical movement started to gain more popularity, men of this movement were spewing hurtful and harmful words toward BlackQueer people, which included “kill” hate speech towards Black Gay men, specifically those who were effeminized (hooks, 2001, p. 188-189). Homophobia like this was not new, as communities were well aware of Queer people, and prior to this time frame, churches preached “loving everyone,” and for Black people, Queer people were not exempt. Although it was not talked about, most everyone in the community knew who was Queer and who was not (hooks, 2001).

In Harlem, there were Black women and men who opened their homes for the BlackQueer community to have private parties, where BlackQueer people could feel

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comfortable. One rule at these parties was that those in attendance had to know someone who could vouch for their loyalty, so that no harm was brought to those in attendance. Eventually, parties had to go underground for safety reasons, as people began to turn against one another. One way this happened was through police officers who pinpointed individuals that they could bribe or blackmail for information. It was an easy pitch when simply being Black was a crime that could, at any given time, cause further surveillance. The “Tenement House Act” passed in 1901 had been originally created to protect Black and poor people who lived in low-income tenement housing; however, the act inadvertently began to harm Black people when they were targeted due to landlord negligence over things like a lack of clean water, and even arrested for alleged crimes like prostitution (Hartman, 2019, p. 250). The police quickly made it their business to harass and intimidate Black folks.

Those who were afraid of possible repercussions from not cooperating with police would therefore snitch and/or go undercover to spy on people that police suspected were Queer and/or participating in illegal activities, like smoking marijuana or making “hooch,” or homemade alcohol. This resulted in houses being raided and people at these parties being arrested, along with the hosts or homeowners.

The police use of spies infiltrating these formerly safe spaces resulted in BlackQueer people becoming fearful of those that they did not know. This also caused some BlackQueer people to put on a façade, for example, pretending to be cisgender when they might have been Transgender, a masculine-presenting woman, or a feminine-presenting man. This fearful living also caused some to traditionally marry the opposite sex, despite knowing that they were Queer, in order to be able to live safe and happy lives. During

this timeframe, it was common for married couples to live in separate rooms with their Queer lovers, because the police and community would not bother nor harass them due to their being married (Hartman, 2019). This became another form of passing.

Support for BlackQueer Students

Students want to relate to those close to them, and they want to see themselves in their readings, on television and social media, and in potential future jobs. BlackQueer students want to feel confident using their voices and be able to express themselves through writing, poetry, singing, and/or their dress; however, in order to do so, they must feel that they are in comfortable and safe spaces. In one small school in the Southeast United States, some BlackQueer youth have been able to enter their English class with the awareness that it is a safe space to talk openly about what they are feeling and how they are dealing with their sexuality (Johnson, 2017).

In Shameka N. Powell & Kevin Lawrence Henry Jr.'s article, *Sustaining Quality Education for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA) Students* (2017), various methods for how society can move toward sustaining quality education for Queer students were discussed: (a) to treat Queer students as if they are normal and (b) to ensure that their lives are thriving, or as Carl Grant calls it, *flourishing lives*. In order to provide this quality education, the educator must use five core components: (a) self-assessment of beliefs, (b) critical questioning of dominant narratives and systems, (c) practicing democracy, (d) social action, and (e) criteria for adjudication (Powell & Henry Jr., 2017). This means that negative connotations that educators have learned about Queer students need to be confronted in

order to work towards dismantling racist and patriarchal systems. “Practicing democracy” in this case means being political in the classroom for educational purposes, to show that there are different ways of thinking and being. Through social action, one learns how to advocate and protest alongside marginalized people. Finally, adjudication refers to letting go of the judgment of others who are different. It is imperative for teachers to utilize these tools in their classrooms, because it is part of their job to be cognizant of how they come across to others, while also working to challenge their own beliefs that can be harmful to Queer students. As can be seen in the next section, BlackQueer youth are dehumanized and considered abnormal (Powell & Henry, 2017), the same way Black people have always been viewed around the world, especially in the United States of America (Hartman, 2016).

Gaze and Surveillance on BlackQueer Youth Bodies

Callier and Hill (2019), who wrote the book, “Who Look at Me?!: Shifting the Gaze of Education through Blackness, Queerness, and the Body” with an in-depth explanation about how and what the gaze on Blackness, Queerness, and the body means inside of today’s world. They also explain what it means to have school administrators, teachers, and staff continuously gaze at Black and Brown bodies through different lenses, “...to gaze is a communicative process between the gazer and the object in view, steeped in history and culture. In relationship then, it follows that accountability should be shared between and across the two. However, this is not so, especially as it pertains to non-white, non-binary, non-male, and other bodies marked by socially constructed norms as non-dominant (Callier and Hill, 2019, p. 4).” This type of racist, homophobic gazing is

not only harmful, it also tends to create a harsh internal gaze that then further harms BlackQueer youth and young adults (BQY/BQYA). When this demographic of young people connect with trusted adults and feel supported, this type of internal disdain can be examined and reversed, so that they can begin to love and accept themselves.

Browne, (2015), goes into depth about surveillance of the Black body, and how one cannot talk about this without mentioning the surveillance on BlackQueer bodies. Browne illustrates the history of how this surveillance began and why this action continues with Black bodies, because of their skin color. Surveilling the skin tone began as a learning mechanism for white people, and their perspective of Black bodies became abhorred, grainy, and distorted because White people chose to not see past differences to see fellow human beings. Although Browne did not go into detail about the Black Gay community, she mentioned that Black Transgender lives are surveilled at a slightly higher level than other Black people. Eventually, Black people learned that if their skin tone was able to pass as white, a better life would or could be afforded to their families and themselves. In today's society, BlackQueer people have come to a similar realization in order to maintain safety. One cannot successfully speak or write talk about surveillance without mentioning how Transgender bodies, regardless of race, are highly surveilled and their bodies are often handled in extremely traumatizing ways. Beauchamp (2019) gives an analysis about how surveillance started on Queer bodies and how out of control it has become with Trans bodies, for example, "in 2017, the Trump administration specifically [negatively] addresses Transgender people ... [by] rescinding federal guidelines protecting Transgender students in schools that receive federal funding (137)."

These guidelines had been put into place as protections for Trans bodies just one year prior, during the Obama administration. Harmful laws harm the body just as much as harmful thoughts and actions. Reported harassment percentages were on a decline prior to Trump's presidency, but have since increased; 81.9% of students of color were harassed, 38.3% were physically harassed, and 8.3% were physically assaulted, because of identifying as Queer in their school setting (Kosciw and et al, 2020).

The Black Family, Spirituality and Queerness

The road to learning to accept oneself can be hard when growing up in a family that has not done the same (Lynch and Murray, 2000); in a Black family, emotions can be turbulent, creating more disagreements between the child and parental figure(s) (Lewis, 2003). One common major disagreement is about being Queer while still religious; majority of Christian churches have strong feelings and teachings about homosexuality, and shun those who are a part of the LGGNC community (Douglas, 2018; Griffin, 2000). There are four bible verses in particular that Christians use to denounce same-gender relationships (ASU, 2018):

1. Humans were created male and female and expressly blessed by God to be fruitful and multiply and to exercise dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:26-28).
2. Sexual union is intended by God to take place only within the marriage covenant between a man and a woman (Genesis 2:18, 21-24; Hebrews 13:4), which Jesus reaffirms (Matthew 19:4-6).
3. The New Testament teaches that followers of Christ are to remain celibate outside the bond of marriage. In sexual union, both body and soul are deeply impacted. A person who engages in sexual unions outside the bond of marriage sins against his or her own body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:13, 18-20).

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4. The sexual union within the marriage covenant between a man and a woman has been designed by God to bring them together as “one flesh,” creating a solid foundation on which to build a family (Genesis 2:18-24; Ephesians 5:31).

In 2018, Gallup Report reported that 50% of Americans reported belonging to a Christian church, however, from 1937-1976, church membership was 70% or higher (Jones, 2018). More recently, in February 2019, the United Methodist Church held their leadership meeting/conference in St. Louis, Missouri, and one of the controversial votes at that conference was regarding gay marriage in the church. The majority of those attending the meeting voted to exclude Queer people from marrying in their churches, as well as for possible pushback and punishment of any minister conducting Gay marriages or providing counseling for Gay couples (HRC, 2019). Their church leadership made a stance that may have caused it to lose both members and pastors. Christianity has also taken a hit within various denominations, because many struggle with the idea that God could approve of anything regarding same-gender relationships. In response to the United Methodist Church’s stance on homosexuality, a group of clergy and other members of the denomination formed the “Reconciling Ministries Network” in 1982, to promote justice for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities (RMnetwork).

For Black women, spirituality is interconnected between their wellbeing, mental health, and how satisfied they are with their lives (Reed & Nellville, 2014). 84% of Black women have reported that religion has been very important to them, and they have been able to create a sense of community with other members of their church. Black women attend church activities, services and community-based initiatives more frequently than Black men (Mattis, 2000), but are often still not considered for leadership roles. Because

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Black women are the backbone of the church, they should also be a haven for BlackQueer youth, and not only for heteronormative Black youth and men.

Mental Health, Queerness, Disability & Safe Sex

The acceptance of Queer youth has started to get better as the years have gone by, however there is still limited discourse and research detailing how youth are handling coming out in their families. Queer youth have to deal with being erased and ignored within the media, at school, and sometimes their own families. They must also frequently navigate the reactions of those around them in isolation, and at times even fear the responses to their sexuality from those closest to them. History tells us that these youth are already vulnerable, however, educators, therapists, parents, mentors, writers, and administrators can improve this by making sure Queer education is a part of the K-12 education systems, higher education teaching curriculums, and mental health dealings (Russel & Faith, 2016; Woodson, 2017).

Not long ago, homosexuality was in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), and before 1973, was considered a mental illness (McCormick, 2015). For years after being removed from the DSM, it was still often stereotyped and suggested that one was mentally ill if they identified as Queer. When it comes to mental health, suicidal attempts and substance abuse as coping mechanisms are huge problems that can no longer be ignored. It has been reported that BlackQueer youth are more likely to attempt or consider suicide more than any other Queer youth (Treavor Project, 2020).

BlackQueer youth also need support when it comes to sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, and/or disability. Brockenbrough (2016) followed and interviewed

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Black and Latinx Queer youth who participated in programming at the Midtown AIDS Center (MAC), which was an urban, not-for-profit HIV/AIDS prevention and support services center that focused on serving Black and Latino urban queer youth (BLUQY). The premise for this organization was for those who support Queer people and those affected by HIV/AIDS to show up as strongly as they do for mainstream programming centered around mentoring and self-esteem for heteronormative youth. It was important to the founders and individuals running this program to provide HIV/AIDS prevention, as well as support Queer youth who were HIV positive, as there was a higher chance of contracting the virus through unsafe sexual practices for Black and Latinx people. Some of those interviewed in that study were able to recall times when they felt unsafe or were bullied because of their sexual identities. Coming to the MAC was a healing experience for them, to be in a safe space and around people who supported BlackQueer youth for who they were, which turned into being nurtured, supported, challenged, and loved unconditionally.

Although there are many students in K-12 schools who openly identify as LGGNC, test positive for HIV/AIDS, and have disabilities or mental illnesses, they are often less likely to have support from the adults in their lives. In a 2015 youth student survey (King et al., 2018), 11,000 students volunteered to answer questions based on their sexual orientation, race, and/or disabilities. Further, students who identify as Queer and have a disability have dealt with suicidal ideation significantly more often than students who did not identify as LGGNC.

BlackQueer Youth & Coming Out

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According to the Oxford Dictionary (2017), coming out is an expression used to describe the making public of one's sexual preference. Not all Queer people take this step, as many feel there is no need to announce who they are, or which gender they are dating. Heterosexual people do not have to take the extra step of announcing that they are straight. For some Queer people, coming out can happen at various ages, because some are aware of their orientations early on, while others may learn to embrace it later in life. No matter when or if one decides to come out, safety is always a top priority. In addition to wanting to be safe, some Queer people might not ever come out because they are able to "pass" as straight and do not mind others not knowing, or simply feel like their personal life is no one else's business. For someone to pass as straight means that the average person cannot tell by looking at them that they are Queer. This type of passing is similar to what light skinned Black people did early on after slavery, in order to be safe from harassment & discrimination (Harris, 1993).

Passing is common for cisgendered Queer people, which is an act that is often not done on purpose (Pfeffer, 2014). For someone who is Queer, coming out can solidify their identity as being part of the Queer community, however that action can also place people into a box where they could possibly feel stifled (McCormick, 2014). Although homosexuality is still considered taboo to many, according to Public Religion Research Institute (2017) "about four in ten (39%) Black Americans, three in ten (30%) white Americans, and only about one-quarter (26%) of Hispanic Americans oppose same-sex marriage. Majority of smaller racial and ethnic groups also support same-sex marriage today, including Asian-Pacific Islander Americans (72 percent), Native Americans (56 percent), and those identifying as multiracial or with another racial and ethnic group (66

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percent).” Research shows that Black and Brown people overall are becoming more accepting to Queer adults, but what about to our Queer youth? The Public Religion Research Institute on Gay youth published a different report in 2014 stating that, “Nearly two-thirds (66 percent) of Americans agree that bullying of Gay and Lesbian teenagers is a major problem in schools.” Why has this percentage not also gone down?

Anti-Queerness & Anti-Blackness

Although attention to the Midwestern United States has been limited, the Gay Straight Alliance Network (GSANETWORK) completed a report in 2017 on the amount of harassment for BlackQueer youth nationally. Percentages of harassment reported during the previous six years were on a decline: 81.9% of Queer students of color were harassed, 38.3% were physically harassed and 8.3% were physically assaulted because of identifying as Queer in their school settings (GSANetwork, 2018 & GLSEN, 2017). The rates that BlackQueer youth have been bullied inside of their homes and schools are alarming. Not only are they bullied by their peers in school, but teachers, staff, and administration cause harm as well.

The school-to-prison pipeline is also relevant when talking about BlackQueer youth, as they too have long been pushed into the criminalization system. BlackQueer youth represent 67% of the juvenile delinquent population (Green, 2017). Angela Davis (2012) encapsulated this phenomenon, writing, “when obvious examples of racism appear to the public, they are considered to be isolated aberrations, to be addressed as anachronistic attributes of individual behavior (p. 169)”. That is to say, “racism—and homophobia for that matter—are rhetorically situated as problems having to do with

individual behavior and violence, rather than as a systemically supported outgrowth of oppression and marginalization” (Green, 2017, p. 40).

As a nation that prides itself on being the Land of the Free, it does not take into account the damage it has done and continues to do to the Black people on this land. Youth of color are disproportionately ignored and harmed by adults in the school system who are supposed to protect them. In a study that GSA Network completed in 2018, BlackQueer students noticed a pattern when complaining to their schools’ administration about being bullied or harassed: when the offenders were Latinx, discipline was punitive and delivered quickly, but when the bullying student happened to be white, discipline was non-existent or slow to come. This delivers a silent message to Black and Brown students that can be just as harmful, if not more so.

Supporting BlackQueer Youth

For a teacher, staff member or administrator to engage with Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, the goals of the framework are to train the educator to positively influence youth regardless of their background and to show students that they can receive care and support from authority figures. Williams-Johnson (2016) interviewed Dr. Bettina Love about how and why culturally relevant pedagogy is important when trying to reach youth of color. It was made clear that meeting them where they are is imperative, because students are then able to feel as though the educator truly cares about them by relating to them beyond the books. Dumas, Rogers, and Way work to explain how anti-Blackness is intertwined throughout the education system, politics, and policies. Educators often claim

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to support Black students with positive educational policies, when instead they often harm Black students and their intellect.

There is a breakdown in communication when it comes to engaging with adolescent Black boys and girls, and as a result, these students must jump through damaging hurdles on a regular basis. Black students have been disciplined for their behaviors in school more often than their white counterparts for decades, and the color of their skin has been considered a threat to society, which has harmed the educational landscape for Black people (Lynn and Dixson, 2013).

When considering how Black males are constantly under scrutiny, and even more so when it comes to gender fluidity, it is clear that Black males are mistreated so that they can be “put in their place.” Young Black males who were followed for two different studies were seen as continuously trying to prove they were not “bad boys” or Gay. Young Black boys are taught that being gay is not acceptable, DeMarquis Clarke (2011) stated that “queer men are often loathed based on the fact that they are considered ‘feminized’ and violate the rules of masculinity by being attracted to other men” (p. 11). Stereotypes have been formed about Black boys and men, with regards to being oppressed because of being a Black man but at the same time, still having privileges due to being male (Dumas, 2016; Rogers and Way, 2016; Morris, 2007).

When studying how Black girls are treated in school, as well as their environment or school climates, they are usually identified as being “loud” or “ghetto” when they are simply expressing themselves. Black girls are expected to stay quiet, so that they can be viewed as “more respectable.” It is incredibly harmful to Black girls when they are judged this way by adults, especially when this type of policing is done by Black women

that they look to as role models. During a two-year study completed by Dr. Monique Morris, it was observed that Black girls' voices and bodies were continuously policed by men and women and even more so by adults of color (Morris, 2007).

Black students account for significantly higher numbers of out-of-school suspensions than their white counterparts. However, Black student actions do not often warrant this punishment, and overall, it has been found that they were often being suspended simply because they were Black. "The Effects of Zero Tolerance Policies on Black Girls: Using Critical Race Feminism and Figured Worlds to Examine School Discipline" reported that Black girls are consistently picked on and overlooked at the same time, and when schools' discipline practices are to remove Black girls from the in-school structure, it harms them more. More often than not, these girls are turned off from learning all together, and feel that they would be better off doing something else with their time. Additionally, Hines-Datiri et al. (2017) reported suspension and expulsion rates of Black girls were disproportionately high throughout the United States, and the intersectionality is repeatedly neglected. This makes way for Black girls to be marginalized in schools over and over again, because of their race first and gender second (Hines-Datiri et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 2014).

These girls that are mistreated by the school systems often get introduced to a life of homelessness, sex work, or using drugs that they typically would not have chosen for themselves. When interviewing girls at a group home, Morris (2016) recognized that some of the Black girls who had become homeless, had been erased from their homes, and experienced some other unforeseen situations, actually preferred to live a life of sex work, because it allowed survival on the streets. This was a "fast life" where they could

make money, care for themselves, and not have to worry about where their next meals were coming from.

Perceptions Towards BlackQueer Youth

Ferguson (2004) raised the following question about one's sexuality and how they present themselves to the world: "Is there a way in which their emergence can be located within the social formations that the picture represents (p. viii)"? Ferguson was focusing on a historical picture, when "colored only" separation was still being used, and butch Lesbian and Transgender women had to pass as men in order to navigate the world safely and ensure their lives would not be threatened. This question leads to another: what are adults' perceptions towards other adults who are Queer, and do their negative opinions also affect how they navigate through life on a day-to-day basis? It is also important to mention adults when talking about youth, because what people feel about LGGNC still affects someone Queer and also trickles down to the youth. If adults are struggling due to being ostracized, as grownups with "real life" responsibilities, it is of paramount importance to consider how youth feel when ostracized.

McCune (2015) offered succinct and piercing critical thought when he stated, "The frequency of Black death is itself Queer. Strange. Out of place. Awkward, (p. 173)", referring to Michael Brown's death and other Black people who have died at the hands of police officers. In addition to the idea that Black death is Queer, trying to hide because of one's gender, sexuality, presence, and perceived dominance is something that Black men "on the down low" have been doing for decades. Black Gay boys and men have had to silence themselves for their safety, while still being interested in other men for reasons

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outside of likeminded extra-curricular activities like sports or fraternities (McCune, 2008; McCune, 2015).

In the article, “Intersections, Ambivalence, and Racial Justice in Schools: BlackQueer Students Remap Complexity,” Rosiek et al., spoke about BlackQueer students that participated in programs geared to LGGNC students, like Gay Straight Alliances or Gay Straight Spectrums, who still had problems with the feeling of belonging due to racial differences and adults’ biases towards them. Furthermore, when it comes to the curriculum taught in schools, there has always been an erasure of students who identify as LGGNC. K-12 curriculum has been and will continue to be heteronormative until all states’ school curriculum laws are changed (Rosiek et al., 2017). Future students need to be given the opportunity to learn how to deal with those who have different identities, specifically those that identify under the Queer, disability, and HIV/AIDS spectrum. Researching the Black youth LGGNC community proves to be complex, because when looking at someone that identifies as Queer, the whole child must be considered, and there is no standard recipe for the betterment of an individual or situation.

BlackQueer Youth: Child Welfare and the Juvenile System

When researching BlackQueer youth/young adults who were homeless, in the foster care system, or in juvenile justice, the numbers were alarming: this subset of students make up 40% of the numbers, and there are approximately 1.6-2 million youth who are a part of the homeless population (Robinson, 2018). The Human Rights Campaign (HRC) reported to have found that BlackQueer youth are highly regarded as

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dispensable: 77% of youth reported feeling depressed or down, 95% reported having trouble sleeping at night, more than 70% reported feeling worthlessness and hopelessness, 77% have heard family members making negative comments about other LGBTQ people, and 59% reported that their families have made them feel bad because of their identities. 40% of Queer youth are commonly displaced from family when coming out, which then turns into homelessness (Crenshaw, 1989; Lee, 2018).

Queer youth are also sometimes preyed on by older people in the Queer community and/or pimps in the attempt to recreate a “family” atmosphere that they have been stripped of. A handful of the Black girls that Morris interviewed identified with being Gender Non-conforming and reported that they have often been overlooked, picked on, and/or made to feel small because they were not like the other girls around them. Morris explained that the different identities of those she was working with were “mostly girls of color (a disproportionately high percentage of girls are Black and/or Latina), and many of them (by some estimates 40 percent) identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ), or Gender Non-conforming (Morris, 2016, p. 2)”. When BlackQueer youth and young adults who are already struggling with displacement enter into the child welfare system, they are more likely to never get placed into a home where they can stay to gain stability.

BlackQueer youth are frequently pushed out of the school system and into the juvenile justice system because they are harshly punished for fighting back against an environment that is already set against them. Paulo Freire (2000) stated, “it is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves. This

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discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be a praxis (p. 65)".

When backed up against a wall, one's response is to go into fight, flight, or freeze mode, and BlackQueer young adults have been in this position throughout their lives, often for reasons beyond their control. It can become a way of life for them, as their means to survive might include sex work, selling drugs, or robbing people on the street, which is also done in retaliation to the systems that have failed them. Chapter three discusses the decision to use a methodology that entails Life Histories, how participants for the study were recruited, and how analysis will use critical discourse.

Chapter Three: Life Histories and Taking Up Space

This dissertation, *“Life Histories of BlackQueer Adults: Why and How They Support BlackQueer Youth,”* examined BlackQueer adults in the United States work with BlackQueer youth in K-12 schools and communities, how they advocated and protected themselves and their students by being reliable people. Research showed that the suicide rate can decrease for BlackQueer youth just by having one adult in their life that they can relate to. As part of this qualitative life history study, I interviewed BlackQueer adults to gain an understanding of why they chose to mentor and invest in this particular demographic of youth. Additionally, this dissertation explored BlackQueer adult mentors’ reflections on their own mental health and experiences as youth.

To support this research, I combined Black Feminist Thought theory (Hill-Collins, 2001) which encompassed intersections of what it means to be Black in regards to race, gender, and class, with Howard’s (2014) Black Queer Identity Matrix, which gives insight on sexuality and what it means to be Black and Queer in this society. Using this combination allowed interaction with the research of senior scholars, while being inclusive of this research area which brings light to the need for future explorations of how Black Queer youth are standing in their identities. It is my hope that this research will serve as the foundation of my tenure book and inform the implementation of safe spaces, inclusive curriculum, and bullying policies for BlackQueer students in K-12 schools.

As a methodology, “Life History” allows a person to analyze certain memories and experiences and how those various trajectories have shaped their lives. While growing up, youth learn how to hide certain attributes that their parents, family members, K-12

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school, and community leaders might not like or agree with in order to attain approval. LGGNC peoples have been surveilled harsher, and Black bodies even more (Browne, 2015; Hartman, 2019). Black LGGNC youth in the Midwestern United States often have harsher experiences (Kosciw and et al., 2020), and a more difficult time with being able to express themselves and be in safe spaces than Black LGGNC youth on the East & West coast (Clarke, 2011). BlackQueer youth work is somewhat void in the Midwestern and Southern areas of the United States, yet is actively done on the West and East Coasts (Brockenbrough, 2013; Brockenbrough 2016). In general, the majority of research on Queer youth focuses on white youth (Callier, 2016).

Research Design

Black Feminist women have been paving the way for other Black people to live life on their own terms, without fear of life going back to the way it was prior to 1966. This was the year that the “Black Panther Party and the National Organization of Women” (Ferguson, 2004, p. 112) were created in order to focus on the liberation of Black people and Lesbian women, both separately and collectively. When starting the National Organization of Women (Ferguson, 2004), Black Lesbian Feminists stepped into this movement to protect and care for other Black Lesbian women, because they noticed a trend that some individuals respectfully paid attention to the issues and needs of their lives on an individual level, but not those collectively for all Black people. Audre Lorde, (1983) wrote a short article titled, *There is No Hierarchy of Oppression*, in which she stated:

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As a Black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, poet, mother of two including one boy and a member of an interracial couple, I usually find myself part of some group in which the majority defines me as deviant, difficult, inferior, or just plain ‘wrong.’ From my membership in all of these groups, I have learned that oppression and the intolerance of difference come in all shapes and sexes and colors and sexualities; and that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and a workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression. I have learned that sexism and heterosexism both arise from the same source as racism ... Within the lesbian community I am Black, and within the Black community I am a lesbian. Any attack against Black people is a lesbian and gay issue, because I and thousands of other Black women are part of the lesbian community. Any attack against lesbians and gays is a Black issue, because thousands of lesbians and gay men are Black. There is no hierarchy of oppression.

When those in the same community cannot find mutual understanding, it allows discord in the foundation of that community, which can harm everyone. Black Lesbian Feminists have been working collectively to show community alliance with other Brothers and Sisters, no matter their orientation (Ferguson, 2004). They have also been telling stories about their lives for years, because that is how Black people relate to each other and navigate life. Therefore, it is fitting to bring the Life History methodology into this study in order to narrate the lives of Black Lesbian, Gay, Gender Nonconforming Adults (BLGGNCA). Chamara Kwakye (2011) discussed how narration turned into “mystories,” as denoted by Alice Walker, because it becomes the way that a woman is able to look at herself and bring forth her own story (Kwakye, 2011; Walker, 1993). These stories are directly dependent upon the person whose life one is examining.

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Life story techniques introduce the opportunity to collect rich data textured by the respondents' own interpretations of their experiences and the social circumstances in which their story has unfolded, and the ways in which they continue to be active agents (Atkinson, 1998; Gluck & Patai, 1991; Roets & Goedgeluck, 1999). Feminist life history methods serve a political purpose, to “negotiate openness, expose hegemonic power arrangements and inherent silences, highlight secrets of oppression and resistance; and revalue knowledge that risks being disqualified in current social sciences (Roets & Goedgeluck, 1999, p. 85). When utilizing a Black feminist lens to speak about other Black people, “[it is] important ... [when] combining Life History techniques with a Black Feminist Narrative Analysis ... [to] provide a vehicle to reflect different standpoints ... to particular findings or predetermine outcomes based on the researchers' frames of reference (Sosulski, Buchanan, and Donnell, 2010, p. 30)”. When combining methods, the techniques must be appropriate to the questions asked and transparent enough for others to interpret and evaluate them (Sosulski & Lawrence, 2008; Tierney, 1999).

The literature that pertains to this research study is important, as this contextual viewpoint shows that there is a missing element in BlackQueer youth research, where the focus is BlackQueer adults who are disrupting the status quo. As the researcher, it was imperative that I had time built into the data analysis process to allow me to step away repeatedly from the data in order to understand what I was reading in order to effectively represent my participants. Also, according to Yin (2018), the researcher is supposed to practice asking questions and giving interviews, so that while conducting the interview, it flows easily, like a conversation between friends. These are the steps that I took, and I

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accomplished this by reaching out to my network of friends to practice with the questions that I was using for my study. That process also helped me to tweak some of the questions in order to be more appropriate for the goal of the research, and to give an open-ended model so as to not lead the interviewees in any way. This also helped me become comfortable with both the data and the analysis that came from conducting this research.

The Method: Life History

For this qualitative study, I had three questions that guided the research, and these same questions also helped with analyzing the results. This study explores how Black women, men and Gender Non-conforming peoples that identify as LGGNC advocate and protect themselves in the various spaces that they are exposed to, which may be safe or not. One goal of this research is to explore ways to develop, support, and embrace BlackQueer youth. Eventually, this research will be used to help implement safe spaces and develop inclusive curriculum and bullying policies for Queer individuals in K-12 schools. It is important for students to be able to pair their educational knowledge with empathy, relatability, and hands-on work.

Research questions

- Who protects and supports Black students that identify as LGGNC and what role do they play as an advocate?
- In what context does intersectionality influence BlackQueer youth?
- In what ways can BlackQueer adults increase liberation for BlackQueer youth?

Demographics

The first phase of this study was an in-depth reflection of life events in the stages and development of my acknowledgement and appreciation of my own sexuality. The analysis of which helped to inform the questions that I posed to the interviewees. For the second phase of the study, I recruited participants by utilizing my personal network to reach out to individuals that I felt would be willing to participate in this study.

Recruitment was concluded once I had enough diversification in order to meet the saturation of data, where I was getting similar responses from my participants. Eligible participants met the following criteria: (a) Black, (b) 26 years old or older, (c) identify as Queer, (d) work in a field where they are helping to change the climate for BlackQueer youth, and (e) must have previously done this work in an urban city located in the Midwestern United States.

Unexpectedly in the recruitment stage, the first round of emails that I sent to individuals in my personal network did not gather much response. I did a pilot study with two people that I knew, and had assumed that they would respond for the actual research study. When that did not happen, I ended up doing a “snowball” method through my other personal connections. It was important to me to have an open relationship or a close connection with the people that I interviewed, because of the delicate nature of the information that I would be asking them to share. I sent a total of 14 emails requesting participation in this study, and completed a total of six interviews and two focus groups.

To begin, I sent an email introducing myself and the research project, as well as going over what the requirements were to participate. Additionally, I assured them that I would be available to talk or answer any questions that came up for them, and provided

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my personal phone number in case they did not have it. I asked the potential interviewees to respond to the email to let me know whether they would participate or not, and after receiving the email responses I then sent over my Calendly link for them to schedule their interview, consent form and journal prompts for them to look over before our interview. To not limit my participation pool and to address the various potential outcomes, I decided to relay to potential participants that I would do interviews of Black Queer adults who previously or currently spent time working with and/or mentoring Black Queer youth.

Participants agreed to talk about their childhood, teenage years, college years/young adulthood, and current adulthood. They also agreed to complete the provided journaling prompts before and after the interview but only three out of six participants submitted the journals, so I excluded this data from the analysis. I will use the data from the journals submitted in the future for a different project. The original plan was to have two different interviews, but I completed both in one setting for all but one participant. They also agreed to be willing to address or identify the moment that they knew they had an attraction to the same gender. The objective was to have a mix of people who identified as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, or Asexual, and participants touched nearly all of the subsets, except for Asexual.

Participants were asked various questions about their experience as Queer individuals, and the support they received or did not receive in their various life stages. For the BlackQueer adult focus group, I interviewed the same participants from the individual interviews. The purpose of having the focus group was to build community with each other, as well as to see and hear how others work, because I felt there would

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also be space for collaboration. For the BlackQueer young adult focus group, I had a harder time with recruitment; the BlackQueer youth that I personally knew were under 18, and for this study, young adults are defined as 18-25 years old. At first, I posted on social media with a flyer asking for leads, yet that did not gain me any participants. I then reached out to ask for help from the adult participants, and another snowball method effect took place: one participant connected me with a colleague, who then connected me to a BlackQueer young adult who was able to bring some of their friends to a focus group on a date and time that they chose themselves.

Although I used pseudonyms for the narrative research design, two of the adult participants and all three of the BlackQueer young adults requested that I instead use their real names in this study. The purpose of using the pseudonyms was to track everyone seamlessly, protect my participants, and to respect their privacy. It was imperative that I interviewed a range of age groups and gender expressions for this study, to gather different experiences. Questions dealt with how they felt supported in schools, their homes, and communities with their sexual orientations and how they dealt with how they were perceived as students who were outside of the “norm.” Each person that was interviewed had different experiences growing up; while one out of six was raised in a more liberal home, the rest were raised in strict Christian homes. Some learned early on how to “code switch” their gender expression for safety. I did not want to assume that everyone was ostracized or treated negatively due to their being Queer, and this is why interviewing others worked well for this study.

Confidentiality

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Interviews were conducted virtually through video chat, and I asked a series of semi-structured and open-ended questions. The physical distance was needed to keep participants and myself safe from risk of personal contact due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I had planned on using a digital audio recording device for in-person interviews, but instead the interviews were conducted via Zoom, a web conference platform, and recorded on my password-protected computer and then saved onto the hard drive. There was also one focus group, consisting of the same set of adult participants recruited from the community. They were asked to generally share their experiences with how it had been for them to work with Black Queer youth. The focus groups also took place virtually over Zoom, due to the pandemic.

The audio and transcriptions from the focus groups went through the same process of being saved onto my secured computer and external hard drive. The audio files were then uploaded to a transcription website, www.rev.com, and I jotted down my own notes both during and after the interviews. I also took at least twenty minutes to write about the atmosphere, energy, and temperature of the interviews once it was completed. I then went through each audio transcription to verify accuracy and printed out a copy of each transcription to begin my memoing and coding process. After I completed the vignette write-ups for each interview, I sent my interviewees an email copy to give them the option to participate in member checking, which is looking over their transcripts to ensure that what they expressed to me as the researcher was relayed clearly. Those who chose to do this also had the option to edit by adding or removing anything from their transcripts.

Denzin & Lincoln (2003) expressed that the meaning of qualitative research is a “guide by the researcher’s set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied,” and an “interpretive practice of making sense of one’s findings is both artistic and political (p. 34-35)”. According to the Center for Research Quality, qualitative research is about things that cannot be counted. There are also four qualifying messages when utilizing qualitative research: (a) maximize understanding by listening to the right people, (b) dialogue to clarify & interpret, (c) be open to their point of view, and (d) analyze the significance of what you hear (2015). A researcher would use qualitative methods based on their overall question, and if they wanted to conduct research that could potentially be a case study, focus group, detailed interviews and/or observations, they could also do narrative approaches with a qualitative study.

Interview Protocols

Individual Interview Questions

1. What was your conditioning around sexuality? Who taught you?
2. Do you think how you were conditioned helped to give you a negative or positive connotation around sexuality?
3. What was your conditioning around sex? Who taught you these things?
4. In what ways did the adults that were in your life as a teenager support you as someone that identified as Lesbian, Gay, or Gender Nonconforming?
5. What type of support did you receive as a LGGNC teenager?
6. Do you feel like you received support as a LGGNC teenager?
7. What is support? What does support look like?

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8. Were there adults around you that let their biases get in the way of supporting you unconditionally?
9. What does support unconditionally mean?
10. Did you find anyone's support that was unconditional?
11. How could the adults that were in your life have helped you develop a positive and healthy sexual identity?
12. Sex was taught with the implication that it was between a man and a woman, so which part of the norm made you uncomfortable?
13. What age were you when you came out?
14. What changed for you during the time you came out?
15. Have you ever had a life-threatening experience?
16. What was your parents' response when you came out?
17. Have you or any of your friends had to deal with becoming homeless because of your sexual orientation?
18. If you only had five minutes right now in the present to talk with your parents, siblings, other family members, schoolteachers or administration, and/or classmates about your sexual orientation and bring up how you were treated, what would you say to them?
19. Was there something that you wanted me to know about your upbringing that I did not ask?

After each interview and focus group, we practiced grounding work by bringing up other topics, for example, asking about their favorite meal, flower, drink, and pastime, etc. This was done to help my participants come back to the present, so that they

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would not be holding on to whatever was shared during the interview through the remainder of their day. All of the participants had also been actively involved in therapy and knew what the grounding exercise was and meant to each of them.

BlackQueer Adults Focus Group

1. Name, location, name of program and description of program focusing on BlackQueer youth (BQY)?
2. What made you choose to work with BQY?
3. Do you see your younger self in the youth that you are helping?
4. Describe your approach to working with BQY and how does it help them?
5. How did you get to this age as a BlackQueer person?
6. Any closing remarks?

BlackQueer Young Adults Focus Group

1. Tell me about your childhood?
2. Tell me about your high school years, ages 15 to 18.
3. What has support looked like for you?
4. Do you feel like you can be your full authentic self at school and at home?
5. Did you grow up in a church?
6. When did you come out and what were the responses?
7. What do you feel like you need in your life in relation or related to your queerness that you have not received?
8. What does safety look like for you?

9. What has been your experience living as someone who's young, Black, and Queer?

Data Sources and Collection Procedures

For this research, I used primary data that consisted of interviews and focus groups with participants. In order to welcome camaraderie and trust between myself and the interviewees, I made sure to let my participants know in multiple ways before the start of the interview that if at any point they wished to withdraw from the study, they could do so without repercussions. All interviews were recorded electronically, as well as the two different focus groups. Participants agreed to do two journal entries, which would help provide any lasting thoughts that they forgot to share during the interviews. I then asked them to email journals to me one week after their interview, and three participants submitted their journals, while three others did not turn in their entries.

I used a Critical Narrative Analysis to examine the research data, which was a good approach for this particular study; Black Gender Non-Conforming, Gay, or Lesbian youth are often seen as being abnormal (Ahmed, 2004) and it was my goal to debunk this myth. It is important to hear how and why those who work with this demographic do so, by sharing their stories and being able to do so in their most comfortable environments to gain insight on how they view themselves and their lives thus far (Atkinson, 1998; Borland, Gluck & Patai, 1991; Roets & Goedgeluck, 1999). I approached the data by letting the themes from the interviews and focus groups emerge while reading through the transcriptions. My resulting code book consists of six components, including the code

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name/label, brief definition, full definition, inclusion criteria, exclusion criteria, and examples (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, and McCulloch, 2011).

Research area was an urban city located in the Midwestern United States. Prior to making all of the interviews virtual, I had hoped that interview sites would include some of the after-school programs, organizations, and local events that my participants were actively running. I had also hoped that the interview settings would include community libraries, university classrooms or conference rooms. In the end, each of the participants came onto the Zoom calls from the comfort of their own homes, including me, where I also used headphones to maintain privacy.

I used an open-ended and semi-structured interview format with participants, and initially anticipated that the data collection research for this project would begin in March 2021, however, I did not start until June 2021 and completed collecting the data in October 2021. I planned for a minimum of two interview sessions that would take place during a time frame that was convenient for the participants and myself as the researcher, and each interview lasted between about 60 to 90 minutes.

Prior to each interview, we took the time to go over the consent form and I gave the participants space to ask any lingering questions. Upon consent, the interview then began, and I took handwritten notes as needed while the interview was video recorded with Zoom. While I was prepared for any of my participants to not consent to audio recording, none refused, and therefore I did not have to rely on my memory while conducting the interviews. The questions that I asked guided the interviews, and questions that I did not ask came up in their responses, which led to us being fully engaged in conversations that flowed smoothly. Data collected from interviews was downloaded from Zoom and kept on

my secured hard drive, along with transcripts of interviews and focus groups. All data was then transcribed, coded, analyzed, and transferred to electronic word documents.

Table 1: Data Collection by Research Questions

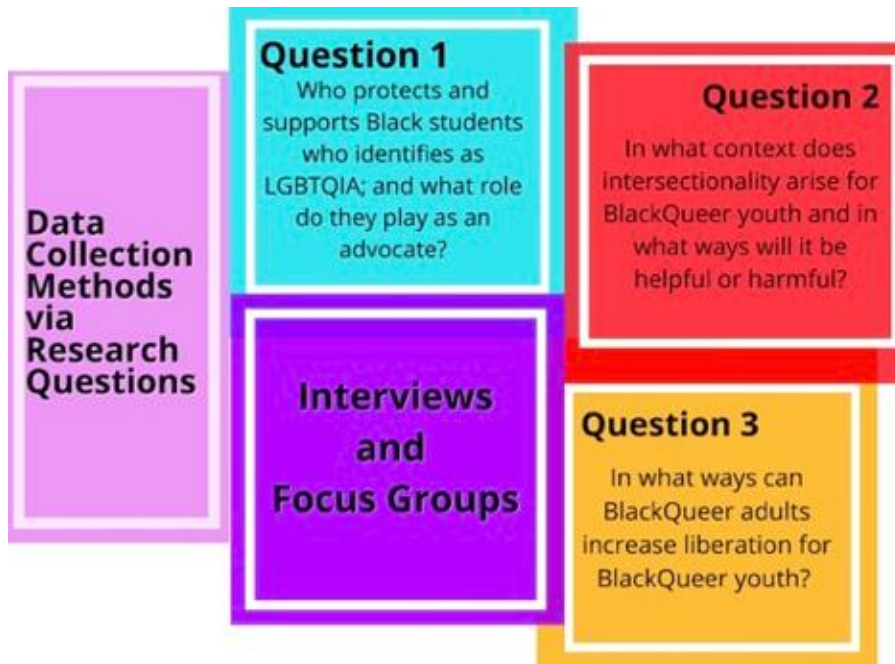


Table 2: Data Collection Timetable

Data Collection Timeline

D	T	L	M
Data	Month/Year	Location	Method
Six Individual Interviews	June 2021- October 2021	Everything was conducted on video chat via Zoom	Each interview and focus group was conducted via a virtual platform
Focus Group 1	September 2021		
Focus Group 2	October 2021		

Data Analysis Procedures

Steps for coding qualitative data and then analyzing that I utilized: (a) read through all the data, (b) choose different themes, (c) list out emerging topics & cluster the topics together, (d) develop codes and categories, (e) find descriptive wording, (f) divide into categories and interrelationships, (g) alphabetize the codes, (h) assemble data that correlates in each category, and (i) perform preliminary analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 196). For data analysis, I listened to the interview audio recordings after each one was completed and worked on memoing and noting potential codes that were being repeated. Once all codes and themes were assigned after going through the data once, I then went back through to look for any categories that might need to be added to the themes. As a result, I came up with great recommendations on how adults can support Black LGGNC youth to gain more self-love, leadership skills, and the ability to advocate for themselves and others because of their sexual orientation.

Table 3: Research Code Book

Research Questions		
Who protects and supports Black students who self-identify as LGGNC; LGBTQIA; and what role do they play as an advocate?	In what ways can BlackQueer adults increase liberation for BlackQueer youth?	In what context does intersectionality arise for BlackQueer youth and in what ways will it be helpful or harmful?
Memos / Codes		
1. Negative Coping Skills	2. Identity Pronouns	3. Foster Care / Adoption
4. Identity & Pronouns	5. Belonging	6. Advocacy at a young age
7. Isolation	8. Modeling Behavior	9. Advocacy
10. Therapy Seeker	11. An Open Book	12. Family Dynamics
13. Queer History	14. What does support look like	15. K-12 Education System
16. Mentoring	17. Relationship Experience	18. Molestation
19. Trauma Bound	20. Intergenerational Household	21. Gay
22. Religion	23. Open ear	24. Trans*
25. Learning about relationships	26. Open door policy	27. Nonbinary
28. Community organizations (working with them or being a founder)	29. Being relatable	30. Lesbian
31. Landscape Analysis	32. Community outreach	33. Intersex
34. Private schooling	35. Liberal household	36. Felt that they were born wrong gender
37. College students	38. Single parent household	39. Effeminate Male
40. Parents passing	41. Super religious household	42. Gender Expression

Ethical Issues

One concern that I had for this study was the fact that I had personal relationships with most of the BlackQueer adults that I reached out to, and I feared that their participation might hinder our relationship. The questions that were asked brought up some old and painful feelings for them, that they may have buried. Additionally, the urban city where I recruited was relatively small and participants could potentially be identified by their stories, however most of them were not concerned about being recognized because they felt that their stories were important for others to know. For

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those who did agree to use a pseudonym, I paid extra attention to how I described them, while also having them choose their own pseudonyms that were not easily identifiable.

Credibility

To prove that this study was credible, I used “member checking” by sending my vignettes to the participants so that they could read over what I wrote and edit their own stories. Four people chose to make changes to their stories where I misheard or misunderstood something that they said. One person said “Gone head with your writing! It made me smile. It looks great and I'm sure how you captured us all was with pure intention and attention.” I met triangulation by obtaining feedback via study participants, committee members, and discussing how I was analyzing the research with colleagues who were in the same stage as me, to ensure the study was credible and honest (Hays and Singh, 2011).

Research Bias

I am a part of the Queer community; I identify as a Lesbian, and I personally knew three of the people that I interviewed individually and was connected to the other three. I did not know the people from the BlackQueer focus group prior to starting this research study.

Limitations & Delimitations

Queer youth who do not racially identify as Black were excluded, as well as other individuals who might also benefit from this study. However, it was important that I chose the demographic that I plan to do justice work for in the future. Further, this

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exclusion does not mean that other Queer youth are not important, but that I am centering and showing a representation of BlackQueer youth because they are consistently overlooked and dismissed in research and there is a limited view of BlackQueer youth in the Midwestern United States. In order to be eligible for this research project, participants had to meet criteria specifically but not exclusively: (a) Black, (b) 26 years old or older, (c) must identify as Queer, (d) work in a field helping to change the climate for BlackQueer youth, and (e) must have done this work in an urban city located in the Midwestern United States. I therefore excluded BlackQueer young adults who were working with BlackQueer youth. While 18-25 year olds are still capable of mentoring others, the majority of those in this age range are also in need of guidance and/or getting mentored themselves.

The impact of research because of COVID-19 on research

Since I have been mostly confined to my home since March 13, 2020, I have had to think of different ways to engage in my work and conduct interviews. My original data collection plan included face-to-face interviews and observations so that I would be able to analyze the methods and processes of how the research participants conducted their work. Instead, I was forced to let go of the idea to observe this work and pivot which meant I changed the direction. All interviews moved to being conducted online through video recorded conversations.

As a result of not being able to meet in person to observe BlackQueer youth programming, I began working on a landscape analysis of the largest cities in the Midwestern states to see how many community organizations were supporting Black Queer youth, and the numbers were low at just 18 organizations compared to the 50

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organizations/programs that cater to white Queer youth. There are a total of 47 major cities in the Midwestern states. I am still working on this and plan to have it completed by the end of 2022. You can find more about the organizations in Appendix D.

Summary

Black LGGNC youth being supported in their families, schools, and communities assists them toward leading healthy, happy lives. According to the HRC, most parents have a difficult time accepting their child's differing sexual orientation at first, but eventually start to fully embrace them; however, some must go through their own journeys in regards to their child's orientation (2019). Being able to talk to one's parents or a trusted adult about anything conveys that safety is important to all parties. This also opens the door for each party to educate themselves on what is going on, how to help, and how to love unconditionally.

Chapter Four: Those who intentionally protect & who are some BlackQueer youth

I'm Coming Out by Diana Ross

I'm coming out, I'm coming out
 I'm coming out, I'm coming out
 I'm coming out, I'm coming out
 I'm coming out
 I want the world to know
 Got to let it show
 I'm coming out
 I want the world to know
 Got to let it show.

There's a new me coming out
 And I just have to live
 And I wanna give
 I'm completely positive
 I think this time around
 I am gonna do it
 Like you never knew it
 Oh I'll make it through
 The time has come for me
 To break out of the shell
 I have to shout

I'm coming out.
 I've got to show the world
 All that I wanna be
 And all my abilities
 There's so much more to me
 Somehow I'll have to make them
 Just understand
 I got it well in hand
 And oh how I've planned
 I'm spreading love
 There is no need to fear
 And I just feel so good
 Every time I hear

...

I'm coming out
 (Edwards and Rodgers, 1980, track 4).

Introduction

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The purpose of this study is to examine the ways BlackQueer adults stand in the gaps to protect BlackQueer youth. As part of my dissertation research and awarded fellowship, I conducted a Landscape Analysis to get a better picture of organizations and programs that support BlackQueer youth in the Midwestern United States. What I found was astounding, as there were a total of 18 organizations supporting BlackQueer youth in the major Midwestern cities (See appendix D). The inequality of help was not what shocked me—it was seeing how many more organizations there were designed for white Queer youth. In the search for different programs and organizations, I also noticed that “People of Color ” might at times be specifically referencing Black people, however, using that more political term can help organizations show that they are not “exclusionary,” when applying for funding (Ahmed, 2007; Danley and Blessett, 2019). Therefore, this might have led to the miscount of the numbers of organizations that serve BlackQueer youth in the Midwestern United States. It is also important to note that because of outside pressures and the inner workings of politics, it can also be ‘easier’ to say “People of Color” than Black people.

As someone who has an organization and program that was specifically created to help BlackQueer youth, I had not noticed that even the language that I had been using says “People of Color” instead of Black people, until I started looking more closely at other organizations. Additionally, it is challenging for there to be exclusive programs for Black girls or boys in certain school districts, because it then excludes others (Price-Dennis & et al., 2017, p. 6). In trying to have a program that is created for Black students, Black teachers at times face policies that prevent these programs and consequently Black youth are not supported around their needs. In programs that are geared for Black youth,

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no matter their sexual identity, it is expected for one to see that there are also Black people leading the program or at least a part of it. Relatability and trust are established when there are program leads, directors, etc., who can directly relate to the issues at hand. While white people can still help Black students, their abilities to relate and have a level of comfortability are limited, because they cannot understand what it is like to be Black. There are many reasons that the word “Black” needs to be denoted when talking about Black people, because of their being pushed out and mistreated in various cases. As stated in previous chapters, the Queer community is divided, and Black and Brown people are not factored into the equation often enough. It is important to continue to make the distinction that I am centering Black people in this study, which will include all of the research, as well as the majority of the scholars cited.

The first part of this chapter is organized by my own Life History vignette, which builds on the argument in chapter three that when one is supported with love and understanding, their life trajectory can have various outcomes and inputs, dependent on a moment that becomes pinpointed in their story. To remain fair, I have undergone the same analysis that I have asked my participants to go through. The second half of this chapter are the vignettes for each of the participants, shared in the order that I interviewed them. I interviewed a total of nine people, ages 19-61, all of whom were in different stages in their lives.

There were ten individual songs that I chose to describe each participant at a particular stage, including myself as the researcher, while this chapter begins with a song that I felt depicted each of us collectively. The different songs also frame the different barriers that the interviewees experienced, along with the support that they did or did not

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get in their lives. Finally, this chapter will end with a conclusion, followed by chapter five, which is organized by the research questions and themes that were found through analysis.

Vignettes

As the researcher at the time of this writing, I am a 36-year-old Lesbian woman, my pronouns are “she,” “her,” and “hers.” I was raised in northern Illinois and southeastern Texas. I was born to a mother and father who struggled with addiction to drugs and alcohol, as the youngest of three children and the only girl. My mother lost custody of my brothers and I when I was three years old, and I went into foster care for about six months, until my grandmother obtained her foster care license and got custody of me. For those six months that I was away from family and people who looked like me, my placement was with a white family, whose “foster mother” took pride in showing off the Black children that she and her husband had taken pity on. Meanwhile, she never even took the time to comb our hair. My father was in and out of prison, and my mother was battling demons through her therapy of choice: drugs. I was molested multiple times before the age of five, and it did not stop after that. When it comes to my orientation, I vividly remember that I felt “different” at around five years of age, and I thought that something might be ‘wrong’ with my eyesight at around 11 years of age, because I found other girls—dare I say it—attractive. I wanted to be around girls who wanted to be around boys, and because I wanted to be liked by those girls, I would deal with being around the boys. I would get in trouble for fighting boys, because from the outside looking in, it looked like I was flirting with them, when I was really just chastising them

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for being in my face or trying to talk to me. I was 13 years old and in youth church when I first learned of the word “homosexual.” I did not know what it meant so I raised my hand and asked, and the answer that was given immediately shamed me. I was then constantly bombarded with a fear of going to hell because of my non-normative thoughts, feelings, and same-gender attractions.

I got in trouble like any teenager, mainly because of my smart mouth, but I was also scared of my grandmother, so I did not push it too much. There was a period in my life, between eighth grade and my early high school years, that I was very “boy crazy.” Because of this, it was hard to be taken seriously when my Queerness was finally spoken aloud. At one point, I even had the cutest boyfriend in my grade, but I was also later preyed on by a basketball player, who took advantage of me after my mother died. There was a set of older twin girls I knew, who I was attracted to and may have subconsciously flirted with, but I definitely never admitted this out loud. There was an exchange I had with one of them during swim class that I would come to think about often. On this day, I was sitting around with a group of classmates, and we were joking around and “trash talking” each other. For some reason she singled me out, saying that she would pull down my swimsuit bottom so that she could, “see what I was working with.” Not fully knowing what she meant, I rolled my eyes at her and took my clothes to the bathroom to change. When I got home, I told my grandmother, “This gay girl is bothering me and if she were to ever touch me, I would punch her in the face.” My grandmother, who believes in “turning the other cheek,” responded that I should not hit her, but instead tell the teacher. I always wondered why my grandmother skipped over the “gay” part. After I was “out” to my family, I inquired about this, to which she replied, “That had nothing to do with

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me.” During high school, I had two boyfriends, and with the last one, I shared that I was attracted to girls, and he did not seem phased by this confession but kept my secret.

While in college, I dated guys, even though it wasn't what I really wanted, but felt this was what I was “supposed to do,” as a young woman; I was supposed to bring home a man that I would eventually marry. There was an unspoken tradition that the young ladies in my family were expected to carry. This consisted of graduating from high school and college, getting a great job, learning how to take care of oneself, be a productive citizen by saving money and paying taxes and bills, not having sex or bringing home an unwedded baby, and magically be found by that special man and marry him.

At any moment, I can be taken back to my aunt's house in November of 2004; I had just turned 19 the month before. We were in the kitchen, cooking and washing dishes, and I was expressing my emotions and feelings that I was experiencing in relation to my sexuality to her. She told me that “girls in college, they experiment with certain actions,” and that eventually I would “come back around to who [I really was].” I had been away from home for only three months at this time, so I was still naïve. I paused and asked, “What if my feelings are not a phase?” and she just said, “no worries—it is.” I did not argue with her, I just switched the topic of conversation. I purposely did not mention the elephant in the room again, for at least a couple of years. After that talk with my aunt, I swallowed what I thought was me acknowledging that I was gay, and by the end of the semester, I was rushed to the hospital for alcohol poisoning and placed on academic probation.

For so long, I hated the sight of my face in the mirror, and I despised everything about me that was not heteronormative. I finally told myself that the next year, 2005,

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would be my time to come out. I had gained a friend who I was honest with and would vent to about the pressures of dating the opposite sex for the sake of appearances. I no longer wanted to do this—live for others—but it still took me a couple more years to fully acknowledge and accept my own sexuality. I believe part of my insecurities around sexuality were because of my childhood: I was raised Baptist, still belonged to the church that I grew up in at home in northern Illinois, and had friends who were very active in church. So, I felt that I was constantly being judged at home and in college.

Cranes in the Sky by Solange

I tried to drink it away
 I tried to put one in the air
 I tried to dance it away
 I tried to change it with my hair

I ran my credit card bill up
 Thought a new dress make it better
 I tried to work it away
 But that just made me even sadder

I tried to keep myself busy
 I ran around circles
 Think I made myself dizzy
 I slept it away, I sexed it away
 I read it away

Away, away, away, away, away, away
 Away, away, away, away, away

Well, it's like cranes in the sky
 Sometimes I don't wanna feel those metal clouds
 Yeah, it's like cranes in the sky
 Sometimes I don't wanna feel those metal clouds

I tried to run it away
 Thought then my head be feeling clearer
 I traveled 70 states
 Thought moving 'round make me feel better

I tried to let go my lover
 Thought if I was alone then maybe I could recover

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To write it away or cry it away (don't you cry, baby)

...

But it's like cranes in the sky

Sometimes I don't wanna feel those metal clouds

Yeah, it's like cranes in the sky

Sometimes I don't wanna feel those metal clouds

Away, away, away, away, away

...

(Knowles, Johnson, and Saadiq, 2016, track 4).

I started to secretly hate others who were “out” and “free,” living their lives regardless of if they had support from family or friends. By the middle of 2005, I got on the social media site, “Myspace,” and started using it to seek out other women who were like me. And then, I met someone! I talked to her for approximately three months on the internet before we agreed to meet, and she was beautiful in her photos. However, when we met, I found out that I had been “catfished,” and she had used someone else’s photos when chatting with me, because she was not comfortable with herself. After discovering she was a completely different person, I told myself that it was a sign from a higher power and that, in order for me to be “saved,” I had to give up the idea of dating women and continue dating men. Still, I knew deep down that I could not continue to date men, because I only liked the idea of men being my platonic friends.

By November of 2005, I had attempted suicide because I no longer wanted to deal with my sexuality pressures, and wanted to be with my mother. I was also about to flunk out of college for the second time. My suicide attempt was the last straw for my grandmother, and she gave me an ultimatum—that I could either go to counseling or come home. I did not want to go back home to Chicago, because failure was honestly not an option in my mind. I come from a line of strong women, and I was taught to keep trying and never give up. So I told my grandmother that I would start on-campus

counseling, but I pushed off setting an appointment for as long as I could. I finally made my first appointment in January of 2006, and she wanted proof. Thankfully, my grandmother was serious about me taking hold of my mental health, and she consistently made that clear.

I officially came out during my junior year in college to a small number of family members and the majority of my friends, who were like sisters to me. Some had a positive response to me coming out and others had responses that were traumatizing. Yet on the day of my college graduation, my brother outed me to the whole family, just to take the attention off him during a heated conversation. The moment I confirmed my sexual orientation after being outed, I felt judged by those around me. There were no words of disapproval, but I could feel it in my bones, and I caressed the pain and disappointment, while their looks of discontent told me that I was an embarrassment. It suddenly felt as if everything I had accomplished was erased and meant nothing.

Over time, I went through the motions of trying to be seen, by any means necessary. I just wanted to feel love from them. There were plenty of nights where I laid awake, asking God to take away the hard feelings and emotions I had for women, but they only grew stronger. I would go to church and pray that I would no longer see other women as more than pretty. I started to build up a wall of anger because I felt like what I wanted from my family was never going to happen. I already did not have my mother and barely had my father. Therefore, I was willing and prepared to fight to keep the small number of family members that I had left. I wanted to prove that I was still worthy of love, and tried to make my family accept my being a young Lesbian woman. I spent ten

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years doing this before I finally gave up, tired of trying to force their love. I learned early on that being gay was not okay in my family structure, and I felt that I could change that.

If I had been better prepared to handle this type of adversity, I could have freely lived out loud these past 17 years. Eventually, I had to move on, to live my life for me. I decided that I was not going to stop living my life because they could not understand why they had a gay family member. In the strife of yearning to be accepted, I had forgotten that I still had other family and friends who loved me. I also finally realized that “family” didn’t have to be blood. Family could be chosen and was not limited to genetics.

In 2005, just after I tried to commit suicide, I developed an idea for a program for other people like me. “You Are Worthy, Incorporated” is a leadership and mentoring program that was born in my dorm room on a dark night. After a long period of serious crying, I started taking pills in order to “go home to be with my mother,” when my roommate walked in on me lifting the bottle towards my mouth for another dose and knocked them out of my hand. Previously, in 2001, my mother had died of a narcotic overdose, and although I knew she was not coming back, I had become numb to the pain of that loss until that moment. Four years of hurt, strife, being ignored, used, and pushed away, and the sadness came rushing down all at once, which is why I felt I could not go on. After lying there crying and venting to my roommate, I got up, went into the bathroom and locked the door. I looked in the mirror and began reciting the phrase “you are worthy,” and other words of affirmation to myself repeatedly, and when I would start to think negatively about myself, I had to start the process over. I did this exercise for 60 days before I made it through one session of looking in the mirror for ten minutes and actually believing that I was worthy and liked what I saw looking back at me. It took ten

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years for me to accept myself. In 2014, I decided that if I had to walk alone and be ostracized from my family, then I would rather do that than be miserable. After I made that declaration to myself, any shame left my spirit and I started to love all of me, fully and authentically. I refused to question or fight myself, and once I stopped judging and hating myself, love came pouring in from my family.

The following vignettes are from the participants of my study. When reading, please take the time to experience their stories with gratitude, for the courage it has taken to share.

BlackQueer adults



Lorde Baldwin was a 40-year-old non-binary, gender fluid, femme, androgynous person. They called their gender “in flux,” and used pronouns “they,” “them,” and “their.” They were born and raised in southern California, during the height of the LA riots in 1992. Lorde was an educator and founder of a non-profit, where they used art as a form of healing. Early on, while doing the interview and then reading over the transcriptions, my

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first thought about Lorde Baldwin was that they were the “unicorn,” out of all of my participants, and that remained true throughout the full data collection process. Asking my participants about the dynamics of their family was intentional once I realized the importance of this information. Lorde Baldwin said,

My mom is 67, my dad is 69, and they were both born in St. Louis, Missouri. I was born in Los Angeles, California, and they moved to LA right after they had my brother—he’s 18 months older than me. Um, they were together for two years after ... they got there. They divorced ... and so we moved to an apartment. My mom became a teacher, so I was always at school.... We started off poor and my mom being my mom, she was able to raise money, and then we were like, straight up middle-class, like doing great. Then, you know, my mom, like most Black women, started taking care of people and gave up all their money. Then we was like poor again, and then we was rich again and then, I don't even know how that happened.... I've been at like three different class brackets and yeah, I had a very happy childhood.

According to them, growing up in California was fun, and at times, somewhat traumatic once the riots began, because the city was placed on lockdown. There were gunshots that would go off throughout the neighborhood, and they also experienced coming home to their house being randomly broken in and ransacked. They shared with me that their childhood was healthy, full of love, and void of childhood trauma. Lorde described their mother as a liberal, single mother who was very giving, a teacher by trade, and an all-around amazing person. When talking about their early childhood, they lit up, telling me how they went to see Janet Jackson and MC Hammer in concert for their 10th

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birthday. They described themselves as very shy and slow to develop, while most of their friends had breasts, they did not. They also shared that it was more comfortable to hang out with younger kids, which is what they have continued to do, as an adult. During our conversation, they had some technical issues which caused a great deal of distraction; I offered to have us stop the interview, but Lorde insisted that we keep going, because this research was also important to them.

Although Lorde grew up in LA, which many outsiders view as the “land of liberals,” being Queer was still looked at as a problem. They shared that going to an arts high school during the early 90’s was amazing, and presented them with the opportunity to have lots of Queer expressive friends and classmates, as well as same-gender people who they found attractive. While growing up, their mother shared that their house had an “open door,” and that no questions were off limits, and as a result, Lorde learned about sex and sexuality at a younger age than most; their mother did not want them to learn inaccurate information from their friends. She was also not afraid to expose them to folks that society deemed as “too different,” and she purposefully did this so that they would grow up valuing everyone. One childhood story they shared was about a time when their mother moved her co-worker into their house, when he had been kicked out at 19 years of age because he was Gay. When they shared this, I thought about how amazing it would be to see your mother open her arms and heart to someone who was in need like that. Some children may witness their families help someone who needs food or a place to stay during a hard time, but not often because being Queer got them kicked out of the house.

Next Lifetime by Erykah Badu
Now what am I supposed to do
When I want you in my world
(Want you in my world)

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But how can I want you for myself
When I'm already someone's girl

What am I supposed to do
When I want you in my world
(Want you in my world)
But how can I want you for myself
When I'm already someone's girl

First time that I saw you boy
It was a warm and sunny day
All I know is I wanted you
I really hoped you'd looked my way
Then you smiled at me so warm and sweet
I could not speak
You make me feel like a lil bitty girl
What do you do to me

...

Your energy, feels so damn good to me
It picks me up don't wanna come down
You got me spinning all around (oh) yeah
You need to know, I've got somebody
But, you're beautiful, shh
But still it ain't that type of party now

...

Maybe we'll be butterflies
I guess I'll see you next lifetime
That sounds so divine
I guess I'll see you next lifetime
I guess I will now
I guess I'll see you next lifetime
Wait, wait a little while

See, it ain't nothin' wrong with dreamin'
But boy don't get me wrong
Cause every time (every time) I see you
(Every single time)
It lets me know just how strong
(Every single time)
That my love is for my baby
But emotions just don't lie
Well I know I'm a lot of woman
But not enough to divide my pie, ooh

...

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Cuz what we got is so divine
I guess I'll see you next lifetime
Next time I'll make you mine, ooh
(Wright and Scott, 1997, track 6).

Lorde graduated high school and went to college in the Midwestern United States, and they mainly went to school, not doing much outside of studying and going to class. They graduated from high school at 17, got their bachelor's degree at 20, their master's degree at 21, and then their doctorate at 25. In-between these years, they reconnected with a classmate that they had known from high school, and during the final year of Lorde's doctoral program they started dating and married shortly after graduation.

Lorde expressed how dressing androgynously had always been a part of their style, however back then, they did not have the language to identify as non-binary but would have. Once married, they began to question their identity, because at around 25 years of age, they began to acknowledge that they found women attractive. Sharing with me that their marriage lacked intimacy, they had talked with their then-husband about their newly embraced feelings, and they both decided to enter an "open" marriage. This is when Lorde began to explore their sexuality and transitioned from "she/her" pronouns to "non-binary." They stated that it was a "process of unlearning" information, ideas, beliefs around heteronormativity, gender, and femininity. They even had folks questioning them about their "wanting to be a man." Eventually, they got a divorce, becoming a single mother. Lorde shared that when they brought a girlfriend home for a holiday to their mother's house, no one thought anything of it, and this was their version of "coming out." They shared that once their sexuality was publicly known, it became an interesting road for even their immediate family members to use the pronouns they identified with. They

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shared that some distant aunts and cousins had something to say about them being Queer and then “non-binary,” and added that it was nothing worth mentioning or mulling over.

When I asked the final question, “How could the adults that were in your life have helped you develop a positive and healthy sexual identity early on, regardless of the outside pressure?” Lorde said,

I don’t think that’s possible, and that it depends on the kid. The adults have to do everything in their power to lift their kid and all that they love and to support it. But beyond that, how, um ... how susceptible you are to influence is really what matters because you got that one friend who’s like, you know, being Gay is a sin that could mess you up, despite 200 people telling you you’re fine. So, I think parents, ... we [think that we] have power over how our kids see themselves. We absolutely do not, absolutely [do not]. We can try and we can give them all the tools, but that doesn’t mean it’s [going to] work.

The next vignettes will be mixed with love, frustration, sadness, and fight. While the rest of my participants are not meant to be viewed as victims, their Queerness was not as welcomed at home as Lorde’s, and they have fought hard to grow into the people that they have become.

Fairy Wings was a 29-year-old nonbinary person who used all pronouns including “ze,” and “zir,” and was born in northeastern California. At the time of the interview, they had recently graduated with their master’s degree and were in the process of getting prepared to obtain their license in social work.

My [birth] mom [was] pushing probably, 65, and then my adopted mom, I want to say, well, just talking to her the other day, she said she's 55.... I felt like I've lived

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in so many intergenerational households, um, you know, had parents ready to actually raise you all under the same roof. We all help each other, type of situation. I would consider my mom a liberal, especially during that time, then, um, culturally wise, um, with my grandparents and so they were Jehovah witnesses.... But, um, so my birth mother is one person and then [I had] my adopted mom. Um, and my adopted mom is her cousin. So my mom wasn't aware she was pregnant with me. This was also during the time of, like, Black Panther party stuff happening, like the war on drugs, like historically, like I've heard a lot.... So [she was] always on drugs. She birthed me, obviously a social worker, can't give, you know, the child to the family. Um, so I was in foster care or group home. And then my adopted mom ... came to visit me probably like two months later and was just like '[why] my baby, this baby got a rash ... what are y'all doing? ... why is she even in this room?' So she took me in, um, and you know, she's been through her own stuff, but I just like, vaguely remembered going to like, what I would consider a doctor's office ... basically [to] meet up with my birth mom, who never showed up. So this was like a continuous thing until, probably about like six [years old]. And then after that, the, uh, people had called the social services [saying to] our adopted mom ... like, 'she's yours and you can have her, um, you have all the rights.'

Fairy Wings' life started off shaky as they were removed at birth from their mother's custody, because of a drug addiction. They were a quiet child, who was not the oldest but was considered to be the most mature, and was tasked with helping to care for their other two siblings; one was five years younger and the other was five years older, with

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developmental disabilities. Fairy took this job seriously, and because of it, often struggled as a student while also keeping their family business out of the ears of the teachers and administrators at school. For some Black families, sharing the inner workings of how they function with outsiders is forbidden.

CINDERELLA, Pt. 2. By Chika

Cinderella, you sound like me
I remember you from my dreams
When I'm with you, you make time freeze

(Oh-oh)
(Oh-oh-oh)

Cinderella, who I might be
Doesn't matter if I'm icy
No agenda, you love blindly
...
Maybe I'm out of my mind
I'm used to hanging with dimes
Something about you is different
You're all that I'm missing
I'm thinking about making you mine
Me, I got used to the limelight
Spending my nights getting rhymes right
Being with you is the highlight
Lately I'm thinking the time's right
Don't want you anywhere else
Stay, girl I need you right here to myself
No one is better alone
Come and take part in the wealth
And I know that you're leaving soon
We're running out of time
Let's create our own reality
And shift the paradigm
Cinderella, you sound like me
I remember you from my dreams
When I'm with you, you make time freeze

...
Cinderella, who I might be
Doesn't matter if I'm icy
No agenda, you love blindly
...

(Cunningham, Snider, and Oranika, 2021, track 4).

Fairy Wings shared that they started to have visible crushes in middle school, and fell in love with one guy who also happened to be Queer. They also had other crushes, and remembered feeling that their peers helped to shape their early understandings of sexuality and how they viewed themselves. Fairy looked melancholic when reminiscing about these years, especially when they recalled the times when poetry and music came into their life, and again when sharing how they loved to play basketball with the guys, because they wanted to be strong. To them, playing certain sports that were associated with “boys,” equated to them being close to masculinity. It was during high school, when Fairy realized that masculine-presenting females were secretly their “soft spot,” and had a couple of public crushes on them, while still outwardly dating men.

Their stepfather was a very pivotal parental figure for Fairy, as he advocated for them to be a child, brought music and poetry into their life, and encouraged Fairy to spend time with their friends after school, instead of being “so serious” all the time. The one time that they had finally mustered up the strength to have friends over, their mother showed up and embarrassed Fairy in front of them. One of Fairy’s punishments was to take a cold shower, and their mother also verbally degraded them. The various forms of abuse that Fairy received eventually caused them to fear sex and intimacy later in life. Fairy shared that they barely graduated high school, but it happened, and then they chose to attend junior college. This was where they started to come into their own, embracing their sexuality, and also began working with BlackQueer youth, deciding that social work was the next move for them. They started to use their voice to help support and protect Queer people, while also realizing that they were Transgender. From early on, Fairy had dressed with an androgynous style, and stated that they never liked wearing dresses as a

young girl. They shared with me that they continued to face the crossroads of either outing themselves or choosing to remain silent. Their choice depended on how they were feeling and the environment, because safety had to be the priority.

Joe Black was a 42-year-old cisgendered Gay male, who used all pronouns. He was born in eastern Missouri to his mother, who he didn't remember much about, and his father, who was a Navy veteran. In his reflections, Joe shared that he went into foster care in his early childhood,

I am the youngest of three boys, but I'm the only child of my mother, like, long story short. Um, so my mom died when I was around two-ish. Um, I ended up going to foster care around [age] six, after experiencing some traumatic events in my home. Um, my dad was, uh, sent to jail. Um, recently, actually recently in the last five years, [I] learned that was due to sexual abuse of me, which I have no real memory. Physical memory—obviously my body has some memories of that, which makes sense throughout some of my sexual character throughout my life. Um, and as a result, I, uh, was actually in foster care with my older brother, um, at the time I don't remember, but he was there sometimes, he tells me he was there, and I was in foster care from [age] six to 12.

Joe remembered his foster parents having a computer in the house, which was a big deal in the 1980's. When asked about the family dynamics in his early childhood, he said,

So the house I'ma pull from, I had the most memory of, it's my foster care. I still really don't have much memory of going to church. I know that my mom actually was, uh, one of the traveling Christian singers. We went to church. Right. Um,

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and so I know that my [birth] dad's ... he was super, super, super, uh, Christian in his own belief system. And, um, when I went to my foster home, we went to church often ... but I think [my foster] father was Catholic. So I went to Catholic church and I think [I remember] going to a couple of Baptist churches with [my foster] mom. My assumptions are that they were Democrats, um, just from looking back from now and all the things, uh, that I remember in the hallway. Um, I know my dad was a Democrat for sure.

Although Joe's foster parents went to separate churches, he was especially fond of the Catholic services—mainly because they were shorter, but he also loved the Baptist service because of the music. Joe transitioned back to his birth father's house around age 12 or 13, but while he was with his foster parents, he started going to a school almost an hour from their house, because there was a belief that those schools were better than what the neighborhood schools offered. Once he was back in the custody of his birth father, he continued attending school in that district until he graduated high school. He participated in his school's choir, which he called his "saving grace," to get away from his father who was very homophobic and would constantly demean him. Around this timeframe, Joe also started to learn that being in close proximity to whiteness corresponded to safety for him. He spent most of his high school years arguing with and trying to avoid his father. He then joined a local program where he learned about Queerness and was able to explore his own sexuality and learn how express himself. While he was thankful for this experience, it was very white-centered.

Joe looked off to the distance while recalling a time when he came home late and when his father asked him where he had been, he opted to say that he was with a girl to

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avoid an argument. His father only cared that he was not with another boy late at night. There was no concern for his safety, as long as he was with a girl, who he could possibly have sex with. He eventually graduated high school after working hard to prove himself through his straight A's, extracurricular activities, as well as part-time jobs. For college, he went to a school in southern Missouri on a full-ride scholarship for music. Joe had been providing for himself for years at this point, and once he got to college, he did not want to be responsible anymore. He started to cope with his overachieving, needing to be close to whiteness, and gayness by drinking and using drugs.

Sissy That Walk by RuPaul

Pick myself up, turn the world on its head
 Don't forget what, don't forget what my mama said
 People talking since the beginning of time
 Unless they paying your bills, pay them bitches no mind
 And if I fly, or if I fall
 Least I can say, I gave it all
 And if I fly, or if I fall

I'm on my way, I'm on my way
 Fly, fly, fly, fly, uh oh, uh oh
 Fly, fly, fly, fly, uh oh, uh oh
 Fly, fly, fly, fly, uh oh, uh oh
 Fly, fly, fly, fly, uh oh, now sissy that walk

Better beware, ain't no T, ain't no shade
 But at the same time, bitches better get out the way
 I'm a femme queen, mother of a house of no shame
 My pussy is on fire, now kiss the flame

...

Fly, fly, fly, fly, uh oh, uh oh
 Fly, fly, fly, fly, uh oh, now sissy that walk
 (Rupaul and Piane, 2014, track 2).

Eventually he dropped out of college, but stayed in the area and would do drag shows at the local gay clubs to feel like he belonged. He met other Black folks, but it felt like it was always them wanting him to be their Gay friend or brother, and never a

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relationship where he could experience romantic love. He stated that he had met some amazing people throughout his life, and one of those close friends was a white woman who never judged him for his drug and alcohol use. She did however feel compelled to help get him out of that lifestyle. She talked him into moving back to his childhood home, but he did not think she was serious, so during this phone call he blurted out a random move date for her to, “shut up talking about [him] moving away from the home [he] felt most comfortable.” Sure enough, she showed up at his doorstep on the date that he gave, and he proceeded to move back to his father’s house, the day after Hurricane Katrina had ripped New Orleans apart. He has been clean ever since, and got reacquainted with the life he had before the drugs and alcohol had taken over. Joe started working again, enrolled into college, completed his Master’s degree, and became a licensed social worker within the next six years.

Rusty Bain was a 35-year-old cisgendered Gay male who used all pronouns. He was born in southeast Missouri, and because his parents were still in high school when he was conceived, it was decided that his grandparents would raise him. In between time, his mother got married and moved to Virginia because her husband was in the United States Navy. Five months after Rusty was born, his grandparents also had their own last child, and so he was able to grow up with a male cousin and have a confidant. His grandfather was a Church of God in Christ (COGIC) preacher in the “Bible Belt” of Missouri. Rusty shared some stories about his early childhood which made me want to wrap him up in a tight hug and repeatedly affirm him. Rusty’s gender expression was effeminate for as long as he could remember, and he had wished he was a girl on numerous occasions, as he felt that it would have been easier and safer for him. He reminisced on times when he

prayed that he would wake up a girl, and questioned God as to why he was not a girl but a boy who expressed himself outwardly the best way he knew how. Since there was another child in the house around the same age, the adults assumed they would have the same interests, but this was not the case, and he was constantly singled out for that—mainly by his grandfather and other male figures.

During his interview, I could sense that these memories were still somewhat painful for him. The women in his family loved him and were his saving grace. He smiled as he thought about visiting his great-grandmother and aunts, because when he was with them, he could be himself authentically. Back in the Bible Belt, he was censored, and maybe he needed to be to avoid extra unwanted attention. Erotic and sexual energy were learned early on for Rusty, as he explored with himself and other children his age. He said that it felt like home for him, and it was not something that he felt was “wrong,” although he knew that it would not be welcomed in his household—so he kept it a secret. Eventually, his father ended up in Virginia as well, since he was also in the United States Navy; so during the summers, he got to spend time with both of his parents, which he loved. He stated that he knew that his father loved him, but he was distant while he was growing up.

His father also remarried and had more children, so spending time with his siblings was always fun. He shared about himself and his siblings fighting other children in the neighborhood for making fun of him and calling him names. Rusty learned early on how to defend himself with words, and was quick-witted enough to be able to “joan,” or throw insults, back on others when needed. He reflected on a time when he was at home for the summer, having a good time dancing to the music at a family cookout where everyone

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was eating and laughing, and he took a break to use the restroom. When he was coming out of the house, his uncle stopped him and asked, "Are you a faggot?" Rusty had heard this word before, from others making fun of him, but the pain and hurt that he immediately felt was a shock when this came from someone who he thought would love and protect him.

River by Leon Bridges

Been traveling these wide roads for so long
 My heart's been far from you
 Ten-thousand miles gone
 Oh, I wanna come near and give ya
 Every part of me
 But there is blood on my hands
 And my lips aren't clean
 In my darkness I remember
 Momma's words reoccur to me
 "Surrender to the good Lord
 And he'll wipe your slate clean"

Take me to your river
 I wanna go
 Oh, go on
 Take me to your river
 I wanna know
 Tip me in your smooth waters
 I go in
 As a man with many crimes
 Come up for air
 As my sins flow down the Jordan
 Oh, I wanna come near and give ya
 Every part of me
 But there is blood on my hands
 And my lips aren't clean
 ...

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I wanna go
Lord, please let me know
Take me to your river
I wanna know
(Block, Jenkins, Bridges, and Vivion, 2015, track 10).

The majority of Rusty's close friends were girls his age. His uncle had a best friend that he secretly began a relationship with, which then became his first heartbreak, and one that he had to deal with in silence. Rusty chose to put all of his energy into his schoolwork, ROTC, and "Upward Bound" activities. He also got a job, so that he would not have to ask his grandfather for money, since it was always a hassle when he needed something. He could always feel that his grandfather only tolerated him throughout his life. He expressed that he never felt like his grandfather loved him, and instead felt like a burden. Rusty began looking for the love that he was not getting at home, in relationships, and that was also reflected in those he attracted. He had his first romantic relationship in high school, and his boyfriend ended up making fun of him and blasting him to their friends. Soon after he had "come out" to his own friends, he got into an argument with one of them, and she then went around their school, telling everyone that he was Gay.

Rusty struggled with blow after blow on his own because he did not have any adults that he could talk to help him through these moments. Some of the bullying that he endured back then still affected him; for instance, he would not eat Skittles because of the pain that it brought up from the name-calling. He shared a story about a day in class, when he was singled out by one of the school jocks who had not done his homework. The kid said out loud to the whole class that if he "rubbed on Rusty's booty," he'd get all the

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answers to the schoolwork. Then, when Rusty responded angrily, he was the only one sent to the principal's office. He also shared about a job he was able to get the summer before his senior year in high school. It was at a record store, which he loved because he was very into music and was able to get lost in the stacks and find some things that he really enjoyed.

That same summer, Rusty's mother found among his things, a book by the late E. Lynn Harris, who was a popular author who wrote about Queerness and men on "the down low." She confronted Rusty about the book, and they had a heart-to-heart conversation about how he felt growing up in his grandparents' house, and he told her that he was Gay. She then called her pastor, who came over with his wife and another deacon to talk with him. Rusty was on guard during this conversation because he just did not understand why his mother called these people over. To make matters worse, during the conversation, the pastor's wife asked him if he knew why his mother was upset and when he replied no, she said, "She's crying because she's ashamed ... she talks about people like you." His mom then forced him to call his father, and in that moment, he found out that his father loved him. All of the doubt he previously had left, because his father stood up for and defended him, and became his biggest fan.

Back in Missouri, Rusty became the "token" Gay boy in his school, and he felt that no one cared about him unless it was to their benefit. Although he was a straight-A student, he barely graduated high school because he lost his great-grandmother his senior year, which "shook [him to his] core," so much so that he stopped going to school. Throughout this time, no one from his school checked in on him until it was time for the yearly testing. Soon after, he was kicked out of his home, supposedly for coming in late,

after leaving a church service. He was told that he needed to “get right with the Lord,” and go talk with the church’s bishop or get out, because his “ways” were why his grandfather was sick. Hurt and dejected, he packed up his belongings and moved in with his cousin for the remainder of his senior year.

Rusty was accepted into two schools for college, and he chose to go to the one closest to home, in Missouri, where he got a full scholarship that covered him for four years. Despite that the relationship between him and his grandfather was strained and emotionally abusive, when his grandfather passed away after his high school graduation, he was affected so deeply that he almost did not go on to college. In the final hour, he chose to go to school, and another tragedy struck: the uncle that he grew up with got into a terrible car accident in Chicago the same weekend Rusty was leaving for school. Everyone rushed to Chicago for his uncle, and he moved himself into his dorm room alone and started college. He expressed that he enjoyed his time away at school, although he “spent too much time partying and socializing.” Despite this, he was able to stay on top of his grades and his job as a Residential Advisor (RA). One of his tasks as an RA included creating programming for students, and he came up with a supportive event called “Hurt, Pain, and Peach Cobbler,” (the peach cobbler was made by his grandmother), and that experience solidified his decision to go into counseling, because the students on campus loved it so much.

Rusty graduated college, moved to eastern Missouri to get his Master’s degree in counseling, and worked full-time in a mentally draining job in the meantime, which did not help his undiagnosed depression. Still, he persevered through for two and a half years. During this time he also met a man and they entered into a relationship. However,

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in his line of work, he kept meeting Gay men who were testing positive for HIV, and it became too much for him. In a sort-of domino effect, his relationship ended, he quit his job, and wanting to escape this life, he moved to northwestern Missouri. He stayed there for a year, but eventually moved back to eastern Missouri where he had some community. During this time, his mother asked him why he was unhappy, saying he was “too blessed to not be happy.” There were so many layers as to why Rusty was not happy, but he was not fully vocal about it. While looking for a job in his field and trying to be content with himself, he started working as a bartender and he thoroughly enjoyed that break. He eventually returned to the mental health field as a creative expression dance therapist, which was a job that had been on his “dream list,” and he loved the position, but did not feel respected by his colleagues. He eventually left that job and moved to Virginia to be close to his father, which is where he has remained, working to build his business as a therapist.

Jordan B. was a 61-year-old Transgender Intersex woman who used “she,” “her,” and “hers” pronouns. She grew up in northwestern Missouri. Jordan asked for me to use her real name and not a pseudonym, because she wanted her story to be shared and seen. She had a more typical childhood, with two parents in the house, and was the youngest of 11 children. Her parents and siblings were very supportive of her, and her parents encouraged them to live authentically. However, Jordan’s life changed drastically after her eleventh birthday, when her mother died, and five months later, her father died.

She was closer to one of her older sisters, but a judge ruled that she would go to live with her brother—who was married with two children, instead of her sister—who was single and living with her boyfriend. Jordan did not like the ruling, but had to deal

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with it. Although Jordan's lifeline had passed away, she rarely had any trouble from family or friends over her gender expression. She did however recall a time when one of her cousins said to her, "I promised your mother on her deathbed that if you turned out to be a sissy, I would tie you to a tree and beat it outta you." Jordan could not remember what she did for her cousin to say this, but she said, "I must've done something that was really, really flamboyant." Throughout our conversation, Jordan repeatedly said, "they [her family] did the best that they could with what [knowledge] they had."

A Change is Gonna Come by Sam Cooke

I was born by the river, in a little tent
 Oh, and just like the river
 I've been running ever since
 It's been a long
 A long time coming
 But I know a change gonna come
 Oh, yes it will
 It's been too hard living
 But I'm afraid to die
 'Cause I don't know what's up there
 Beyond the sky

It's been a long
 A long time coming
 But I know a change gonna come
 Oh, yes it will

I go to the movie
 And I go downtown
 Somebody keep telling me
 Don't hang around

It's been a long
 A long time coming
 But I know, a change gonna come
 Oh, yes it will

Then I go to my brother
 And I say, brother, help me please

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But he winds up, knockin' me
Back down on my knees
Oh, there been times that I thought
I couldn't last for long
But now I think I'm able, to carry on
It's been a long
A long time coming
But I know a change gonna come
Oh, yes it will
(Cooke, 1964, track 7).

The rest of her childhood was met with her wanting to do something and her brother saying no, but her sneaking off and still doing it. She expressed that all of her friends' parents felt that she was the sweetest person, yet she remembered being very mischievous. When it came time to graduate high school, she had her eyes set on California, but her brother vetoed the idea, saying that it was too far, and that she needed to be close enough for family to get to her, if need be.

She ended up going to a private university in Missouri, where she graduated with a double major in business administration and theatre, and then moved to eastern Missouri. Jordan was always competitive and knew how to play basketball but chose not to pursue that because she was more interested in cheerleading and tennis. Sometimes, she would have to shut up the neighborhood boys and family members by showing that she still had the skill on the court, despite not using it. Doing drag shows became another way for Jordan to be competitive. It helped that she had a big presence when she walked into a room, and because of this, one of her friends asked for her help in raising money to start a local non-profit. At the time of the interview, this was where she still worked, in a leadership capacity. Along the way, there were plenty of twists and turns, especially when Jordan noticed that her genitalia looked different than others, but it was part of her,

and for a time, she was fine with identifying as a Gay man. Still, there was always something nagging away inside of her.

One day, at 51 years of age, she was performing in her drag persona, and there was a medical doctor in the audience. The doctor reached out to her, to get her to come into the office under the guise of getting Botox, however once she was in the office, the doctor revealed that she had suspected Jordan might be Intersex. She let Jordan know that she was overweight and wanted to do some blood work before putting her on medicine to get her weight under control, and the bloodwork came back fine, while also showing that her hormones were female, but her chromosomes were male. This was indeed an indication that she was an Intersex person. It was during this time spent with the doctor that Jordan decided to transition, and the medicine took her through a very different version of “puberty.”

While reminiscing about this period of her life, she laughed about how it affected her—one moment she wanted to lash out, and in another she would want to have sex. Once she finished going through the hormonal changes, she finally began feeling more at home with herself, with that nagging feeling gone. She still had to tell her loved ones about her transitioning from male to female, and the brother that raised her was the first person that she considered, but she still did not feel ready.

One summer, she was volunteering for her city’s Pride Festival, and she needed to get some new clothes. She decided to go to the “big and tall” men’s store, because this was what she was used to when she needed comfortable, loose-fit clothing. However, it was during this trip to the clothing store where she saw that “Leon,” the name she was given at birth, was gone—and not coming back.

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She had a breakdown in the store, ran out, and expressed to her friend in the car that she needed to say goodbye to Leon and live out her truth. The next morning, she woke up and removed all of the men's clothing from her closet, but later put them back. This act of removing and replacing her clothes happened multiple times. While she was dealing with this dilemma, she was also ruminating over calling her brother, to let him know what was going on with her. She kept picking up the phone and hanging it up. When her phone rang, it was her brother on the other line, and he asked her, "What is going on with you?" She expressed to me that she was only semi-shocked that he knew something was wrong, because they usually felt each other whenever they were battling internally with something. She took a deep breath and told him everything, and his response warmed her heart. He asked if this was why she had not been coming home, and wanted to know why she hid from the family for so long. She just had not known how to handle the potential rejection that she would have received from her family, and made up stories in her head to protect herself. That year, she went home, partially as Jordan for Thanksgiving, but without the clothing. Not long after the holidays, her best friend—her brother—passed away. When she went home again, it was authentically as Jordan.

At her brother's funeral, people were looking at her and trying to figure out who she was, and when they realized who she was, they were shocked—in a good way and very happy to see her. Multiple people told her "not to stay away from family as long as [she] did ever again," and treated her just as well as they had treated Leon. She had gone home with pamphlets, ready to hand out information about what it meant to be Transgender and Intersex, and no one cared—no one treated her differently. In fact, some

folks stated that they had always assumed she was Queer and were just waiting on her to tell them.

Whitney B. was a 35-year-old bisexual Queer woman who used “she,” “her,” and “hers” pronouns, and was raised in southern Illinois. Whitney was another participant who asked me to use her real name and not a pseudonym, because she wanted her story to be shared and seen. When I asked her to tell me about what she remembered from birth to age ten, she laughed and said, “That’s a long time ago, and I’m closer to 40 than I am ten.” In the next breath, she went through multiple memories.

Whitney was raised in an intergenerational household, and it was a strict National American Baptist household, mixed with some Church of God in Christ (COGIC), where she was the only child for 13 years. She grew up with cousins who were like her siblings and expressed that she had a normal childhood. Whitney attended private schools all her life, but during her primary years, she was around other Black students. She later experienced some shock when going into her private high school, as she was one of only eight Black students in her graduating class. She went from having Black teachers and classmates to all White teachers and only seeing Black staff in the lunchroom or as the gym teacher.

She spoke passionately about how the toxic theology from her high school, paired with her home and friends’ interpretations of God and Christianity, had her questioning everything that she had been taught up until that point. Whitney recalled a time that she did not agree with something one of her teachers said,

Yeah, like they would just say crazy stuff. One staff member who was just talking about like, heaven and hell, because that was also a huge part of the theology of

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the school. Like we had to take religion classes and now that I have an MBA, I'm like, yo—y'all really didn't know what y'all was talking about, but okay. Um, and I remember her saying like, we can't just automatically say that babies go to heaven because they never had a chance to profess Jesus Lord. Like I remember that conversation in her office and I was just like, speechless. It's a baby. And she's like, 'What's the word?' The Bible says that every tongue must confess and maybe don't have a chance to confess. So we won't see them on the other side. And I was just like, so yeah, that was, that was the level of like toxic theology that I was dealing with. Um, just from the white side. And I only had, I only remember two black people working at Westminster at the time. One was the assistant to the headmaster. And that is the main, not the, not the principal, but headmaster. And then the other one was the PE teacher and basketball coach.

She knew that for college, she wanted to get “back to [her] roots,” or in touch with her heritage, and applied and was accepted to an HBCU in Georgia. She was over-the-moon excited about the school she was going to attend, but then there was a mix-up beyond her control, and she almost did not get to go. However, her mother resolved the issue, only to later threaten to bring her back home, once she had seen her first semester grades. Whitney had gotten a taste of freedom and “almost lost her mind,” skipping out on her responsibilities, but she quickly got her priorities back in order.

Make Me Feel by Janelle Monae
 Baby, don't make me spell it out for you
 All of the feelings that I've got for you
 Can't be explained, but I can try for you
 Yeah, baby, don't make me spell it out for you

You keep on asking me the same questions (why?)
 And second guessing all my intentions

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Should know by the way I use my compression
 That you've got the answers to my confessions
 It's like I'm powerful with a little bit of tender
 An emotional, sexual bender
 Mess me up, yeah, but no one does it better
 There's nothin' better

That's just the way you make me feel
 That's just the way you make me feel
 So real, so good, so fuckin' real
 That's just the way you make me feel
 That's just the way you make me feel
 You know I love it, so please don't stop it

You got me right here in your jean pocket (right now)
 Laying your body on a shag carpet (oh)
 You know I love it so please don't stop it
 It's like I'm powerful with a little bit of tender
 An emotional, sexual bender
 Mess me up, yeah, but no one does it better
 There's nothin' better

...

It's like I'm powerful with a little bit of tender
 An emotional, sexual bender
 Mess me up, yeah, but no one does it better (oh!)
 There's nothin' better (better!) Damn

...

(Robinson, 2018, track 8).

Towards the end of college, she started to explore her sexuality and had the privacy and opportunity to do so without pressure. She was somewhat living a “double life,” preaching in public and dating women behind closed doors. Still, she never preached against homosexuality and presented herself as a very strong LGBTQ+ ally. When asked about the years in her 20’s, she took a deep sigh and described them in three words, “a hot mess.” She added,

And you couldn't pay me to relive my twenties. Nobody could pay me enough money in the world for me to be like, oh yeah, I [will] do that season again.... [I was] just a mess everywhere: financially, spiritually. I'm trying to force people to

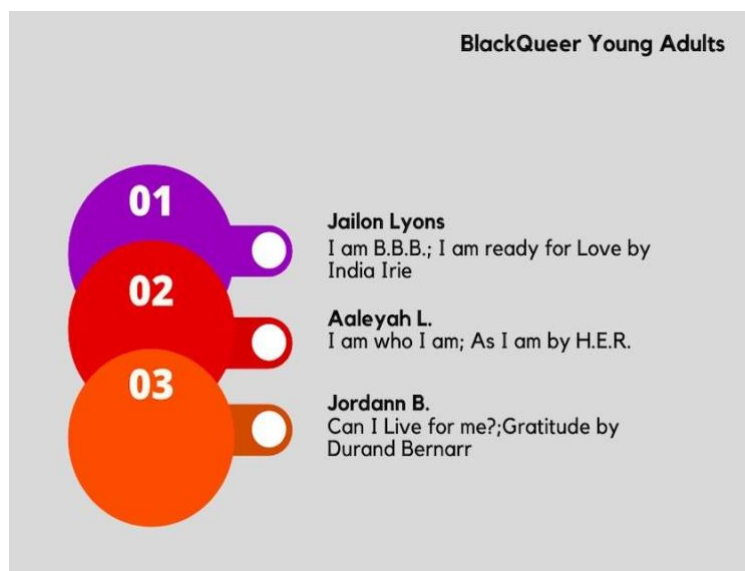
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love me. Um, [I] moved to DC. When I say [my ex was] crazy ... like she had me legit suicidal, like for real, for real. And it was the same year that one of my best friends was killed by a stray bullet on the 4th of July. And so 2012 for me will forever be the worst year of my life forever. Um, and ... I lived in DC and hated it because I didn't know what I wanted to do. I wasn't paying any bills for real, but I never had any money. Um, I was working three jobs and I was just like, how, how is this happening? Like, and I didn't realize that that was a sign that I probably should have left earlier, but I was trying to like, stick it out. Like ... I'm not going to call my mom nor call my daddy. Like, I'm fine. And I remember when I moved back home at the end of December of 2012, and everybody just being like, you must do a lot of walking in DC, cause you're so skinny. Like I, I [was] depressed out of this world, like to the point where I was sick, like not eating, the smell of food made me nauseous. If I did force myself to eat, it came right back up. Um, like you couldn't, you just couldn't pay me to relive my twenties, period. Um, but yeah, I became like a super strong ally. Like we all are God's children, we should love everybody.

Post-graduation, she had reconnected with a college classmate, who she then started dating. This person lived in Washington D.C., and Whitney moved there for their relationship, which ended up being "a tumor to her core." Soon she was able to remove herself from that relationship, and moved to Illinois for a short stint before moving back to Georgia to begin her Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree. Throughout all of her experiences, she has been learning and figuring out who she was and what she needed to thrive.

The next three vignettes are for the participants from the BlackQueer young adult focus group. Initially, I did not intend to do a life history section for each of them, but since they gave me more information than I had anticipated, I felt that it was right to give their stories space in this study, to see their lives' progression. These young adults each have amazing stories and futures ahead of them.

BlackQueer Young Adults



Jailon L. was a 20, almost 21-year-old non-binary, Gay person, who used all pronouns. They were raised in a suburb of eastern Missouri, by a single mother who identified as a Lesbian. Jailon was an only child and didn't talk much about any cousins that he may have been raised alongside. Jailon was tall, bold, and beautiful. He was also very articulate for his age, with a wealth of Queer knowledge. He attributed this to the household he was raised in, and while I thought it was amazing that he was the son of a Lesbian mother, Jailon had other feelings and experiences,

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...I was just always a really happy kind of like, know-what-to-do type kid, um, in terms of my family. ...I always had a very kind of like, supportive family. My mom was actually kind of like the least supportive of Queerness, uh, simply because, just the effect that it had on her.

His mother was very conservative, and did not want the same pain and strife that she had experienced to be inflicted onto him. He shared with me that she had been kicked out of her parents' house at 17 years old for being a Lesbian, which caused her to suffer from internalized oppression. Alternatively, his grandparents welcomed and embraced his gender expression and Queerness with open arms from day one. Jailon also grew up in a Christian household, and while life for him was mostly affirming and accepting, he still had some issues. He said,

I grew up in a Christian [environment]. Like I grew up around my grandmother who was really Christian, but at the same time she was here for [me]. Like my mom, she, the way that she puts it is, 'I had to stop [you from dressing up] early,' because [like] I told you, my mom was conservative ... because she was like, if it was [up to] your grandma [letting you dress up], I [probably] would have been going to your drag shows at 16. Um, because I was walking in my grandma's heels at like three, four [years old].

Jailon was censored by his mother because she knew what could come with his being effeminate out in the world, and she knew what the looks and gossip felt like. She just wanted to shield him, but that was not how he received it when he was younger. At the time of the interview, Jailon was a junior in college, where he was involved in lots of extracurricular activities, and also worked to support himself. He shared that he had also

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been tasked with helping to provide for his mother at times, although he only worked part-time, but he still did it out of wanting and craving love from her. In the next breath, Jailon expressed his desire to have true partnership, having someone to support him and vice versa.

Ready for Love by India.Arie

I am ready for love
 Why are you hiding from me
 I'd quickly give my freedom
 To be held in your captivity

I am ready for love
 All of the joy and the pain
 And all the time that it takes
 Just to stay in your good grace
 Lately I've been thinking
 Maybe you're not ready for me
 Maybe you think I need to learn maturity
 They say watch what you ask for
 Cause you might receive
 But if you ask me tomorrow
 I'll say the same thing

I am ready for love
 Would you please lend me your ear?
 I promise I won't complain
 I just need you to acknowledge I am here

If you give me half a chance
 I'll prove this to you
 I will be patient, kind, faithful and true
 To a man who loves music
 A man who loves art
 Respect's the spirit world
 And thinks with his heart

I am ready for love
 If you'll take me in your hands
 I will learn what you teach
 And do the best that I can

I am ready for love
 Here with an offering of

My voice
 My Eyes
 My soul
 My mind

Tell me what is enough
 To prove I am ready for love
 I am ready
 (Miller and Simpson, 2001, track 8).

Aaleeyah L. was a 20-year-old Bisexual woman who used “she,” “her,” and “hers” pronouns. She was raised in a suburb of eastern Missouri, in a heteronormative two-parent household with two siblings. Aaleeyah had a brother ten years older than her, who identified as a Gay man, and she shared that his gender expression caused contention towards him in their household. Although it took a while for her brother to be accepted, she expressed that his being authentic in who he was helped her to own her sexuality early on. She mentioned multiple times that she felt her being Queer was easy, because she “passed” easily, and no one would have ever known unless she told them. She also said that she wished she could speak openly about her Queerness without fear of being judged. When I asked how it was for her growing up, Aaleeyah said,

My family was really spiritual. We used to go to church a lot and we stopped. So, but like Christianity was ... it was there, it just wasn't that important. But um, like, I got back into church later into my life and that turned out to be a mistake, like joining the church—not the religion. But like, joining the church again was a mistake, because they were being like, oh, it's a sin. Homosexuality is a sin; you're going to hell, read Romans ... I left because I didn't want to hear that.

When asked about her “coming out” process later on in the interview, she stated that she didn't really come out, unless the other person that she was talking to brought it

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up, because she did not like not knowing how the other person would respond. She told me about a time when she opened up to someone, and she got really hurt. She said, “Just recently I came out to this girl who I thought I trusted, from this church I used to go to. So, I came out to her. That was a disaster.”

Aaleeyah was very quiet while on the Zoom call, and it seemed that her disposition was to observe and listen, more than to talk and be seen. At the time of the interview, she was a college junior, living with roommates close to her campus. Although she was on time for the focus group, the other two people who came were not, so she had already made alternative plans and was not able to stay on for more questions.

As I Am by H.E.R

It's like the morning time
 Don't wanna wave goodbye
 Just wanna stay in bed
 But if I'm next to you
 I'm lookin' forward to
 Just layin' in this bed

Ooh, that never gets old
 Promise you'll never let go
 I don't want no one else
 So we should be chillin' back
 Ain't nothin' wrong with that
 So tell me that, tell me that

Tell me I'm the best, I am
 I'll be feelin' like, yes, I am, I am
 You know I'm the best, ah yeah
 You'd be a fool to not take me as I am

...

You're like the sweetest thing I know
 Like my favorite Lauryn song
 And I need you really bad (oh, yeah)
 Don't take me for granted
 You'll be regretting it
 Oh, I should be your last, ooh yeah

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Ooh, that never gets old
 Promise you'll never let go
 Grass ain't green nowhere else
 So we should be chillin' back

...

I am
 Take me, take me, oh yeah
 Tell me I'm the best, I am (I am)

...

(Strother, Gitelman, Colson, Diaz, and Wilson, 2019, track 16).

Jordann B. was a 19-year-old non-binary person, who used all pronouns. He was raised in a suburb of eastern Missouri, in an intergenerational household, with his mom, grandmother, and two siblings. He stated that he always knew that he was different but did not quite know what the “different” was until later in life. Jordann was bullied and ostracized in school because of his gender expression, so he quickly learned how to protect himself. He described his disposition in his younger years as “really mean.” His family loved him for who he was, but at the same time, would continuously police him before he left the house, in an attempt to keep him safe from harm. When Jordann spoke on his childhood, he said,

We went to church, like, every Sunday ... my household is very, like, strictly Christian. I have an older sister and I have a younger brother and he's 17 ... I feel like it was kind of forced upon me and I was very confused with my identity and who I was in general. So I guess I questioned it a lot, for sure. Um, and then like slowly stopped [attending] and I've noticed that my parents got really upset with me not going to church. Um, and like, I don't know. I just feel like if you ever went against their anything, like, it was a problem.... You don't have to go to church in order to like, you know, be a good person and still do the right thing. And like, you

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know, know about the Bible, know about God and everything else. And I just never really explained that to them cause they don't really understand or care.

At the time of the interview, Jordann was a junior in college, and expressed that he did not participate in many activities, because he preferred to keep to himself. He has been able to live at home, with his mom and grandmother, while in school. He also stated that he had not yet had a romantic relationship and was almost too scared to have one, because he did not want to experience heartbreak.

Although Jordann had a bright and cheerful personality, he has kept his circle intentionally small because he felt wary of people wanting a token gay friend. He wanted to make sure that whoever was around him actually liked him for who he was. Jordann and Jailon were really close and met while they were in high school, where they developed a “big brother” type of relationship. While they were talking, I could tell that Jordann felt more comfortable when Jailon was present.

Gratitude by Durand

Very seldom do
They grow up with you
Life got cute on me
So filled with gratitude

My first hype man
Baby boy's number 1 fan
Always said to ask questions
And found growth in the lesson
Where you lacked understanding, you didn't disregard
Love had no conditions, before it even started
...

You gave me black man rarity
A sincere apology
Said you coulda did better
And I appreciate the honesty
Finally love every part of me
Cause you see so much of you in me

The good, the bad, the fluid and the ugly
The man I am is because of who you were to me
The man I am is who you were to me

...

To the Rents:

It's funny when you get surrounded with everything that can go wrong with a person and their kids that you start being grateful for everything I'm not and start being grateful for all the good I am

Y'all grew up with me... and I take ALL the credit for how cool y'all are. Hell yes, like hell I won't take the credit... but y'all also get all the credit for who I am today And I love who I am today. Which means I love you

(Bernarr, 2020, track 8).

The next chapter will contain the themes that emerged from the interviews and focus groups, (a) BlackQueer adults and (b) BlackQueer young adults. As the reader, you will learn about why doing community work is so important for this demographic, as well as what BlackQueer youth and young adults are needing from potential mentors.

Chapter Five: The Recipe & Qualities of those who Support BlackQueer Youth

I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Loves Me) by Whitney Houston

Huh, yeah, woo
Hey yeah, huh
Ooh yeah, uh huh, yeah
I wanna dance

Clock strikes upon the hour
And the sun begins to fade
Still enough time to figure out
How to chase my blues away
I've done alright up 'til now
It's the light of day that shows me how
And when the night falls
Loneliness calls

Oh, I wanna dance with somebody
I wanna feel the heat with somebody
Yeah, I wanna dance with somebody
With somebody who loves me
Oh, I wanna dance with somebody
I wanna feel the heat with somebody
Yeah, I wanna dance with somebody
With somebody who loves me

I've been in love and lost my senses
Spinning through the town
Sooner or later the fever ends
And I wind up feeling down
I need a man who'll take a chance
On a love that burns hot enough to last
So when the night falls
My lonely heart calls

Oh, I wanna dance with somebody
I wanna feel the heat with somebody
Yeah, I wanna dance with somebody
With somebody who loves me
Oh, I wanna dance with somebody
I wanna feel the heat
Yeah, I wanna dance with somebody
With somebody who loves me
Somebody who, somebody who

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Somebody who loves me
 Somebody who, somebody who
 To hold me in his arms, oh
 I need a man who'll take a chance
 On a love that burns hot enough to last

So when the night falls
 My lonely heart calls
 Oh, I wanna dance with somebody
 I wanna feel the heat with somebody
 Yeah, I wanna dance with somebody
 With somebody who loves me
 Oh, I wanna dance with somebody
 I wanna feel the heat with somebody
 Yeah, I wanna dance with somebody
 With somebody who loves me

...

Don't you wanna dance?
 Say you wanna dance?
 Don't you wanna dance?
 (Dance)

...

(Houston, 1987, track 1).

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways BlackQueer adults stand up to protect BlackQueer youth. This chapter is set up with research questions that are paired with the themes discovered from the interviews and focus groups that were conducted with BlackQueer adults and young adults. Correspondingly, I have a total of three critical questions that I analyzed for this research study:

1. *Who protects and supports Black students who identify as LGGNC, and what role do they play as advocates?*
2. *In what context does intersectionality arise for BlackQueer youth, and in what ways will it be helpful or harmful?*
3. *In what ways can BlackQueer adults increase liberation for BlackQueer youth?*

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This chapter is also organized by songs that I selected to depict a moment in each person's story, as part of the research study. The themes were then broken down by the questions that emerged from the data, and then I included direct evidence from the interviews. Recommendations for practice and future research follow, as well as how I felt the study went and could have gone differently, and then the dissertation will be concluded.

Themes

The interview questions that were developed centered around specific time frames in the participants' lives, to help with the overall analysis of how and why they chose their field of work. I asked everyone to tell me about the following time periods:

- Childhood, birth-age 14
- High School/Teenage years, age 15-18
- College/Young adult years, age 19-25
- Adult years, age 26+

I also asked closed-ended questions to see if there were going to be any responses that differed from previous questions. Taking an inductive approach to memoing and coding the six interview transcriptions yielded 189 codes and three major themes, with sub themes. These were as follows:

- Belonging
 - Approval-seeking behavior
 - Performance as a safety measure
 - Performance versus "code switching"
- Parenting self
 - Navigating Relationships

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- Family
- Characteristics of household
- Romantic
- Mentors in Community
 - Educational Cultural Visionaries
 - Coming into own identity
 - Defining safety

Belonging

Who protects and supports Black students who identify as LGGNC, and what role do they play as an advocate?

The characteristics of my participants' childhood households were different yet somewhat similar at the same time; four participants grew up in intergenerational households where they received conflicting messages that caused confusion for them. In the book, Terrell Strayhorn writes about "College Students' Sense of Belonging: A Key to Educational Success for All Students" (2019), in a series of associations: that when one feels safe, a connection with others, and supported by school personnel, community, family and/or friends, is when they can feel as if they belong. Fairy Wings said, I've lived in so many intergenerational households, um, you know, had parents ready to actually raise you all under the same roof. We all help each other, type of situation. I would consider my mom a liberal, especially during that time then, um, culturally wise, um, my grandparents ... were Jehovah witnesses, um, it's very interesting.

Although Fairy described their intergenerational household experience as interesting, Whitney had another outlook on her experience. She said,

So, my mom had me when she was 19, so she dropped out of college and we moved back in with my Granny and Papa, and my great-grandmother who would often come up from down south, you know, for the summer to stay and stuff—like that's our, I was raised in an multi-generational household. Um, and my mom was the youngest of eight: seven girls, one boy. And so, I've always been around a lot of people. Um, a lot of women with—I didn't realize that then, but—very strong personalities. Um, bless my Paw Paw's heart because I just don't know how he has remained sane for almost 91 years. Um, yeah, so very family oriented. Um, I didn't get a sibling until I was nearly 13. So, it was just one big, happy family.

Whitney also shared that she was raised in a strict Christian household, saying that growing up it was “very churchy. Um, my mom's side of the family is National American Baptist. And then my biological father's side of the family is Church of God in Christ (COGIC), which is Pentecostal holiness.” In fact, five out of the six adults interviewed said that they were raised in strict Christian households. Lorde Baldwin was raised in a household that had Christian values, like loving everyone, taking care of one's brothers and sisters, and not harming others; so although they may have not gone to a regular church service, they were still taught the same Christian principals as the other participants. When Jordan shared her experience about her household, she said, We went to church every week. I sat in a church choir. I was a junior usher. We went to church in the morning and the evening, [and] even on Wednesday nights. So we were ... [the typical] black Baptist family.... I got baptized in the church. That was a big deal. We had a big baptism party, you know, you know ... in a black family, [getting] baptized, that's the big thing. Back in the day ... I got a Bible with my name on it, with the day that

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I got baptized, and the reverend of the church signed it ... so that was a big deal. That was how I was raised in the church.

At times for the participants, even growing up in a loving household was hard to navigate, because they were taught that being Queer was not okay with God. Because of this, there were times when they had to grapple with the idea that they were going “against God” and their teachings/religious beliefs by simply being themselves. Kelly Brown Douglas is a scholar and theologian who has spoken out about Christianity, sexuality, and same-gender loving relationships. Douglas has called out homophobia within the Black Church, stating that those in the church need to be responsible for holding safe spaces to talk about sexuality in her book, “Sexuality and the Black Church” (1999). The basis of this book stemmed from her wanting to know about the aversion to gay people in the church and Black community, which then turned into doing research on homophobia and heterosexism. She saw that it wasn’t only homophobia, but it was sexuality as a whole that needed to be embraced in the Black church (Douglass, 1999, p. 3 & 5).

When it comes to parenting oneself, five out of six participants talked about how they had to protect and care for themselves with limited help from their parents/guardians, in order to survive. Joe Black talked about an argument that he had with his father, in which he spoke up for himself. He recalled,

My dad loved [my friend] Charlene, and so like, he would be like, ‘Where’s Charlene,’ and like I remember me saying ... ‘I’m not dating Charlene, we are never going to get together. We’re never going to be together.’ He goes, ‘Why?’ And I go, ‘Well, beyond popular belief, I’m gay. I suck dick and I like it, this is it.’”

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... I walked out [of the room], and I came back in [and] his mouth was still open, [he was] shocked, like it felt [like] 45 minutes later, but it was like a minute ... [I remember thinking] like why you mad, like, and it might've damaged our relationship on his end but it didn't on my end. If anything, I felt more empowered after that because [of] everything I was doing, I was working and I was ... paying the bills. I could clean up and [was] doing all these things to survive.... Um, so I felt more empowered at that point.... I was in school, I didn't need [him] anymore. And I know how to work, I've been working for years at this point. I know how to hustle.

For Joe, standing up to his father like that was a game-changer. Although all of their parental figures played important roles, not everyone had the strength to stand up to them. Rusty Bain loved working while in high school, yet he also worked because he had to support himself. He recalled,

I started working at 16 ... Um, there's so much, so I was hesitant to ask my grandfather for money, um, for different things. Um, just because I knew our relationship, and so at 16, I got a job so that I could [take care of necessities], not because, oh, I'm, uh, I'm growing into being an adult ... it was in response to being treated differently. And so, um, I worked when, when I could, so I was away from the house, and I loved it.

When talking about safety for BlackQueer people, the question “what is Queer safety?” continued to come up. Participants expressed always having to be mindful of their bodies and expressions. For instance, for Jordan, being able to “pass” as a woman

24/7 meant safety, while for Whitney, talking about her Queerness was not safe, because that would have removed financial stability from her. Whitney shared,

I don't know how much earlier in the timeline of my life, [coming out] would have taken place, but it possibly could have, but at the same time there were some other things that I needed to get ... because as much as I love my grandmother, she is a controller, like, and so my grandfather bought me a car ... so, there were ... things that were tied to other people that I also could not risk. Like I couldn't afford car notes. So let me kind of stay on the straight and narrow so that I keep my car. Um, and all that kind of stuff so [maybe] earlier, but probably not too much earlier. Yeah. Yeah. And at that time, they had given me a credit card. Um, and I mean, it wasn't that I was, you know, just swiping, but that was a source of income and access. And so yeah, so earlier, but not ... not that much.

It is important to bring performance as a safety measure into the conversation, as well. These interpretive tensions came from my observations and interviews: are BlackQueer people hiding in plain sight, or is their performance a part of “code switching”? While interviewing Fairy Wings, these questions stuck with me for those who are Trans, non-binary, and/or effeminate. Fairy said,

I want to say that ... I'm trying to challenge myself to think about [when I came out and became comfortable in my Queerness], but it's hard because it's like, there's categorizing.... I find women attractive. I'm a womanist, I believe the love for all women, trans women, anyone who identifies as femme. So there's that, but there's also how I identify and how I'm showing up, whether I'm wearing my Aaliyah style clothes, which is baggy clothes or feeling more, you know ...

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androgynous. And then there's like pansexuality, and then me being poly. So there's like multiple 'coming out' that can happen during the day or during the week.... When my partner ... came to visit me, [they] use [the pronoun] 'they' all the time, [and] that's 'coming out,' because now we're [out in public] with a stranger and they [hear that pronoun and ask] 'oh, what do y'all mean?' ... So ... being aware of the cultural background and like when I choose to use which pronouns ... is very important.

Joe talked about defeminizing his body, saying,

Looking back now, I think what saved me is like, learning how to use my gayness for situations of protection, to determine what not becoming a threat meant, because if I'm overly feminine, I'm not a threat. [Through] lots of therapy ... I know enough to keep it. Like, I wouldn't say I did that on purpose. We're talking about code switching. Oh ... and like recognizing which identity was providing your safety. Cause as a black male, my identity is more of a threat if I'm angry and being feminine is less of a threat because my body presents as a threat.... So if I feminize my body ... so that I don't feel like a threat when I go off on you ... but part of it was who I was, like, I think it's part of our culture too, as black men too. I think there are some, um, unhealthy tropes that we need to go through to get to a healthier side ourselves.

There was also a connection between wanting to belong and being someone who has been ostracized or bullied. I wanted to understand what belonging was and how it played out for BlackQueer people. One participant explicitly said they felt like they did not

belong, and that was a pattern that I saw among the others, both during the interviews and reading over the transcriptions. Joe recalled a conversation from his 20s with a

BlackQueer woman, who said to him, “Girl, you're still Black, do you recognize that?”

He explained,

So, during that time I was doing drag ... again, [around] all this whiteness, never felt like I belonged. Right. Um, and I wanted to like, do some pageants and ... and the people that were Black that I felt like I related to, they wanted to be my ‘sister,’ or they did not want to date me.... So, [I was] going away from my Blackness for the longest time, because to me it felt safe to identify with whiteness. So I abandoned my Blackness for the sake of being with my [white] friends. I didn't really have to be honest and transparent about [my] experiences [with them].

There was also a connection between belonging and being someone who displayed approval-seeking behavior, as each of the interviewees talked about feeling as if they had to do more than others, but did not feel like it was necessarily because of their being Queer. I felt it was still important to note. All of my BlackQueer adult participants were college graduates, and all but one had a master's degree. Two participants were licensed therapists, one had their doctorate, one was working on their doctorate at the time of the interview, and another was working on becoming a licensed social worker. The one participant that did not have a master's degree graduated college with a double degree, and was a leader in sales at a previous job.

Navigating relationships can be hard for some Queer people, and when it comes to family, it's hard to know what the response to one's Queerness will be. There was a wide range of responses experienced by my participants: some had family who waited on them

to acknowledge it, while some families went to the extreme of kicking them out of their homes. Jordan shared with me how she eventually decided to come out to her family at 51 years of age was a two-year process,

I transitioned, and I went to work, and I didn't ask anybody [for approval], but I still hadn't told my family. So, one day, it was a Sunday morning, actually ... two years ago yesterday [July 28th], I decided I was gonna open up my closet door and throw out the last [pieces] of 'Leon.' He had to go ... [I] set all [the clothes] out, [opened] the closet doors and sat on the bed, sat there, looking at [the] clothes, rocking back and forth [saying to myself], 'Okay, you can do this, come on.'

On a different occasion, she expressed how having to navigate dealing with an older family member was hard and frustrating. She said,

Cause remember we never talked about me being gay ever ... one time at Thanksgiving, when my sister-in-law's mother kept saying, 'Why aren't you married? Everybody's married and you're in your forties. You're not married. What's wrong?' ... and [before this] my brother and I had talked one time [and he] said, 'You know, if you have a girlfriend or boyfriend or whatever, just to bring them home and we'll deal with it,' for Thanksgiving. And I was like [okay whatever], so she kept going on and on. And he was [sitting at] the head of the table. I was sitting next to him, and she was going on and on. I said, 'Okay, mother hen, I'll tell you what,' and I wipe my mouth, I put my fork down ... Oh, my brother underneath the table just quietly put his foot on top of my foot [and] I could see my sister-in-law space out [thinking] oh God, please. [She] is 97 years old, and I just said, 'Mother hen, it's not in my nature.'

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Later on, when Jordan went home for her brother's funeral, she went home fully as Jordan, instead of halfway between Leon (her former self) and Jordan. She expressed how people were confused at first, trying to figure out who the mysterious woman was, and when they realized that they did indeed know her, they were shocked but still welcoming. She spoke of how one brother looked her in the eye, saying,

‘This is why you didn’t come home. You’ve been running from the family?’ He said, ‘It ain’t like we don’t know what you got. Remember we changed your diapers when you were a baby. So we already know what’s down there.’ And [he] is the quiet one ... never says a word. He just lets us carry on, he just sits there. And I said, ‘Now is the moment you try to say something prolific after all these years?’ He said, ‘Ain’t nobody fooled. You, you ain’t hiding a secret from nobody’.

When she was a child and her parents passed away, Jordan was sent to live with her older brother, and she kept referencing the experience by saying, “They did the best that they could do.” This showed that she was thankful for the love she received and didn’t want to seem ungrateful, despite sometimes not receiving enough support from her family. On page 31, in “Salvation: Black Folks and Love,” hooks said, “So many Black folks are grateful to the families and kin who raised them that it is difficult to be in any way critical of these environments.” Often, many problems go unresolved because it has been socially unacceptable to comment on any issues that occurred in the household. However, different children need different forms of love and support, and that must be more readily acknowledged.

Whitney smiled when thinking about how her mother reacted and then laughed out loud, thinking about how her grandmother reacted. She said,

I read my mama my personal statement that I use to apply to my PhD program.

She was sitting on [the couch in the] living room, eatin' her Popeye's chicken and

she was just like, 'Okay, I didn't know. Okay. Are you happy?' And I was not

expecting that to be her first question.... I was like, 'Ma'am?' And she was like,

'Are you happy?' I was like, 'I am,' [and] she was like, 'You could die tomorrow.

And I would prefer that you die happy'. I was like, is this my mom? Because my

mama is really churchy. She is real, 'Jesus is the best thing that ever happened to

me,' like a worshiper ... That went much better than I expected, then I'm feeling a

little bit super optimistic that everybody else is going to be like, okay ... that was

not the case. Um, my grandmother, who was yet alive to this day, um, sent herself

to the emergency room because she thought she was having a heart attack. On

Christmas Eve, I thought that I had killed my grandmother. But now I know that

she is just a very dramatic woman.

Joe and Rusty both expressed that they had a hard time throughout their childhood because of their gender expression. For Rusty, everyone assumed he was Gay, but it went unspoken. For Joe, he was vocal about being Queer early on, while still in high school, and being in a positive Queer program helped him with acknowledging this. Rusty ultimately came out during his senior year in high school, and experienced trauma from one of his close friends, as well as from his mother. While recalling these stories, it looked like he had been transported to the time. He said,

I came out first [to] my group of friends who were girls, uh, and one of those friends was my cousin, and me and my cousins fell out. And so she went around the school, telling people ‘Rusty’s gay.’ Um, it hurt me, but I didn't have time to be hurt, I had to defend myself.... Then when I went home ... to Virginia for the summer like I usually did ... I was reading this book by E. Lynn Harris called ‘Invisible Lives,’ and on the cover, there is a man and a woman, they look like they're in a relationship, then another man’s walking by, and the men are looking at each other.... My momma found the book and she said, ‘What is this?’ I said, ‘a book.’ She said, ‘What kind of book?’ I said, ‘a good book.’ We got into a conversation about home life or whatever and I thought that we were really having a moment. And then she stopped [talking] and got on her phone ... she said, I'm calling the pastor. [I asked her] ‘you calling the pastor for what?’ ... she said [to them] ‘Rusty is here and he's um, um, opening up and yada, yada, yada.’ ...

Anyway, I remember the pastor, a deacon and the deacon's wife coming over to the house. I was so angry and disappointed ... the pastor asked me, ‘So do you have something that you want to say?’ I said, ‘I don't know ...well, I'm gay.’ He said, ‘Okay, is there something that you want to change?’ I said, ‘No.’ ... The deacon’s wife said to me, ‘Do you know why your mom is crying?’ And I said, ‘No.’ She said, ‘because she's ashamed, you know, she talks about people like you.’ That summer, they wanted me to hang out with the men from the church to do male bonding.... I really didn't want to do it, but I remember my momma making a big deal about it.... She painted this picture that my daddy wasn't going to support me but my daddy flipped the script. I thought that he was going to be a hard egg to

crack, and he wasn't, he said, 'You my son.' And he said, 'If this is who you are, then ... be who you are. Don't, don't fake it.' And he [then] said, 'I don't understand why everybody is making such a big deal about it because it's not like we didn't know already.' ... He was my number one support, I'm blessed to have him.... and still is.... In the household, cause I was raised by my grandparents ... there wasn't a conversation. I think, I think my mama told my grandma ... we never had a conversation about it until she brought out the Bible.

It was important to utilize all of these previous conversations to show the complexities of how family relationships can go for those who are Black and Queer. Belonging (Strayhorn, 2019) is a part of how Black people are raised, having community and building relationships within the family; when some are Queer, they can lose this part of their lives. This happens through their being ostracized or not feeling like they can communicate openly with their family which pushes them to go and create family among peers.

Romantic relationships

In order to cope with being Black and Queer, some of the participants engaged in addictive and reckless behaviors, like doing drugs, drinking alcohol, and having lots of sex, to excess. Joe shared,

I started to drink around [age] 20.... I followed the rules until I didn't. Um, and I remember [this] time ... on one of those nights [there] was a very unhealthy sexual encounter. Like looking back, not always consensual ... just not healthy boundaries ... I realize ... this informs my work later on in the years, inappropriate sexual counters. But still a lot of whiteness ... And like, I wasn't able to be myself.

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Like I had to dumb myself down, like how dare I be intelligent as a Black person in general, and then intelligent as a Black Queer person So I numbed myself. I started getting a lot of drugs, I struggled with some addiction during that time, [for] roughly like 10-ish years. Um, I never was fully addicted, but I was like, 'Oh, I'ma dance over here on the other side of the line for a couple of weeks.' And then my ride-or-dies actually helped pull me outta that.

Rusty, another participant, had his fair share of parties and wild nights as well. In one story, he shared,

[I was] traveling back and forth from Cape Girardeau to Memphis, from Cape to St. Louis. It was every weekend or every other weekend I would be going, because those places were the first times that I had seen Black people—Black men, they were gathering together and it was just, it was great.... I was in college, um, I had already been drinking before [college], and of course [since] I was in college, I was definitely doing a lot of drinking. Once I turned 21, um, I was working, and I was going to school so, I had money. I was definitely doing a lot of traveling, partying, and drinking, and, um, trying to be around the boys. I love boys. Um, and so that's really what I was doing.... I think that time I should have been on an antidepressant ... because I just, sometimes I couldn't focus. Um, it was hard for me to get up and it's just rough. I was 21 in Memphis when I discovered Pride, the Black Pride movement ... so I traveled to Memphis a lot because there was a community ... of Gay Black men.... I did a lot of, uh, of background dancing for, um, for drag queens [during this time], it was nice, and that kept me entertained and, um, busy. Um, I didn't do a lot of dating or official

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dating because I really didn't know what that was. It mostly was talking to a guy I like to have sex with him, I guess.

Five of the six interviewees shared that they did not fully accept or feel authentic with their sexual identities until after they turned 30. Fairy Wings was my only participant under 30, and they had just turned 29. They shared with me that they became fully aware of their orientation at around age 27. One of my interview questions was, “How could the adults that were in your life have helped you develop a positive and healthy sexual identity?” Although the responses to this varied, it became clear that BlackQueer youth need the same autonomy as heterosexual youth, to be given the freedom to be themselves.

Joe, a participant, said,

The adults could have helped me by talking about sex in general. Let's start with diverse sex education. That's not sex positive first and foremost, regardless of how you want to have sex. We don't talk with young people about sexual expectations. Like we teach them what to expect for college or how to prepare for college, but yet we don't talk to you how to respect and navigate sexual relationships. [I now] work on campus now with rape sexual assault prevention. From my lens, why did we not expect them to be sexually assaulted college? We never talk to them about that. But even in that, assuming that we did, there's not enough conversation around like, how to have sex, how to have sex with Queer bodies. Like ... I think [that] would've been helpful, just not labeling my body.... Like having more sex positive talk, made more inclusive, would have been helpful for me, like, I have a more positive self-image and having everything I

heard about Blackness and Queerness, not being such a, um, personal deficit. [It's like] you're in danger, for Black people.”

As the elder of the group, another participant, Jordan's response was very understanding. She shared,

They did the best they could, given the circumstances. [I want you to] remember, my parents were in their fifties and sixties by the time I reached 11 and 12. So I think they did the best with the information that they had, because there was no school for parents of Queer kids back then, you know, they were still giving kids lobotomies.... When there were family problems, they turned to the church, that's what they always taught to you. So ... like I said, there was no one, there was no education, no Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) for people or parents.... All they had was the church and the church told you to pray the gay away. [Don't get me started] on the conversion camps, thank God I never went to conversion therapy, I know a lot of people who did.... I just came out as gay back then, you just didn't do [anything else] because there was no sex education. So [us gay folks] just talked to ourselves and learned a special talk ... until we found our own little community to go and talk to.

Relationships with self, friends and family can be more complicated with BlackQueer people, and having to constantly worry about who they can talk to or invite in adds stressors which can contribute to their mental health. Each of the BlackQueer adults that I interviewed acknowledged that they were in need of therapy at least once in their life and that they had all gone to therapy or were seeing therapists during the time the study took place. Knowing how to navigate relationships and set boundaries is also

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important for BlackQueer adults, young adults, and youth, because when one feels as though they cannot speak up for themselves, that limits one's ability to self-advocate.

BlackQueer Young Adults Focus Group

In what context does intersectionality arise for BlackQueer youth and in what ways will it be helpful or harmful?

Initially, I had no intention of breaking down the stories for those who were a part of the BlackQueer young adult focus group, but when three people showed up and provided more information than expected, I felt that it was fitting to create small vignettes for them as well. There were a total of 78 memos and codes for the focus group data that was broken down into one finding with sub themes. The finding and sub themes were:

- BlackQueer youth navigate and negotiate spaces
 - Parenting self
 - What is safety?
 - Navigating relationships

The three young adults were Black college students, who were still working to find their own way and community. A common thread between them was that their dating pool was very limited, therefore they hadn't yet learned how to have romantic relationships. In "Salvation: Black People and Love," hooks said, "Love remains for Black people a crucial path to healing (hooks, 2001, p. 14)." This means that love can heal broken hearts and be the glue to hold people together.

In my first attempt to host the focus group, I met Jailon, who was the only one who showed up as planned. We talked for about twenty minutes, getting to know each other,

and he offered to send a message to his network to see if anyone he knew wanted to be a part of this research, which proved successful. Despite that the focus group was hosted on a video platform, each of the young adults seemed comfortable with me, even though it was my first time meeting Jordann and Aaleeyah.

Throughout the discussion, Jailon and Jordann looked to each other for moral support as they thought about the challenges that they have faced, from identifying as Queer to presenting as effeminate. The conversation became free-flowing, and I learned that all three of them were a part of the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) programs at their high schools, and were the only BlackQueer ones participating, as they were all in predominately white schools.

Trying to Belong

As stated in previous chapters, BlackQueer youth are often pushed to the side and/or ostracized in their schools and families. “Their words reflect their search for community, humanity, acceptance, and even visibility, all core elements of sense of belonging...” (Strayhorn, 60). When I asked how their lives were growing up, Jordann and Aaleeyah talked about the Christianity in their families, going to church services on a weekly basis, and not really caring for the rhetoric that was spoken indirectly to them at church.

Safety is always a primary concern for BlackQueer people, and is even more of a concern for youth. This remained true for the people I interviewed individually and those who participated in the focus groups. When I asked Jailon and Jordann about safety, they had a hard time trying to come to a consensus. In fact, they both agreed that they were constantly unsafe. Jailon said,

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I don't really know what safety feels like just because ... because I was feminine, from a very young age. It's so crazy when you're Black and, you know, when you were feminine, you know that you are 'wrong.' From age seven, I always just felt like someone was out to get me ... you really 'spawn' at like six or seven, so you don't really like, develop intuition and that subconscious ... until around that age. And ... the moment that I realized that at like seven or eight or something, I just felt attacked [because I was told to] 'put some bass in your voice,' 'boys do this [and] that.' ... People talking to my mom about me and like my walk and stuff... We knew that if it wasn't for my mom being who she was, these people would make my life hell... Um, so I guess safety for me, it's like a space to just be ... I don't think I've ever been in a space where I've felt safe, other than like, in the company of other Queers.

Jordann said,

I feel like I don't know what safety means fully, as well, just simply because my parents didn't really like, let me express myself as much. So ... I guess [my] safety was just like, being restricted ... I kind of would think ... [being] safe [had to be] with others. It's simple: if I trust you, I have to [have] known you for a while... And I've always felt safe with Jailon. I always feel safe with people that I really trust and [they better not] break [my trust] basically. So I guess this [is] what safety looks like to me, but like, I don't know if I've, like, really ever fully felt safe anywhere. I've always felt paranoid. Like I'm always thinking someone's going to kill me just because I'm Queer and Black on top of that. So it's not healthy, but I

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was very paranoid at some points, even like, heightened sense of just the way someone's like, looking at me. Cause I mean, at times, trust me when you're feminine and you're a boy, you get stared at all the time and ... there's nothing you can do.

Hearing from Jailon and Jordann about the reality of the lack of safety available to them was important because although Queer youth are coming to terms with their sexual orientations earlier than prior generations, it does not mean that other people are comfortable with it. Queer and Trans folks are still dying at the hands of extreme violence, and very little is being done to help them and prevent these killings. It was also difficult to hear Jailon and Jordann say that they never feel safe, because one of my main goals in this work is to help create safe spaces for Queer youth.

Because Aaleeyah has *passed* as heterosexual, meaning someone looking at her wouldn't be able to determine if she was Queer, she stated that she did not have any safety issues around that. However, she did have issues with her safety when outing herself, and has gotten hurt more by people that she trusted. When asked what support looked like for her, she responded,

I mostly just get support from my friends and my brother and sometimes my mom, that's about it. My other family, I don't know about all that, but my mom is being better. She's grown a lot, so she's definitely the more accepting and less homophobic. My brother has definitely helped me throughout my journey. And I have a good handful of other LGBTQ+ friends. So like we all just kind of worked through it together.... I honestly don't really like talking to people about what I do with my personal life, whether it would be with a man or a woman. So I don't feel

like I'm personally being restricted. Although I did have a situation like with the church and that was a big awful situation. But other than that, other than that, I feel like ... at least accepted in other communities, like at home.

Although Aaleeyah did not feel the impact of her invisibility in the Queer community, Dr. Kaila Story has faced similar experiences. In (2017) Story wrote,

While my Blackness in many Queer and non-Queer spaces has made me extremely hyper visible, it has been the combination of my racialized difference and my performance of intentional femininity through my chosen Black femme identity that seems to deem who I truly am, invisible (Story, 2017, p. 3).

In the Midwestern city that we lived in, the white Gay scene often felt very open and accepting, and while harm may not be intentional, it does happen and has impact.

Jailon said,

You know, sometimes you have the token white girls [that act like your fans] ... but that gets old, and then Black parties, it's like, you're just scared, like you are fighting for your life, you're just scared that something's going to happen to you. You're scared that somebody's going to say something to you and you're going to have to defend yourself.... And you can't experience life the way that you want to. I went to a party like last week, and I'm very comfortable in myself now.... I went to a party, I had a crop top and these red heels and stuff, and I thought it was [a white Gay party], I just don't respond [at Black parties] like I do at a White party.... It was a full-blown Black people party, and we got there, I mean like [folks got] guns in they pockets. That's fine. I'm from the hood. That's never really intimidated me, but my thing is, everybody got the straps. I'm getting looked at, I

feel the eyes, you know, and we couldn't even get in. So we just standing on the corner where everybody is walking past on high ... I see someone smirking, cause I got this crop top on and they probably said something to their friend. You know, that's just like, well, I can't go over here because I'm not accepted where I'm being judged.

It's like hatred and jealousy is everywhere.... I don't want to be in that space. My mom actually made a very great point about white parties, she was like, the reason why people get caught in gay lifestyles, um, like, you know, white, poor people who get caught in like, the gay lifestyle with like, the gay party scene is because they're not used to being loved and accepted like that, and not judged. I mean, don't get me wrong. It can be problematic, but gay white scenes, well not even just gay white scenes, but [you know what I mean] ... There's a lot of sex and there's a lot of drugs because that is a reality ... but you're loved, you're accepted, you're welcome and you're encouraged even....

The beauty standard of having to be like super clean cut to like whatever, like you can be as big and Black and gay as me in a gay scene. And like, they will love you and love your personality and love your vibe. You know, [they might be] smoking meth from a pipe in front of everybody in the club ... [but] that is the gay scene— judgment free. And so people get caught into that scene. She said that she feels like they're caught into that scene because it felt open. It's so real. There's so much love and there's so much positivity and there is no judgment in that moment. And you're not used to that ... so it's a lot, it's, there's so much to break down.

These statements showed how BlackQueer youth and young adults have been conditioned by society and their communities. Many have felt the need to put themselves in environments that have been foreign and sometimes toxic, in order to feel some type of love and acceptance. Spending time in this type of scene can also lead to them resorting to using drugs to cope with life outside of the party, which can create even more issues.

Parenting Self

BlackQueer youth have a harder time finding someone to talk to about their Queerness, sometimes because they are either trying to hide it for safety reasons. Aaleeyah was no longer on the Zoom call when this question came up in the focus group, but Jailon and Jordann had a lot to say regarding this topic. The following exchange is from the dialogue between the two of them.

Jailon: Queer people have issues with their parents, I have issues with my mom and she's Queer. Um, it's always about being Queer, always about thinking that because you're Gay, you can be still kicked out because you're misunderstood. I have a mom who didn't have the ability to grow, who didn't have the ability to be a child. And so now at her age, in her forties, she has the financial comfortability to mess up, she is [currently] messing up and now I have to grow up and it sucks. Love and romance, it gives you someone to support you, someone to push you [to be a better version of yourself].... It just helps, and sucks [to not have that] because you know, I have a friend who has been through the exact same thing I'm going through, but she is okay because she has someone with her whenever she's

low. She has a boyfriend that will just do it first and guide her through it ... he'll ride right with her to make sure they're okay, but me I'm right here [trying to figure it out alone]. I'm going to stay stagnant until I decide to move myself up. And at this age, that's really frustrating.

Jordann: Just the simple stress of everyday life with school and all this stuff on top of it. And it's like, dang, you can't have no one to like, look forward to after that, or a break, or a sense of comfort throughout your day.

Jailon: And um, I think another thing that, I mean, it's cliché, but [the notion of being] supported financially from parental figures. Like, um, I mean having a Queer mom [had it's ups and downs] don't get me wrong. I had my issue with my mom now, but having a Queer mom, when it counts, counted. It always counts. I still need it. But in my crucial years, it was kind of great, you know, to be able to grow up and see like, you know, um, a mom that was into Queer culture, that had ... her romance.... I am spoiled, you know, like romantically seeing Lesbian love, two beautiful Black women, just loving each other, like, the bar is set so high, you know, like, oh my God, my mom literally drove through the pouring rain to change a tire, in the name of love.... Um, so ... having someone to guide you through tough times as a Queer person, because a lot of us have straight parents that don't know what to do with it. Um, and then money sucks. And that's weird to say, but ... I mean, all Black people need money, but for Black Queer people, I grew up early. [It's that] even if we got support, we have to make financial decisions and

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make ends meet, that other people don't have to meet for some odd reason. And I ultimately think that Queer Black people need resources, in terms of checks.

Javania: When you say that you all have to make sacrifices that other folks don't have to make, what do you mean?

Jailon: Um, I mean, I guess other Black kids have to make that, but I don't know—at least in my experience, um, and maybe this isn't a Black Queer group thing, but at least in my experience as Black and Queer, um, I feel like again, you have to raise yourself, you know, um, you have to like take care of [your parents'] emotions and really like parent yourself. And even in some cases, at least me, I'm an only child. But you know how people talk about being like, the only girl, or being the oldest girl? Um, so you're kind of like the mom or second mom of the house, when you're feminine and Queer. It is very bad. Like I am parenting my parent, you know, without the means, literally paying bills while I stay on a college campus as we speak, to a woman who makes more than enough to take care of herself and pay all of her bills, and it's frustrating.... It could be a personal thing, but ... I know several Queer people who have been in predicaments of this added responsibility, just because Queer kids are more reliable because we have to be for some reason.

bell hooks described belonging (2009) as, “finding your place in the world, having a sense of homecoming” (p. 2). In other words, to belong, one needs to feel safe and secure wherever they decide to put down roots and how they choose to do their life's work. BlackQueer youth and young adults often feel as if they do not belong as a result of

their experiences, and often recreate a family through alternative communities. When BlackQueer youth and young adults get kicked out of their homes, become ostracized and or ignored by their biological families, they then “construct family for themselves, creating a viable alternative to the biological family from which they have been excluded (Arnold & Bailey, 2009, p. 3).”

Navigating Relationships

No matter one’s age, navigating relationships seemed to be harder when adding Queerness to the equation, especially for Trans women, masculine-centered Lesbian women, and effeminate Gay men. It is important that they learn how to navigate all aspects of romantic relationships, for example, safe sex, heartbreak, and “passing,” for Trans women. Equally important is learning how to navigate platonic and family relationships, which can entail possibly losing connections due to being Queer, setting boundaries, or being the only Queer person around who has to field questions. This list is not exhaustive. Jordan shared with me about a time when she was attacked, even after making sure to be as safe and transparent about being a Trans woman as possible. She recalled,

I had, um, a guy off and on, he knew about me. He met me when I was [still] Leon, on the bus, he was a security guard at a different gas station. He met me one cold winter night—I was sitting in the bus, staying warm and he got on and he said, ‘What’s your name,’ I said ‘Leon,’ and he said, ‘Leanne.’ I just went with it. So, he thought I was a girl, I had no makeup, no hair on and he thought I was a girl. Cause I looked like a girl anyway with no hair or lashes or nothing. We exchanged

phone numbers and we would talk here and there. One day, sometime after exchanging numbers, he came to me, he said, 'You know, your name is Leon.' I said, 'Yeah, I know.' You said you were a dude. I said, yanno, 'What about it?' I said, 'Does that make you upset?' He's like, no, he's understanding, he said, 'You're transitioning to a woman,' and I said, 'Yeah,' and that was it for a while. Then he saw me, about six months later, he stopped being a security guard and he came to my job, I was working at a gas station in the county. He saw me after I had lost a hundred pounds and got these [breasts]. We talked about [me being a Trans woman], he knew about it. I was fighting getting close with him, but he said he could do anything. Cause I was, uh, I was a man, and I said, okay. So one day he sent me a Duo, it's like FaceTime, and he ask can I talk to you, I agree, we can [chat], so now I'm like, okay ... so when he [video called] me, he was in the bathroom naked. I was taken back like what, we never done this. He tells me to chill out and that he's just taking a shower, [so we talked while he was taking a shower and getting dressed, and then got off the phone]. After we stopped talking that afternoon, he sent me a text message asking if I could close the store down early and he would come pick me up at 11pm, when I get off work.

I agreed and he was there at exactly 11pm and um, we're in the car and he put his hand on my thigh. I said, 'What are you doing?' He said, 'I've missed you.' I said, 'Why can't you just admit that you're attracted to me?' There's nobody [else] in this car ... it is just me, you can say those words. He said, 'Well, you know, I, you know, you know, you know, Black men, can never say that.' So we went around talking and I said, 'Well, you missed my exit back there,' he say, 'Let's just talk

and spend time together. I'm going to spend time with you.' I said okay. So, he drove the long way to my place and when we got to the driveway of the house, he did that thing that men do in the car where they take the seat handle and they slide back, and as they slide back, they lean back.

I said, 'You want me to suck your dick, don't you, cause you just did the dixie flat position.' I'm like, oh, 'Why you drive around and do all this? If that's what you want, why don't you just say that? Why you think first of all, I'm going to do it right here in the driveway. That's nasty, I have more respect than that.' He said okay and apologized for that, then we went back to his apartment cause I had roommates. So, we did it. Everything's fine, he takes me back home, I kissed him goodnight, I go in the house, I'm about to change my clothes, and the phone's ringing and it's him. I answer like, 'Hey, what's up?' He said, 'I can't believe you made me do that.' I'm like, 'What are you talking about?' 'I can't even, you tricked me and made me have sex with you...' He's like, 'I can't believe I did this, I didn't even like it. I didn't even like it.' I said, 'Well, the three times you came, it didn't seem like you didn't like it,' ... he's still saying, you made me do that, calling me evil and all this stuff. Then he said, 'And because you made me do this, I'm gonna come in there and kick your ass.' ... He says, I'm outside, I'm outside, [I hung up the phone].

And we had three dogs at that time, so when I went out the back door to see if he was still outside, they came out with me. He was coming through the back gate, and I went to stop him, but there was a garden hose, mixed with the three dogs, and I tripped and fell... He kicked me six times while I was down, but I eventually

got up and looked him in the face and said, 'I'm not afraid of you.' Then he stopped, ran back out the gate, got back in his car, and drove off. The next day he called me, like nothing had ever happened. And I was like, 'What are you doing? You physically attacked and beat me last night, now you're gonna call me like, nothing is wrong.'

He said he was sorry, and that he didn't mean it. He had the nerve to say, you know, 'I love you.' I hung up with him and deleted him and blocked him from my phone. I didn't say anything to anybody because I could not believe that—all the time, I talked to Trans girls about not getting in this type of situation, [and] I was in that exact situation. I thought I had done everything right. I had navigated, we had talked, he knew me before transition. We had conversations about me transitioning, we had all this talk and conversation then all sudden [he flipped the script] once it happened, and I was like, I couldn't believe I was the victim that I counseled people on not becoming.

I was devastated. I went into this funk and people were like, 'What's wrong with you?' I was like, I can't talk about it right now. I was like, I can't believe that I did that, I even wrote a blog about it, I did everything right and still got my ass kicked. He's seen me again [since that night] and was like, I'm really sorry, I can make it up to you. I'm like, no, there's nothing you can do. So that kind of, of problems that Trans women get into, even when you think you've done the right thing, it still can end up in bodily harm.

This story from Jordan was especially important to share in full, because it gives context to show that no matter how safe you think you are as a Queer person, you can

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still end up getting hurt by someone who is not comfortable with their own sexuality. There are so many others like her in today's era, who are struggling to find safe relationships and safe spaces.

Rusty shared with me how having a lack of knowledge about sex led to heartbreak with his first boyfriend in high school. He said,

I had turned 17 and I had my first boyfriend, he was from Tennessee, um, and some, somehow my group of friends ... [who] went to high school together and were also in 'Upper Bound' together, and so, um, it was two of my friends and myself.... One of my friends ended up meeting somebody, I guess he was online chatting, and he met somebody from Tennessee and ... they had started dating or whatever, and somehow the Tennessee group and the Missouri group ended up meeting up. And so, we all [were] mixed and mingled and stuff. And, um, I did not know what, I didn't know what the hell I was doing [and] the first time that I had sex was very traumatic. Um, because there is a process that we go through to prepare for sex.... I had not done that because I didn't know anything about it, so, when my first boyfriend and I had sex, it ended up being very traumatic.... I was devastated.... and I clung to him [anyway] ... I just, I felt powerless, extremely powerless. Um, I didn't think I could do anything. And that was before my grandmother, my great-grandmother died. And so, um, and 'coming out' was, um, my mama was, she just—it was very dramatic, and we had, we didn't have the best relationship either, um, but she took it personal when I came out. Um, she said things like, you know, I always knew that you'd be like me, but I didn't know that you would be just like me.... I think ... there were some, there was some good

times, but thinking about this ... what stands out most though, is the painful experiences. And there [has been] a lot of pain that I have experienced.

Parents and/or guardians are an important aspect to those who are Queer, and as much as they may try to deny that need or affection, they usually come back around to it (Coenen, 1998). How one feels about them will inadvertently play a part in how they feel about themselves. When parents are told (or discover) a child is [Queer], it is usually experienced negatively and is followed by long-term distress (Coenen 1998; Bozett & Sussman, 1990).

Mentors in Community

The next question that I want to answer is, *In what ways can BlackQueer adults increase liberation for BlackQueer youth?* We met through Zoom, a video chat platform, and five out of the six interviewees were in attendance, as one participant had a last-minute emergency. Luckily, this particular participant had already talked about how they help BlackQueer youth in their individual interview, so I was still able to utilize their voice in this portion. There were a total of 80 memos and codes from the focus group data, which was broken down into three themes:

1. Approval-seeking behavior
2. Self-love
3. Mentors in community

When coming up with these themes, it was important to me to paint a clear picture for the adults, versus the young adults, because firsthand experience is always more valuable as a learning tool. The BlackQueer adults that participated in this project were

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very open and candid about the lessons that they have learned along their journeys. The questions that I asked during the focus group were as follows:

1. Name, location, name of program and description of program focusing on BlackQueer youth?
2. What made you choose to work with BlackQueer youth?
3. Do you see your younger self in the youth that you are helping?
4. Describe your approach to working with BlackQueer youth, and how does it help them?
5. How did you get to this age as a BlackQueer person?
6. Any closing remarks?

The start of the focus group was really good, and we jumped right in with the questions after making introductions. I learned that two of the five individuals from the adult focus group had worked with BlackQueer youth through a college or university program, while the other three worked through community-based programs. When they were asked what made them want to work with BlackQueer youth, the consensus was “because [they] wished someone would have done it for [them].” Each participant had experience with not having anyone to turn to or relate to, when it came to being Queer. When asked how they approached working with BlackQueer youth and young adults, these educators expressed similar ways of interacting with their students.

Joe went into detail about his Black Gay and Trans “babies,” as he calls all of his students,

I think [a lot of Queer] homeless youth in general, they would not be homeless if [it was the] norm.... all those babies that are Queer, in my mind, [are treated] like:

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you're just weird and [then] you have trauma and [when you're] Black and/or Brown ... you got put out the house. You weren't thinking in a heteronormative fashion ... even if you like traditional ways ... you're just a Queer individual. And I mean that [in an] affirming way. Yeah. So navigating that ... some babies—they're not babies but I call them babies—just helping them navigate what they are willing to disclose ... Let's talk about Trans babies for a second... to [get certain types of help, you need a] medical diagnosis ... and people would be like, well, I shouldn't have to be diagnosed with gender dysphoria [in order to get help]. [I'd say] I agree with you. And as a therapist, I recognize [that]... [I made sure to spend time helping each client that I came across (in the field and at different organization) learn what their boundaries are]... I would always have my 'Uncle Joe' hat on, talking to babies, with harm reduction [always in mind]. Like, do you know where this testosterone came from? Have you looked at it? Has it been chilled? Because I know you're going to [risk getting it on the streets]. How do you know when it's time for injection, [and] have they cleaned the needle? You have your own needles? How do we go get needles? How about these needles? This is where your injection site should be ... I don't want you to come back with, uh, HIV or Hepatitis C or worse. And now I want you to be able to do what you got to do.... So how do we keep you safe in the process? And I think that's what people who've never done any work around [youth] homelessness don't recognize; they gone do what they gotta do. They've been doing what they need to do already to survive and ... the sex work you're choosing to do, but you're really not choosing, it's survival sex and a tactic.... I went from homeless youth to therapy.

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Out of all participants, Joe was the only one that talked about working with BlackQueer youth and young adults who were homeless and living on the streets. These were youths that had to constantly figure out how to get their next meals and where they would be laying their heads at night. He has chosen to show up for these “babies” and provide mentorship that teaches them to prioritize safety, and the impact of that can mean a world of a difference.

Whitney brought the Christianity perspective to the conversation, as she was working on her Ph.D. in Theology, Ethics, and Human Sciences at the time of the focus group. She expressed that for her, doing this work was truly an act of service. She said,

Within Black Christian spaces, um, like we all knew ... you know, ‘sweet folks,’ but nobody like, had resources or anything for us, except to say to hate them. Um, and so, I mean, my whole recent, my dissertation project is around my own life experience, and just finding other people who are identified [Queer] and wish that somebody else had come along and said, ‘Oh, ain't nothing wrong with you.’

These adults were all very clear on why they did the work that they did, as helping BlackQueer youth was both personal and political (hooks, 1989). When I asked about the participants seeing themselves in the youth that they were helping, I heard both yes and no from everyone, and when asked why, they stated that it was because the new generation of BlackQueer youth are notorious for being much more vocal about their identities. Lorde and Jordan were the elders on the call, and they both had these words to offer,

Lorde: I'm guessing that I'm probably an elder to some of the folks on this call and y'all moved differently to me. Fairy Wings, didn't you teach a class [on]

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using your body to tap into your erotic power?... the generation right behind me was already bolder, and these babies right now—like my nine-year-old child, at 18 months was like, I don't wear dresses; two years old [said, Momma I want to] cut my hair off; five years old, [said] my name is Alex. Then from there, we went through a bunch of names, and at seven years old, 'Blade' stuck. My baby has known who they were from birth. These children are different ... I didn't come into my Queer and non-binary self til I was 32 and it was because of my child. They, their existence gave me permission to be my whole self. So these kids [today], they hit different and they're unapologetic, they don't give a fuck. They will tell you about yourself and sometimes they be wrong as hell, too—loud and wrong. The fact that they are free to talk about things like [their gender expression and sexuality], ooh, these kids are different, and I love it for them.

Jordan: These kids, they don't cry. Like I look at kids nowadays and I think, I thought I was bad back in my day and I will tell them in a heartbeat, I ain't got shit on y'all. Cause they would just, I think if I could have talked and walked and dressed and just been free to be me and, and held hands in public... you know, I, I remember, um, back in when I was about eight or nine, I did something and my cousin said, oh, 'I promised your mother on her death bed, if you turned out to be Queer, I'd tied you to a tree and beat the sissy out of you.' You know, it's that kind of upbringing that I had and I was brought up in the church. I sang in the children's choir and played in the little, um, little church band that we had. It was all centered around church, and the church was the center of everything in the Black family. So, I didn't dare step out of that norm of being ... all I wanted to do

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was be a cheerleader, be on the pompom squad, you know, and that was not acceptable. So ... my punishment one time was to go and play basketball and shoot baskets and hoops.... I been gay all my life. I didn't come into my Transness until I was 52, until somebody told me I was intersex. Lord, I was happy being a gay man. Then I went for a little Botox and blood test, and they told me, guess what? I was like, what? They said, some of your chromosomes are female. I'm like, no, shut up. So, it wasn't until then and after I'd started taking hormones and all of this [breast, hips, buttocks] developed. And it's those kinds of things that I see young in Trans kids. Like when, like Lorde said, her child knows [who they are]—I always knew, but we didn't dare speak of it. And sometimes I have to remind the kids that, you know, up until 1973 being gay was a mental illness and they think really, I'm like, yeah. So y'all have lived in a world when it was free, when it was okay [to be LGGNC].... I grew up in a time when you didn't dare speak the word gay ... and talking about the church and ... they'd be like, 'you know, James got a little sugar in his tank,' you know how they do with the 'over the back fence, laundry day, washing' gossip, you know, 'That little boy he got sugar in his thing, but he sholl was cute though. He will be alright, we're going to pray for him.'

During the end of the focus group, Fairy Wings spoke of the importance of the inner child and the strength that overcomes the hardships they have faced, saying, I think that we realize as a society now that we, um, always have our innocence and our inner child, even when they try to beat it out of us and tell us what to do. We will always

have our spirit, and so, all my Trans* ancestor's wept over me and I'm just helping them [do] good.

Getting back in touch with innocence and the inner child is a process regardless of one's orientation, but BlackQueer people also have to sift through all of the hurt that was projected onto them, in order to (re)member (Dillard, C.B., 2012) which can take a much longer time. This is due to having to learn from scratch about how to speak up and set appropriate boundaries for safety. When I asked how they made it to where they currently were, as BlackQueer people, a significant message rang out from everyone on the call.

Lorde Baldwin said,

The biggest thing is not acknowledging my Queerness for years. I did not. Like I said, I was 32, nothing changed my feelings. Didn't change my view of myself, nothing changed. What [finally] changed was I felt comfortable acknowledging it. And so [at first] a lot of it was suppression, compartmentalization, and completely ignoring that. And instead choosing to attempt to [create] the perfect nuclear family and then failing at that, because that wasn't my charge, you know? So yeah. Part of me wishes again, I had these programs when I was a kid, so I could [have known] that it was okay to be my whole self.

Rusty Bain stated,

I don't really know how to articulate it, I guess, or to call it by something or to name it, identify it, but it, you know, if I could have been somebody else ... I would totally be somebody else. You know, the first people we fight [is] our family. And ... so, following one of your interviews, I went back home [to Missouri], and I asked my grandmother, I was like, 'did you recognize that, that

me and, uh, my grandfather had a tumultuous relationship?’ and she said yeah. And I said, ‘do you know why?’ So what she said was, she said, ‘I think he was seeing in the spirit and got information about your lifestyle.’ Now, I could have ... corrected her ... but I understood what she was saying and that was really all the information that I needed. I thought it was going to be a long, drawn-out thing, but it wasn't. Um, I guess I just needed to hear that ... he struggled with trying to figure out how to support me because of his teachings, he was taught that ... who I was, was wrong. And, you know ... I want to say that it was survival for me to, to, to make it to this point. And I don't even know if I ... had really planned to make it to 34. ... I'm thinking, wow, I have 30 more years to plan, at least, if I'm blessed with that.... I'm going to be honest, even though I have my challenges with white people, there have been a lot of white people who have stood in the gap for me and supported me, when my Black sisters and brothers didn't or wouldn't. Um, so I think that support, no matter what color of skin they were, um, but having a beating heart for me was important. So, um, I think that's what has helped me to get this far. Another thing that has helped me get to this point has been the work with the community, cause they, they had a way of keeping to me. They kept me young.... I knew about the new music out, the new little dances that they were doing, [even] the little sex parties that people was doing that I wasn't a part of, but would go over there and pass out condoms. You know ... one of my clients said that, uh, adopting his son was them saving each other. And I think that doing this ... has that element where we're saving each other.

Fairy Wings reflected,

I remember at a very young age, um, my grandma and granddad raised me for a little bit and always used this word 'flamboyant.' Always loving words, but [being told] 'you're just, you're just so flamboyant.' I would wear like polka dots and stripes, and I just love love clothes. I feel like clothes is literally an expression of who you are, and I can play with that. So, if I want to dress like [the late musician] Aaliyah I can ... I still play with clothes very much today ... and I think that ... creativity has gotten me here, art has gotten me here. Um, I try not to perform ... I'm not performing with my feelings, I'm very real ... however, I'm very performative with my outfits.... I was Trans in my youth, um, I was doing yoga for ... a little summer camp. And they were like, 'all the cis folks, you got to leave ... you got to go.' And then one of my friends was like, 'Why are you leaving?' I said, this space isn't for me. They responded with 'You're Trans, and I'm Trans, you can stay.' So like, [I'm still learning] even just like the understanding of what Trans means. Um, I think a lot of times, like it was covered up when I was growing up as being a tomboy, right ... but really I'm just trans and gender fluid. Um, so even understanding like the terms and terminologies is really hard sometimes ... I always knew I was different. I always knew that I was a little bit more sensitive than I should've been, fighting in the streets.... And I always knew that I wanted to wear my grandad's flannels, which I always wear to this day.... I think it goes back to the spirit and, um, our kids, kids in general being closer to our ancestors. And then we beat that wisdom out of them. When I say we, I mean, society. Society tells them, no you [are supposed to] operate like this, socialize like this ... I'm going back to when I was in the fourth grade

wanting to play basketball with the boys. This is just who I am. I'm just rediscovering myself every day and healing. The inner child is working with you.

Whitney expressed,

I got to the point where nobody else's happiness could supersede mine. Um, like I was miserable. Like on the outside, looking at my life, it was fine. I graduated from Spellman, went to Emory for my Grad program, you know, no real struggles. Like everything is fine, but I was miserable. Um, and I was just like, I can't, I literally cannot do this anymore. Like cannot. And it was literally, a life-or-death choice [for me]. Um ... Whitney was not on the chopping block. Like everybody else can be on the chopping block, but not me. Um, and so ... I worked through how that process is going to look, with my therapist and with my close friends.... Um, but realizing that I, I needed to be the one that was satisfied with my life.... And like Fairy said, parenting and loving on that inner child. I'm somebody who still buys [coloring] supplies. Now I know that's shocking for like, people who know me 'cause I've been in school for eight years. I went from my master's program straight into my PhD program. But like, we had no inhibitions as a child. It was just like, you thought a thing, you just did it. Like, you just did it. There was nothing that blocked you from doing that and like coloring and watching cartoons. It's a way of liberation that I don't know. Like, I don't know who told us after a certain age? No, you shouldn't be buying coloring books. Now I got kids coloring books. I got adult coloring books. They got nothing but cuss words in them. And I mean, my life went with them. Like during this PhD process, there are times where

I'm like, I can't even think ... you know what I mean? Let me grab these coloring supplies.

Later, we had a moment that represented why bringing this community together was important to me. Fairy Wings had just finished their master's degree in social work and was in the process of getting supervision in order to take the licensure exam, when they asked the group for any advice on how to proceed, since they had hit some bumps and blocks along the road. The supportive direction that came their way from the others illustrated just how important it was to have people to reach out to and depend on for mental, emotional, and sometimes financial support. Having this type of community is what moves people forward and helps them grow. This is what BlackQueer people are in dire need of, no matter their age.

The purpose of this study was to examine the ways BlackQueer adults stand up to protect BlackQueer youth. The previous chapters indicate that there is still major work to be done for BlackQueer youth, as the journey to becoming a Queer adult should not be met with so much adversity. This study also asks how community leaders can ensure that experiences improve for Queer youth in society. There are opportunities for youth to be supported more emotionally and mentally regardless of their sexual orientation, and this type of support will allow them to have better lives overall. In the remainder of this chapter, an explanation of the findings from the study will be provided, where I will reiterate the theoretical framework, give recommendations for practice, and offer recommendations for future research.

Implications of findings

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Regarding implications, the work that I conducted can be used in diversity, equity and inclusion trainings and those focused on mentoring, as well as Queer activists who are working in the community and on policies, and expanding Queer scholarship. One hope for this work is that those who are in charge of developing policies and procedures will look to this work as a guide, and what I researched will be added to the field of research for BlackQueer youth centered in the Midwestern United States. This work was also completed with empathy for other groups of color in public schools and their nuclear communities, while speaking to the specific needs of BlackQueer youth.

The work that I have started with this dissertation and will continue to work on once I graduate fits into multiple departments and interdisciplinary studies. I envision being cross listed in Women's, Gender Studies, Queer Studies, African American History or Africana Studies, Sociology, and Educational Leadership courses, because data on BlackQueer youth is lacking in all of these programs. I can also see myself branching out to technology education jobs, education research jobs, and social media technology jobs, to conduct research and have this work expand to be relevant in various national fields.

Black Feminist Thought as a theoretical framework (Hill-Collins, 2002) brings marginalized voices to the center and helps to assist with amplifying my participants' voices, which brings them to the focus of the conversation. Those who are in close proximity to womanhood are automatically marginalized, and this includes cis women, Lesbian women, masculine-presenting women, and effeminate men. During the interviews that were completed with the six adult participants, it was revealed that it took up to ten years for them to own their authenticity and Queerness. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) conveys the distinctive ways and layers that BlackQueer people show

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up authentically or subconsciously, while also being aware of the intersections that help and possibly harm them. At the last minute, my decision to use Black Queer Identity Matrix (Howard, 2014), worked well for this study, and Howard discussed how this framework can be used in Queer studies as groundbreaking research to help scholars (upcoming and current) and community activists utilize a framework become inclusive to the Black Queer community and to understand what it means to be Black and Queer in this society. In the preface, Howard explained,

The Black Queer Identity Matrix represents research and theory that includes the experience and ideas shared by ordinary Black, Lesbian women who provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society. ... Thus, I would like to see a Black LGBTQ framework that re-centers the African American standpoint—with us as the historical, social, and cultural underpinnings of the African American experience... as opposed to creating a theory that stems from a Eurocentric platform (viii).

When researching Black bodies, it is imperative to use work and studies that support and embrace Black bodies, to counter the white supremacist narrative.

I sought out to tell the stories of those who have been rejected because of their gender expressions and/or sexual orientations, and guide those in educator positions to support BlackQueer youth. Supporting them unconditionally both inside of the schools and in the community is of vital importance, so that they can know that they are valued just as much as their heterosexual peers. The goal of this study was to show that when BlackQueer youth have support of their family and other adults in their life, they do better mentally, in school, and overall, while suicide and drug abuse rates also decrease. I

wanted to talk with the BlackQueer adults that support BlackQueer youth to get a glimpse of what would have made their lives and upbringing better. I wanted to talk to and collect stories from BlackQueer people about their experiences around coming out.

I also wanted to talk to parents, to ask them “What would you say to your child if they ‘came out’ to you?” Although I did not get to all of these topics, I plan to in the future. I want to get as many experiences of the Black LGGNC population as I can and offer support that can be given through grant-funded programs. Further, I envision these stories that have already been collected and those that will be turning into a film documentary, to help Queer youth feel seen and heard. To quote the many celebrities that told Queer youth in 2009: “It gets better (Brandon-Friedman, R. A., & Kinney, M. M. K., 2019).”

Conclusion

It has been an honor to have been able to conduct this study, and for my participants to have trusted me with their stories to share with the world. It is not often easy to be vulnerable, but they each gave me their all, when talking about their life stories. It was amazing to feel validated with my different hypotheses on how BlackQueer people react to being ostracized, and how they want to show up in the world, because this is something I have been talking about for the past 13 years.

This research is important to me on a personal level because I spent all of my 20’s trying to beg for acceptance and show family and others that I was worthy of love, regardless of my sexual orientation. I did not “come out” in high school because I knew that it was not safe to do so. A question that remained at the forefront for me while

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conducting this research was “Who’s looking out for your past little you and your future you?” I always knew that You Are Worthy, Inc. was a necessity in the K-12 system, and this is part of what led me to go further with my education. I needed to understand all of the inner workings of the education system, as well as have a better understanding of how to research, and develop policies and systems for future work. I also want those who are not in the Queer community to know how they can support BlackQueer youth more, to ensure that they do not turn to drugs and alcohol, attempt suicide, and most importantly, learn how to love themselves for who they are. BlackQueer people cannot do this work alone, there has to be co-conspirators on the front lines with them.

Further, I feel strongly that it should not take 15+ years to accept oneself due to one’s Queerness, but too many young people have had this issue because of perceptions and preconceived notions from the adults in their lives. It is also important to note that not all youth have issues with being unsupported at home, but may still have issues at school or in other communities. Far too many Queer youth and especially Trans youth are being killed or dying by suicide, and these numbers must begin to decrease significantly.

Enlightenment of Findings

After completing the research study and analyzing the data, I realized that there was really not much difference between the adults and young adults that I was privileged to get to know so intimately. I interviewed a total of nine people: three who were under 25 years of age, one who was 29, two people who were in their mid-thirties, two who were in their early forties, and one who was in their early sixties. The complexities of the differences in how they were raised, their different school experiences, and the way they have chosen to give back to society, all played a major role in their life trajectories. There

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was a consensus between my participants about navigating different types of relationships, and that was how difficult and lonely it can be when one doesn't know how to set boundaries and still seeks approval from those important to them, while navigating the life they want to live. Being Black and Queer might be one of the most dangerous identities, because one can never fully know who might be out to hurt them because of their very existence.

I shared a story from Jordan, and hearing her talk about how she did her best to stay safe in a relationship, yet still got physically assaulted, simply because the man she was with felt like she had 'tricked him,' was heartbreaking. Hearing Joe talk about the turmoil and trauma that he endured from his father because he was Queer was also difficult, as well as how he, as an effeminate Gay man, had learned how to position his body in order to not appear threatening, or to be threatening, depending on the situation. All of my participants shared stories on how they have survived as BlackQueer people by remaining silent in order to be safe. This has been their reality, as well as my own and many others. Although I "pass," and am able to walk down the street with my Queerness being invisible—unless I am walking with my wife and holding hands, I have immense love and empathy for those who cannot.

Lorde Baldwin had been my first participant interview, and although I had completed practice interviews before, they helped me to see that I needed to add demographic questions to the interview, because that information would help with analysis. That proved to be true, and once I became comfortable with my study, I was able to relax and ask questions, while working.

Findings showed that there were few differences between the treatment that BlackQueer adults and youth have endured. The youth often had to parent themselves, for example, by working while in high school to pay for necessities and sometimes household bills, much earlier than their heterosexual peers. The adults had to do the same when they were growing up, and still face harsh judgments overall. Being older, they have also been able to provide mentorship through their lived experiences. However, it was not easy getting to that point, and there is a great need for both more support and more research on effeminate men and non-binary people especially, because they face so much hardship on their journeys.

Recommendations for Current & Future Practices

After conducting this research, I have coined the term Educational Cultural Visionary (ECV). From my findings, I realized that these individuals were doing more than the traditional term of mentoring. They are what I call Educational Cultural Visionaries.

ECVs are BlackQueer adults who support BlackQueer youth by:

- centering BlackQueerness
- helping them to develop their own personal agency and giving them tools so that they can walk authentically on their own
- serving as an othermother (Hill-Collins, 2014), otherfather, or family member
- providing & implementing educational programming (traditional or non-traditional)
- advocating for new(er) policies that aid in the survival of BlackQueer youth through social justice & understanding the importance of disrupting systems of oppression.

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ECVs create programs and promote leadership and advocacy skills through mentoring and educational programs inside or outside of K-12 school systems. ECVs are essentially charting territory for their own people and envisioning healthy, loving, liberatory spaces for all. Despite having the awareness that there are white people who can be allies for BlackQueer people, in my definition and intent, Educational Cultural Visionaries for Black Queer youth must be found within Black culture. I look forward to continuing to expand upon this in future research.

One goal for this research study was to create a blueprint on how teachers, administrators, community members, and parents can support and make a difference for BlackQueer youth. A common thread from everyone that I spoke with was about their wanting to have someone to talk to about their Queerness. There already are a number of Black K-12 teachers and administrators, and staff, along with community activists, practitioners, body movement instructors, and more who help BlackQueer youth and young adults.

My recommendations are for mentors to be ECVs who:

- center BlackQueerness
- help them to develop their own personal agency
- serve as an othermother(Hill-Collins, 2014)/father/family member
- provide educational programming
- and advocate for better policies.

My recommendations for educators, family, and community members are to:

- educate themselves on BlackQueer experiences and help to reframe the narrative of BlackQueer Students

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- protect BlackQueer students who are harmed and turn towards them, rather than away from them
- be a co-conspirator who advocates and fights alongside BQY
- educate BlackQueer youth on what it is like to be Black and Queer in today's society

Educators, policy and law makers, community activists, and even parents will be able to use this dissertation as a guide to help BlackQueer youth, and BlackQueer youth can read this collection of narratives to see themselves in others' personal stories.

One of my goals is to begin to provide individual one-on-ones and group mentoring which provides safe spaces for BlackQueer youth and young adults. I also want to provide professional development for K-12 teachers and administrators, and staff, along with community activists, parents, caregivers, and other adults to help them understand the need to respect students' attractions and gender identities. When writing my own vignette, I quickly brushed over the fact that I had developed an organization that offers support to Black youth and young adults who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual. "You Are Worthy, Incorporated" was created because when I was growing up, I wished there was someone to talk to about the attractions and feelings that I was experiencing, so I wanted to provide that for others. Our mission has been to empower, encourage life-changing activity, and promote critical thinking to ensure that all are able to live a fulfilled life and know their worthiness. YAW Inc provides a safe space for mentoring Queer youth, and seeks to help adults of color respect their children's attractions and gender identities. The organization goals are to help decrease suicide, drug & alcohol abuse, and increase

acceptance and understanding; further, we hope to eventually reach adults with an intergeneration approach.

There are many topics of research that were not included in this study that should be touched on in future research. Speaking with BlackQueer youth who are 18 and under in the Midwestern United States is something that still needs to be done, as students in this age range are often overlooked as there are not many scholars here doing this work; they are mainly situated on the Eastern and Western Coasts. Research also still needs to address how and why Gender Non-Conforming (GNC) people are treated differently in the Queer community. What does this mean for those who identify as GNC? How do we stop this from happening and include everyone in the Queerness dialogue?

What does it mean to need to “code switch” at home and in public in order to protect yourself? What good does it do for one to be publicly “out,” if they still have to live a lie to keep the peace? This list is not exhaustive, and while I hope to continue the research that I started with this research project, the next step will be to start writing multiple publications from my data. Topics I envision are:

- “How do Black Queer and Trans women work with Black Queer youth?”
- exploring what mentoring looks like between Black Queer adults and Black Queer youth, since I was not able to do observations as planned because of COVID-19.
- dismantling destructive conversations around Queer youth, offering strategies for shifting previous thoughts and supporting this student population.
- focusing on ECVs as othermothers, the connection between effeminate men and transwomen.

- I also see myself doing a book project on my dissertation and making sure that my work is accessible to practitioners.
- I researched organizations that support Black Queer youth in the Midwest with the goal to create a landscape analysis. This will result in a report of the different programs and organizations in the Midwestern United States that have safe spaces and provide support for Black Queer youth.

The past two years must also be mentioned in relation to the needs of BlackQueer people, because the COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on the community. With the isolation that has increased due to a need for safety from the virus, normal community events that many relied on for support were canceled. As a result, many youth and young adults have not been able to interact with friends and other individuals who support them unconditionally, inevitably affecting their mental health. Suicide is the second leading cause of death with Black teen suicide increasing 4.82% in 2017 (Coleman, 2019). Further, those under 18 who have been homeless during this time have not received any COVID-19 financial relief, and if they were working, many of them also lost their income.

Finally, I want to close this study with something to reflect on. I would like my readers to answer for themselves and ask among their own circles: Who's looking out for your past little you and your future you? My study participants have consistently had to worry about how to heal their little selves while in conjunction with trying to heal their current selves from past hurts. This is also what Queer people have to think about on a day-to-day basis, while also worrying about if they are in a safe or harmful environment.

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Audre Lorde specifically told us, “There is no hierarchy of oppression” (1993, p. 1), so when we talk about getting free, it must include all Black people.

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Appendixes

Appendix A: Definition of Terms

- Asexual: having a lack of (or low level of) sexual attraction to others and/or a lack of interest or desire for sex or sexual partners. Asexuality exists on a spectrum from people who experience no sexual attraction nor have any desire for sex, to those who experience low levels of sexual attraction and only after significant amounts of time. Many of these different places on the spectrum have their own identity labels. Another term used within the asexual community is “ace,” meaning someone who is asexual.
- Bisexual: a person who may be sexually and/or romantically attracted to people of more than one gender.
- Cisgender/Cis: a person whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth (eg, man and male-assigned).
- Cisnormativity: the societal and structural assumption that all people identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.
- Educational Cultural Negotiator: someone who advocates for students behind the scenes, often stepping in when their parents might not know how/where to do so.
- Gay: a person who is attracted exclusively to people of the same gender; misused as an umbrella term for the entire LGBTQ+ community.
- Gender: a wide range of concepts related to identities that apply to everyone.
- Gender Nonconformity: not expressing specific gender or not having gender characteristics or gender identity that conform to the expectations of society and culture.
- Gender Pronouns: how people want to be referred to when they are addressed or talked about in third person. Some examples of gender-neutral pronouns are they/them/theirs, ze/zir, and hir/hirs.
- Heteronormativity: the assumption, in individuals or in institutions, that everyone is heterosexual, and that heterosexuality is superior to all other sexualities.
- Heterosexism: the societal and structural assumption that all people identify as heterosexual.

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- Homophobia: the hatred, prejudice, and violence onto someone because they are or are perceived to be gay, lesbian, or queer.
- Intersex: an umbrella term that describes someone with a combination of biological sex characteristics that puts them outside the binary “male” and “female” boxes. Visit interactyouth.org for more information about intersex issues.
- Lesbian: a woman who is attracted exclusively to people of the same gender.
- Passing: being perceived as a particular privileged identity/gender, regardless of how the person identifies (e.g., straight passing, cis passing).
- Queer: a term originally used as a slur that has been reclaimed; used as an umbrella term to describe someone who does not identify as straight (when used for sexual orientation), someone who does not identify as cisgender (when used for gender, i.e. genderqueer), or someone who does not conform to sexual or gender expectations or norms.
- QTPOC: refers to queer and trans people of color, often used when differentiating the experiences of people of color and white people within the LGBTQIA+ community.
- Sexual Orientation: the sexual identity of a person in relation to attraction and gender. For example, someone might identify as gay or lesbian if they are attracted to a person of the same gender.
- Transgender/Trans: an umbrella term used to describe people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. ‘Transgendered’ has been noted to be an incorrect term.
- Womxn: a spelling of “women” that aims to be more inclusive and intersectional, to show that womxn are not limited to being defined by patriarchy or gender binary.

Appendix B: Consent Forms

Department of Education
 One University Boulevard
 St. Louis, Missouri 63121-4499
 E-mail: jmwgd4@umsystem.edu

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities (BlackQueer adults)

Life histories and engaging adults leading the charge in helping Black Queer Youth in an Urban Midwest City.

Principal Investigator: Javana M. Webb
 PI's Phone Number: 314-393-9445

Summary of the Study

My dissertation research focuses on BlackQueer adults who work with BlackQueer youth. Through conducting a qualitative life history study, I am choosing to interview this set of demographics in order to gain an understanding of why and how you chose this line of work. This research explores their self-reflections on their mental health and experiences as youth. This study also examines how these individuals currently advocate and protect themselves and their students in various spaces that may or may not be safe. One goal of this research is to discuss ways on how to develop, support, and embrace BlackQueer people. Eventually, I hope that this research informs the implementation of safe spaces, inclusive curriculum, and bullying policies for Queer students in K-12 schools. There might be some residual risks, trauma, and emotional distress from the questions that will be asked. This study will have questions that might make someone relive trauma from their family or community members. During the interview process, the subject will have the choice to opt-out of the interview to not answer any question if they become uncomfortable with any of the questions that are posed from the schedule of questions.

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Javana M. Webb, a PhD student in the College of Education. My Faculty Advisor Dr. Thomasina Hassler, if you have any questions or concerns, please reach out to her or myself at any time. The purpose of this research is to find out how to inform the implementation of safe spaces, inclusive curriculum, and bullying policies for BlackQueer students in K-12 schools.
2. Your participation will involve:
 - i. Two one-on-one individual interviews for 60-90 minutes virtually over Zoom, the interview will be audio and video recorded on my password-protected computer.

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- ii. One focus group and there will be individuals that you do not know therefore participating in the focus groups is a confidentiality risk. The focus group will be audio and video recorded over Zoom. The focus group will be 60-90 minutes long and a \$10 Vanilla EGift card will be sent via email for you to order your choice of meal to eat during the focus group. You will **not** receive any monetary compensation for your participation
- iii. Completing provided journaling prompts before our first interview and after the second interview.
- iv. There will be up to 10 participants who may be involved in this research at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.
3. There is a risk of emotional distress or discomfort from answering potentially sensitive questions about your childhood. The research and focus group interview questions are provided in advance for you. **There will also be a plan of action and list of mental health resources provided in advance for you. There is also a loss of confidentiality risk since you will be agreeing to participate in a focus group with others that you do not know.**
4. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study. If you choose to participate your responses will help develop and inform policy and procedures for current and future high school and community programs to support BlackQueer Youth.
5. Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate in this research study or withdraw your consent at any time. You will **NOT** be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or withdraw at any time.
6. We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. As part of this effort, your identity will not be revealed in any publication that may result from this study. I will be using pseudonyms for both the interviews and focus groups. In rare instances, a researcher's study must undergo an audit or program evaluation by an oversight agency (such as the Office for Human Research Protection) that would lead to the disclosure of your data as well as any other information collected by the researcher.
7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, **you may call the Investigator, Jvania M. Webb, 314-393-9445, or my Faculty Advisor, Dr. Thomasina Hassler, 314-440-8806. You may also ask questions or state concerns regarding your rights as a research participant to the Office of Research, at 314-516-5897.**

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I hereby consent to my participation in the research described above.



Department of Education
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 St. Louis, Missouri 63121-4499
 E-mail: jmwgd4@umsystem.edu

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities (BlackQueer young adults)

Life histories and engaging adults leading the charge in helping Black Queer Youth in an Urban Midwest City.

Principal Investigator: Javania M. Webb
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1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Javania M. Webb, a PhD student in the College of Education. My Faculty Advisor Dr. Thomasina Hassler, if you have any questions or concerns, please reach out to her or myself at any time. The purpose of this research is to find out how to inform the implementation of safe spaces, inclusive curriculum, and bullying policies for BlackQueer students in K-12 schools.
2. Your participation will involve:
 - i. Participation in one focus group, the focus group will be audio and video recorded over Zoom with individuals that you do not know. The focus group will be 60-90 minutes long. You will **not** receive any monetary compensation for your participation.

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- ii. There will be up to 10 participants who may be involved in this research at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.
3. There is a risk of emotional distress or discomfort from answering potentially sensitive questions about your childhood. The focus group interview questions are provided in advance for you. **There will also be a plan of action and list of mental health resources provided in advance for you. There is also a loss of confidentiality risk since you will be agreeing to participate in a focus group with others that you do not know.**
4. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study. If you choose to participate your responses will help develop and inform policy and procedures for current and future high school and community programs to support BlackQueer Youth.
5. Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate in this research study or withdraw your consent at any time. You will **NOT** be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or withdraw at any time.
6. We will do everything we can to protect your privacy. As part of this effort, your identity will not be revealed in any publication that may result from this study. I will be using pseudonyms for the focus groups. In rare instances, a researcher's study must undergo an audit or program evaluation by an oversight agency (such as the Office for Human Research Protection) that would lead to the disclosure of your data as well as any other information collected by the researcher.
7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, **you may call the Investigator, Jvania M. Webb, 314-393-9445, or my Faculty Advisor, Dr. Thomasina Hassler, 314-440-8806. You may also ask questions or state concerns regarding your rights as a research participant to the Office of Research, at 314-516-5897.**

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I hereby consent to my participation in the research described above.

Appendix C: Plan of Action & Resources

The interview questions are sensitive in nature because of potential emotional risk due to the interview questions being asked. Down below are resources and steps that the researcher will complete after each interview.

Step One:

Open the interview up with a disclaimer letting them know that I will be talking about suicide during the time we are with each other. I will be asking this question in only one of the two interviews.

Step Two:

Ask them if they are okay to continue with the interview and if yes, send the information through the chat function if on Zoom or slide the piece of paper with the resources on it if in person.

Step Three:

Once the interview is over or I have asked all questions I will do a ‘grounding exercise’ where I ask random questions like:

1. What is the date?
2. What is your favorite color?
3. What is your favorite meal?
4. What is your favorite flower?

And the purpose of these questions is to bring the participant back to the baseline state moment and space of not remembering any of the traumatic background that they have just shared with me during the interview.

Mental Health Resources:

Behavioral Health Response contact information which a hotline number in case you have any suicidal or homicidal thoughts after our interview(s).

- Nationwide: 1-800-811-4760
- Local: 314-469-6644
- Website: www.bhrstl.org

Start Here St. Louis Area Resource Directory

- Website: <https://www.startherestl.org/mental-health.html>
- startherestl@gmail.com

Appendix D: Landscape Analysis

Name	Website	City	State	Type: Non-Profit Organization (501c3), Non-Profit, Community, University	Description	Types of Service	Demographics Served	Contact	Email	Phone
You Are Worthy, Inc	www.youareworthyinc.org		Missouri	Non-Profit Organization	Support groups for at risk youth of color are needed, because Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) youth of color attempt to commit suicide three times the rate of their white counterparts. In addition, many parents of color lack knowledge needed to support their children having same-sex attractions and/or desiring to be a different gender. You Are Worthy, Inc is the first organization in the specifically designated for youth and adults of color.	Mentoring	Black Queer Youth			
Blaqueout	http://www.blaqueout.org		Missouri	Non-Profit Organization	BLAQ OUT is a united community of individual advocates, community activists and healthcare professionals who work to address the racial, social, and environmental challenges faced by the Black LGBTQ+ community. The purpose of Queer Trans People of Color is to create a safe, supportive, and inspiring space for queer and trans people of color on Missouri's	Mentoring	young adults & adults			
MU QUEER TRANS PEOPLE OF COLOR	https://missouri.computelabs.com/image/organization/queer-trans-people-of-color		Missouri	university		Mentoring	Students 18+			
Brave Space Alliance	https://www.bravespacealliance.org		Illinois	non-profit organization	Brave Space Alliance is the first Black-led, trans-led LGBTQ+ Center located on the South Side of Chicago, dedicated to creating and providing affirming, culturally competent, for-us-by-us resources, programming, and services for LGBTQ+ individuals on the South and West sides of the city	Mentoring	youth, 18+			
Ruth Ellis Center	https://www.ruthelliscenter.org		Michigan	non-profit organization	Founded in 1999, Ruth Ellis Center (REC) has established a national reputation for quality and innovation in providing trauma-informed services for lesbian, gay, bi-erectrational, transgender and non-binary (LGBTQ+) people. REC provides youth receiving unwavering support from neighboring communities in any capacity that promotes the well-being and interests, including in education or	Mentoring	Black Queer			
LGBT Detroit	www.lgbtdetroit.org		Michigan	non-profit organization		Mentoring	Black Queer youth, adults			
His Health: Brother's United & Damien Center	https://www.hishealth.org/medical-of-care/brothers-united-damien-center		Indiana	non-profit organization	The Damien Center is a one-stop care setting where clients living with HIV can access resources and services that help them lead healthy and fulfilling lives. Supports include a full-service medical clinic with a food pantry, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) services, and community spaces for support groups. Brothers United provides comprehensive, specialized case management and care coordination for PLWHA—particularly for Black LGBT patients. Both	Mentoring	Black MSM Youth			
His Health: Brother's United & Damien Center	https://www.hishealth.org/medical-of-care/brothers-united-damien-center		Indiana	non-profit organization	exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) services, and community spaces for support groups. Brothers United provides comprehensive, specialized case management and care coordination for PLWHA—particularly for Black LGBT patients. Both organizations rely on a network of local community-based organizations (CBOs) and AIDS service organizations (ASOs) to improve linkage to HIV and STD/STI care services for Black gay/bisexual men who live in Indianapolis and surrounding areas.	Mentoring	Black MSM Youth			
Columbus Community Pride	columbuscommunitypride.org		Ohio	Community		Mentoring	14+			
Helping Us Emerge	https://www.facebook.com/HelpingUsEmerge		Ohio	Community		Mentoring	18+			
Blackqueercolumbus	https://bqc.net		Ohio	Community		Mentoring	18+			
Black LGBTQ+ Migrant Project	https://transgendercenter.org/programs/blmp/steering-committee/steering			non-profit organization	BLMP uses leadership development, capacity building, and organizing to address the ways in which Black LGBTQIA+ migrants are targeted.	Mentoring	18+			
Sister Circle / Northern Illinois University	https://calendar.niu.edu/event/sister-circle-4933?utm_source=widget&utm_medium=widget&utm_source=Northem+Illinois+University+YQ10ZVNK3U		Illinois	university	Sister Circles are spaces for women with underrepresented racial identities. These spaces are welcoming of trans and nonbinary students and provide opportunities for all to connect, communicate, and learn from each other with support from NIU staff.	Mentoring	Students 18+			
The LGBTQ Resource Center / SIU	https://mrsc.siu.edu/lgbtq/programming/		Illinois	university	the Student Multicultural Resource Center serves as a catalyst for inclusion, diversity and innovation. We look to foster an environment where all campus members are respected and welcomed	Mentoring	Students 18+			
The LGBTQ Center	https://www.theqbtcenter.org/youth		Indiana	Non-Profit Organization	First Saturday of the month at 1 p.m. QVOC is a cross cultural group focused on the fantastic triumphs and struggles that all queer youth of color face when living their intersecting lives.	Mentoring	Black youth			
META Center Inc	https://metacenterinc.org/		Ohio	Non-Profit Organization	META Center Inc. is an Akron-based 501(c)(3) organization that creates regular programming for transgender and gender non-conforming youth ages 7-19. Through providing affirmation to one of society's most vulnerable, META Center Inc. works to create social change and foster acceptance.	Mentoring	Black youth			
Call Black Line	https://www.callblackline.com/			Non-Profit Organization	BlackLine provides a space for peer support, counseling, witnessing and affirming the lived experiences to folks who are most impacted by systematic oppression with an LGBTQ+ Black Femme Lens.	24/7 phone line	Call BlackLine prioritizes BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color)			
Freedom Inc	https://www.freedom-inc.org/index.php?page=about-us		Wisconsin	Non-Profit Organization	Freedom, Inc. (FI) is a Black and Southeast Asian non-profit organization that works with low- to no-income communities of color. Our mission is to achieve social justice through coupling direct services with leadership development and community organizing that will bring about social, political, cultural, and economic change resulting in the end of violence against women, gender-non-conforming and transgender folks, and children within communities of color.	Mentoring	Black and Southeast Asian			