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This dissertation, NAVIGATING AND NEGOTIATING IDENTITY IN THE BLACK GAY MECCA: EDUCATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCES THAT POSITIVELY IMPACT THE LIFE HISTORIES OF BLACK GAY MALE YOUTH IN ATLANTA, by Michael D. Bartone, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Philosophy, in the College of Education, Georgia State University. The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

---

Kristen Buras, PhD.  
Committee Chair

---

Joyce E. King, PhD.  
Committee Member

---

Jodi Kaufmann, PhD.  
Committee Member

---

Deron R. Boyles, PhD.  
Committee Member

---

Maura Ryan, PhD.  
Committee Member

---

Date

---

William Curlette, PhD.  
Chairperson, Department of Educational Policy  
Studies

---

Paul A. Alberto, PhD.  
Dean, College of Education

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Michael Bartone

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Michael D. Bartone

Department of Educational Policy Studies

College of Education

Georgia State University

The director of this dissertation is:

Dr. Kristen Buras

Department of Educational Policy Studies

College of Education

Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA 30303

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Michael Dominic Bartone

ADDRESS: 4486 Pineridge Cir.

Dunwoody, GA 30338

### EDUCATION:

Ph.D.	2015	Georgia State University Educational Policy Studies, Social Foundations
MED.	2007	Seattle University Curriculum & Instruction
B.S.	2000	Elon University Elementary Education

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

2011-present	Graduate Teaching Assistant Georgia State University
2008-2011	Teacher Civicorps Schools
2007-2008	Educational Consultant education.com

### PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS:

Bartone, M. (2010). Cultural applications: Ideas for teacher education programs. *Perspectives on Urban Education*, 7(1), 91-95.

International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI). (2015, May).

Black and Gay in the South: I Will Not Be Society's Stereotype! Champaign, IL.

International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI.) (2015, May).

Analysis and Interpretation With Narrative Inquiry: The Tensions of Staying True to the Participants' Story While Utilizing a Critical Race Theoretical Perspective. Champaign, IL.

American Educational Research Association (AERA). (2015, April).

“I know my own self worth”: Creating Educational Lessons of Masculinity for African American Male (co-presented with Jennifer Esposito, Myles Irving, Brian Harmon, and Romero Stokes). Chicago, IL.

Queer Studies Conference (2015, April). “You not gonna hurt my feelings or destroy who I worked so hard to become because I’m not straight.” Influences in the Identity Formation of Black Gay Young Males. Asheville, N.C.

Queer Studies Conference (2015, April). Smartphone Applications for Gay Men: A Place of Exclusion Within a Place of Inclusion. Asheville, N.C.

International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI). (2014, May). No Other Races, No Fems Apply: Gay Men’s Smartphone Applications, A Space of Exclusion? Champaign, IL.

International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI). But Internet and Cell Phone Methodologies Don’t Fit: A Call for Smartphone Applications Methodology. Champaign, IL.

International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI). (2014, May). Youth Definitions of Race and Sexuality via New Social Media (co-presented with David Alexander and Jennifer Young). Champaign, IL.

Southeast Philosophy of Education Society (SEPES). (2014, February). Who Needs Gay-Straight Alliances When There is Jack’d: Creating Underground Safe Spaces for Black Gay Males in High School. Decatur, GA.

Ethnographic and Qualitative Research Conference. (2014, February). Brothers Gonna Work It Out: African American Males’ Perceptions of Manhood (co-presented with Jennifer Esposito, Myles Irving, Brian Harmon, and Romero Stokes). Las Vegas, NV.

International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI). (2013, May). Choosing from Lookalikes: The Quagmire of a Student of Qualitative Research Methodology. Champaign, IL.

American Educational Research Association (AERA). (2014, April).

The Fight for Black Liberation in Schools: An Oral History of Civil Rights Lawyer Howard Moore, Jr. San Francisco, CA.

## PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

2011- American Educational Research Association

2011- American Educational Studies Association

2010- National Association of Multicultural Educators

NAVIGATING AND NEGOTIATING IDENTITY IN THE BLACK GAY MECCA:  
EDUCATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCES THAT POSITIVELY IMPACT THE  
LIFE HISTORIES OF BLACK GAY MALE YOUTH IN ATLANTA

by

Michael D. Bartone

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Educational Policy Studies

in

the Department of Educational Policy Studies

in the

College of Education

Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA

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## ABSTRACT

# NAVIGATING AND NEGOTIATING IDENTITY IN THE BLACK GAY MECCA: EDUCATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL INFLUENCES THAT POSITIVELY IMPACT THE LIFE HISTORIES OF BLACK GAY MALE YOUTH IN ATLANTA

Michael D. Bartone

Sexual minority people face a heterosexist society in which they are legally and socially marginalized. Additionally, Black people face a society where racist attitudes and laws persist, one in which they are dehumanized as "other" in relation to Whites. Furthermore, being a Black male means confronting a system where, beginning in elementary school, one is frequently deemed deficient or deviant and penalized by racist practices and policies. Very few studies have examined how Black gay males come to understand their intersecting racial and sexual identities or how they navigate and negotiate life in a White heterosexist society.

This dissertation outlines the current state of sexual minority youth with a focus on Black gay males and suggests that more must be done to understand the lived experiences of this community within and beyond the schoolhouse, especially in a city such as Atlanta, which is known as a Black gay mecca and where the Black sexual minority community is visible. It is important to examine how a range of institutional forces, working in tandem with and sometimes against racism and heterosexism, challenge as well as assist Black gay males in forming their identities.



The purpose of the study was to gather the life histories of five young Black sexual minority males aged 19-24 in metro-Atlanta. I utilized critical race theory and queer theory, which critique endemic racism and heteronormativity, as a lens to understand their life histories within a larger societal context. By probing how numerous social institutions have influenced young Black male identity formation, including schools, peers, family, church, community-based LGBTQ organizations, and social media, this study presents life histories in a way that provides a more holistic picture of this community.

Due to the paucity of research focused on how young Black gay males are productively navigating through life, this study offers a distinct contribution by placing their histories front and center in an attempt to provide a counterstory to deficit-based perspectives. From the participants' life histories, five factors were found to shape identity formation while navigating the above institutions: racial shelving (bracketing race in majority-Black environments to contend with sexual identity issues); thick skin (increasing ability to face and conquer challenges based on negotiation of past challenges); self-determination (taking the initiative to seek information and relationships to learn about sexual identity, including use of social media); defying/transcending stereotypes (refusing to conform to dominant narratives about Black gay males); and experiential evolution (understanding that experience translates into growth and self-affirmation). All of these factors address the ways in which the participants have come to understand, negotiate, accept, and even embrace their intersecting identities.

Additionally, findings are useful because the participants' life histories have set a foundation for how educators and sexual majority youth can better understand a population facing a racist and heterosexist society and enable new policy interventions to be imagined. Four proposals, which emanate from participants' life experiences, are presented for schools to

undertake: incorporating Black gay activists and community members into school culture, providing professional development for teachers on race and heterosexism, developing a comprehensive sex-education curriculum that includes gay students, and implementing a “Who Cares” campaign to mediate peer pressure to conform.

Keywords: Black males, Gay, Critical race theory

## **DEDICATION**

To all the social activists past and present who have fought for racial and sexual equality.

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Table 1: Themes

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Racism and homophobia. The relationship between them? I think that we don't want to be forgotten. If you start talking about homophobia inside ethnic communities then we start getting concerned because they're not looking at the race issues. If we start talking about race issues in the LGBT communities then we're concerned because they're not focusing on the fact that we're gay. You know, there's that going back and forth.

That has to do with a lot of cultural, the way that we're brought up. Being part of the Black community I know that most Blacks don't think that Blacks are gay. "It's a White thing." (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 99)

The quote by Kevin Kumashiro's participant, Christopher, illustrates the tensions felt by a Black gay man. His intersecting identities (Black, gay, male) and life history converge to create a picture of what he faces in understanding and forming his identity. These intersecting forces also demonstrate how one is forced to understand their identities based on the views of those within their community. For instance, Christopher has been told by his Black community that a gay identity is a "White thing," therefore one is "less Black" if they are gay. Conversely, oftentimes in society, and in the gay community, gay equals White (Berubé, 2003; Han, 2007). According to Kumashiro (2002) these intersecting identities place racially marginalized gays within stereotypic categories where "*queer* is often racialized and Black is often sexualized" (p. 98, emphasis in original). Additionally, Christopher must understand not only what it means to be Black but what it means to a Black man. Thus, all of the trappings of Black masculinity converge to provide another layer with which he must grapple in understanding his place in society.

It is from these tensions and intersecting identities that I have examined life histories of Black gay youth. By ignoring these intersecting identities and how these young males' communities and institutions shape their identities, we risk becoming color-blind to their struggles and successes. All too often in research the voices of those in liminal categories have

been silenced and their lived experiences dehumanized (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). The purpose of this research study was to focus on how Black gay youth have negotiated their identities by navigating through myriad social spaces and institutions. Keeping their lived experiences at the center is the mode through which I gained an understanding of how they have come to be, how they view themselves within a racist, heterosexist, sexist, and homonegative society. Through their lived experiences, educators and those studying the Black and gay communities can be informed to have a broader sense of these youth and how to assist them on their journey while not dehumanizing them. Before I begin it is important to provide my own narrative. By doing this, I share my positionality as a researcher and give the audience an understanding of where I come from and how I relate to this study, which informs my choice of methodology, research questions, and analysis and interpretation.

### **My Narrative: Situating Self in Research**

It's hard to explain. Inherently it's just always been strange, neither here nor there, always somewhat out of place everywhere, ambiguous, without a sense of belonging to touch. Somewhere halfway feeling there's no one completely the same. Standing alone eager to just believe it's good enough to be what you really are, but in your heart, uncertainty forever lies. And you'll always be somewhere on the outside. Early on, you face the realization you don't have a space where you fit in and recognize you were born to exist. (Carey, 1997, track 12)

Mariah Carey's words sum up my life; I always felt on the outside, that I never fit in with the rest of my family or peers. Thus, I open this chapter with my life history, as a middle-class White gay man. It is important to understand my positionality and who I am because the population I collected life histories from differs from me in several ways. Johnson-Bailey (2004) explains that the researcher's understanding matters, whether they are an "insider" or "outsider," because that determines how one frames the study and analyzes, interprets, and presents the data. As I moved forward with my study I was reminded of the differences between my participants

and myself and that these differences “occur when there are societal experiences and circumstances attached to distinct lived positionalities such as class, race, gender, and sexual orientation” (Johnson-Bailey, 2004, p. 126). Therefore, it was essential that I was cognizant of these differences in order to reconstruct and represent their life stories with fidelity.

I grew up comfortably in a White enclave 10 miles outside of Hartford, Connecticut in the suburb of Glastonbury, technically in the section known as South Glastonbury, and did not have to think of where my next meal was coming from or if my father would lose his job; my mom was a homemaker, so my reality was a mom making lunch for me every day and cooking dinner for us at least six times a week as we all (mom, dad, and two sisters) sat and ate together. My geographic location explains much of what I knew and understood about people; as of 2012 85% of South Glastonbury’s residents reported being of the “White” race only (United States Census Bureau, n.d.), and I did not have a Black classmate until the fifth grade.

My father was a third-generation plumber who owned the third-generation family company, but I could never relate to him. He was outgoing and popular, like my two sisters, athletic in high school, and was very good at what he did for work; many said he was the best around. I was shy, self-conscious, and awkward on the field of any sport; it just was not me no matter how hard I tried. Additionally, when I would go to work with him I was out of my element, and could not connect with his coworkers as they discussed women and sports. As I began to mature I understood I was not like the other boys; I knew I was gay. The thought of being gay scared me because gay equaled AIDS and death. Vacationing in Cape Cod I would see openly gay men and just as I would begin to smile in support, I would hear jokes being made by my family members about the “queers.” However, I knew there was a community out there where I belonged, but did I really belong to a community where men wore leather, dressed as

women, spoke with lisps, and were openly flamboyant as they pranced around with rainbow flags or with another man on their arm? That was my conception of the gay community. How could I come out to my family? President Clinton, who I admired and was mocked for liking, said he would treat LGBT peoples with equality but that did not pan out as promised. Also, in 1992 MTV's *The Real World* came on and I was enamored with the openly gay cast member. He was my inspiration, finally a gay man on television who does not have HIV or AIDS, which changed in 1994 when *The Real World San Francisco* had an openly gay HIV positive cast member, reminding me that gay does equal HIV and AIDS.

Simultaneous to my journey into understanding my sexuality, which I made sure I hid the best I could from everyone, although I was always self-conscious that people would find out and that they knew, I also grappled with understanding race and the history of the United States. While I did not personally know any Black, Brown, Asian, or Indigenous People, I relied on images presented in the media and what I saw when I drove into Hartford to visit with cousins and my great-grandmothers. I had an image of Hartford as, what Leonardo and Hunter (2009) refer to, a “disorganized jungle.” It was run down and full of people not like me (read Black and impoverished). Every time we drove to Hartford I would be filled with fear and anxiety as we navigated through the city (and my family lived on the better [read Whiter] side of town). Where did this fear come from? What made Hartford a place that I feared?

Let me put Hartford and Glastonbury into context. In 2007, Hartford was the sixth most impoverished city in the United States (Somma, 2007). Due to the fact that I saw racially marginalized people, unfamiliar to me as a kid, in Hartford, I equated racially marginalized and urban (read Black and impoverished, not the part of the city where White wealthy people reside) with impoverishment, gangs, and drugs. People from this urban environment are viewed as, in

the words of Robin Kelley, a “monolithic and debased underclass culture” (as cited in Leonardo and Hunter, 2009, p. 14). To me, Hartford was a terrible city, rampant with crime. Literally across the Connecticut River is South Glastonbury, a more rural section of Glastonbury, a wealthy White suburb where the estimated 2012 median household income was \$118,750 and home values were \$407,000 (United States Census, n.d.b). Glastonbury is far from impoverished, a polar opposite of Hartford. In another example of inequity, the Hartford region is ranked as having the highest per-capita gross domestic product in the world, which stands at \$75,086 (Ro, 2012). This was my reality growing up.

Often I would hear stories of what Hartford used to be like, a grand city with immigrants living and working together in harmony. While keeping their Italian heritage and pride, it was important for my family to work hard and prove to others (i.e.: English, German, and Irish Whites) that we Italians were not swarthy thieves, as was so often the narrative propagated of Italians. I heard stories of how my grandparents moved out of the city and into the country to raise their children. The stories continued with coded (“just work hard”) and not so coded (“those people”) language. In one story I heard how my great-grandparents, who spoke Italian and wrote and spoke very little English, owned and operated their own corner market; they succeeded so why cannot everyone else? They left because the neighborhood became too dangerous. Story after story I heard negative accounts about Black people and how the city was just not the same (because “others” have taken over and “others” have a bad set of values and drive out the Italians). Driving into the city with my grandfather I saw what they spoke of. I had no idea of the structural and institutional forces working *against* racially marginalized people and designed by and working *for* White people (Omi & Winant, 1994).

I knew something was wrong with what I was seeing: who would choose to be impoverished? The same ideas would come to my head about gay people: who would choose to live in a community where people are denied rights and dying of AIDS?

I went to Elon University [College] in North Carolina for college and immersed myself in understanding other cultures. Elon was very White and economically privileged, yet I took advantage of getting to know those people who were racially and economically different than me, either at Elon or in the schools where I worked. During this time I realized the narrative (lazy, thugs, drug dealers...) I had been given about Black people did not hold true. I encountered successful Black people who came from middle-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds like myself.

I began to challenge all that had been told to me and what I saw in Hartford. Through books and personal communications, my mind started to shift. I read, *There Are No Children Here: The Story of Two Boys Growing Up in The Other America* by Alex Kotlowitz (1992). The boys in the book were the same age as me, and I could not help but think of their lives and what I was doing at the time the author followed them; our lives were vastly different. I then thought of children in Hartford who were my age and what they must have been going through while I was safe at home in South Glastonbury. In 2006, while still going through a transformation and grappling with race, I read *The Children In Room E4* by Susan Eaton (2006). The book analyzes school segregation and inequities in Hartford and the surrounding suburbs. It details policies that help explain why White people, my family, were able to move to the suburbs and make it and why racially marginalized people were not. I got a better glimpse of Hartford, from a critical race standpoint. By this I mean my suburban upbringing did not happen on hard work alone by my

family members, but policies were put in place to allow my family to move and create better opportunities for subsequent generations.

My journey continued when I moved to Atlanta and taught third grade in the racially, ethnically, and religiously diverse town of Clarkston, a town with a large refugee and immigrant population. I was there during the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and being in a school with a population that was roughly 50% Muslim and having a principal whose husband was a Baptist preacher and a female assistant principal who was a Christian-turned-Muslim, was one of the best experiences of my life. While in Atlanta I wanted to know more about the Black community. Thus, my journey into Atlanta began with a tour of the Atlanta University Center from a co-worker. This is a place where she, a Black woman from California, saw the rich civil rights and intellectual history of Black America in its most concrete form. While in Atlanta I found myself at a crossroads and finally admitted I was gay. I began to associate myself with Black gay males, not from a fetishized point (Hill Collins, 2005; Nagel, 2003), but rather as a way to get to know a culture I had been told was off-limits. Since my move to Atlanta in 2000, my friends, a majority are Black gay males, and their friends have embraced me. Our conversations run deep and do not shy away from talking about race and the gay community as well as their lived experiences versus mine. These exchanges have provided me with a glimpse into the Black gay experience, an experience that challenges what I believed growing-up to be a very bleak existence for being Black and gay. For example, often times my friends express ways that their families have dealt with their sexuality. Almost all of my friends have been open about their sexuality to their families and many have indicated their families ultimately have given them support. Take, for instance, one of my best friends Shawn. When he was 18 his mother drove him down to Atlanta from Ohio to live with his aunt because she refused to have a gay son in her house. Times have

changed and within a year or so his mother began to provide him support and accept his sexuality. My friends' narratives challenge this notion that the Black community is more homophobic than the White community (Boykin, 1996). However, it has been important for me to understand the social context in which their narratives have taken place because some of their families understand that being oppressed is wrong no matter what identity is being oppressed. Concurrently, several have noted that they do not view the gay community as White because in Atlanta the Black gay community is so large and visible. Instead, many of my friends wish to move away from the "gay equals White" discourse. Their lives push me to grapple with the space I inhabit while understanding their experiences and perspectives can challenge what I know.

I next moved out to Seattle and then Oakland with a former partner. In Seattle I encountered a community of Asian people of many different cultures and from numerous different countries; in turn, I was embraced by many of my students' families and got to learn the ways of their culture, especially the Samoan culture. In Oakland it was the Latin@ community I began to understand. While out west I longed to be back in Atlanta and began to read much more about the modern day Civil Rights Movement. From there I tapped into the work of Paulo Freire (2000) and created units designed to confront and tackle injustice and inequality. As an anti-racist White person, I created units and lessons with my elementary school students that examined the state of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism in the United States. I made sure these lessons had purpose and that the students would carry the lessons of those who fought against injustice with them as they got older. For example, social justice was the guiding theme for the year, and I used the Civil Rights Movement as a way to understand social injustice and how to bring about social change. Also, almost every lesson I taught incorporated a social



movement (e.g. farm workers' and immigrants' rights or the LGBT movement) that allowed my students to conceptualize injustice and how collective social action has led to change. Last, I brought this passion to teach issues of race and social justice to a summer session in 2012 at Clark Atlanta University in the Upward Bound program. As the only White person teaching a course on Civil Rights and race relations, I was met with skepticism, what did I know about these issues? That ended when I engaged in open and critical conversations with my students and co-workers and acknowledged my White privilege. Additionally, I heard from these colleagues, students, and which is something I hear from Black gay friends and others in the community, that they appreciate how I understand and can discuss my White privilege. All of these experiences have led me to this point in understanding my White privilege. This has been a process, one that continues as I have gathered and understood the participants' narratives.

I do not claim to know a Black gay male's lived experiences. In an effort to illustrate this point, one clear example sticks out when I was living in Oakland. It was roughly 9 p.m. and I was speeding over the Bay Bridge with my former partner, a Black news reporter in the passenger seat, to make my flight back to Atlanta. I got pulled over on the bridge and was none too pleased. As the White cop approached the car I angrily turned around to the backseat to grab the proper paperwork. While digging back there the cop did not say a word, did not make a move, and had a slight smile. My partner nervously leaned over to the cop and told him what I was doing. After it was said and done, we were on our way with a ticket and my negative attitude in high gear, but the conversation I had with him brought me back down. He told me never to do that again because the cop could have pulled his gun. We both stopped for a second and laughed an awkward laugh; we both knew that my White skin color afforded me a luxury that was not afforded Black males such as Oscar Grant, a young Black man, murdered in Oakland by a transit

police officer while following the officer's directions only a year before. That situation, yet again, reaffirmed why I could never claim to know a Black male's lived experiences.

That said, I do have a sense of what it means to be marginalized due to my sexual orientation. My lived experiences have not been easy. Due to my sexuality and/or because my former partner is Black, my grandfather disowned me; I did not speak to him for the last three years of his life. Though not surprising, my grandfather was very stubborn, and it hurt because he was the only immediate male I could look up to since my father died when I was 16. However, his wife, my Italian-born and Catholic abiding grandmother, embraced me beyond belief, and continues to inquire about all aspects of my life. She was angry with me for not telling her I was gay sooner, but I figured she would be upset and disown me as well. I have learned that asking and telling, sharing stories and life histories, is key to understanding one's perspective, no matter how it has been shaped. From this perspective, of inquiring and not assuming, I situate myself in this study.

In the end, after hearing about my Black gay friends' lives and how it does not always match the dominant narratives I was taught, and narratives that continue, I am on a journey to know more. If my challenges as a gay man were mediated by my race and class status, I began to wonder about those experiencing the "double burden" of sexual and racial marginalization. My work is not intended be the final say in the lived experiences of Black gay youth, but rather to let their narratives be placed alongside and challenge those who continue to marginalize and/or ignore this population through their research.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Imagine walking into an environment and having to hide a part of your identity for fear of being bullied or because nobody else was like you. Or imagine being open with your sexual

identity and gender non-conforming expression, one of which or both, challenge normative ideas of sexuality and gender. Finally, imagine walking into a space where your racial identity adds an additional layer to your sexual identity and/or gender non-conforming expression. For many youth this is the reality.

Sexual minority students face oppressive conditions and victimization daily as they enter schools (Espelage & Rao, 2013). While in schools, two instances occurred in North Carolina last year within a week or two of one another. One young male was told it was his fault he was being bullied because he chose to bring a *My Little Pony* backpack to school (“Child attempts suicide,” 2014). In another instance, an eleven-year-old North Carolina student tried to commit suicide due to his love of *My Little Pony* (Roy, 2014). Only 14 states and the District of Columbia have laws to protect students based on their sexual identity and gender expression (Orr & Komosa-Hawkins, 2013); Georgia does not have a law protecting these students. Even though the landscape in school is bleak, Jamil, Harper, & Bruce (2013) note that their participants have found ways to mediate these problems and they “found that youth were very creative and resourceful in the use of educational and informal contexts for the development of their identities” (p. 194). The current study continues that work by eliciting the life histories of the participants to provide an understanding of how they have negotiated and managed through either negative and/or positive school environments.

For many sexual minority youth schools are viewed as environments where verbal and physical assaults are not uncommon. Additionally, schools are places where heterosexuality is held up as the standard and norm and the lives of sexual minorities are either ignored or considered abnormal (Chesir-Teran, 2010). To mediate the challenges faced by sexual minority youth, gay-straight alliances (GSAs) are often formed (Miceli, 2010). Research studies looking

at GSAs for sexual minorities in schools mention the lack of racial diversity in these organizations (Heck, Lindquist, Stewart, Brennan, & Cochran, 2013; Wooley, 2012). Thus for some racially and ethnically marginalized sexual minority youth, gay-straight alliances do not address issues of race (McCready, 2012; Patton, 2011). By employing a color-blind ideology, gay-straight alliances may further marginalize Black sexual minority youth and are not places where many seek support, if Black sexual minority youth even want to join a publically visible alliance. Last, Black sexual minority youth must navigate through understanding their racial identity in tandem with understanding their sexual identity; this is something White sexual minority youth are immune from due to the idea that “whiteness takes center stage and it becomes synonymous with gay where gay comes to mean white and white comes to mean gay” (Han, 2007, p. 54). While all sexual minority youth must understand their sexual identity in ways sexual majority youth do not, the issue of race cannot be divorced from how one understands sexual identity; communities have different understandings of sexuality which influence how one contends with their sexual identity (Lemelle & Battle, 2004).

### **Research Questions**

By utilizing narrative inquiry and gathering life histories of five Black gay males between the ages of 19-24, I probed how they are navigating through schools and society and negotiating and understanding their intersecting identities. In essence, I wanted to know what can be learned from these young males due to the lack of research focusing on their lived experiences and how they are faring in all aspects of their lives.

Five questions guided this study:

- What do the narratives of Black gay youth reveal about the factors that support or undermine their ability to successfully negotiate intersecting racial and sexual identities?

- In what ways have the following institutions influenced Black gay youth identity formation: school, family, church, peers, community-based LGBTQ organizations, and social media? To what degree has growing up in Atlanta contributed to identity formation?
- In what manner have Black gay youth either experienced or created social networks of support?
- To what degree and how have Black gay youth used social media to create networks of support, navigate their intersecting identities, and present themselves?
- What can educators and policymakers learn from narratives of Black gay youth to best support them in their personal, social, and educational growth?

These questions will be returned to in greater detail in chapter 3, but I place them here to give the reader a frame of reference while reading chapter 2. Additionally, I have chosen to focus on the above institutions and understand that the participants could have identified other institutions as relevant, through the semi-structured interviews. I now turn to my theoretical perspective and literature review, which guide how I have chosen to define and study the problem and likewise inform my methodology and analysis.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

In this chapter, I detail the theories relevant to my study as well as the research literature that informs my concerns and questions about the lives of Black gay male youth. I also consider the national context and legal status of sexual minority communities during the period when participants were growing up; the racial and sexual history of Atlanta; and the virtual context provided by media, all of which has likely contributed to participants' sense of identity. Combined with insights garnered from research literature and critical theories of race and sexuality, this enabled me to contextualize and analyze the life histories that I gathered. I now turn to a discussion of theory.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Theoretical perspective is important for it is “the philosophical stance that lies behind our chosen methodology” (Crotty, 1998, p. 7). Bogdan and Biklin (2006) posit that it is a way of “looking at the world” (p. 24). Therefore, it is important that I lay out the theoretical framework driving this project because it helps determine how I understand and present the participants’ narratives. In this study I employed and relied heavily on a critical race theoretical perspective and utilized a queer theoretical perspective to interpret and comprehend the life histories and self-presentations of Black gay youth.

Crotty (1998) denotes there is a range of epistemologies that inform one’s philosophical underpinnings of “*how we know what we know*” (p. 8, emphasis in original). In essence, the epistemological stance I take informs the theoretical perspectives I have chosen. Conjointly, my theoretical perspectives determine how I have designed this study and what I learned from the participants. Before I explain my epistemological and theoretical perspectives, I need to give a brief explanation as to why, when working with Black gay youth, the theoretical perspectives I

take, as a White man, is crucial. Mills (2007) notes that it is important for Whites to recognize their privilege, especially when doing research with Black communities, because “[T]he white delusion of racial superiority insulates itself against refutation” (p. 19); thus, by acknowledging and owning my racial privilege as a researcher with Black gay male youth, I am able to challenge Whiteness and create a space for better understanding and valuing the voices and narratives of my Black participants.

For too long White colonizing epistemologies have dominated and been used as justification to “other” those who are not White, male, and heterosexual (Dunbar, 2008; Hylton, 2009; Parker & Lynn, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2009; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008).

Indigenous ways of knowing have been devalued, and as Louis (2007) explains:

We have been pathologised by Western research methods that have found us deficient either as genetically inferior or culturally deviant for generations. We have been dismembered, objectified and problematised via Western scientific rationality and reason. We have been politically, socially, and economically dominated by colonial forces and marginalised through armed struggle, biased legislation, and educational initiatives and policies that promote Western knowledge systems at the expense of our own. (p. 131)

Ladson-Billings (2000) notes that when one’s liminal perspective is heard then that voice and experience challenges dominant understandings of the group’s lived experiences. While speaking of “transformative education and research practices in Black education” (King, 2005, p. 5), King (2005) argues there must be a rehumanization process through which “hegemonic structures” of knowledge and understanding the world are dismantled because they “impede knowledge” for all humankind. In other words, colonizing (i.e.: U.S. Western/Eurocentric) epistemologies have ignored the ways of knowing of myriad groups of people and presented Eurocentric knowledge as a linear universal entity, and as Asante asserts “[I]t imposes Eurocentric realities as universal” (as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 266).

I bring this forth as a way to demonstrate that as a White male I am in the position to, under the guise of research, perpetuate the devaluation of my participants' lived experiences as many scholarly forefathers and foremothers have done. By positioning the participants' ways of knowing as valid, the intention is to move toward dismantling Western ways of knowing the Black gay experience, which will benefit, as King (2005) suggests, all humankind.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, it is from this understanding that I move forward to explain how my theoretical perspectives attend to the ways of knowing and the life histories of my participants.

Epistemologically I situate myself in social constructionism and standpoint epistemologies (Harding, 1993; Schwandt, 2000). According to Schwandt (2000), social constructionists believe that “[W]e do not construct our interpretations in isolation but against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language, and so forth” (p. 197). It is from the standpoint of the participants against a racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist society that I understand their life histories. In other words, because their experiences are formed in relation to these structural forces, I was attuned to how these structural forces have helped construct their identity and life history.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Coming out of critical legal studies, critical race theory has been adopted by educators to illuminate the educational experiences of racially marginalized students and to change dominant epistemologies (Crenshaw, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Taylor (2009) explains that critical race theory places race at the center when analyzing and understanding a person of color's experiences. Theorists in this tradition believe that racism is endemic to society and cannot be divorced out from one's experiences (Taylor, 2009). In other words, one is not free from the racialized effects of society. Since the participants in my study are Black, their experiences as



Black males must be understood within a school system and society, which, for the most part, does not support Black males (Ferguson, 2001; Giroux, 2006; Lewis, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006; Spring, 2012).

Edward Taylor (2009) describes critical race theory as “com[ing] from a long tradition of resistance to the unequal distribution of power and resources along political, economic, racial, and gendered lines” (p. 2). Thus, major guiding tenets of critical race theory that are connected to this study are: (a) racism is endemic in society, (b) a colorblind ideology should be challenged, (c) attention to intersectionality of multiple identities is necessary, (d) experiential knowledge is valid, and (e) historical contexts of experiences is relevant (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Taylor, 2009). First, racism is endemic in society, which effects how racially marginalized people are treated; they must negotiate through challenges that do not affect those who are racially classified as White. For this study, understanding how racism and negotiating through a White-dominated society affects these males enabled an interpretation of their life histories from a racialized lens. Second, in order to capture their life histories as Black gay males, I had to shed the colorblind ideology that permeates through the literature. Essentially, ignoring the racial experiences of the participants and analyzing their narratives as equal to White gay youth misses a key component of their identity formation and self-presentation. Third, the participants have multiple intersecting identities, their sexuality, gender, race, and socio-economic status. Therefore, their narratives were analyzed and interpreted from a perspective of identifying how these intersections have shaped their life histories and identities. Fourth, critical race theory argues that one’s experiential knowledge is valid and important for understanding these wider dynamics. Delgado (1989) reminds us that groups create their own stories, and often times these stories are a “counter-reality” to the dominant group’s story. In other words, the dominant groups

(in the case of this study White and heterosexual) tell a story that is viewed as a story shared by all groups, when in reality groups on the margins have very different experiences. Last, being attuned to the historical context of events is important when utilizing a critical race theoretical perspective. While this tenet applies to the realm of how “political, legal, and educational systems” operate (Taylor 2009), I evoked the historical tenet in this study as a way to position the participants’ narratives in a larger context. Accordingly, by juxtaposing their narratives and ways of identity formation against the national, local, and cultural climate, their narratives were analyzed in a comprehensive manner within a certain historical context.

Critical race theory also places racially marginalized peoples’ narratives in contrast to the dominant White discourse (Taylor, 2009). Thus, when reviewing and interpreting my participants’ life histories, I paid attention to the reality that racism informed how my participants negotiated and understood their identity in Atlanta, including how they navigated through and optimistically defied a racialized system, even when they attended majority Black schools. Therefore, any reading of the existing research literature must take into account what is not being said and who is being left out; much of it is grounded in a colorblind ideology, which erases race and looks at groups as equal instead of understanding that race has been (and continues to be) a factor in laws, policies, and attitudes, which have shaped society (Leonardo, 2009). In conjunction with understanding racism as normal in the United States, critical race theory also allows one to better understand the intersecting identities, which make up a person’s total identity (Crenshaw, 1995). For instance, groups cannot be looked at monolithically (e.g., all Black men) because within each group there are other intersecting identities (e.g., sexuality, class, gender identification, religion, etc.). In the case of sexual minority youth, it is not enough to make blanket statements that *all* sexual minority students benefit from joining in gay-straight

alliances at school and thus will be successful in school. This idea does not account for race, ethnicity, religion, or class, because in some cases one's race and ethnicity contributes to why some racially and ethnically marginalized sexual minority youth do not get involved yet they are still successful (McCready, 2010; Patton, 2011).

A critical race theoretical perspective provides a space to examine these intersecting forces. Black gay youth face intersecting identities because, taking from Crenshaw's explanation, Parker and Lynn (2009) explain "race does not exist outside of gender and gender does not exist outside of race" (p. 12). By adding sexuality where gender, sexuality, and race all do not exist outside of one another, I have been able to illuminate how these intersecting forces have influenced and impacted the participants' experiences. Cane (2012) explains that for him these intersecting identities are influential because being Black, gay, and a man are not synonymous and can cause confusion until one reaches a level of acceptance with these intersecting identities.

Cane recalls:

I remember walking through Harlem once when I saw a T-shirt...[it] read, "A real black man is a man who loves God. A real black man is a man who doesn't deal drugs. A real black man is a man who doesn't have sex with men." I was only twenty-one but already secure in my sexual identity at the time...I realized that engaging in homophobia in the black community equaled becoming a "real man." I rejected that equation. I am black. I am a man (p. 175).

In conclusion, by utilizing a critical race theoretical perspective, the intent was to provide a reading and analysis of the life histories from an emancipatory point of view. In other words, by interpreting, analyzing, and presenting the participants' life histories, I followed in the footsteps of critical race theory and in the "emancipatory hopes" that these life histories will begin to break down systems of marginalization built mostly by and for White heterosexual males (Taylor, 2009). I position their narratives in conjunction with the major tenets of critical race theory, which in turn allow for their life histories to challenge and penetrate the White

dominant discourse about the sexual minority community (Berubé, 2003; Han, 2007). Last, as I will explain in chapter 3, one of the purposes of narrative inquiry is to promote and bring forth social change (Chase, 2005), something I this study achieves.

### **Quare Theory**

While critical race theory targets race and other forms of oppression, and has bred subsets such as LatCrit, to examine the intersections of one's Latin@ identity (Huber, 2010), it is not explicit in its interrogation of sexual minority populations. In conjunction with critical race theory I employed a much lesser known but still valid theoretical perspective of quare studies. Johnson (2005) notes that quare studies "is a theory for gays and lesbians of color" (p. 127)<sup>2</sup>; therefore, when I refer to quare studies I am also referring to it as a theory to be used to understand the embodied lives of Black sexual minority male youth. In defining quare studies, I quote Johnson at length:

By refocusing our attention on the racialized bodies, experiences, and knowledges of transgendered people, lesbians, gays, and bisexuals of color, quare studies grounds the discursive process of mediated identification and subjectivity in a political praxis that speaks to the material existence of "colored" bodies. While strategically galvanized around identity, quare studies should be committed to interrogating claims that exclude rather than include. I am thinking here of black nationalist claims of "black authenticity" that exclude, categorically, homosexual identities. Blind allegiance to "isms" of any kind is one of the fears of queer theorists who critique identity politics. Cognizant of that risk, quare studies must not deploy a totalizing and/or homogenous formulation of identity, but rather a contingent, fragile coalition in the struggle against oppressive forms. (p. 136)

In other words, quare studies acknowledges the embodied existence of Black sexual minority people, unlike queer theory, and quare studies allows a space for Black sexual minorities within discussions of Blackness because "heterosexuality is no blacker than homosexuality" (Johnson, 2005, p. 144). For my purposes, it is important to understand the embodied existence of Black gay youth and how they are negotiating through school and society. Concurrently, these young

males' embodied lived experiences must be included in discussions of experiences of sexual minority youth and in discussions of Black males in schools because Black gay youths' experiences are influenced by myriad factors and they cannot be lumped into the same category as their heterosexual or White, Asian, Latino, and/or Indigenous sexual minority peers.

Another aspect of quare studies examines ideas of performance and takes from performance theory (Johnson, 2005). Quare studies pays attention to how one's performance, or presentation of self in this study, is contextual and influenced by social norms. Since this study sought to understand the lived experiences and life histories of Black gay youth, being attuned to how they are performing and presenting themselves within society defined by their multiple intersecting identities and by society's definitions placed up on them, was warranted. The intention of this study was to probe how self-presentation and performance occur across the numerous social institutions in which Black males are situated. Paying attention to how Black gay youths are performing and presenting themselves adds to an understanding of how they are constructing their identity and how events in their lives have influenced their presentations of self.

While both critical race theory and quare theory are similar, the difference is quare theory is concerned with juxtaposing itself against queer theory and the disembodied nature of queer theory (Johnson, 2005), where critical race theory is not. Coming out of queer theory, quare studies challenges queer theory and its lack of focus on race, while providing an opportunity to examine queerness within racialized communities (Johnson, 2005). Quare theory also adds the performance piece to understanding Black gay males. Therefore, quare theory is important because how Black gay youth are presenting themselves cannot be divorced from their lived experience. As they navigate through society and myriad institutions, how they are performing as

Black and gay are integral to their identity. Additionally, their presentation of self more than likely shifts over time, so paying attention to these shifts throughout their lives becomes beneficial. Greg, one of Johnson's (2008) participants, explains that while attending Morehouse in the 1970s, he was very aware of how he presented himself. For Greg, defying masculine stereotypes and being himself was key to his success at Morehouse:

My grandmother used to tell me this as a young child. You get more bees with honey than with vinegar. So I always used my good looks, my great speech abilities, the swing of my hips, and the command of my flamboyance and my "gayism" and all of that, as a calling card to be able to have all entrée, to be able to succeed as a novelty and to go through the hallowed halls of academia with success. And at Morehouse, it was that way. (p. 420)

Acknowledging how his self-presentation helped him succeed, Greg's experience highlights how one should consider these actions as thoughtful and conscious rather than unconscious acts. I now shift focus and review the literature regarding sexual minorities with a focus on the paucity of literature regarding Black gay males.

## **Literature Review**

The focus of this study is on Black gay youth, or young adults, aged 19-24. Therefore, I review the literature on educational experiences for sexual minority youth. Then I focus on Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth and how their experiences differ from their White LGBT peers. Next, I briefly describe the experiences of Black males in schools because there is a shared racial experience between sexual majority and minority Black males. I then briefly discuss the Christian Black Church and its relationship within the larger Black community while honing in on the relationship with its LGBT members. After that I go back to the narratives of sexual minority youth and I explore the roles of gay-straight alliances (GSAs) in schools and how they can be seen as spaces of exclusion for Black gays. Lastly, I examine

research on social media since I sought to understand the role social media plays in the participants' lives.

Before I continue let me define the terms *Black*, *Whiteness*, *racially marginalized*, and *sexual minority* as I use them throughout this dissertation. I use the term Black to refer to any person who identifies racially and ethnically as a part of the African diaspora. I hesitate to use the term African American because there are people in this category who are not American citizens and do not consider themselves American because of their citizenship status but identify as Black because of the racial category assigned to them in the United States or by self-referencing based on their nation of origin. At this point I want to define the term "Whiteness" because Black youth (of any sexual orientation and gender) are confronting a racist system where White is at the center (Leonardo, 2009; Omi & Winant, 1994). As Zeus Leonardo (2009) notes, the discourse of "Whiteness" is grounded in the belief that White is normal and universal where "the white race speak[s] for the human race" (p. 263).

The term racially marginalized refers to any racial group that has been historically, politically, and economically marginalized by the dominant White race (Omi & Winant, 1994). Since race is a colonizing socially constructed marker, I use it as a way to identify a population of people that have shared, albeit different, histories of marginalization (Omi & Winant, 1994; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008)

There are numerous terms to describe a person's sexuality; they include, gay, lesbian, homosexual, heterosexual, queer, and oftentimes the acronym LGBTQIA is used to encompass all people outside of the normative standards.<sup>3</sup> For now, I explain why I have chosen to use the terms gay and sexual minority. While gay is the accepted term used by many to describe males emotionally and physically attracted to other males, it can often be viewed as a White term even

though Black men use the moniker (Johnson, 2008; Mayer, Bradford, Makadon, Stall, Goldhammer, & Landers, 2008). Sexual minority is a term used more often in the literature to encompass the myriad gender and sexual identities one has, an identity which marginalizes them within the dominated heterosexual (sexual majority) society (Mayer et al., 2008). I use the terms sexual minorities to encompass the LGBTQIA community but gay in reference to my participants as they identify as gay. Queer is used as an umbrella term to define anyone whose gender identity and/or sexual identity are considered in opposition to heterosexuality and socially constructed definitions of gender (Jagose, 1996). Placing myself within these terms, I identify as a gay male and rarely use other terms to define myself; I belong to the group of people who find queer offensive and derogatory (Jagose, 1996). Lastly, in keeping with the researcher's intent, when citing works from other people I keep the term they use rather than changing it to fit my definition. This is important to acknowledge because I do not want to impose my definition onto one's work, which will alter the meaning of their work, as I would not want someone altering my terms to fit their definition, which would alter the meaning of my work.

### **Challenges Facing Sexual Minority Youth**

Sexual minority youth are a part of a society where constricting standards of heterosexuality, masculinity, and conforming to socially constructed gender roles are celebrated and are the norm (Carbado, 2005; Connell, 1992). Societal norms of sexuality can cause personal tensions on those who do not meet these expectations. Sexual minority youth face a society that tells them they do not fit the norms of sexuality as dictated by heterosexism. Due to these constricting standards, life for sexual minority youth in school is problematic and presents issues their sexual majority identified peers do not face. In a national climate survey of sexual minority youth and their experiences in school, Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, and Palmer (2012)



find that (a) 85% of the youth heard the term “gay” used negatively, (b) 71% heard homophobic language used in school with 57% hearing teachers using such language, (c) 64% experienced being unsafe, (d) 82% were bullied verbally, and (e) 38% were physically harassed (“pushed or shoved” p. xiv) with 18% being physically abused (“punched, kicked, injured with a weapon” p. xv). Within school, there is a psychological toll taken on sexual minority youth, whether they are “out” or not to school officials or friends. Kosciw et al. note 56% of sexual minority students who have lower rates of victimization state they have positive self-esteem, while 39% (those who are victimized based on their sexual orientation identification) and 35% (those who are victimized based on their gender expression) have higher levels of victimization and positive self-esteem.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the more the student is victimized due to their sexual identity and gender non-conforming status, the greater the rates of depression and low self-esteem.

There are several negative academic outcomes for sexual minority youth (Birkett, Espelage, & Koeing, 2009; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001). Kosciw et al. (2012) note the rate of skipping school or dropping out of school is higher for those who face any form of victimization; 29.8% skipped a class within the last month the survey was taken and 31.8% skipped a full day of school due to the hostile environment. Birkett, Espelage, & Keoing (2009) point out that several studies have found sexual minority students to have lower grade point averages than their sexual majority peers. They do note that when the school environment is supportive and positive the rates of negative effects decrease, so more must be done to create safe supportive environments for all students.

Another challenge facing sexual minority youth rests not only with their peers but also with their teachers and administrators (Lugg, 2003; Pascoe, 2007; Varajs et al., 2007). Sexual minority students report they have very little support from administrators when they alert them of

bullying or of unsafe environments (Kosciw et al., 2012; Lugg, 2003; Valenti, 2010). In the national school climate survey, 60% of the students do not alert faculty and staff of harassment at school (Kosciw et al., 2012). For 37.9% of the students, they doubted alerting school officials would result in any action being taken or that it would end in their favor. In fact, 36.7% of the students note the incident was ignored by faculty and staff. Others who uphold society's norms of sexuality and gender conformity thus place blame on the victim when they have done nothing wrong, but are bullied due to their sexual and/or gender identification.

Schools have become institutions that ignore the lived experiences and multiple intersecting identities of sexual minority youth while also denying “queer youth, and queer youth of color in particular, equal opportunity for a rewarding education in an environment that is safe and supportive of their various struggles for identity” (Grady, Marquez, & McLaren, 2012, p. 984).

A challenge sexual minority youth confront comes in the form of state and local policies around sex education. In many parts of the country, excluding the northeastern and western coastal states, state legislatures and boards of education have pushed through laws, which ban the “promotion of homosexuality” (Hoshall, 2013, p. 222) in schools. Hoshall (2013) examines seven states (Alabama, Arizona, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah) where laws have been enacted in which schools are not allowed to discuss homosexuality or if they do they refer to homosexuality as a lifestyle choice. Concomitantly, these states, as well as many others, promote abstinence-only sex education in which students are taught to wait until marriage to become sexually active and there is very little if any mention of homosexuality (Hoshall, 2013). For a majority of the country, marriage rights are beginning to be granted to same-sex couple, but court litigation has placed many of these on hold, thus total marriage equality has not

been extended to sexual minority couples. Therefore the youth in these states, where same-sex marriage is still illegal, are ignored because they cannot be legally married unless they leave their families and home and go to a state, which grants marriages licenses to sexual minority couples. Also, if and when sex between two males and two females is briefly discussed in abstinence-only lessons, often times it is connected to HIV transmission or is demeaned (Cianciotto & Cahill, 2003). Oftentimes sexual minorities are not discussed in these programs and as one of Fisher's (2009) participants notes "[i]t's like, well, you know, shit, if you aren't represented when they talk about *human* sexuality—you're not human. You can't be, because you're not included" (p. 71). For many sexual minority youth, they are ignored and made invisible because policies have been enacted to promote heterosexuality through refusing to address issues affecting the sexual minority community (Hoshall, 2013). Cris Mayo (2013) sums up how schools teach sexuality in "subtle and nuanced" ways by addressing how "[S]exuality, especially heterosexuality, is infused throughout lessons, subject areas, extracurricular activities, and general assumptions about school community" (p. 544), yet she explains that teachers must be better versed in sexuality and that "schools need a more robust sexuality education — one that cares for difference as it is currently understood and aims as well for what comes next (p. 558)."<sup>5</sup>

### **Research on Sexual Minority Racially Marginalized Youth**

Black male sexual minority adults and youth are oftentimes part of research studies that tie their sexuality to either HIV/AIDS, mental health, and/or grappling with homonegativity or homophobia within the larger Black community, as if homonegativity and homophobia are not within the White community (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Foster, Arnold, Rebochook, & Kegeles, 2011). The research connected to HIV/AIDS, while an important issue, reifies the notion that being a Black gay male means one must be at risk simply because of their racial categorization

without focusing on systemic issues that continue to place this population at risk. In one study that explored the “ball culture” within the Black male sexual minority community, a community that has been created as a support system in which “houses” and families are created, the study connects this support to how youth are using this system in the face of HIV/AIDS (Arnold & Bailey, 2009).<sup>6</sup> What I view as a positive step in representing the community again falls back into defining Black sexual minority males as a community facing this disease, as if the disease defines them. There is much more to the community than HIV/AIDS and presenting the community as little more than always fighting stigma and other Black men with the disease, always being on the lookout, does not explore how this community is thriving.

There is a paucity of research studies that focus solely on Black sexual minority youth and young adults (Blackburn, 2005; Gresham, 2009; McCready, 2010; Quinn, 2007). In my review of the literature, I came across many studies that did not focus on race and where the number of participants identified as a member of a racially marginalized group was very small (Daley, Solomon, Newman, & Mishma, 2008; Glover, Galliger, & Lamere, 2009; Lee, 2002; Pingle, Bauermeister, Johns, Eisenberg, & Leslie-Santana, 2013); in some of these studies 50% of the participants are White while 50% are “non-White” thus presenting the data as inclusive but by lumping all racial groups together ignores the differences between each group and the different experiences members of each racial and ethnic group face against the White dominated society. My review of the literature supports the findings by Huang et al. (2009). Huang et al. conducted a “content analysis of the past decade (1998-2007) of psychological scholarship about lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people of color” (p. 363). What they found is a scarcity of research focused specifically on individual racial groups and if studies did focus on an individual racial group that group was compared to another racially marginalized group. For example, when

researchers examined Black LGB people, this group was compared to another racial group without focusing solely on their individual racial and sexuality identity and experiences; this is something my study has done, focused on Black gay males. Last, within each racial group are varying ethnic and national identities which intersect to form a person's identity. If a first generation immigrant from Cameroon is asked to participate and can only choose a racial identity, his experience as a Cameroonian is being grouped with that of Black people born and raised in the United States whose upbringing, culture, and experiences differ from his Cameroonian experiences. Thus, the point is that just because one is classified, as a part of a specific racial category here in the United States, does not mean they have the same cultural background as others in the same racial category, which affects how one understands their sexuality.

There have been several theories of sexual identity formation for sexual minority people (Rosenfeld, 2009). What these theories neglect to take into account is how sexual identity formation is shaped by one's racial identity formation. Black sexual minority youth must learn their racial identity within the racialized system of the United States as well as understanding their sexual identity within this heteronormative society. White sexual minority youth only need to attend to their sexual identity and do not have to worry about racial identity formation. Therefore, understanding sexual identity formation within a mostly White group of youth ignores how a racial identity also factors into one's sexual identity formation in a White dominated society (Parks, 2008). Also, when a racially marginalized person begins to explore their sexual identity, often times they are faced with forming this identity when being a sexual minority is viewed as a White issue (Han, 2007; Kumashiro, 2001; Parks, 2008). Dube & Savin-Williams (1999) note that for racially and ethnically marginalized gay and bisexual men, there is a

difference in the “developmental trajectory through which they established their sexual identity, the extent to which they disclosed this identity, and the rates at which they became involved in heterosexual relationships” (p. 1395). For example, they found differences between different racial and ethnic groups as to when, at what ages, these men entered into same-sex sexual relationships and a difference in when they disclosed their homosexual identity to their family members.

Hill (2009) asserts that for racially marginalized youth who live in environments where hip-hop and rap music is celebrated, many sexual minority youth are confronted with homophobia and heterosexism through the song’s lyrics.<sup>7</sup> Interacting with peers and family members who listen to these songs provides another reason why many feel they cannot express their sexual minority identity to those with whom they have close relationships. Also, if these young sexual minority youth listen carefully to the homophobic and heterosexist words then they may begin to think negatively about their same-sex or bisexual identification. I must also note here that hip-hop is not the only genre with these types of lyrics; country music has a history of upholding heteronormative values or being homonegative (Armstrong, 1986).

Claiming that all sexual minority males have the same trajectory of sexual identity development or that the issues affecting sexual minority youth are similar simply because of their sexual identity or gender nonconformity, ignores the racial and ethnic influences on their sexual identity development. Many sexual minority youth face similar obstacles in society based on their sexuality or gender nonconformity, but Black sexual minority youth face different sets of obstacles than their White peers.

For Black sexual minority youth, forming a racial identity consists of relying on family members and peers (Cardabo, 2005; Jamil, Harper, Fernandez, & Adolescent Trials Network for

HIV/AIDS Prevention, 2009). In order to understand being Black and negotiating through society as a Black person, Black sexual minority youth, as well as sexual majority Black youth, have other Black people who can give them racial advice since this is their unifying thread. Conversely, when understanding their sexual identity, Black sexual minority youth do not always rely on family members or their peers to provide advice because many of these people have not had to question their sexuality (Johnson, 2008); being heterosexual is “normal” so one does not need to question sexual desires and emotions they may have toward opposite-sexed people, which society deems abnormal (Cardabo, 2005). Studies show Black sexual minority male youth turn to the Internet and/or community-based organizations to get a better understanding of their sexuality (Harper, Serrano, & Jamil, 2009; Jamil et al., 2009).

A question White sexual minority people do not have to answer is, “what do you identify with first, your race or sexuality?” Since Whiteness is normalized and the community of sexual minorities is seen as largely White, then race becomes a non-factor (Han, 2007). However, for Black sexual minority peoples this question gets asked (M. A. Hunter, 2010; Meyer & Ouelette, 2009) and this adds another layer to their identification. The question is problematic because it demonstrates the idea that one must fit into either their racial community or into the community of sexual minorities because they must choose one or the other, which can cause them stress (Meyer & Ouelette, 2009). Yet, it is an important piece to examine because it affects Black sexual minority youth. These identities should not, and cannot, be divorced from one another; these multiple intersecting identities must be front and center when discussing the lives and experiences of Black sexual minority youth so as not to ignore the influences of each identity on the person.<sup>8</sup>

Marcus Anthony Hunter (2010) asked gay men to define themselves based on race and sexuality. He found there are three different ways his participants identify: (a) interlocking identities (24%), (b) up down identities (50%), and (c) public-private identities (26%). With interlocking identities these males cannot place one identity over the other since who they are is both Black *and* gay. For those who identify as having up down identities, in which almost all place their Black identity first and their gay identity second, many note this is because society sees them first as Black. Those who identified as public-private see how they identify as a question of space, where they are and with whom they are around. As one of Hunter's participants adds:

I am Black first and always. That's what people see, and that's what I deal with. The gay thing is something else. It's not that I locate it elsewhere, or don't identify with it. But I choose Black first. Gay is an action, and Black is a way of life. When I go out, even when it's to something gay, people still see me as a Black man. What I'm saying is, Black is always there, gay is when you're out on a date or out there. When people are put in jail for no reason, beat on by police, or can't get a job, it's for being Black. (p. 87)

Yet, conversely, another participant explains that he is gay first and then Black; "We don't get anywhere because some dudes can't admit that they are gay...that they like men...so I see myself as pushing that when I tell people that I think of myself as gay before Black" (p. 88). The point I raise here is to illustrate that many times Black gay men feel forced to choose one identity over the other or how they wish to be defined first and then second, as if these identities are not interlocking. These quotes reflect the challenges many Black gay males face in a racist and heterosexist society.

This identity process, and choosing how one presents oneself, demonstrates how racism (or Whiteness) and heteronormativity function as social structures which influence how sexual minority people must live; they must choose to privilege a racial or sexual identity over the other and they must choose some category in which to place themselves based off of sexual majority



social norms (e.g., in a relationship there must be gendered roles, one must be the “man” or husband while the other must be the “woman” or wife).

## **Masculinity**

While hegemonic masculinity affects all males, especially sexual minority males (Connell, 1992), Black sexual minority youth face a community tied strongly to ideas of masculinity, which is an offshoot of being denigrated in a White dominated society (Hill Collins, 2005). Due to ideas of Black masculinity, often times the Black community can be read as more homophobic than the White community, but this is not always the case (Boykin, 1996; Johnson, 2008; Stone & Ward, 2011). Some of Johnson’s (2008) Black gay participants explain that their sexuality, while at first a shock for some in their Black community, has been accepted and is a non-issue for their sexual majority peers and family members. However, for some Black gay males not being able to meet the expectations set for them to become strong Black males with families and a wife can be difficult (Johnson, 2008). Since another aspect of Whiteness is to emasculate Black men (Hill Collins, 2005), this trickles down and affects Black gay males.

While masculinity is often viewed as being something one must possess to be considered a man in society, Hunter and Davis (1992) argue there are four realms of manhood for Black men: (a) self-determinism and accountability, (b) family, (c) pride, and (d) spirituality and humanism. Effectively, they posit that these categories differ from theories that view the experiences of all men monolithically.<sup>9</sup> According to Hunter and Davis, for Black men they interviewed being accountable for their actions was crucial to their identity as a man. Also, their participants note that as a man they must be concerned for their family’s well-being and that their role is to provide for their families. Having pride in one’s decisions and in ways to better himself in the face of a racist society, is key for Black males to define their manhood for themselves.

Last, Hunter and Davis note that the idea a man is spiritual is connected to “Afrocentric philosophies.” Conjointly, through this spirituality the men understand manhood as a collective “we,” in that a man respects women and other men, instead of thinking of a man in individual terms. These ideas of Black masculinity ignore how masculinity is viewed and created by Black gay males.

Following in the tradition of critical race theory and the use of counterstories, I now turn to the literature on Black males and the narratives of Black sexual minority youth to get a better understanding of their lives and issues they face within and outside of school.

### **Black Males in the United States**

Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant, Mike Brown, and Jordan Davis are young males whose names represent the racialized and dangerous climate many Black males face in the United States. Conversely, the names Brandon Frame, Reggie Shuford, and Chase Adams may not come to mind and are not known outside of their respected circles. These are Black males who are influencing society with their work, something Trayvon, Oscar, Mike, and Jordan were denied. These males interrupt and counter the narrative that Black males are “in crisis” (Brown, 2011). How does the literature portray Black males and what literature is written about their experiences in school and society? For my purposes, I largely focus on the educational climate for Black males in the United States.

In a review of how Black males have been presented throughout the social sciences and education literature, Brown (2011) argues since the 1930s there have been “four recursive conceptual narratives—absent and wandering, impotent and powerless, soulful and adaptive, and endangered and in crisis” (p. 2048). These narratives have influenced how educators and society view Black males, while continuing to stigmatize Black males and not taking into account the

“continuities and discontinuities” such as class and sexuality (Brown, 2011). The purpose of my study is to honor the call made by Brown in which he asks that researchers explore “the complex and diverse ways that Black males’ material realities and identities are differently constrained across varied class, sexual, and regional lines” (p. 2073). Brown also notes that through Black males’ narratives there will be a shift in how educators and social scientists view them. Thus, from this study a much broader picture of Black males has been created while moving away from a monolithic view that portrays them as, in the current period, helpless and “in crisis.”

Within the literature about Black males in schools, much has been written about their “shortcomings and deficiencies” without a holistic picture of Black males that shifts away from a deficit-ideology (Howard, 2013). Howard’s (2013) extensive review of the literature in the past twelve years on Black males in school reveals the paucity of scholarship focused on Black males. He suggests that research and scholarship must continue to move toward presenting Black male narratives and counterstories to push against the deficit-ideology. When presenting the Black male’s counterstory, Howard argues it must be done by researchers whose theoretical perspectives do not position Black males more as failing and/or struggling in schools. It must be noted as well that too often young males, and Black children in general, are presented as living in urban impoverished areas where they are in jail. Yet most Black males are not in jail and many have various levels of academic achievement (Howard, 2013), which needs to be taken into account. In my study the intent was to illustrate how Black gay males have been productively navigating through life. Therefore, I wanted to know what factors and experiences in their life have brought them to this point and what can be learned and tapped into from their experiences to assist others in similar situations.

Black male academic achievement is often viewed from an individual achievement perspective without focusing on social and historical factors that continue to widen the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). For instance, Howard (2013) points out that for math scores in grades 4-8, Black males who are not eligible for free and reduced lunch have lower math scores than White males receiving free or reduced lunch. This does not mean Black males are less intelligent than White males. A critical race theoretical perspective points to the endemic nature of racism in the United States as a factor in accounting for the gap in scores; education policies, teachers' preconceived perceptions of, and a disinvestment in Black males contribute to this gap (Howard, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Howard (2013) notes that Black males make up roughly 7% of the school population in the United States, yet they make up a vast majority of school suspensions (see also Losen & Skiba, 2010). For example, Losen and Gillespe (2012) point out that since the 1970s the increase in school suspensions for all students has increased but the increase has been greatest for Black students. They explain

In the 1970s Black students had a suspension rate of about 6% - twice the likelihood of suspension as White students (about 3%). With the advent of zero tolerance, Black children experienced a 9-point increase in suspension rates, from 6% in 1973 to 15% in 2006. Meanwhile the White suspension rate also grew, but gained less than 2 percentage points. The Black/White gap has grown from 3 percentage points in the '70s to over 10 percentage points in the 2000s. Blacks are now over three times more likely than Whites to be suspended. (pp. 2-3)

Ferguson (2001) points out the suspension rates are not due to the fact that Black males are more violent and/or aggressive, but rather that teachers have preconceived notions about Black males and thus these males are at a disadvantage the minute they step into the schoolhouse. Ferguson also points to school policies that negatively impact Black youth. Additionally, educational and individual school policies, such as Zero Tolerance, unfairly target Black and Latino students,

especially males (Giroux, 2006). Due to the public perceptions of Black males as deviant, teachers and policy makers have created a system where:

the punitive and overzealous tools and approaches of the modern criminal justice system have seeped into our schools, serving to remove children from mainstream educational environments and funnel them onto a one-way path toward prison. These various policies, collectively referred to as the School-to-Prison Pipeline, push children out of school and hasten their entry into the juvenile, and eventually the criminal, justice system, where prison is the end of the road. (NAACP Legal Defense Fund, 2005, n.p.)

This line of thinking most likely does not take into account racist structural and institutional policies that have created the pipeline, because, as Charles Lawrence argues, laws [or policies] cannot and are not written from a racially neutral frame of reference (as cited in Bell, 2009, p. 42). Indeed, “nihilation (e.g., total abjection) of Blackness is inherent in the U.S./Western cultural model of what it means to be human/civilized/worthy of life” (King, 2011, p. 351) and has created an educational system that has dehumanized Black students through miseducation and misunderstanding of the Black experience. In order to create transformative education, we must pay attention to and refute the devaluation of Blackness in schools and society, thus creating greater academic opportunities for not just Black males but for all students. If this does not occur then Black males will continue to be ignored and dehumanized, but once educators and policymakers are humanistic in their approach (Freire, 2000) to these males and their experiences are known and understood, then they will more likely than not succeed in greater numbers in schools.

In spite of these barriers, there are Black males who are succeeding in schools and learning how to navigate through a system that has disinvested in them and miseducated them through either a devaluation of or an ignoring of their culture (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Graham and Anderson (2008) set out to understand how gifted African American males at a predominately African American high school in an urban city succeed while they are traversing

between their ethnic and academic identities. They focused on three males in a high school deemed by the community to be very good at preparing its students, although it was one of 19 schools found to be so low-performing that a judge recommended the school be shut down. It is within this context that the researchers examined what made these young men succeed academically while embracing their racial and ethnic identity. Through interviewing the young males and others in their lives, the researchers concluded they succeeded academically while holding onto their racial and ethnic identity. The young males: (a) take school seriously, (b) have a strong sense of their heritage, and (c) have support from their parents or other adults who expect success. For these males failure is not an option, and they hold on tight to their Black identity instead of giving in and conforming to negative notions of Blackness. These young males see their Black identity as an asset and understand they are capable of much more than the dominant society has made them out to be.

Currently, the Obama administration has begun to tackle the problems affecting Black males. First, in January of 2014 the offices of Justice and Education issued guidelines for disciplinary actions in school that do not discriminate based on “race, color, or national origin” (Lhamon & Samuels, 2014, n.p.). Second, in February of 2014, President Obama launched the first federal initiative to reach and provide support and opportunities for “young men of color” (“My Brother’s Keeper,” 2014). This is an effort to work with community leaders, philanthropies, and businesses designed to improve educational experiences, thus helping boys successfully navigate through the system. As I was speaking with Dr. Nikki Giovanni last year, we were discussing the problems with My Brother’s Keeper. We both agree the problem is that it lacks a dismantling of laws that disproportionately affect Black males. I believe it is a step in the right direction bringing Black males’ lives to the forefront of the national dialogue, but what

good does it do if the structures of oppression are still in place? Through my research, I aimed to not only bring their narratives to forefront but anticipated these narratives will challenge dominant monolithic ideas about Black gay youth. I now turn to an institution that has a long history for many Black people, the Black Church, and the relationship of the Church to Black sexual minorities.

### **The Black Church**

It is thus clear that the study of Negro religion is not only a vital part of the history of the Negro in America, but no uninteresting part of American history. The Negro church of today is the social centre of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of African character. (DuBois, 2003, p. 137)

As noted by DuBois (2003), religion, particularly Christianity, has for centuries played a large part in the lives of many Black people in the United States. His assessment is echoed by others who study religion and Blacks in the United States of America (Douglas & Hopson, 2011; West & Glaude, 2003). In 2009, the Pew Research Center (2009) found that 87% of Blacks polled stated they belonged to “a formal religious affiliation” with 83% of those polled belonging to the Christian faith. Due to the large number of Black people in the United States who identify as Christian, the focus in this section is not meant to diminish or ignore other religions but to briefly explore Christianity in the Black community and how it has and continues to deal with sexual minorities.

Historically the Black Church has been a “social institution that remains virtually free from white control” (Douglas & Hopson, 2001, p. 98). Even though Christianity was the religion of masters, enslaved peoples formed their own version of Christianity and they created an institution free of White control to meet their needs. In doing so, the institution brought rise to two sets of values: core and contingent (Douglas & Hopson, 2001). According to Douglas and Hopson (2001), core values arose from “an African worldview that equated balance and harmony

with god...a harmony of relationships” (p. 100) while contingent values “emerge in response to particular social and historical circumstance” (p. 101). These sets of values continue to inform how the Black Church functions and treats issues affecting the community and society as a whole.

In relation to views on homosexuality, recent polls note that Christian Black people have a negative view of homosexuality and same-sex marriage (Pew Research Center, 2014). While the exact reasons for this may never be known, one reason often mentioned is that many Black Christians view homosexuality as another form of the breakdown of or threat to the Black family (Douglas & Hopson, 2001; Ward, 2005). Those findings echo some qualitative studies that found that while not all participants viewed their churches to be homonegative, many participants note that preachers and the congregation often speak negatively of homosexuality (Barnes, 2013; Pitt, 2010; Wilson, Wittlin, Muñoz-Laboy, & Parker, 2011). In Pitt’s (2010) study of Black gay males in the church, his participants did not blame Christianity for the homonegative content of the sermons or the actions of the church, but rather the blame was placed on the “messenger,” their preachers. Unfortunately, this paints a broad picture as if all Black preachers and congregants in the Christian religion are homonegative, which is untrue and would be a reckless claim to make. This is a claim Boykin (1996) challenges in the hopes of moving away from pitting Blacks and Whites against one another, as if one group is more homonegative than another since both groups have tolerant and non-tolerant members. Barnes’ (2013) interviews with Black clergy found that many may be opposed to the act of homosexuality or the homosexual “lifestyle,” but they readily admit their churches have gay men and lesbians in their ranks even if they disagree with their homosexual “lifestyle” and believe these members are not adhering to the word of God; they view gays and lesbians as integral to the church. Additionally, to understand the complex



relationship between the Black church and the LGBT community, Wilson, Wittlin, Muñoz-Laboy, and Parker (2011) looked at several Black churches in New York City and their efforts to meet the health needs of Black gay males, focusing specifically on HIV. Even though the leaders of some of these churches may hold homonegative attitudes, one theme that emerged of why their churches have been tackling this issue is because they heed the word of God: “your body is a temple.” Thus, taking care of oneself is something God has decreed, regardless of sexual orientation, and the church must continue the work of God.

The Black Christian church continues to have an influence on the lives of many Black people in the United States and this influence in turn shapes how its congregants view and interact with sexual minorities. Since the Black church has been and continues to be an institution on the frontlines of fighting issues of social justice, the Black church can be the place where social change and acceptance of sexual minorities begins (Barnes, 2013; Douglas & Hopson, 2001).

It is important to examine the complicated relationship between the Black church in metro-Atlanta and the sexual minority community. From the beginning, Jackson and Patterson (1989) note that the “black churches in Atlanta originated from a need to establish a spiritual base in a local community... histories of black churches in Atlanta is one of emphasis on service to the community” (p. 50). This idea of service and meeting the needs of the community echoes the larger history of how the church originated. However, this mission to attend to the needs of the community is where the contradictions of the church in metro-Atlanta and its relationship with the sexual minority community can be understood. The contradictions are rooted in the fact that the church’s history has been to advance causes of social justice for the Black community yet at the same time the many churches and congregants have become unaccepting of the sexual

minority community. Additionally, Atlanta is home to several Black “mega-churches” which serve a much greater population to meet the social and spiritual needs of the Black community while embracing and advancing a strong Black religious identity (Chaney, 2013).

Whether churches are traditional, mega, or “storefront,” churches set-up in small buildings in urban communities (Dash & Rasor, 2002), there is a commitment to meet the needs of their members and surrounding communities. However, not all churches’ missions view meeting the needs of the community the same, especially in regards to sexual minority congregants. Delving deeper into this complex relationship, one need not look further than Bishop Eddie Long of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, Georgia, roughly 20 minutes east of downtown Atlanta. As of 2007 New Birth had a membership of over 25,000 (Mock, 2007). Mock (2007) Southern Poverty Law Center, describes Bishop Long as “one of the most virulently homophobic black leaders in the religiously based anti-gay movement” (p. 61). While being “virulently homophobic,” in 2010 Bishop Long was embroiled in controversy where four young males filed lawsuits and accused Bishop Long of sexual misconduct. Long vehemently denied these accusations but took a leave of absence from New Birth before finally settling out of court with the accusers (Lenz, 2011; Simpson, 2011). These accusations demonstrate the hypocrisy of not only Bishop Long but of New Birth, since Long often preaches against homosexuality (Lenz, 2010; Mock, 2007) and the congregation as a whole has not protested. Thus, New Birth is not fulfilling the historic role of the Black church and is denigrating and dehumanizing its sexual minority members. Also, because of the massive reach of New Birth, with a congregation larger than many towns, and many churches like New Birth, it is important to understand that for the participants in the study, their interactions with others, I speculate, could be influenced by anti-gay the teachings of such a church. However, not all Black

Churches in metro-Atlanta preach anti-gay rhetoric or are non-inclusive (Jarvie, 2006a; “Stone Mountain Church Gets Backlash, 2012); in fact there are even some Black LGBT Churches (Kelley, 2012).

Unity Fellowship Church (2015) was founded in Los Angeles by the openly gay Reverend Carl Bean and has since opened a church in Atlanta as is Vision Church of Atlanta, which is located in the Grant Park neighborhood of Atlanta. Victory Church’s pastor, O.C. Allen, is openly gay and has a partner who is considered the First Gentleman of the church (Kelley, 2012). The Vision Church, with 3,000 members, is clear in its beliefs and teachings of Christianity when it comes to the LGBT community. The church’s website notes:

we embrace the teachings of Jesus Christ as our moral and ethical gauge. Jesus makes no mention in any of the 4 gospel accounts about the immorality or spiritual depravity of women, gays, lesbians, transgendered individuals or any marginalized group. (2012, n.d.)

While a church with an openly gay pastor that is open and accepting of the LGBT community may be viewed as an aberration, there are several churches in Atlanta that have majority non-LGBT members but whose pastors have taken it upon themselves to support the rights of the sexual minority community (“Stone Mountain Church Gets Backlash,” 2012). Pastor Samuel of Victory of the World Church publically supported President Obama’s stance on marriage equality and because of that his church lost one thousand of its five thousand members. Also, Reverend Timothy McDonald, III of First Iconium Baptist used to preach against homosexuality until a member inflicted with AIDS spoke with him; at that point McDonald shifted his views and began working with the sexual minority community and speaking in the pulpit on their behalf (Jarvie, 2006a). Thus, within metro-Atlanta one can find churches such as New Birth that preach against the sexual minority community and are dehumanizing some of their members,

while there are other churches that are embracing the sexual minority community and are fulfilling the mission of social justice of the Black church.

Closing out this section, it is important to note that in 1989 Johnson and Patterson, in writing about the history of Black church in Atlanta, envisioned

These churches may accept the relative security of the current status quo approach, but it is likely that within the next few years political and social events will again necessitate that black churches in general return with vigor to the nonsectarian arena as the vocal champions of social justice. (p. 51)

Twenty-five years later several churches in the region are doing just what Johnson and Patterson imagined. However, this is not particular to Atlanta. In 2006, a group of Black clergy from around the country met in Atlanta at the Black Church Summit to combat the anti-gay attitude and teachings of the Black church with Reverend Al Sharpton giving a keynote address (Jarvie, 2006a). While homonegativity is often associated with the Black Church (and other churches more generally), there are those working to shift the Church away from homonegativity to one of inclusiveness and acceptance, bringing the church back to its roots of advancing social justice and engaging with all community members.

### **Sexual Minority Youths' Narratives**

Literature focusing on Black sexual minority youth is not new (Blackburn, 2005; Boykin, 1996/2012; McCready, 2010; Patton, 2011; Quinn, 2007; Vaught, 2004) but without an actual figure, the number of studies I have come across has been small in comparison to those studies that focus on all sexual minority youth. In many of the aforementioned studies, when there is a mixed pool of participants, the White voices get privileged. For example, in the 2011 National Climate Survey, out of the 8,584 students surveyed, 68% identified as White and 3.7% identified as African American. Also, in the Birkett, Espelege, and Koeing (2009) study of the effects of homophobic bully, 73% of the respondents identified as White and 7% identified as Black. Here

I want to focus on those studies, which have placed Black sexual minority males at the center. My purpose is to not only show there is research out there regarding racially and ethnically marginalized sexual minority youth but also to illuminate issues found in these studies which can oftentimes be overlooked from a colorblind perspective. Kevin Kumashiro (2002) notes the importance of bringing these narratives to light because one must “complicate a person’s “frame of thinking” (p. 8) or what one presumably knows to be true, their frame of reference. In other words, through understanding the issues facing Black gay males, the intent is that one can interrupt a monolithic view of them and move away from viewing them as only sexual beings or as living in a Black homonegative community.

One thing that comes up in the literature focusing on Black sexual minority youth is the fact that they have either issues affecting them based on their multiple identities or they have created a sense of self and community based on these multiple intersecting identities (Blackburn, 2005; McCready, 2010). For instance, Blackburn’s (2005) work at a queer youth community center draws attention to the language created and used by the mostly Black LGBTQ youth. These youth use what is coined “Gaybonics” as a way to communicate and be recognized within the Black LGBTQ community but also “used [it] to avoid being understood by those outside of the community” (Blackburn, 2005, p. 91). Due to the effect of Whiteness and White cultural norms being placed at the center of the national discourse about sexual minority peoples, the understanding and celebration of Gaybonics can get lost in the analysis and even in the initial questions asked by a White researcher; these youth are using Gaybobnics to create community and distinguish themselves from their White sexual minority peers. Lumping sexual minority youth in one category with one shared history and way of being, ignores differences, such as

language, as a way to form identity and present oneself in opposition to the larger White sexual minority community.

In the case of McCready's (2010) Black gay male participants, being openly gay allows them to "make space" in their school. In one instance his participant David finds the school's gay-straight alliance filled with White lesbians and their heterosexual friends. Since this space does not allow for issues important to him, such as tackling racism in the LGBT community, he decides to form his own group. Another individual, Kevin, embraces his sexuality and pushes the socially constructed boundaries of gender. Both of these young men confront constricting social norms affecting their lives and challenge these norms. By presenting their stories of resistance, McCready demonstrates that Black gay males do exist and are not bowing down to pressures they may face from the different communities with which they identify and are situated.

Jamil et al. (2009) point out how important the Internet has become for racially and ethnically marginalized GBQ youth. While I do not mean to suggest the Internet is not as important to White sexual minority youth, these communities differ in why they are using the Internet, which should be noted. The Internet provides a way for Black gay males to virtually connect to those they may not see within their community (e.g. other Black gays) to understand and negotiate their intersecting identities. For Cameron, a participant in their study, the threat of being attacked as an openly Black gay person was real. He explains, "[T]hey'd judge like, wow, damn, he's gay and, and some people probably want to fight. That's for serious. Some people want to fight, because that's what people—that's [what] homophobic [people do]" (p. 209). Going online provides a safer space and experience for Cameron. Also, when Black GBQ youth are chatting with other Black sexual minority male youth or adults they share an understanding of how race influences their lives; this is something White youth do not have to discuss with

their White peers while exploring and understanding their sexuality. One of their participants, Malcolm, a 19-year-old Black gay male, sums up why Black youth engage online:

Helpful and supportive? Um, well, at 14, when I came out, um, I would say Internet discussion boards, like forums and chat rooms, just hearing other people's experiences and stuff like that. And reading what they had to say um, really helped me. Um, to I don't know, come into acceptance....Just like seeing their stories and like giving me advice and stuff. What to do and safety tips and stuff like that. (p. 208)

Gresham's (2009) study is the first of its kind to examine how Black gay men "negotiate the relationship between cultures in the university environment" (p. 525). In his analysis, Gresham reveals his participants as men who use different strategies to successfully navigate through their undergraduate years. Strategies included creating a positive support system to counter the negativity they encounter, and employing a chameleon-like mechanism where they manage their identity to fit the environment in which they are situated. Due to the success of these men illuminated through his study, Gresham is one of the few (alongside Boykin, 2012, Johnson, 2008, and McCready, 2010) to move away from viewing his participants from a deficit perspective. It is in this vein that I situate my study, by not looking at what is wrong with Black gay youth but rather exploring their life histories and the factors that enable the ability to negotiate intersecting racial and sexual identities.

As one of Vaught's (2004) Black gay male participants, Jamarcus, reminds us he is heavily influenced not only by his sexuality but also by his race. Without hearing Jamarcus' voice educators and those who work with and study Black sexual minority youth will not fully understand how painful and conflicted life can be for some:

Jamarcus put his head in his hand and sobbed. "I've never wanted anything *so bad*." Anything was to a join a fraternity, meet a young woman, marry, have kids, have a career, and be respected. His sobs subsided and he shook his head, shaking off an emotion, shaking off a memory. "I hate it Ms. Vaught. I really hate it."

Then he turned and looked me straight in the eyes. He was up that morning at 3 a.m., grieving in the shower, trying to wash away the

dirtiness of himself, trying to rid himself of the sex he'd had impulsively earlier that night, the desire he did not want to have. He had stood in the shower, wracked by pain, and wanted to die.

“I hate it.” (p. 23)

The pressure from the heteronormative culture is too much and understanding that he grapples not only with the pressures of being gay but also the pressures placed on him by his racial community, which is a huge burden. To assist youth who are sexual minority, schools have begun to set up programs to meet their needs. The most prominent program is the gay-straight alliance (GSA).

### **Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs)<sup>10</sup>**

In order to mediate the negative experiences faced by sexual minority youth in school, gay-straight alliances (GSAs) have been formed, but oftentimes they lack diversity and do not address issues of racism within the sexual minority community (McCready, 2010; Wooley, 2012). Before the discussion of GSAs begins it is important to note there is no specific outline of how these clubs should be structured. With over 4,000 active clubs in U.S.' middle and high schools, all of these clubs function differently yet have the same core mission to support sexual minority students and their allies (Allen, Hammack, & Himes, 2012; Mayberry, 2013; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009).<sup>11</sup> The original GSAs were founded at two preparatory schools in Massachusetts in 1989 (Herdt, Russell, Sweat, & Marzullo, 2007; Miceli, 2005) and were focused on being political and changing the social conditions of their schools as the visibility of sexual minority peoples was increasing in the country due to the work of national LGBT organizations (Miceli, 2005). Currently, many GSAs are “orienting their mission toward the disruption of heteronormalizing institutions that exclude and stigmatize non-heterosexual identities” (Mayberry, 2013, p. 36) and providing spaces for some students to either “critique normative sexuality...[or] critique normative gender” (Mayo, 2004, p. 28). In other words, these



clubs function as places where sexual minority youth and their allies not only socialize and embrace their identities and how they present themselves, but the clubs are moving in the direction of greater social activism.

Gay-straight alliances have not always been received as beneficial additions to a school (Lee, 2001; Lugg, 2003). Due to the passage of the Equal Access Act (EAA) in 1984, schools, which have tried for years to deny GSAs from forming, quickly realized they are violating the EAA. Some had gone as far as to disband all school clubs (Lee, 2001; Lugg, 2003). While there has been resistance to GSAs in several places, Massachusetts took action in support of lesbian and gay students in 1993 (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004; Miceli, 2005). The Massachusetts Department of Education implemented the Safe School Program, which provides “support and resources to high schools...designed to make schools safe places for lesbian and gay students” (Griffin et al., 2004, p. 10).<sup>12</sup>

Several researchers note the benefit of having a GSA (Griffin et al., 2004; Lee, 2001; Mayberry, 2013; Russell et al., 2009). Such benefits include safer environments for sexual minority youth with lower rates of victimization and suicide, youth less likely to hear homophobic language, and sexual minority students more likely to stay in school and not skip class (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2013; Walls, Kane, & Wiseski, 2010). This is encouraging, yet in the 2011 National Climate Survey, of the roughly 8,500 participants from around the country, only 45.7 percent of the students note they have GSAs at their school (Kosciw et al., 2012).

Due to the issues facing sexual minority youth in schools, several organizations, all founded in the last 25 years, have stepped in to assist in bringing GSAs to more schools or by providing training to teachers to provide safe spaces within schools for sexual minority youth.

The largest organization known for their work with GSAs is the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN), which provides support and training to schools all around the country and connects GSAs with one another (Miceli, 2005). Like GLSEN, the Safe Schools Coalition (SSC) focuses on teacher training and ways to create safe spaces for sexual minority youth. What began as a commission to look at LGBTQ youth in Seattle, the Safe Schools Coalition has now turned into a nationwide organization geared more for teacher training but, while not their focus, does provide some support for GSAs (Miceli, 2005). Last, the only organization with a mission geared specifically for increasing the number of GSAs is the Gay Straight Alliance Network (GSAN) (Miceli, 2005). This group, based in California, not only pushes for more GSAs in California, but also aims to create youth leaders and to reach across coalitions and work with students of “different classes, races, and ethnicities” (Miceli 2005, p. 35). While there has been a strong push to open GSAs in middle and high schools, does this mean that GSAs are for everyone or for every school?

### **Gay-Straight Alliances are Not for Every LGBTQ Student**

The benefits of having a GSA are hard to refute, however even in schools with a GSA not all sexual minority students feel welcome nor does every sexual minority student believe they need to be an active member.<sup>13</sup> In McCready’s (2010) study of four Black gay males, none of them attended the GSA and when one did attend he felt like it was “tea time for a few [white] lesbians and their friends” (p. 41). For this young man there was nobody in the GSA who could identify with the racial and sexual dynamics he faces. As the young man goes on to explain, race is not even mentioned in the very few meetings he attends. In another example of the lack of racially marginalized students in GSAs, Woolley’s (2011) three-year ethnographic study of a GSA finds the group to consist mainly of White students when only 30% of the school enrolls

White students.<sup>14</sup> For GSAs, in the studies I have found, White participants represent more than half of the sample (Griffin et al., 2004; Heck et al., 2013; Mayberry, 2013; Russell et al., 2009; Walls et al., 2010). This is problematic because none of the studies question why there is a low number of racially marginalized participants, thus ignoring how racialized GSAs have become or ignoring how certain communities do not like the visibility GSAs provide and therefore they do not join (Patton, 2011). Through my study, I gained understanding of how Black gay males have worked through issues not addressed by many GSAs and why they did not participate in or start GSAs in their schools.

Patton's (2011) study found that Black sexual minority males in college do not feel the fight for sexual minority rights is central to their activism. Interviewing Black gay college students at a HBCU, Patton found her participants did not want to join a GSA because they did not want people to know of their sexuality and felt their sexual identity is a private matter. One of Patton's participants explains that joining a GSA on campus and being known as gay is "just not that deep to me" (p. 92); he has more pressing issues to attend to which affect his life in myriad ways and sexual minority rights and being a visible gay man will impede the activism he has already started. For this young man, he notes "I'll be far more effective in making it [social justice reform] happen with the status that I have now as opposed to me being in the student organization" (p. 92). Concurrently, Patton's participants did not find the need for a school sanctioned GSA because they have formed social networks of support outside the view of others, as was true for several of Johnson's (2008) participants. Last, for many of Bowleg's (2013) and several of Johnson's (2008) Black gay participants, being "out and loud" was not how they wanted to be seen. They believed their sexuality is a private matter not to be flaunted in public,

something they learned early on from their families about all aspects of their lives; GSAs are inherently designed to be visible and can be considered to some as flaunting one's sexuality.

It is easy to dismiss the lack of Black or other racially and ethnically marginalized students in GSAs because the onus is placed on the student for not joining, not on the organization. However, it is important to understand the intersecting dynamics at play as to why many do not join GSAs; the racial make-up of GSAs is mentioned only in passing (McCready, 2010; Woolley, 2012). To claim that Black youth lack interest is misleading and more needs to be done to understand why there is a lack of participation even in schools where there are very few White students.<sup>15</sup> Is this due to their exclusion as Black gay males or due to the fact they do not want to be "out" at school? Also, could this lack of participation be cultural, like Patton's (2009) participants note, in that their private life is private and these clubs are too public? Through the participants' life histories, their experiences at school shed light on why they either did or did not participate in such groups.

To conclude, several Black sexual minority males, as Johnson (2008) and Patton (2011) note, have created social networks (such as close friendships and attending house parties and/or gay oriented events and bars/clubs) outside of their school and these networks cannot be discredited. However, times have changed for many gay males and gay-straight alliances are not the only ways to meet people and understand one's intersecting identities. Social media is a space where youth are engaged with others and out of sight of many of their sexual majority peers and family members. It is from this point that I move into discussing the role of social media and the Internet in the lives of youth.

## **Social Media: Computer-Mediated Communications and Social Networking Sites**

In 2015, it is hard to ignore the pervasive and influential nature of social media and technology. People with economic means are attached to their phones, emails, and social media pages due to the immediacy they provide. According to a report from comScore (2015b), there are 176 million smartphone users in the United States in October of 2014, a two million-person increase from August of 2014 (comScore, 2015a). This trend is undeniable. Therefore it is important to explore how social media influences and informs how the participants have created their identity and their presentation of self.

There is much scholarship in the field of informational and communication technologies with researchers seeking to understand how youth use computer-mediated communications (CMCs) such as chat rooms and social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; boyd, 2008; Richman, 2007; Schmitt, Dayanim, & Matthis, 2008). Several studies focus on sexual minority peoples' use of CMCs and SNSs (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Kubicek, Carpineto, McDavitt, Weiss, & Kipke, 2010; McDermott & Roen, 2011; Pingle et al., 2012). In many instances youth are going online to meet new people, connect with their offline friends, and create a space that is not an "adult-regulated public space" (boyd, 2008). Oftentimes sexual minority youth are connecting with people who have shared interests and histories because of their sexual identification, and these are people who they can engage with without fear of rejection and public humiliation based on sexual orientation (Pingle et al., 2012). Through these virtual spaces, youth are experimenting with different ways to present themselves and thus expressing the identities that best represent themselves (Schmitt et al., 2008); for some youth their Internet profile on SNSs or on a personal webpage is a presentation of their "authentic" self (Stern, 2008). However, there can be no separating both online and offline lives and

presentations because they both influence and affect one another (Hilliar & Harrison, 2007) and both [online and offline] presentations are valid representations of the user.

For sexual minority youth the Internet has been a space to create social networks and connections with others who can understand the hostile environments of schools and who can help in understanding their sexuality (Harper et al., 2009; Pingle et al., 2012). These connections are correlated to the idea of homophily where people have contact at higher rates with those with whom they have similarities (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001; Mesch & Talmud, 2010). For instance, when sexual minority youth face hostile school environments where they feel out of place (Miceli, 2005), they create homophilous relationships online and offline to buffer homonegativity and heterosexism at school. Additionally, McPherson et al. (2001) explain “[h]omophilous relations help friendships survive other structural challenges” (p. 436), challenges such as homonegativity and heterosexism. As Mesch and Talmud (2010) note, from a sociological standpoint, youth are seeking out these relationships with others with “shared interests and concerns” (p. 134) in order to expand their network of friends and support. Therefore the Internet provides the space for sexual minority youth to create homophilous relations based on commonalities such as race, sexual orientation, and social class, rather than in school where they may be limited in their interactions or criticized for doing so. The Internet is used as a place to disclose one’s sexuality and “come out” to strangers or friends who identify as heterosexual who one knows are likely to be accepting (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Pingle et al., 2012). “Coming out” online provides a “dress rehearsal” before they disclose their sexuality to those offline (Hilliar & Harrison, 2007). This allows one to feel more confident when, and if, they tell their friends and families of their sexual orientation because they have already built up a social network of support.

For Black gay youth, the Internet has been found to be a place where they turn to meet other gay males of all ages, classes, and races (Harper et al., 2009). It is through the Internet that these youth begin to understand their sexuality and the larger gay community (Harper et al., 2009). As one of Harper et al.'s (2009) participants explain, chat rooms provide a space to “talk to people... you share your thoughts, it's like oh, this happened to me or people share information with you and you just know what's going on. And you don't feel alone” (p. 314). The notion of being alone is key because often times Black gay youth feel alone in school or their community (Boykin, 1996/2012; Johnson, 2008; McCready, 2010). However, the Internet does not address the issue of Black gay youth meeting people similar to them within their school or within their immediate community. When a Black gay youth uses the Internet they are connecting with people possibly within close proximity or on the other side of town but most likely they are chatting with people in faraway cities, states, and countries.<sup>16</sup> While, depending on the smartphone application, CMC, or SNS, gay youth can communicate with others in different parts of the world, smartphone applications such as Jack'd and Growlr' allow for people to find each other within feet of one another or thousands of miles away. To date no scholarship and research examines how sexual minority youth are using smartphone applications. Part of my intent was to question my participants on their use of smartphone applications as I examined their use of other modes of social media in navigating their identities and creating systems of support.

I have just provided a glimpse into the landscape surrounding the lives of gay youth and Black males. The social location of any study is important to understanding because where the participant is geographically and socially situated and how this shapes an understanding of their intersecting identities is tied to their identity formation. Thus, it is important to provide historical

and social context for the current study. In discussing Black males and masculinity, Cazenave (1984) reminds us the best way to understand the males and their responses are to understand the social context. He points out “only by placing masculine role perceptions within the appropriate social context will it be possible to fully comprehend why men act the way they do and under what conditions they might be expected to change” (p. 655). Even though this study is not focused on masculinity, I heed Cazenave’s advice and have examined the historical and social context, from the national to the local levels, to better situate the participants’ life histories.

### **Historical Background: National Context**

Given that my participants were a maximum of 24 years old, I take a minute here to briefly lay out the social landscape of the past 20 or so years for sexual minorities. Coming on the heels of the now highly visible and vocal LGBT campaign for rights in the early 1970s, United States Representative Bella Abzug of New York, sponsored a bill that would have ended discrimination against sexual minorities in the workforce, housing, and accommodations; House Resolution 14752 (1974) was known as the Equality Act. The law never passed and the decade continued with very little legal protection for sexual minorities. The 1980s was ushered in with the HIV/AIDS epidemic, a disease that would have permanent and damaging effects on members of the community and how the sexual majority population viewed sexual minorities, especially males (Gould, 2009). Also, in 1986 the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986), a case originating in Georgia, which “authorized criminal prosecution of the consensual behavior of two adults in a private bedroom, in part on the grounds that same-sex intimacy had long been despised in Anglo-American law” (Kornbluh, 2011, p. 538). Essentially, the government had the right to dictate what happened in bedrooms if one was engaged in same-sex intimacy.



Due to advances in medicine, the 1990s saw a change in focus from national LGBT organizations away from solely addressing the HIV/AIDS crisis, while shifting their direction to battling federal policies that continued to marginalize sexual minorities (Gould, 2009; Kornbluh, 2011). In 1993 the LGBT movement took a major hit when President Clinton, in an act of “compromise,” signed into law the policy of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” which forced active military members to stay “closeted” (Bailey, 2010). Around the same time, the federal government allowed those who were sexual minorities seeking refuge in the United States a chance to stay (Randazzo, 2005). However, with the passage of The Illegal Reform and Immigration Responsibility Act of 1996, the federal government specified that any person of sexual minority status living in the United States and seeking asylum only had one year to apply for asylum based on their sexual minority status (Randazzo, 2005). That same year President Clinton, in another “compromise,” signed the Defense of Marriage Act, in which the United States government would only legally recognize opposite-sex coupled marriages (Kornbluh, 2011).

At the dawning of the new millennia, a time when the participants were in elementary school, the climate for sexual minorities was a mixed bag of progress and regression. For instance, in 2003 the United States Supreme Court, in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003), struck down a Texas law banning acts of sodomy, which was passed to target sexual minorities, in essence going against the Court’s previous *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986) decision; this made null and void any state law banning acts of sodomy (Chauncey, 2004; Kornbluh, 2011). While a victory of sorts for sexual minorities, the next year saw the Bush-Cheney presidential ticket argue for a federal amendment asserting marriage between “one man and one woman” (Cahill, 2009). Also, during the 2004 election cycle, 13 states voted to add to their state constitutions an amendment

declaring that only an opposite-sex couple's marriage would be legally recognized (Cahill, 2009). In Georgia in 2004, the electorate voted overwhelmingly, 76.2% to 23.8%, to ban sexual minorities from having their marriages legally recognized ("Georgia election results," 2005); a poll of Georgians conducted in 2012, after President Obama expressed public support for marriage equality, found that while a clear majority still oppose granting marriage equality to sexual minorities, the number stood at 59.4% in opposition ("Poll shows most Georgians," 2012), a slight decrease from 2004. Within a year of 2004, and throughout the rest of the decade, states began passing legislation or individual state supreme courts ruled their state could not deny granting marriage equality to sexual minorities. Then in 2010 the federal government overturned "Don't Ask Don't Tell" and in 2013 the United States Supreme Court ruled that the Defense of Marriage Act, section 3, was unconstitutional (Klarman, 2013; Korbluh, 2011).

Placing the participants' life histories within a historical context is important because Elder (1999), in explaining one's life course, notes "the life course of individuals is embedded in and shaped by the historical times and events they experience over their life" (p. 304). Elder also points out that "the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances" (p. 308) influence what actions people take and have taken in life. Accordingly, understanding the participants' life histories, within the brief historical context I have presented, allowed me to better understand how their lived experiences have been shaped by wider forces. In essence, a life history told from 1994-2014 is going to be different than if I were to tell the life history of my first 20 years, 1978-1998, because the social context and climate have shifted.

### **Atlanta: The Local Context**

One key tenet of narrative inquiry is how it pays attention to the social context in which a narrative is told (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Richardson, 1990).

Thus, it is important that I expound on the spatial context in which these narratives have been spoken: Atlanta. For Black sexual minorities, Atlanta has become ground zero (Jarvie, 2006b; Johnson, 2008; Levs, 2005). Also, for some Black sexual minority residents of Atlanta, the sentiment can be summed up from one person who notes “Freedom lies here. It rests in Atlanta very heavily—freedom to be who you are, whether you be gay, straight, in between, confused. Freedom is here” (Levs, 2005, n.p.). Furthermore, Black Gay Pride in Atlanta bills itself as the largest Black Gay Pride in the world (Ross, 2012), thus situating Atlanta as a city which attracts many due to the visibility and celebration of its Black and sexual minority communities.

Additionally, Atlanta has a rich and influential civil rights history. Between being the headquarters for two major civil rights organizations in the 1950s and 1960s (the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) and home to well-respected institutions of higher learning for Black people and Auburn Avenue, which “emerged during the 1940s and 1950s [and] was described as the richest African American street in the world” (Inwood, 2010, p. 578), Atlanta is much more than just a city: it is a living textbook. These factors converge to add substantial contextual depth to the participants’ life histories; again, their narratives are not read in isolation but within the context of Atlanta’s Black and Black LGBT history.

Concurrently, in 2013 the Williams Institute, out of the University of California-Los Angeles, used a combination of random telephone polling, a three-year long community survey of United States’ communities, and United States census data to provide an overview of myriad characteristics of Black same-sex couples in the United States.<sup>17</sup> What their findings reveal is that Georgia is the second state with the highest number of Black sexual minority households with 1.25 per 1,000 households (Kastanis & Gates, 2013). Additionally, three metro-Atlanta

counties take their place in the top-ten counties in the country with Black sexual minority-led households, as a percentage of the total population (Clayton, DeKalb, and Fulton counties respectively).

Atlanta has also become a home to several reality television shows, which bring forth Black sexual minority males as supporting cast members. One such program is *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, where two “out” Black sexual minority males are seen as stylists and hairdressers to the main female characters (“Fashion Queens,” 2014). Since the show premiered these two people have found themselves hosts of their own show on BravoTV titled “*Fashion Queens*” (“Fashion Queens,” 2014). On *The Real Housewives* and *Fashion Queens* these two people are seen as challenging social norms of what defines masculine and feminine. For example, they wear clothes for men and women, thus blurring the lines of what constitutes socially acceptable dress based on socially constructed ideas of gender.

The visibility of Black sexual minority males in Atlanta, either on television or through events and organizations targeting this population, provides important context for my study. When my participants provided their life history, it was important to keep in mind that Atlanta’s reputation as a “Black gay mecca” (Jarvie, 2006b) may have shaped how the participants understand their identities and how they are navigating through and presenting themselves in a highly visible social landscape for Black sexual minorities. However, for many participants they were unaware of this until they were in high school or college.

### **Television: A Virtual Context**

In 2005 media giant Viacom launched Logo TV, a new channel targeting the sexual minority community (“TV network for gays,” 2005). Logo TV markets itself as “[E]ntertaining a social, savvy audience of gay trendsetters, Logo TV also attracts a straight audience that wants to

be ahead of the curve” (Logo TV, 2013, n.p.). Less than a decade before, Ellen DeGeneres made headlines as the first openly lesbian lead character of a television show (Skerski, 2007). Since then the portrayal of sexual minority peoples on television has increased (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2006). Before the 1990s, sexual minority peoples were portrayed on television as deviants or were nonexistent (Schiappa et al., 2006). However, as Yep and Ellia (2012) point out, present images depoliticize sexual minorities and present them as characters to be welcomed by the sexual majority. In other words, these portrayals satisfy the heterosexual imaginary and are not threatening to heterosexual hegemony (Ingraham, 1994; Skerski, 2007).<sup>18</sup> Conjointly, Yep and Ellia note that these images are largely White and male and thus an “explosion of gay and lesbian White images simultaneously reinforces the perception that GLQ people are always presumed to be White, able bodied, and middle class and literally and symbolically erases the lives and subjectivities of GLQ people of color” (p. 894). However, this examination did not take into account several television shows, besides *Noah’s Arc*, that have portrayed Black sexual minorities such as the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* or *Shirts and Skins*, a show which followed a gay basketball team (“Shirts and Skins,” 2014).

Since McCready’s (2010) study was conducted in the late 1990s and Johnson’s (2008) collection of oral histories of Black gay men in the early part of the 2000s, the visibility of Black sexual minority men on television has increased (“Fashion Queens,” 2014; Logo TV, 2013; Yep & Ellia, 2012). In 2009 *RuPaul’s Drag Race* premiered on the Logo TV network, which brings drag queens from around the country to become “America’s next drag superstar” (Moore, 2013). The show is hosted by a Black gay man who has made a name for himself performing in drag around the world (Magubane, 2002). Writing an article seven years before *RuPaul’s Drag Race* premiered about RuPaul’s time in the spotlight in the 90s, Magubane (2002) argues that RuPaul

was fighting to challenge notions of Blackness and queerness. Magubane posits that RuPaul, while not free of reinforcing stereotypes of race and gender, “attempts to break out of simply being [an] object[s] shaped to the demands of mainstream desires and explores social tensions that are the inevitable result” (p. 251).<sup>19</sup> Simultaneously, in 2005 Logo TV placed the show *Noah’s Arc* on its prime-time roster (Yep & Ellia, 2012). This show lasted for two seasons and followed the life and times of five Black gay men living in Los Angeles. The show was cancelled after two seasons and a movie was made, *Noah’s Arc: Jumping the Broom* as a way to give the show closure (Yep & Ellia, 2012). However, Yep and Ellia (2012) point out that, while on the surface the show looks revolutionary, it falls back into reproducing ideas of homonormativity by highlighting “assimilationist qualities” such as “consumption and domesticity.” While the current study does not examine the portrayal of Black sexual minority males in popular culture, I bring this to the forefront for a good reason. By framing the social contexts (e.g. Atlanta and television shows) of the past decade, I have been better able to gauge the life histories of my participants. I turn now to the design of the study, which allowed me to illicit in-depth life histories of Black sexual minority young minority young males. ...

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<sup>1</sup> King is not speaking directly to the Black gay experience but the overall Black experience.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson (2008) explains this term comes from his southern grandmother who would refer to gays as “queers” but in her southern accent it sounded like “quares.”

<sup>3</sup> LGBTQIA is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, and asexual (“LGBTQIA Resource Center,” 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Kosciw et al. (2012) explain the difference of victimization as “[h]igh and low levels of victimization are indicated by a cutoff at the mean score of victimization: students above the mean were characterized as “Experiencing high Levels of Victimization” (p. 125).

<sup>5</sup> I want to emphasize that this is more than just the act of sex but understanding homosexuality as a part of human sexuality and that there is a vibrant sexual minority community they can join.

<sup>6</sup> In many cities, including Atlanta, Black gays have created a social structure known as “ball culture.” Within the ball community “houses” and “families” are formed. These houses offer emotional and social support to help Black gay males and transgendered people navigate through society. Also, there are dance and drag competitions, which pit the houses against one another. In essence these can be viewed as fraternities for Black gay males and transgendered people. For a better understanding of ball culture see Jennifer Livingston’s (1991) documentary *Paris is Burning*.

<sup>7</sup> Not all hip-hop and rap is homophobic or heterosexist, but a large majority sends those messages as Hill (2009) points out. For instance, sexual majority rap artist, Murs, has a song titled “Animal Style” which speaks of a gay teen conflicted about his sexuality who enters into a relationship with another man and ends up committing suicide

because the tensions between his feelings and society are too strong (“Murs, ‘Animal Style,’” 2012). Also, there are several sexual minority hip-hop and rap artists such as Tracey Chapman, Meshell Ndegeocello, Tori Fixx, Yo Majesty, and Last Offence (“5 Black homo-hop artists,” 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Again, I am speaking of Black sexual minorities but this can be said for any racially and ethnically marginalized sexual minority.

<sup>9</sup> Theories of traditional masculinity are often based on four categories posited by Brannon in the late 1970s; those sexed men who are (a) confident, (b) not into sissy stuff, (c) self-reliant and are the breadwinner, and (d) adventurous and does not shy away from violence (Smiler 2004; Vincent, Parrot, & Peterson 2011).

<sup>10</sup> For an in-depth look at the history of GSAs and the organizations, which support GSAs, please see Miceli’s 2005 book *Standing Out, Standing Together: The Social and Political Impact of Gay-Straight Alliances*.

<sup>11</sup> There are over 50,000 middle and high schools in the United States (Allen, Hammack, & Himes, 2012). This means that less than 10 percent of the nation’s schools have any sort of club for sexual minority students.

<sup>12</sup> Griffin et al. (2004) note transgender and bisexual students were not listed as a group who needed protection.

<sup>13</sup> I have not come across any study where the focus is on understanding why Black sexual minority youth are not joining GSAs. While their studies are not designed to tackle this question, McCready’s (2010) and Patton’s (2011) participants’ explain why they are not a part of GSAs or other sexual minority organizations on campus. While brief, this provides a glimpse as to one reason why there are low participation rates of Black sexual minority youth in the studies I mention.

<sup>14</sup> The racial composition is not the focus of Woolley’s (2012) study and she does not delve into why there are so few racially and ethnically oppressed students in the GSA.

<sup>15</sup> To understand how a GSA was formed by an all Black lesbian group of students, Quinn’s (2007) study illustrates their struggles and successes. I want to note here that roughly over 90 percent of the nation’s schools do not have any form of a GSA. Therefore, it is inaccurate to claim that GSAs are not in majority Black schools because the Black community is more homophobic or homonegative but rather that homophobic or homonegative attitudes are pervasive throughout much of the country’s schools.

<sup>16</sup> Even if a youth chats with someone within their city or town, the physical location can differ which illuminates a difference in demographics and the reception of sexual minority peoples within a specific neighborhood.

<sup>17</sup> The Institute uses the terms “LGB” and “African-American.” While this data examines same-sex couples and excludes those who do not define themselves as being coupled, it provides a glimpse into the Black sexual minority community. Also, I argue here, while read with caution due to the small sample sizes, that this data is important because where there are couples and these numbers can be reflective of a much larger non-coupled population.

<sup>18</sup> Ingraham (1994) utilizes Althausser’s notion of “imaginary” to explain a heterosexual imaginary as “that way of thinking which conceals the operation of heterosexuality in structuring gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organizing institution” (pp. 203-204).

<sup>19</sup> Magubane’s piece also examines the public image of Dennis Rodman.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This chapter discusses the design of the study, which explores how Black gay males have been navigating through schools and society while negotiating and understanding their intersecting identities. In essence, I sought to uncover what can be learned from these young males. This is especially important due to the lack of research focusing on their lived experiences and how they are faring in various aspects of their lives.

Crotty (1998) defines methodology as the researcher's "plan of action," and while there are numerous methodologies from which I could have chosen, narrative inquiry was the design applied to this study. Narrative inquiry is a form of qualitative research (Chase, 2005) that provided me with a framework for understanding where these young males have come from and how they are progressing in their lives. According to Hatch and Wisniewski (1995), the terms life history and narrative are often used interchangeably. However, they note that for some researchers there is a slight difference and it is this difference that guides my work. The distinction is that "all life histories are narratives, not all narratives are life histories" (Zeller in Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995, p. 114). In other words, someone can write a story or they can answer questions in an interview that tell a story but not necessarily *their* story, *their* history; as I explain below, life history narratives embody certain elements. Through the participants' life histories I sought to understand their lived experiences across their life span and across the following institutions: school, family, church, peers, community-based LGBTQ organizations, and social media.

#### **Narrative Inquiry/Life Histories**

Coming out of the social sciences, narrative inquiry seeks to illuminate one's lived experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Dhunpath, 2010; Riessman, 2008; Polkinghorne,



1988). Richardson (1990) reminds researchers that narratives “humanize time” and provide a space to both reflect on a participant’s lived experience and plot a path for one’s future. In writing about what constitutes a narrative, Polkinghorne (1988) points out that there are three realms in which humans exist, “material realm, organic realm, and the realm of meaning” (p. 183). The material realm exists where “human existence shares properties of nonhuman matter” (p. 4). In this case, Polkinghorne uses the analogy of humans falling out of a window and accelerating in the same way and rate as other nonhumans or objects. Essentially, humans are objects taking up space like nonhuman entities. The organic realm refers to the human senses; humans share a “perceptual openness” toward the environment in the same manner as other animals. Last, the realm of meaning is an activity, and is constructed in linguistic form from a mental state distinct to human beings. Therefore, by employing narrative inquiry I focused on the actions of the participants and the meaning they make based on their *lived* experiences. It is within the realm of meaning that Polkinghorne situates narratives.

Polkinghorne (1988) views narratives as a means for people to create an understanding of their experience and the significance of the experience. He argues that one’s narrative is more than just a list of scattered events without any cohesion, but rather narratives consist of a plot with a beginning, middle, and end juxtaposed against the main theme of the narration, which ties together different events in the human experience. To demonstrate this, Polkinghorne provides the example that when therapists elicit narratives from their patients, the purpose is to find themes across the patient’s narrative. With the therapist’s assistance, the patient can examine their life (which includes a plot with a beginning, middle, and end) and get an understanding of how this path has caused and contributed to their current state. Conjointly, the patient can see what threads through their life are constant, constants that may need to be altered to obtain a

different outcome in the future. If, however, a reading of the patient's life history is missing certain elements, then the plot is not fully developed and thus a fractured understanding of one's life becomes apparent and not much can be learned. Thus, it was important to get a life history that contained a beginning, middle, and end to generate a holistic understanding of what was being presented; life is a continuum of interrelated experiences.

A person's narrative takes on myriad layers, and to say that the narrative consists of a beginning, middle, and ending, while helpful, does not go far enough. Therefore, I utilize the framework posited by Riessman (2008). William Labov theorizes there are six elements, which make up a "fully formed" narrative to which Riessman has summarized as:

an abstract (summary and/or "point" of the story); orientation (to time, place, characters, situation); complicating action (the event sequence, or plot, usually with a crisis or turning point); evaluation (where the narrator steps back from the action to comment on meaning and communicate emotions—the "soul" of the narrative); resolution (the outcome of the plot); and a coda (ending the story and bringing action back to the present). (p. 84)

She goes on to note that not all narratives follow this script, as the sequencing differs for each participant. Polkinghorne's (1988) idea of the realm of meaning is important here because it connects to Labov's elements presented by Riessman. In the realm of meaning, one uses linguistics to connect events and pays attention to how events occur in conjunction with one another. Also, in the realm of meaning, the narrator looks from a holistic point of view and begins to examine the connection between different events; in other words the participant becomes conscious of their life through evaluating events they have overlooked as important to the plot or outcome of their life situation. Similarly, the aforementioned six elements are configured in a way that renders life history as a set of actions and experiences that occurs in tandem with one another. Additionally, the element of "evaluation" aligns with Polkinghorne's

idea of constructing meaning because the participant “steps back” to evaluate what has occurred in their life and identifies the connection between the events in a specific story.

For the purposes of my study, I use Riessman (who summarizes Labov) (2008) and Polkinghorne (1988) as guides because through interviews, I had the participants share narratives, while I was attuned to the elements posited by these narrative methodologists. In essence, the narrative inquiry process allowed the participant and myself to make meaning of their lived experiences (and my own). I intended for my participants to step back and evaluate their narrative, which in turn allowed them to comment and provide greater analysis of what these events currently mean and how they have informed their conception of their intersecting identities. In sharing my life history, I provided examples of specific events, “complicating action,” that have led me to this point in my journey, “resolution” and “coda,” as well as an analysis of how these events worked together; I would not have been able to understand my current state of being had I neglected major events that have shaped me and brought me to this current point in my life.

Furthermore, Tierney (2000) explains there are three questions a researcher should ask themselves while they are conducting life histories: (a) what is the reason for this narrative? (b) what constitutes the truth in these narratives? and (c) who is writing this narrative? First, in this study I intended for life histories to inform educators in ways to best support Black gay youth in their personal, social, and educational growth. While the participants’ narratives are not meant to be generalizable to *all* Black gay males, their narratives can provide a glimpse into ways educators, policymakers, and leaders of other institutions can better understand and/or begin to engage with their Black gay students to meet these students’ needs. Second, taking from critical race and queer theories, I find truth in the voices and histories and self-presentations of my

participants, from their standpoints (Johnson, 2008; Solórzano & Yosso, 2009). As Harding (1993) notes, due to the marginalized position of many based on gender, race, class, sexuality, and other identifiers of marginalization, particular experiences and ways of knowing have been devalued. Thus by placing value on their experiences and ways of knowing and doing, I might assist in challenging majoritarian beliefs regarding a universal truth experienced by all. Third, I wrote (reconstructed) and interpreted their life histories, and I describe later on how I maintained the integrity of their narratives. In sum, it is from Polkinghorne's (1988) realm of meaning, Riessman's (2008) six elements (a synthesis from Labov), and Tierney's questions that I read, analyzed, interpreted, and presented the narratives.

Keeping in the tradition of Polkinghorne (1988) and the idea that narratives are much more than scattered events in one's life, through the semi-structured interview questions my participants had the opportunity to tell their stories with the elements laid out by Riessman (2008). I anticipated that when participants were telling their stories, they would encompass multiple events and thoughts about specific moments that have shaped and influenced their lives. Such events in their lives are important because they have informed what they know about their intersecting identities and how they present themselves.

When discussing experience, Clandinin and Murphy (2009) take a Deweyian approach. They posit that the researcher must understand experience, a key to narrative inquiry, as a "conception of reality as relational, temporal, and continuous" (p. 599). In other words, relationally, a participant's experiences are informed by one's surroundings and interactions. Temporally, these experiences are not narrated as occurring in the past and left in the past, but rather as experiences that have shaped and continue to shape one's life. Therefore, in order to understand the participants' reality, I had to understand their past and present lived experiences

in relation to one another. Also, Clandinin (2006) notes that as researchers we are entering the participants' lives at a certain moment and must be conscious of that fact; in essence their life history is not done, so our writing of their narrative should never be a finished product.

Accordingly, narratives are presented with the understanding that from the moment researchers have entered to the moment researchers leave, a participant's experiences and life histories will continue to evolve, so we can only know what we know up until our point of contact and departure.

Another key aspect of narrative inquiry is the focus on the context in which the narrative is told (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Murphy, 2009; Riessman, 2008; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Richardson, 1990). When a narrative is told it is important to pay attention to the social context and myriad intersecting identities, which shape one's life history. In the current study the social context, being a young Black gay male in Atlanta in the 1990s and early part of the new millennium, was crucial for understanding how such youth are negotiating intersecting racial and sexual identities as well as creating networks of support. From this social context, the narratives of the young men illuminated how different institutional factors have brought them to this current juncture in their lives. Essentially, the reality and social context of their experiences and the ways in which they have evolved were crucial to understanding the "plot" and the "complicating action" to gain a conception of their current identity and presentation of self. This brings me to my research questions.

### **Research Questions**

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, there is a dearth of literature focused on Black gay youth, and there are myriad issues facing these youth in schools. Also, for those studies of Black gay males, oftentimes the study is focused on HIV/AIDS and sex acts, mental health

issues, and/or is quantitative and does not probe their life histories and how they are negotiating through society and understanding their intersecting identities (Arrington-Sanders, Leonard, Brooks, Celentano, & Ellen, 2013; Greene, 1994; Voisin, Bird, Shiu, & Krieger, 2013; Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2013). The purpose of this study was to place these young males at the forefront of the research agenda to provide the scholarship and field with a more complete grasp on their reality, their strengths and struggles, how they form networks of support, and what informs their self-presentations. For example, Louis, one of Hawkeswood's (1996) Black gay participants, explains how his family handled his coming out by noting, "I poured Mama a cocktail and just told them. The girls [sisters] giggled a bit. And Mama gave me a hug and said she sorta knew. They thought it was alright. So that was that" (p. 137). Conversely, Craig Washington (2012) recalls that when he was very young his father was angered that he dressed up in female clothes. His father punched him so badly that he felt as if a bomb had hit him and as he came to he remembers hearing his father telling him to "Get out of my sight" (p. 5). Hope and love were not lost on Craig at that moment his aunt comforted him and provided him with support within an otherwise hostile environment. I bring forth these two experiences to demonstrate that these events influenced how these gay men understand their reality, either from a loving standpoint or from a point of disappointment, yet they still managed to stay strong.

<sup>1</sup> How was I able to gather these narratives to elicit such lived experiences as Louis and Craig recall? It was important that I had questions guiding the study that kept me focused on the issue at hand: how young Black gay males say major events in their lives have helped them understand and construct their intersecting identities and presentations of self.

This research project had five guiding questions, which were the vehicle employed to gain insight into the life histories of participants. The questions were as follows:

- What do the narratives of Black gay youth reveal about the factors that support or undermine their ability to successfully negotiate intersecting racial and sexual identities?
- In what ways have the following institutions impacted Black gay youth identity formation: school, family, church, peers, community-based LGBTQ organizations, and social media? To what degree has growing up in Atlanta contributed to identity formation?
- In what manner have Black gay youth either experienced or created social networks of support?
- To what degree and how have Black gay youth used social media to create networks of support, navigate their intersecting identities, and present themselves?
- What can educators and policymakers learn from narratives of Black gay youth to best support them in their personal, social, and educational growth?

### **Participants**

Participants included five males who self-identified as Black and gay; I use the term Black as a socially constructed racial marker (James, 2008) to refer to any person who identifies racially and ethnically as a part of the African diaspora. Also, four out of the five young males

were “out” to their family and all were out to almost all of their sexual majority peers and friends, and are living their lives as gay men in their circle of gay friends and community.

These young males had to be between the ages of 18 and 24 and were not required to be enrolled in formal schooling; in fact only three of the five were currently enrolled in higher education with two on hiatus and one having never attended. I chose five participants because I conducted three interviews per participant, with each interview allowing participants to delve deep into their life history. Since my study utilized a narrative inquiry methodology, my participants had to be willing to share their life history and social media documents in three separate interviews. One’s willingness to share their life history provides “thick descriptions” (Blumfield-Jones, 1995; Chase, 2005; Tracy, 2010), which allowed for a deep understanding of how they are navigating through society as young Black gay males.

Finally, since the project entailed exploring how Black gay youth are using social media to create networks of support, navigate their intersecting identities, and as a means for presenting themselves, it was important that each participant be an active user of social media. For the purposes of this study, I defined an active user of social media as one who uses any form of social media weekly (text messaging, Facebook, emailing, SnapChat, Twitter, Instagram, etc.). I am aware that the issue of economics is present due to this selection since some young males cannot afford to stay connected (Watkins, 2014) and this is addressed in my strengths and limitations section; however, due to the rapid rise and popularity of social media use by teenagers in the past decade (boyd and Ellison, 2008; Ito et al., 2009), it is necessary to examine these young males’ use of social media. Also, they must have been willing to share self-selected portions of their social media pages and/or messages.



In order to find participants, I put a call out to The Evolution Project, an organization that works with young Black gay and transgender males in the Atlanta region. I was unable to procure any participants even though I had met with executives within the organization. Therefore I found participants through word-of-mouth. One participant, Slick Rick was someone I had met in 2012, Charlie I met in October of 2013, and Zion I had met in February of 2014; Tae and Theodore were referred to me by mutual friends who were never told that they were chosen as participants. Participants were required be living within the metro-Atlanta region and have gone to at least one year of elementary school, all of middle, and all of high school in the metro-Atlanta region because I wanted to examine their experiences and life within the context of Atlanta's visible Black community of sexual minorities (Jarvie, 2006b; Johnson, 2008; Kastanis & Gates, 2013; Levs, 2005).

Last, I looked for participants who perceived themselves as productively navigating the ups and downs of their lives; the definition of what is considered an “up” and a “down” was left up to my participants. This is an important piece of the study because it moved away from viewing my participants monolithically or through the lens of deficiency. Humans are complex creatures with periods of struggle and resiliency. Ignoring these facets of my participants' lived experiences and how they have managed to emerge at this point in their lives would have caused me to present a linear narrative that tells half the story and would not provide educators and researchers a glimpse into the course of these young males' lives. The methods I used to gather their life histories are important and detailed below.

### **Methods**

Methods are the techniques used to gather data and align with a chosen methodology—in this case narrative inquiry (Bogdan & Biklen 2006; Crotty, 1998). This study had three face-to-

face interviews, with one allowing for the participants to share their social media documents. The use of a semi-structured interview format in which I created some general questions was utilized. However, since their narratives guide the study, there were follow-up questions based on a participant's responses (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Roulston, 2010). Simultaneously, the interviews stayed on target of what I was hoping to gather, but I kept a semi-structured format because some questions were asked that were not on my list so I could probe deeper into certain responses. Through these interviews I sought to understand, from the participants' perspective, their lived experience, their "complicating action" (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Riessman, 2008). Also, during the interview, and directly following the interview, I took detailed notes and wrote analytic memos (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011) to remind myself of the setting, how the session flowed, and any thoughts or follow-up questions I had that were pertinent when interpreting their life history; these memos were also helpful during the write-up of the life history, the analysis, and interpretation.

Before I began the formal interviews, I intended to meet briefly with the participants individually to share my life history and explain the purpose of the study and their role. In doing so, it was my intent to begin to build a rapport where the participant understood my research intentions and mediate the difference of race that I anticipated may occur and thus would hopefully place their mind at ease to allow for open communication during the three formal interviews. In fact, Theodore and I met to discuss the study and he was surprised I was White, but he agreed to the study and we met the following week. Tae and I were to meet one afternoon for a few minutes and then set up a time, but he felt very comfortable within minutes and he suggested we conduct the interview that day, which we did. Each interview was broken up into manageable categories in which participants were given a chance to focus on specific stories

across the life span and across institutions (e.g. being supported by friends at school when they “came out” or certain life changing events in high school) so “fully formed” narratives, which include Riessman’s (2008) six elements, were able to be told. It was my intent to provide them the opportunity to offer as much detail as possible and recount experiences as fully as possible without interrupting their narrative to move on to other questions that would have fractured the narrative. In some instances, it took several minutes for a participant to explain one event that occurred in school because the story was layered. The first interview, lasted roughly between 45-60 minutes, while interview two was roughly 90 minutes per participant, and each focused on chronologically specific life points and institutions. Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, and Orr (2010) call this “focused narrative inquiry” in which the researcher focuses on a certain “moment or event within the experiences under study” (p. 83). The format of the interviews was as follows and semi-structured interview guides are included in Appendix A, (interview 1), Appendix B (interview 2), and Appendix C (interview 3):<sup>2</sup>

- First interview: Birth to Middle School—45-60 minutes
  - Questions were related to their life history and how they understand their racial and sexual identity with a focus on birth to middle school.
  - What sequence of events or supports from this time period has brought the participant to this point in their lives?
  - Asked for events and experiences connected to each of the following institutions: the school, family, church, peers, and community-based LGBTQ organizations that shaped their identity during this time period.
- Second interview: High school to present—90 minutes
  - We followed-up on the previous interview to tie up any loose ends.

- Participants discussed their identity and life history from high school to present.
- Asked for events and experiences connected to each of the following institutions: the school, family, church, peers, and community-based LGBTQ organizations that shaped their identity during this time period
- We discussed how they presented themselves during this time period and how this presentation (or multiple presentations as teens navigate through different periods of identity) came about.
- Third interview: Social media—45-60 minutes
  - We explored their social media pages and messages.
  - Questions were geared toward the role of social media and presentations of self as young Black gay males.
  - I asked how they have created a network of support through social media, the manner in which this has occurred, and how it functions.

The second method entailed having the participants explain their social media documents. I considered these forms to be “technical artifacts” (Pascoe, 2012). Documents allow for further questions to be elicited and provide a context (Bowen, 2009) for how these young males are using social media to create networks of support and navigate and present their intersecting identities. During this interview documents collected included at least one or more of the following: Instagram pictures and comments; Facebook status updates, comments, posts, and pictures; Twitter “tweets;” and smartphone dating profiles. Also, documents are useful because they “clearly fit the criteria of using data rich in description” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006, p. 64), and documents provided additional evidence so I could better understand their lives, identities, and experiences. Through these documents, I asked the participants to explain their performance

or presentations of self on social media. In other words, what can these documents illuminate about how and why they are choosing to present themselves in such a manner? It is from this point that queer theory lent credence and provided a level of analysis specific to one's presentation of self, which provided me with an understanding of their embodied existence.

By using documents I heed the advice of Prior (2003). He explains that documents must be read as pieces (both written and pictorial in the case of this study), which involve creators, users, and settings. As I examined these documents with the participants and interpreted what the participants said about these documents, I did not forget that these documents are "living" and have been created by someone for someone (or a group of people) within a "system of reality" (Prior, 2003). That is, they are situated. Social media texts are created within a specific time and place and were understood as such rather than as "stable, static, and pre-defined artifacts" (Prior, 2003, p. 2), divorced from the social context in which they were created. I probed their myriad uses and how they help inform the participants' identity and system of support through the interview.

Before I close out this section, I must speak on the role between researcher and participant in narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Murphy (2009) explain that narrative inquiry is relational research, where the relationship between the participant and the researcher is an important aspect not to be overlooked. This echoes the point made by Riessman (2008) who notes that there are "two active *participants* who jointly construct narrative and meaning" (p. 23, emphasis in original). Additionally, Polkinghorne (1995) expounds on this by noting that when one is conducting narrative inquiry the final product is not solely a participant's narrative, but also a narrative shaped by the interactions between the participant and the researcher. Chase (2005) contends that oftentimes sociologists provide extensive pieces from the narration and then

delve into the interpretation, which can cause alarm from some who view this as an example of a researcher's power. For Chase a researcher is not using an "authoritative voice" and privileging their interpretation over the participants' narrations, but rather the "researcher speaks differently from, but not disrespectfully of, the narrator's voice" (p. 664). When writing up narratives, I kept in mind that their narratives have been reconstructed in my voice (Polkinghorne, 1995). In other words, I never lost sight that I reconstructed the narrative through my interpretation, while not taking focus away from the narrator's intent. This has not been an easy task, but being aware of the challenges and using Clandinin and Murphy, Riessman (2008), and Polkinghorne (1989; 1995) as guides, I constructed the participants' narratives with care and fidelity. Also, I intended to share the reconstructed and interpreted narrative with my participants and allowed them to tell me what worked well with the reconstruction and interpretation or what needed to be changed if they believed I had not captured their life history. Once I was finished with the Findings Chapter the participants were given a copy for their feedback. All but Tae have responded glowingly; Tae has not responded as he has been too busy to read the chapter.

### **Analysis**

In conjunction with presenting the life histories in narrative form, I utilized thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008). Riessman (2008) points out that thematic analysis keeps each participant's narrative "in-tact" yet when placed next to one another, one is looking for themes across narrations. For the current study, I highlighted different institutions that influence Black gay youth, institutions I asked them to elaborate on during the interviews. I analyzed each participant's narrative regarding the institution by coding the interviews to look for themes. Once I had a rich story of their lives, I teased out themes within their lives, which then helped me when I looked across participants' lives. Then I placed those interviews and codes next to one

another to look for shared themes across all narratives. I must be clear that I was not comparing participants to one another but rather looking at their life histories as one complete story to find common themes at different junctures of their lives. Taking from Riessman again, coding becomes an individualized endeavor. I quote Riessman at length here to demonstrate how I intended to read and code the narratives. She notes:

[T]he investigator works with a single interview at a time, isolating and ordering relevant episodes into a chronological biographical account. After the process has been completed for all interviews, the researcher zooms in, identifying the underlying assumptions in each account and naming (coding) them. Particular cases are then selected to illustrate general patterns—range and variation—and the underlying assumptions of different cases compared. (p. 57)

The chronological ordering Riessman touches on is in direct correlation to the six stages she provides and Polkinghorne's (1988) notions of plot within narratives. Therefore, coding occurred in stages. I gave attention to one participant at a time and his life history. After each participant's three interviews I analyzed it by carefully reading his narrative to find connecting or overarching themes as they related to the myriad institutions. For instance, I found the theme of thick skin while he was discussing his school (institution) and how he had to build in opposition to teasing or not feeling connected to his sexual majority male peers. Through this thick skin over time the participant was able to ignore and not be fazed by the bullying actions of his peers (another institution) because he had found strength within himself and with friends who supported him. When all of the interviews are completed, I looked over each participant's narratives in chronological order to find common themes from each epoch of their life. These themes provided a rich and holistic picture of a participant's life.

Once I found themes within each participant's narratives, it was important for me to use quotes to support the themes (S. Hunter, 2010). After the individual analysis of their life, in which I pieced together a larger story rather than just focusing on one section a participant's life,

I then looked across participants to find commonalities (Ezzy, 2002). Seeing that I asked the young males to provide examples of events that have shaped their lives at certain points (e.g. middle school) and from the same institutions, I looked across each participant's narrative at specific points of time and looked for any similarities or themes, which emerged. Concomitantly, the same was done when probing the young males about their use of social media. I must stress that for narrative inquirers, it is crucial that the stories stay intact and pieces of a narrative are not teased out and analyzed in isolation (Riessman, 2008). For example, when a participant told me about a time when he began to seek out others who are gay, I then looked at the whole story of when and how this occurred rather than analyzing one segment (e.g. that he sought out other gay youth online without knowing why and at what point in his life this occurred and what this event entailed—the plot) of this rich narrative.

In order to analyze the participants' social media pages I used document analysis. Harper (2000) reminds us “visual materials are often narrative in form” (p. 724). Riessman (2008) adds, “visual narratives[,] are produced by particular people living in particular times and places. Images may be composed to accomplish specific aims, but audiences can read the images differently than an artist intended---an entry point for narrative analysis” (p. 179). The documents I solicited were important in that they told another part of a participant's life history. For this stage of coding I gathered two documents, whether they were streams of messages, photos, and/or posts that illustrated how they have created a social system of support, how they have constructed their identity, and/or how they presented themselves to these virtual spaces. Once the documents were collected, I had the participants explain to me what they meant. It was important that I probed deeply into what these documents meant and why they were created, in essence looking at them as events in their life similar to the events shared in interviews one and



two. I was mindful of what documents were shared since this was a conscious act of what they wished to share and not some haphazard culling of documents for me. Along this vein I follow Riessman who uses Rose's advice for creating methods to analyze visual narratives. According to Riessman, Rose notes that the researcher must enter and interrogate the visual narratives from three angles: (a) the actual production of the visual, (b) the story being told in the visual, and (c) the audience's response and/or creator's purpose in producing said visuals. From here I was able to narrow my focus on what I hoped to glean from these visuals, how the participants were using social media visuals to present themselves, and how social media functioned as a system of support (e.g.: a place to seek work opportunities). Also, I kept a copy of these documents to refer back to during my analysis but was aware that these images, though many are public, can identify the participant. Therefore, throughout my write-up of the documents I concealed their identity by blocking out any markers participants believe will reveal their identity.

Through the participants' explanation of their documents, which was audio recorded, I went back through the transcripts and continuously coded looking for themes across the documents of each participant. Then I examined common themes that were present throughout all of their documents and how these connected, if at all, to themes presented in their individual interviews one and two. For instance, Zion and Tae presented documents that demonstrated their self-determination as they use social media to seek employment. In the end, while analyzing their life histories, I tied in their use of social media and the documents presented to the different stories they told in interviews one and two.

Once the coding and analysis were complete, I interpreted what was found by paying attention to my theoretical perspectives, which informed my interpretation. When applicable, I connected the themes to such tenets as intersectionality (critical race theory) and a presentation

of self (quare theory). Last, when a participant showed me, for instance their Instagram page and the pictures they have chosen to share with their friends, I gained insight into how they present themselves. Here, quare theory was key to informing my interpretation as to how and why Black gay male's performance of self has been so important to their lived experience; these pieces cannot be divorced from one another.

To conclude, when I wrote up my interpretation and reconstructed their narratives, I chose to open with one participant's life history and then wrote about each institution while connected a theme to the different institutions. Once the data was culled, coded, and interpreted then I had a clearer idea of how I wished to proceed with presenting the data.

### **Ethical Concerns**

There are several ethical concerns that I am cognizant of and address in this section. As I previously, stated I am not a Black gay male and I must always be conscious of my White privilege (Leonardo, 2009). As a self-identified gay White male, the participants could have been leery of my intentions due to past historical research and harm done to Black and sexual minority communities (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Young, 2008), but fortunately they were not or did not express their concern to me. Goar (2008) reminds researchers that adopting a race-neutral position can "serve to restrict our knowledge of racial groups" (p. 159). Knowing that their racial categorization and social position differs from mine, as well as the power dynamics due to the participant/researcher relationship, I shared my lived experiences as a gay man who struggled with my sexual identity and felt like a societal outcast. Additionally, I provided examples of my life here in Atlanta, which included being welcomed by many Black gay males and attending social events and establishments where a majority of the patrons are Black gay males. I was very clear that I can never know what it is like to be a Black gay male. By sharing my theoretical

perspectives and the challenges I have faced, the participants hopefully got a better understanding of who I am and why I am engaged in this work.

Also, it is important to present these narratives using pseudonyms, which I allowed the participants to create. By choosing their own name and where to have the interviews, I demonstrated my commitment to power being shared.

Working with sexual minority peoples there are issues I attended to that are unique to this community (Martin & Knox, 2000). I choose 18 as the minimum age of my sample for a few reasons. First, they had time to reflect on their elementary, middle, and high school years. More importantly, at 18 the participants are of legal age to sign a consent form without parental permission. Therefore, if a participant did not feel supported at home or did not wish to disclose his sexual orientation to his family, he was not required to get their permission, which could have caused problems for him at home.

The interviews were conducted in a space where they wished to meet. These spaces were at a park, the university library, my home (per Slick Rick's request), or a quiet public space where they feel comfortable such as the GSA room on campus. Second, several of the participants may not have disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents or other family members and friends, making it challenging to meet at their homes or other public venues, a neutral space was the best option.

In order to protect the participants, I maintained the strictest of confidentiality by not sharing any of the information and kept the information in locked password protected documents on my personal laptop (D'Augelli & Grossman, 2006). Audio recordings of interviews were downloaded to a private file on the iTunes application of my personal laptop. The transcripts, audio recordings, and documents were only shared with the participants and my dissertation

committee members upon request. I followed all of the legal and confidentiality guidelines set forth by the Georgia State University Institutional Review Board and those mandated by my dissertation committee.

Another ethical dilemma concerned how I analyzed, interpreted, and presented the participants' narratives. Denzin notes "[I]t must be remembered that we do not own the lives and the stories we tell. They are lent to us, given provisionally, if they are given at all. They remain, always, and irrevocably the lives and stories of those who have told them to us" (as cited in Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, pgs. 132-132). Essentially, I never forget that these life histories are not mine, and I used my best judgment to reconstruct and present these narratives as best I could while staying true to a participant's intention. As I reviewed the narratives I kept critical race theory's tenet of critiquing color-blindness front and center. Through a continued process of reviewing the transcripts and my interpretations, I remembered that race is a salient and influential influence on one's life history and made sure my interpretations accounted for this. Due to my privilege as a White male I did not slip into a color-blind ideology where I ignored race as a factor in interpreting certain events they shared.

Clandinin and Murphy (2009) tell readers that the ethical issue is more of a "relational ethics" issue when doing narrative inquiry. By this they mean that the researcher should not disconnect themselves from the inquiry. The relationship between the participants and researcher is an integral part of narrative inquiry and the write-up because it is a joint and reciprocal process; they have entrusted me with their narratives and I believe I did their life histories justice in my analysis, interpretation, and written reconstruction. Again, I kept going back to the guiding tenets of critical race theory and queer theory to inform how I was interpreting, reconstructing, and presenting these life histories.

Due to my theoretical underpinnings, I wanted these life histories to illustrate how Black gay males have been navigating myriad social contexts and understanding their intersecting identities. Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva (2008) note that in sociological research, researchers have too often presented the outcomes of racially marginalized peoples from a deficit perspective. This research study was not designed to examine the deficits of the young males' life histories, but rather how these young men are managing the "ups" and "downs" in life, thus illustrating their strengths. Finally, it was not my intention to wrap-up the life histories in a perfect package, which defeats the purpose of the narratives being told (Clandinin & Murphy, 2009). The young males in the study had in-depth, complex, and vibrant life histories, and I always remembered my ethical duties as a middle-class gay formally educated White male to not forget this study was about them.

### **Summary of Overall Strengths and Limitations of the Study**

There are several strengths and limitations with this study. It can be argued that the sample size was too small and therefore it was not a representative sample; however, I find this a strength. Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) remind us that qualitative researchers are interested in understanding rather than establishing their findings as generalizable to the larger group. Therefore, by using a small sample I was able to probe deeply into an understanding of these males' lives and what can be learned from them rather than using their data as a means to represent all Black gay males living in Atlanta or Georgia or the south. Likewise, if I had had a larger sample, for example over 20 youth, I would have lost the opportunity to delve deeply into the life histories with each participant, which may have required the interviews to exceed the suggested timeframe.

One strength of the study is that this work adds to the growing literature about Black gay males, presenting their life histories in a positive light (Boykin, 2012; Gresham, 2009; Johnson, 2008; McCready, 2010); as I have pointed out, their lives remain largely unexamined. The life histories of these males present a counterstory to the dominant narrative that gay equals White. Another strength is that very few studies have examined issues of intersectionality between race and sexuality (Bowleg, 2013; M. A. Hunter, 2010; Patton, 2011), and none of these have done so from a critical race perspective nor have they utilized a queer theory perspective in tandem with critical race theory. My study is unique in that by examining the intersections of race, sexuality, and presentations of self, we gained a perspective on Black gay males' lived experiences, which is needed to examine, as Brown (2011) calls for, the "continuities and discontinuities" of their intersecting identities. While Brown's (2005) study of Black gay males took place in Atlanta, it is quantitative and does not provide qualitative narratives of how these males have come to identify and of their life experiences. Rather, his study relied on a survey of pre-determined questions, which did not allow for in-depth answers, something my study allows. Last, a decade has passed since McCready's (2010) study of four Black gay males in an urban high school in northern California and the historical and social landscape has shifted. As I have noted, Atlanta has a highly visible Black sexual minority community and nationally legal rights for sexual minorities have been front and center. During this time the prevalence and visibility of Black gay males on television has increased, as has the use of social media. It was important to interrogate how these shifts have influenced how Black gay males understand their intersecting identities and how they have influenced how these males created and present a public persona.

Several limitations include the issue of economics and the social location. First, since these young males have access to social media, then my study is excluding those males who are

economically marginalized and do not. The study becomes skewed toward those who can afford to have a smartphone with expensive data plans, thus becoming a classist study. Also, by situating the study in metro-Atlanta, the results are limited to a city population with a visible Black community consisting of people from many different strata, something that may not be occurring in rural parts of Georgia and elsewhere in the south or the country. Further studies will need to examine how Black gay males are faring in rural communities and in those without access to social media. Last, participants may have been anxious to give me the “correct” answer, as if there is one correct answer. At the beginning of the interviews I reminded them that there was no correct answer, as I was not seeking the “perfect” answer but rather *their* lived experiences.

Much can be learned from these life histories. While taking place during major social and legal changes within the larger society and within the sexual minority community, the timing of this study is ideal. Adding these voices and life histories to the literature provides a counterstory to majoritarian views of the gay community and the Black community: there are young Black gay males who are productively navigating through society and creating identities on their terms.

As I close, I am reminded of a conference I attended in March of 2014 at Emory University entitled “Whose Beloved Community?” The focus of the conference was the intersections of race and sexuality that many embody and embrace. One young Black lesbian in graduate school in a northern city got up to speak and broke down in tears because she feels alone on campus and two of her friends, both Black and one gay and one lesbian, tried to commit suicide; forcing them to choose either a racial or sexual identity was too much to bare. Also, Alexis Pauline Gumbs reminded the audience that she has started the Mobile Homecoming project in Durham, North Carolina, with the mission of “collecting and amplifying the social

organizing herstories of black women, trans men, and gender queer visionaries who have been refusing the limits of heteronormativity and opening the world up by being themselves in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (“Mobile Homecoming,” n.d., n.p.). As she explained, many of the people they interviewed did not want their interviews recorded out of fear; these are people who are older and remember a time when if one was open about their sexuality they were ostracized or the fear of being ostracized was too much. In closing, LGBT activist Mandy Carter critiqued White-led LGBT organizations. She argued these organizations must try to look for ways to bring Black people to the table. She reminded White-led organizations that Black LGBT people are gathering at their own table. I use this to close this chapter because Black gay males are creating community and negotiating their intersecting identities. I see it daily in Atlanta and other cities where I have lived. How they are doing this and the experiences that have informed them in the process are what this study aimed to understand and the data that emerged has helped aide in our understanding. They are at their own table and it was my intent that their life histories would be informative to the participants and others. Through histories that are powerful, another suicide may be averted.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig is the founder of the Atlanta based Evolution Project a group focused on Black gays aged 18-28.

<sup>2</sup> These questions shifted due to the fluid nature of when these experiences began. This is why a semi-structured format is conducive to eliciting life histories.



## Chapter 4: Findings

“I would talk like thisah. I would always say things like thatah, like with the extra “ah.” And he [father] was like “*Stop talking like that!*” ...I remember one day I was outside and I was walking and he got super duper mad at me and I was like: why did he get so mad at me? He was like “*Come back here and walk differently!*” And I was like: what? And he just like made me go up and down my driveway and practice walking and that was for like an hour, in the hot sun... I was like: why the fuck am I doing this?...But of course in that household you don’t have a say so, it is his way or the highway, so my happy ass shut the fuck up and walked up and down those gravel and rocks.

--Zion (interview, 2014)

Zion was about six or seven when his father made him “butch up” his walk, which marked a turning point in his childhood. Up until that time Zion’s father was on the road driving trucks and was often not around, leaving Zion to be raised in an Atlanta suburb by his mother. When Zion’s father retired from driving trucks he spent more time at home focusing on Zion’s actions, actions that in school would provoke his peers to taunt him and call him a sissy; this was much to Zion’s dismay because he did not understand the meaning of these words, other than that they must be negative. Without knowing that Zion had very few friends, save a girl or two he had befriended, and was being picked-on at school for his presentation of self and mannerisms, his father reinforced ideas of gender and masculinity by making Zion walk back-and-forth to act more like a man and stopping him from speaking in a perceived effeminate manner. What struck Zion was how this man, who was in and out of the house for the first seven years of his life, came back full-time and was telling him how to act, when Zion was content without his father being around; in fact Zion enjoyed when his father left to go back on the road before he retired because home life felt peaceful with his older sister, younger brother, and mother.

While Zion was with his mother she often took him to the hair salon and he “was very accustomed to doing the girl stuff around the house because I was always with my mom,” which

his father discouraged. Instead, he would put Zion to work in the yard to “make me do masculine super ultra macho stuff.” Zion was influenced by these moments:

It [the butchening up of my walk] was [a] subconscious [act] because after that I was like: well if he has a problem with it, I wonder what other people think? It was like I'd never like actually like thought about the way I was walking but just like in the back of my mind I would just kinda be like: well if my dad is making me walk back and forth, how do I look when I'm walking? ... How am I walking, what's wrong with it?" And he would never answer me. He would just say "Just fix the way you walk.""

This incident sets the foundation for Zion's complicated relationship with his father and illuminates how Zion was initially conscious of his mannerism but as time progressed, and through an *experiential evolution*, has become more self-confident; Zion does not care about his father's or anyone else's beliefs because he has built a *thick skin* and refused to let people bring him down.

This chapter presents findings by exploring five institutions: school, family, church, peers, and media and how these institutions have influenced the participants' lives. Additionally, five themes have emerged from the data: *racial shelving*, *experiential evolution*, *thick skin*, *self-determination*, and *defying/transcending stereotypes* (see Table 1: Themes); these themes will be discussed with how they connect with each institution. While each participant's life history adds to the understanding of how they have been influenced by each institution and embody each theme, I have chosen to not add each participant in each institution and theme for purposes of length and creating a smoother flow of the presentation of the findings. The last section of the chapter explores social media documents that are representative of the participant's life. These documents are connected to the themes found throughout the social institutions. I open with Zion's life history, a life history that touches on every theme and provides a glimpse into the life of a Black gay male. The challenges he has faced and the resiliency and self-assured spirit which

he embodies, speak volumes to how he, as with the other participants, refuse to be broken or be considered “less than” by their peers due to their intersecting identities.

**Table 1: Themes**

Racial Shelving	When in majority Black schools, race was shelved as they were viewed and treated by others based more on their sexual identity than their racial identity.
Thick Skin	Faced with obstacles and challenges because of their racial and sexual identity, a thick skin was built, meaning the ability to face and conquer present obstacles and challenges based on past challenges and obstacles.
Self-Determination	Taking it upon themselves to learn about their sexual identity and seek boyfriends and gay friends while forging ahead.
Defying/Transcending Stereotypes	Refusing to fit into society’s narrative of Black gay males: either flamboyant queens or down low homothugs.
Experiential Evolution	Viewing each experience as something to learn from and grow to become successful and affirm themselves.

**Zion’s Story**

While in elementary school, Zion kept to himself and drew because oftentimes he was teased and called girly boy; art became and still remains Zion’s outlet and mode of expression. Additionally, during gym class he would sit with the girls and talk about hair and make-up because he was disinterested in sports. For Zion, elementary school was a place where he felt different than the other kids as he notes, “I think I felt less of a person; that’s so dramatic but yeah less of a person.”

Demographically Zion’s elementary school as he remembers was mixed, fifty percent Black and fifty percent White, yet it was mainly the White boys who were calling him these names. Internally Zion was conflicted because at the time he wanted to be friends with these

boys but as he looks back he realizes he had a crush on them. Even while they made fun of Zion for being a sissy, this did not stop them from interacting with him. During lunch these boys would come sit by Zion and want to trade lunches causing Zion to comment:

Damn that hurts [being teased], but now you're friendly, everything's fine but then when you get around certain people that's when it comes back. I think that's when it started hurting but otherwise it was really low key.

To deal with this, Zion would have a moment of being sad and then get over it; he did not confide in or seek support from others. Another moment of confusion for Zion was being called a sissy. At home he was doing yard work and masculine chores, so how could he be considered a sissy? All Zion wanted during this time, at seven, eight, and nine, was to be called his name by these boys but that was not happening; he learned how to deal with the taunting and exclusion by keeping his sadness and confusion to himself and keeping life moving so as to not let their insults and fluid relations hold him back.

Toward the end of elementary school, when Zion was nine, his family shifted from going to church on the major holidays to attending weekly. Though bored in church, Zion recalls that sexuality was brought up maybe once or twice, but when it was, it was presented as a sin.

The summer between fifth and sixth grade was one where Zion became intimate with a boy his age that was living in Zion's grandmother's neighborhood. Zion and this boy would play video games at Zion's house and "for about three weeks we were just normal friends play[ing] PlayStation or whatever." During one of their video game playing moments, the young boy asked Zion to grab his penis, Zion acknowledges he [Zion] "fully enjoyed it;" this would occur several times after the initial suggestion. A few days later the boy slept over and propositioned Zion to get out of his bed and meet him on the floor, and Zion agreed. He and Zion kissed, but once the young boy motioned for intercourse to occur, Zion declined and went back to his bed;

Zion was scared but excited and could not stop thinking about their moment. In the morning Zion confronted the young boy and decided he wanted to try intercourse but the young boy ignored Zion. Zion notes that he was “confused and then I never heard from him again.” For Zion there was no name for their interactions, but he knew he really liked this boy as more than just friends. This event speaks to the confusion and tension gays face because living in a heterosexist society (Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999; Rosenfeld, 2009), and as young children, they may have no language for what they are experiencing because their families and friends are not discussing same-sex attraction.

As Zion entered sixth grade the teasing moved from “sissy” to being called gay, Zion notes, “That’s when it actually started affecting me and it was dragging me down and building all these self-esteem issues.” Zion’s mannerisms were considered more feminine than masculine, even when his father tried to butch up his walk. Peers would say he walked gay, and for Zion this helped inform his understanding of the term gay: something effeminate and negative. However, as hurt as he may have felt, Zion did not find school to be a hostile environment and did not fear going. He found solace in his small group of friends, the gothic crowd. Out of his six friends, he was the “token Black gay guy and it was pretty rad.” At this time Zion confided in one girl that he was gay and once he saw her reaction, which was “oh, ok, so next;” he realized there was no fallout but still kept his sexual identity to himself because, “I really don’t [didn’t] know ten thousand percent what I really want[ed] in life.” This again demonstrates the sexual confusion and feelings Zion is forced to confront because being gay is not considered the norm as heterosexuality is considered “natural” and becomes “unquestioned” (Ingraham, 1994) thus making it difficult for one to understand and accept their “non-normative” identity.

While Zion was maneuvering his way through sixth and seventh grades, he joined chorus and there was a Black gay boy in chorus with whom he became fast friends; they ended up dating in high school. Zion's relationship with his father was not improving in middle school and only got worse when his father told him not to hang around the young boy from chorus. This came about when Zion had a solo performance one evening and met his parents afterwards; his father did not praise him nor acknowledge his solo but rather inquired about the young man who had a perm and styled in a feminine way, to which Zion's mom agreed but more out of deference to her husband. When Zion noted the boy was his friend, his father told him to "pick your friends wisely," which Zion knew was code for, do not hang around gay boys or feminine looking and acting boys. From seventh grade on, Zion knew to keep his personal life away from his parents.

As Zion began to understand his sexuality in middle school, his racial identity was also coming to the forefront. Sexuality was not discussed in Zion's home unlike race. Zion's father constantly told him and his siblings, a sister who is two years older and brother who is five years younger, to be proud of their Black heritage. His message was to remember they come from generations of Black people who have accomplished much including his cousin who was an instructor at a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). Also, during this time the family began to attend a predominately White church, in which Zion explains they became the token Black family and his father enjoyed providing an image of a perfect Black family for White congregants. Even though his father tried to instill pride in Black identity, this did not matter to Zion who explains:

I thought being Black just meant my skin is just a tad bit darker from everyone else's. I'm still the same, I can still be evil. I can still be nice...Nothing separates me from anyone else because of the color or amount of pigment that I have in my body.

Viewing race as only a matter of pigmentation is something that Zion has carried throughout his life, which has informed how he understands his intersecting racial and sexual identities to this day; for Zion race matters, but it should not, and he wants to be seen as human. Being seen as human, while laudable, ignores the understanding that racism is endemic in society and influences policies, laws, and how people interact with one another (Taylor, 2009).

Entering into middle school, Zion had a small group of White friends, but that changed in seventh grade. During seventh grade Zion joined an art club in which he was introduced to a lot more Black peers whom he befriended; there were Black peers who did not embody the negative stereotype of those who had teased Zion. This group of friends shared a similar interest in art and “were really chill.” Even though Zion confided in a friend about his sexuality, he was still questioning his sexuality, so he kept his feelings to himself. Therefore, he would engage in conversations about sex and females, causing his peers to question if Zion was gay or not; according to Zion, even if his mannerisms were considered feminine, he was making sexually explicit statements about females, thus his friends believed he was not gay and stuck up for him when he was teased. Zion enjoyed this because he was not left out of conversations, as he was in elementary school, and it allowed him to get people off his back:

That kinda made me feel a lot better because it was like now if people wanna ask me something all I have to do is say something about a vagina and they’ll think I’m straight. So, like that’s what I did for me from my seventh grade to ninth grade year... just [for] people to get off my dick.

Through this action, Zion employed a strategy of deflection and protection, one where he takes the focus off his perceived gay sexual identity from others and engages with his peers as if he is like them: he is too heterosexual, and is protecting himself from future bullying. Within this scenario, Zion has learned that his school is a place of heteronormativity and understands in order to survive he must play the part of a heterosexual.

In Zion's eighth grade year he was zoned to a new middle school, and life became a little easier for him as this school was populated by a Black population that had "been plucked right out of my life," since they were economically similar and shared the same values as his family. Eight grade became "the smoothest middle school year for me because it was just like nobody cared." By being around a Black population he identified with, as opposed to the Black peers at his other school who were tougher and focused more on presenting a "hard" masculine image, Zion was less focused on projecting a false heterosexual image.

High school and college became periods of self-empowerment for Zion. His family found out he was gay, he managed to *defy and transcend stereotypes* that have become the socially constructed narrative of Black gay males, build a *thick skin*, utilized the Internet for venting and meeting guys, and was able to create a support system through his friends. While high school marked a period of constructive evolution, an evolution where he began to accept his gay identity and meet other males online and disclose his sexuality with certain friends. This evolution began with an event that would alter the course of Zion's high school career, a forced coming-out by his father, in which Zion was required to find solace and support elsewhere.

Zion was in the midst of his freshman year and dating a guy who was, at the time, dating his friend from middle school chorus. They were dating for about two months and would talk on his cell phone "every night from like 8 am to like 3 o'clock in the morning." Two months into dating this young man, Zion added him on Facebook and his boyfriend would "like" photos and make comments on Zion's status updates. At this time Zion was friends with his mother and sister on Facebook, and his mother began to question this new person Zion had added as a friend. Within a few days Zion's sister was now friends with his boyfriend, but only because Zion's mother told her to add him and find out this person's connection to Zion. While confusing to



Zion, he began to suspect what was going on so he decided to confront his sister. He walked into her room and blurted out that the boy she added was his boyfriend; she responded that she smoked weed, which put Zion's mind at ease since she was considered the prodigal child and now they both had a bond: a secret to keep from their parents. The next day Zion was at school, he received a text message from his sister:

Momma and daddy went through your call record and kept seeing [boyfriend's] phone number. You can either (a) lie about it and say something I don't really know what you're gonna say but you can call me and we can figure something out or (b) you can tell them the truth.

Walking home from school Zion felt the weight of the world on his shoulders. When he entered his house he saw his father sitting in a chair with Zion's cell phone. Immediately Zion's father stated they had gone through the call record and found a number. His father told Zion to dial the phone number and put the phone on speaker. Once the receiver was picked up an effeminate male voice came out of the phone with the words: hey baby. At this moment his father flew into a rage and his mother came running from the other room:

And my dad just takes my phone and chucks it, and all hell breaks loose. My mom comes flying down the stairs. She's like "How come you didn't tell me?" She starts crying. My dad is just like "What does your little brother know about this? What have you been spreading? What have you been doing?"

Zion admitted this young man was his boyfriend and his father berated him using biblical scripture and told Zion "You've come from generations of strong Black men, just to spit on their graves and not even populate." From that moment on Zion was under strict punishment, including being sent to a therapist which did not last long, and he had many privileges taken away from him, including his cell phone. Zion pressed his father to admit he was punishing Zion simply because he liked boys. What struck Zion was how his father viewed him differently simply because he liked boys; Zion was still the same son his father knew, except now he was

attracted to males. The only comment Zion agreed with, and the one that has shaped his life, was when his father stated:

“As a Black man in today’s society you already have a disadvantage.” He was like: “You being gay and Black is already making it even more disadvantaged.” And I was like, you know that’s true, but when I hear things like that, especially when it’s applied to me because I’m the type of person that wants to make you eat your shit, like I just really like proving people wrong. So, it was just like when I heard him say that like from that moment on, I was just like I’m gonna make him eat those words, and I’m still on that mission.

The concern his father expresses comes from his knowledge and experiences that the United States is a racist society (Taylor, 2009) where Black people are faced with a double-consciousness: understanding and navigating the White dominated society while being devalued of their Blackness by the dominant White power structure (DuBois, 2003). However, Zion’s determination to prove his father wrong demonstrates his desire to not allow anyone to hold him back and will do what he can to not fall prey to a racist *and* homonegative society. Conjointly, Zion’s father may view being gay as a negative and an impediment but Zion refuses to buy into that logic and will use his experiences in life to prove his father wrong.

This explosive and unplanned coming out moment led Zion to one up his father and he began days of solitude where he spoke only to his sister and briefly to his mother. Since this was the wintertime, school had been cancelled due to bad weather so Zion had no outlet to turn to except his art. During his punishment, and beyond, Zion sought inspiration from such musical artists as Grace Jones and Erykah Badu, singers and personalities who are comfortable within their skin as they challenge society’s norms of gender and style, and thus have influenced how Zion approaches life. A few days passed and his father allowed him to have his computer back, at which time Zion began to engage with Tumblr, a website that “lets you effortlessly share anything. Post text, photos, quotes, links, music, and videos from your browser, phone, desktop,

email or wherever you happen to be. You can customize everything, from colors to your theme's HTML" (Tumblr, 2014, n.p.).

For three months Zion would go on Tumblr and express his feelings and share his story of coming out as he dealt with the aftermath. He had over 300 followers and people would ask him questions and support his postings, which boosted his self-esteem. To his own admission, Tumblr became a destructive space since he posted every personal detail of his life, and his sister talked him into ending his account. While initially a place to find support, and people sending messages to thank him for his story was beneficial, Tumblr quickly became a place of negativity; all Zion was doing was sharing the negative aspects of his life. Additionally, Zion became very proud of his gay identity and would go around telling people he was gay and tell guys they were cute. His sister took issue and forever influenced how Zion approached representing his sexuality:

My sister kinda like turned me around she was like "What are you doing?" And at first I got mad at her and I was like "I'm just being myself. But she was like "If you're gonna be yourself, be yourself. You don't have to go around and tell everyone, it's not a good thing, it's not a bad thing, like you don't have to brag about it, it's just a part of who you are." And I was just like "What?" And after ranting on Tumblr and doing all this extra shit it finally clicked like, oh I really don't have to be like "Guess what (in a gay voice)," I mean, I can, [and] I will at times but it's up to my discretion.

At this point the theme of *defying/transcending stereotypes* enters into his life history, for he was defying what it meant to be, according to society's narrow and binaristic definition, Black and gay: either feminine and flamboyant or thuggish and on the down low, thus reinforcing the idea that Black men are sexual deviants (Bowleg, 2011; Hill, 2009; Hill Collins, 2005). While in high school, which was predominately Black, there were no organizations for sexual minority youth, and as Zion remembers it, the few who were open with their sexuality in the beginning of high school slowly dwindled and Zion was one of very few openly gay youth by the time he

graduated. In school Zion was active in art programs and chorus. Many people enjoyed Zion's company and he made friends and counted on them as a source of support, since most knew he was gay and did not shun him or treat him any differently. One friend was his second cousin, who was also gay and whom his father did not like. They would discuss life in school and talk about those who they believed were gay. Though he had a support system there were those who continued to tease him for being gay and one day Zion had had enough.

By the end of tenth grade Zion was out to his family, friends, and most of his peers. One day in the cafeteria a young man called Zion gay in front of everyone and Zion had enough:

He called me gay and tried to make a scene of it in the lunchroom. He did it really dramatically. He was like "Hey look at this fag blah blah blah." And I was like "Oh, I'm a faggot? Ok, but I'm sleeping with your brother and I'm definitely sucking you up and I would suck you up too. So, like are there any takers?" And I did it and it was a very large crowd that I did it in front of, and like no one could say anything because it's like, he knows what?...The only thing that you have on me is gay, what next?... Then like in that moment it was just like all those past times, the bullying and the annoying boys and just it all just clicked and it was just like, ok. And then eleventh and twelfth grade years were the best years of my high school life because literally no one fucked with me.

At this point, Zion's sexuality became the focus for ridicule and not his racial identity, for which he was able to employ *racial shelving*: race became a secondary concern as his sexuality took precedence; though I do not doubt there is possibly an element of ridicule because his classmates might have believed Black men are not gay, which became the impetus for the teasing, Zion was not ridiculed or treated differently by his Black peers solely for his racial identity. A far cry from when he was in elementary and middle school, Zion had built up a *thick skin*, a "and what?" attitude, to confront those who continued to tease him. Concurrently, while at school Zion made friends with office staff and turned to two teachers for support, a male and female teacher neither of which were gay; through this *experiential evolution* he began to view adults as figures of support, which differed from what he believed due to his interactions with his parents. The male

teacher became his surrogate dad since Zion did not feel like he had a dad. At one point the teacher surprised Zion with a birthday party in class where he bought a rainbow cookie cake in honor of his gay identity; this brought Zion to tears because an adult showed interest in him and embraced his sexuality.

High school provided Zion with more freedom to express his sexuality and at the same time the Internet (i.e. Facebook) allowed Zion to speak with different guys and form relationships. Zion dated several different guys in high school, none from his own school except the boy from chorus, and he would see them a few times a month. Senior year Zion got his cell phone back and many heterosexual identified males would contact him on his phone to see if he would draw them something, but inevitably, a few text messages into their conversation, these males would inquire about what it was like to have sex with a male. Therefore, Zion became the proxy, the guinea pig for males who were fluid in and trying to understand their sexuality. Conjointly, power was being wielded by Zion his senior year, the power to get these guys sexually and threaten them with their text messages if they dared to taunt him. By the end of senior year though, Zion was ready to leave high school as he tired of being the guinea pig to sexually satisfy other males.

Meanwhile at home Zion still battled his father. In one confrontation, his father questioned his relationship with a male friend who was not gay since his father assumed this young man must be gay; Zion proceeded to stand up for himself by challenging his father to rethink his comments and asked his father if he believed Zion was out on the town being sexually active with everyone in sight. This confrontation again demonstrated Zion pushing back on stereotypes of a gay male, stereotypes to which he believed his father subscribed. Though Zion was close with his mother, he misjudged their relationship when she brought him to school

and he told her that he wanted her to meet this guy he had a crush on. She broke down in tears and did not want to meet him.

In order to successfully and productively make it through high school, Zion turned many places for support: sister, cousin, best friends, teachers, and found solace in musical artists, a movie titled *But I'm a Cheerleader*, and the "It Gets Better" campaign highlighting one of his favorite singers and songwriters, Sia. He found inspiration in the way Sia discussed her bisexuality, that it was nobody's business and she will be who she wants to be and identify how she wants to identify regardless of others' opinions.

When Zion reached college he found the place very diverse and full of people who did not care about what one was doing or how they were identifying; this became very liberating for Zion. He began to explore different parts of the city and the gay scene, where he was using social media to meet men. Overall Zion enjoyed the freedom to be himself and not care if others were judging him, something that was always in his mind back at home. In fact Zion has noted that in conjunction with the "It Gets Better" campaign there should be a "Who Cares?" campaign, which teaches youth to not let other peoples' opinions of them hold them back from being authentic to themselves and their identity. This idea came to him when he reached college because he believes that in high school so many people care about what others think, they are trying to fit in, but in college the opposite has been true for Zion. In other words, why waste one's time worrying about others when at the end of the day their opinion means very little, so one should do what feels right for them.

Currently, Zion is doing all he can to finish college and share his artwork with the world via social media and proving to his childhood peers that he is making it regardless of the taunts he received. At this point in life Zion has learned from his experiences and evolved into a self-

assured Black gay man. He no longer worries about what people will say about him because he does not want to get entrapped in the messiness, drama, and extraneous aspects he sees within the Black gay community and other stereotypes that define Black gay males (e.g. feminine and/or down low homo thugs). Last, when Zion uses social media he is self-determined by sharing and selling his artwork and gaining new clients in the process. Additionally, he uses social media to present to the world his individualism, letting everyone know that he stands out in a crowd and does not care what others think about his actions. All of these components taken together show that Zion is not that meek little boy who is conscious of his walk and talk, but rather he has a walk of pride and confidence, if he “lacks” the butchness desired by his father. A slight swish in his step lets the world know he is here with little fear.

Zion’s life history was chosen to open this chapter as it embodies all of the themes found in studying the five participants’ lives: *racial shelving, thick skin, defying/transcending stereotypes, experiential evolution, and self-determination*. His life history is used as a window into the life of a Black gay male productively navigating through school and society and acts as a bridge to connect life histories to experiences within the following institutions: school, family, church, peers, community-based LGBTQ organizations in Atlanta, and social media. Community-based LGBTQ organizations did not play a factor influencing their growth, except for Charlie; he has become a part of an organization at a university his boyfriend and cousin attend but since his K-12 schooling experiences and his first year at college have greatly influenced an understanding of his identities, he did not go into detail about how this organization has influenced how he understands his intersecting identities. Also, the role of Black Gay Pride in Atlanta presented itself as a place where most of the participants have ventured and learned about the community; Zion, Tae, and Slick Rick did not know Black Gay

Pride existed while in high school, but have since attended, while Theodore and Charlie attended at least once while in high school.

Five participants who met the selected criteria were chosen for the study. Charlie is a 21 year old who grew up with a younger brother, a mother, and for a short time his stepfather, in a county that borders Atlanta's city limits. Close to his mother, Charlie also has a close relationship with his two aunts and grandmother, all who know he is gay though he has never officially come-out to them. Currently, Charlie attends a college in Atlanta but has taken a year off and has a boyfriend of over a year. Slick Rick is 24 years old and grew up in a socially conservative suburban town about 45 minutes from Atlanta. His parents are first generation immigrants from a West African country, and he has a slightly younger brother and a much younger sister. On a hiatus from college in Atlanta, Slick Rick works full-time and lives with his parents, to whom he has not disclosed his sexual orientation. Tae is an only child who was 23 at the time of the interviews. His mother moved him down to live with her parents in a socially conservative community in metro-Atlanta when he was in second grade; she moved down while he was in middle school and he either lived with her or continued to live with his grandparents, their only grandchild. Presently, Tae is enrolled in a university in Atlanta. Theodore is 19 and moved to Atlanta in the fifth grade from a northern city. One of five boys, Theodore was raised in a socially conservative community about 30-45 minutes outside of Atlanta by his biracial mother and her White husband, but they divorced soon after they arrived in Georgia. Zion, 20, grew up in a suburban metro-Atlanta county with his parents and sister and brother, and is currently attending a university in Atlanta and living with his boyfriend.

### **School**



All the participants attended schools in the suburbs of Atlanta; almost all were living in conservative leaning counties. The location of these schools, whether in a socially conservative community, economically privileged or disinvested in community, and/or a predominantly Black or racially mixed community, influenced the social environment that existed within each school and how the participants were treated based on their racial identity, perceived sexuality, and acknowledged sexuality once they were “out.” For Zion, Charlie, and Tae elementary school was not pleasant as they were teased and called gay or sissy. This hurt them, since they did not understand the term gay, so they were unsure why the term was being thrown at them. Additionally, the demographics of the school factored into their overall experience; in almost every instance elementary school was racially mixed while middle and high schools became more segregated with one race dominating. Due to the influence of these schools, almost all of the themes: racial shelving, thick skin, defying/transcending stereotypes, and experiential evolution, were present in middle and high schools. In many of these schools race and anything that was not heterosexuality or anything that did not conform to traditional gender roles were not discussed, thus reinforcing a heteronormative and raceless environment in middle and high school, where the demographic shift for most participants become less racially diverse than their elementary school.

### *Racial Shelving*

Elementary school was a place where race became more salient because the schools were more racially mixed. However, as the participants evolved and progressed through schools they became less concerned of their race and had a greater understanding of race through social media or media images. Racial shelving is a term that has emerged from the data that I use to explain the participants who were in majority Black schools and for them race was not a central issue;

rather their sexual identification became the issue, so they shelved their racial identity for the time being. Within these schools, the participants did not believe they were encountering a racist climate but instead were facing Black peers and, for Tae, Zion, and Theodore, Black teachers or coaches who were either supportive of their sexuality and did not make it an issue or who provided subtle messages that Black males should not be gay or that they should not flaunt their “gayness.”

While in elementary school several participants began to realize that their racial identity was a marker of difference from their White teachers and peers. Charlie remembers that he would often be in a class with a few other Black students and they banded together because of their racial categorization. For Theodore moving from an exclusively Black neighborhood and school in a northern city to a White suburb of Atlanta, race became an issue. While his mother was biracial and his then step-father was White, Theodore was taught to understand and appreciate his Black heritage, and since his school in the northern city was all Black he did not have to confront racist beliefs:

I never really thought about it as a kid because that’s [Black people] all I was surrounded by. I never really seen [*sic*] White people, I mean even though my step-dad was a White man, and I consider him as my dad, but at that age [elementary school] I wasn’t really thinking about race like that, it was just like: oh, he’s White, he[’s] the only White person, that I’ve been around.

When he arrived in Georgia in the fifth grade Theodore encountered a White classmate that made him realize race mattered and that life for him in Georgia would be different:

It [moving to Georgia] was a huge difference, a huge transition and I can remember I used to get into fights with little White boys because of race. My fifth grade year this boy called me a “nigger,” and I almost killed him. It was a huge change because it [there] was [were] what, one or two Black kids in the class and then all the rest White kids?

What becomes interesting in Theodore's life history, due to the fact he was called a "nigger," is that, like Zion, he had crushes on the White boys, and when he began dating in middle and high school, he exclusively dated White males. Theodore and Zion both had negative images and perceptions of Black gay males, with whom they did not want to associate. Therefore, *their* racial identity, *their* Blackness, was not an issue they wanted to focus on, and their racial identity was shelved because they liked what they liked: White males. However, as they explained, they did not like the images of Black gay males so their attraction to White males partly grew out of a distancing from the stereotype of Black gay males in media.

As the participants entered middle and high school their understandings and ideas of race began to shift. Whether they interacted with a racially mixed group of friends or chatted with one specific racial group on the Internet, race became something that many agreed should not matter because they felt forced to subscribe to stereotypes of the Black community; in my view many have taken a humanist approach to life and identification. In explaining how he viewed race, Charlie points out that he was not into things that many people perceive to be stereotypically Black or that all Black people must do, such as watching *The Color Purple* or *Love & Basketball*:

I was like: what is Black? Like I'm just a skin color. I didn't think that we had to be completely different [from Whites] because of our skin color; that threw me. I was just like: So, I can't like rock music because I'm Black? I can't wear certain clothes because I'm Black. I didn't know there had to be such a racial separation. Our skin colors are already different. What more do we need? It's just enough.

Charlie was not alone in his assessment of how he understood race to affect him in school. In Tae's early life history, he did not feel he was different from his peers in school because of his Blackness. Instead, Tae did not fit in because he was not into sports or girls like almost everyone else at school appeared to be. Through his encounters in school Tae saw Black

to mean one was hood or cool and they were intolerant of people who did not have the same mentality or ways; this is something that he would see through high school and college, which influenced how he understood the Black community. Nonetheless, Tae created his own ideas of what Black and White meant as a kid:

Black to me didn't mean anything at all. It didn't. White didn't have anything, Black didn't have anything. I saw everybody for what they were. I never had a judgment or visual perception as I do now. I consciously did not have that grasp.

Because he was unconscious of race, Tae unknowingly shelved race as being an issue in his early years. When Tae entered a predominately Black high school, he joined band and found a close group of Black sexual majority males. High school was not easy for Tae but he found a support system that helped him realize that not all Black sexual majority males were homonegative or intolerant, as these friends supported him through his turbulent coming out process. Thus, it was his sexuality and lack of liking male-dominated things that marked Tae as different from his Black male peers.

Slick Rick's understandings of race differed from all of the others because he comes from a home of immigrant parents. Both of his parents were raised in a West African nation and ideas of race were illuminated when he entered majority White schools with a fair amount of Black students. Although not affected by not being like his native Black peers, he understood that he lived in an African household with different values. In a racially mixed school, Slick Rick observed all the White students sitting together at lunch and all the Black students sitting together, but did not pay much attention as he saw these as students' own choice. Slick Rick grappled more with understanding his sexuality, something he did not begin to explore until high school, because he saw negative images of gay people being bashed on television and saw his mother cringe whenever a gay person came on television.

### *Defying/Transcending Stereotypes*

Whether stereotypes were racial, sexual, or a combination of both, all participants refused to fit into the narrow narratives of being Black and gay: one is either on the down low homothug or one is a sissy and exuding feminine characteristics (Hill Collins, 2005). To the participants, this binary was too restricting and never represented who they were. Therefore, all of them defied/transcended stereotypes and presented themselves much like their sexual majority peers, with the only difference being they were attracted to males.

Even though Charlie and Slick Rick attended separate schools, they both encountered gays who embodied the feminine characteristics often presented as what defines a Black gay male. Both Charlie and Slick Rick watched as the person proceeded through school and was bullied by other students, students who did not appreciate challenging the heteronormative and socially rigid gendered school culture. When this person entered Charlie's school he remembers him carrying a purse and was quick with his words and to fight anyone who dared to challenge him. For Charlie, this person caused confusion on how Black gay males were to act, since Charlie did not present himself in this manner:

I was confused, I was like: why you just so extra? I was just confused...it was funny to me too, I was just like: is this how I'm supposed to act? Is this gay? Is this what gay people do?

Though not fitting into the feminine stereotype himself, Charlie appreciated this young male for being authentic and true to himself. However, Charlie did not find the need to fit any stereotype:

Putting both together and having to fight to prove that I am gay and Black but I don't have to fit into your stereotype, cause if I'm gay and Black I have to carry a purse, be flamboyant, get a whole bunch of weave all that stuff. I have to be a thug and be on the down low. I can't be in the middle because I'm gay and I'm Black. You know people like me and my significant other, we have to fight to be like: we're gay but we're not one or the other.

Slick Rick encountered a male at his school that challenged ideas of race, gender, and sexuality. In his conservative majority White school, this young Black gay male came in wearing high heels and was, to Slick Rick's assessment, effeminate. He appreciated this young male's ability to be himself if that meant wearing socially constructed ideas of female attire:

He was a cross dresser, he wore heels. Black homosexual out queen, some days he would just wear his red pumps, and be pumpin around these high school hallways. And of course being from [town name], these White people, they don't know what [how] to deal with that. That created an uproar. Maybe in that instance, maybe I heard some not so friendly words or whatever like "He's doing too much." But then again that didn't really faze me too much. That wasn't my style, like I have no desire to be in female clothing or shoes or accessories well maybe like a bracelet.

Like nothing like that. But that's just me. I never had a problem with [male]. I actually ended up being somewhat of a friend with him.

Thus for Slick Rick, even though he was still trying to understand his sexuality in high school and nobody but his best friend knew what he was going through, he knew that he was never going to be like this young male because for Slick Rick being Black and gay did not mean he had to be effeminate. Furthermore, Slick Rick, in what became a theme throughout his school years, befriended this out male and refused to let ignorant attitudes of others influence how he treated an openly gay person; this could also be attributed to the fact that Slick Rick never heard his close group of friends speak ill of gays, however, he never came out to any friends until after high school.

### *Thick Skin/Experiential Evolution*

One component to successfully negotiating through school for participants rested in their ability to build up a thick skin, an "I do not care anymore what you think" attitude; these were all experiences that helped them evolve into creating a thick skin. Referring back to Zion's life history, he relied too much on what people thought about him before he finally decided, enough is enough, I have been bullied too long and calling me gay is no longer effective at bringing me

down because I admit I am gay, everyone knows I am gay. Within schools, all participants noted that theirs was not a friendly environment for sexual minority youth; only at Theodore's school where he transferred during his senior year, did he feel that LGBT students were welcomed and accepted and thus did not have to utilize his thick skin:

They were very open at [second high school], and I really enjoyed my experience. I could be open, I can like actually tell people... Whatever you wanted to be they supported it no matter what. So, it wasn't a judgmental school like how [first high school] was.

At his first school Theodore decided he would join the GSA but quickly became disillusioned. Not only was the group made up almost entirely of White females, a pattern documented by McCready (2010), but the organization did not discuss sexuality; instead the organization was doing community service work but Theodore wanted an organization where he could discuss the issues affecting LGBT youth in their school, so he left after the first few meetings.

Many participants noted that the ridicule they received meant nothing once their families knew they were gay; for Theodore even though his peers did not tease him, he still did not care what people thought as long as his mom supported him. Tae explains that his thick skin was built more from the interactions he had at school. Due to being teased by his Black peers in school for being gay, Tae found this to be the stereotype of the ignorant homonegative Black person, which led him to building a thick skin. Conversely, he found support in his Black sexual majority friends who became his surrogate brothers. In explaining his relationship with the Black community, Tae admits he did not have a strong connection:

I never had a strong Black culture, interaction growing up. I went to mixed schools, mostly Black but, I don't necessarily care for the Black culture, not sayin like because I hate but it's because it has negative stereotypes, [be]cause a lot of the actions they do is [sic] unnecessary, a lot of their views is [sic] completely unnecessary. It's like you're so judgmental for what reason? It's like church. You're judgmental of things around you that have nothing to do with you, so why would I wanna be a part of a group like that? No, Black friends that I have now, they're accepting and they're not judgmental. That's why

I'm best friends with them because they're not judgmental. But the Black culture itself is very close-minded and it's judgmental, I don't wanna be a part of it.

Tae presents how the theme of racial shelving works in conjunction with thick skin. He often feels rejected by the Black community, save his friends, because he is gay:

So, regardless what my skin is, if I know I'm gay, "Oh, fuck you being Black, nigga you gay." And then you disowned right there. I don't got time for that. You not gonna hurt my feelings or destroy who I worked so hard to become because I'm not straight.

However, when Tae entered college he still had negative beliefs about the Black community but that is shifting due to a course he has taken in Black studies. He is evolving, understanding, and appreciating the history of his community, a history he often did not associate with. Last, in a moment similar to Zion confronting his bullies in high school, Tae was tired of one peer teasing him. Finally, Tae confronted a young male after school in their neighborhood and beat him up. From that moment forward nobody messed with Tae.

Charlie's mother was tired of hostile school environments, where he would confront teachers when he believed they were disrespectful to him, so she moved him to other schools during middle and high school; these transfers, evolutionary experiences, helped Charlie become "strong" and build thick skin because he had to adapt to new environments. In middle school his mother transferred him because he was getting into fights and Charlie was dating some guys at the first middle school. In order for him to stop focusing on these guys, she told him not to act up and "[D]on't go to this school and do what you did at the other school." Charlie believed it had to do with his sexuality, but he and his mother never spoke about it outright. By the time Charlie entered high school he and his middle school friends drifted apart and they were no longer friends. Being theatrical, Charlie did not fit into this new high school, and his mother transferred him to a theatre-based high school. In both schools, though more accepted at the theatrical high school, Charlie was still dealing with issues of insecurity and being looked down upon by others



because of his sexuality. In order to ease his pain Charlie began to cut himself without his friends knowing:

I started cutting myself because I was so like just gone. I say the reason why I did it because it was the only pain I could control. I was so distraught about being gay and being confused why it was so wrong. And then having my mom look at me like I'm crazy.

Once he reached bottom he realized he was a strong person and was able to tap into the attitude of not caring what others thought. Charlie's thick skin took hold when he entered college and had to deal with life on his own hundreds of miles away from home. The building of the thick skin also shows Charlie's evolution from an insecure young male to someone who has dealt with and learned a lot.

The participants' experiences in school helped them build a thick skin; they evolved into being themselves, not fitting into stereotypes of what it meant to be Black and gay, and were able to make a place for themselves within school even if they believed others were judging them. In order to evolve most had to step-back and learn from others, friends and family, that they were accepted regardless of how they identify. From this evolution came the freedom to date or have romantic encounters with males in and out of school, for some in the same fashion as their sexual majority peers. While oftentimes these were not broadcast throughout the school, the mere ability to talk to these males within school or hold their hands, demonstrates an evolution in how comfortable they were becoming with their intersecting identities. In some instances experiencing how others who identified as gay or lesbian were treated within their school, allowed them to maneuver through without cause for much commotion or without having to act a certain way that people perceive gay males to act, thus being themselves.

One aspect of school that was touched upon by Charlie, Tae, Zion, and briefly by Theodore, was the role certain teachers played in their lives. In many ways the teachers either

knew or suspected the participant was gay and treated them the same as if they were not gay, which was appreciated by the participants because they did not feel “othered” or that the teacher was taking pity upon them. These relationships I am calling surrogate parents, which is similar to Irvine’s (2003) notion of “Other Mothers” to describe the familial relationship Black students have with Black teachers. I have placed these surrogate parents within the theme of experiential evolution because as they experienced these relationships, the participants evolved in how they viewed some adults and teachers: not all were judgmental and they shifted the conventional understanding of the teacher/student relationship. In all but Slick Rick’s history, the participants found a teacher or a coach who they could talk to or who accepted them for who they were, who allowed them to be themselves within their classroom. What the experiences with these teachers taught them is: (a) not all adults are judgmental and homonegative and (b) that their teachers are human, they are more than facilitators of learning. Charlie found comfort in several teachers, one of whom is a White butch lesbian, something Charlie had never seen; he was used to seeing Black butch lesbians. To see her be herself provided Charlie with an example that one should not let others’ opinions dictate how one presents themselves or hide for fear of being themselves. Zion found his art teacher to be his surrogate father since his strained relationship with his father forced him to look elsewhere for support. Tae found comfort in his male step coach noting, “he knew about me but he was completely supportive of it. He didn’t care, he’s very calm and ‘Ok.’ That was the support I needed, he’s like a father figure to me.” In one instance the female step coach confronted Tae and told him to not flaunt his sexuality; this was much to Tae’s confusion since he was not flamboyant and was never vocal about his sexuality. Due to the thick skin he was building through his experiential evolution, he managed to brush off her comments and instead turned to his male coach for support.

Even though Theodore had support at home from his mother, his mother's boyfriend, and most of his siblings, he found his track coach and a teacher, both at his second high school, to be supportive and let him know he could be himself. When he arrived at the second high school Theodore did not hide his sexuality and one teacher told him "Boy I been knew [*sic*]." What surprised Theodore the most was that he must have been giving off a "gay vibe" and he wondered what these vibes looked like but more importantly this experience taught him "it's also a relief too because I feel like you [female teacher] still treating [*sic*] me the same, like you didn't treat me any different because you thought of me being gay." Being an athlete Theodore did not have to fear his teammates because they all supported him and never made his sexuality an issue. However, when he entered his new high school senior year he feared his track coach, a former Olympian. His fear of how his coach would react was warranted but disappeared when he joined the team. A year after he left high school, Theodore explains this experience and what this coach means to him but more importantly what Theodore taught his coach:

"I'm [coach] so thankful to have you in my life." He was like "You have opened up my eyes to a lot of different things." He's like "I would have never thought in a million years that I woulda had a gay athlete that's openly gay and isn't different than my straight athlete."

While not free of the judgment from all in school, and not always able to express themselves based on the social context, these experiences allowed the participants the chance to learn how to be comfortable in their skin and, by the time they were engrossed in college, worry less about what their peers thought of them; they loved themselves and they knew there were people out there who were not judging them based solely on their sexual identification.

### **Family**

Each participant's family helped define how the participant understood their intersecting identities. While analyzing and interpreting their life history, their coming out stories have had a

profound effect on relationships with family. Oftentimes, they realized that once their parents or family knew, they did not care who else knew. Of all of the participants, Tae, Zion, and Theodore were forced to come out. Charlie has never had the official coming out moment with his mom but she has met his current boyfriend and, according to Charlie, always knew he was gay. Slick Rick is not out to his family because he believes there is no reason to tell his parents or siblings.

### *Thick Skin*

Due to the forced coming out of several participants, a thick skin had to have been built. In other words, once they were forced to come out because their family found out on their own accord, like Theodore and Zion, or whether they felt the need to tell them because of a threat (Tae's ex-boyfriend threatened to tell his mother of their relationship), they built a thick skin because coming out was so difficult for fear of being rejected; since rejection did not occur for most, and I would note that even in Zion's situation his father did not kick him out of the house so he was not physically rejected outright, they were at their lowest most vulnerable and mustered up the strength to rebuild themselves up and be confident and proud of their sexuality.

Theodore grew thick skin when he encountered his brothers who constantly mocked him for being gay, even before he officially came out. Unlike at school, Theodore's brothers teased him at home. One of four males, Theodore and his brothers are close in age, and they played sports together and talked about females, yet that did not stop them from calling Theodore gay. Conjointly, when Theodore would see gay males he would go out of his way to express his disgust, just so his brothers would not believe he was gay. The influence this teasing had on him made him build a thick skin:

I mean it [teasing] used to hurt my feelings, especially when they used to be like "faggot" or whatever, it used to really hurt my feelings. So, I think that's why I just

really tried to like, like girls and force myself and try to act all masculine and stuff like that...I remember one time in New Orleans and you know how one side of the strip of Bourbon Street is gay and the other side isn't. And my brothers used to just always make jokes like "Theodore maybe you need to go down that way and we'll go down this way."

These moments influenced Theodore to take on a masculine persona so that his brothers would stop teasing him and not feel like an outcast, even if they were getting along. While he was accommodating his brothers and was forced to conceal his gay identity, his actions influenced his building of a thick skin: he had battled his brothers so he could handle almost anything that came his way.

### *Evolutionary Experience*

All participants but Theodore grew up in households where homosexuality was not discussed. In some homes when the topic of sexuality presented itself or images of gay males were on the television, some parents had visceral reactions. Slick Rick learned through his mother's reactions to gays on television that homosexuality was wrong. These reactions and experiences with his mother influenced him in that he does not think he will ever be able to tell his family he is gay:

SR: Just anytime a gay scene or something [was on] my mom would react violently like "Ughhhhh, that's so nasty" or "Why?" or I mean she wouldn't go on a rant about it but she would definitely react.

M: So, what did you think when you saw your mother do that?

SR: That she didn't like gay people.

M: So, what influence did that have on you?

SR: Well, then I don't wanna be gay because my mother's not gonna like me.

Theodore's experience differed because he moved to the Atlanta metro-area from a large northern city when he was in fifth grade and his mother would always talk about Atlanta as a

place where gays lived. While this excited Theodore, he also heard his mother make claims that she did not understand being gay but that it was a person's lifestyle choice and could not judge them. While in the suburbs Theodore did not see gay males but was more accustomed, as was the case in the northern city too, to seeing lesbians. Out of all of the participants' family members, Theodore's mother was the most progressive and supportive of his sexual identity, however she still made comments that influenced Theodore into thinking gay meant having a wife or girlfriend and having a man on the side; she subscribed to the notion that gay males live down low lives. This came from the fact that her sister was with a man who cheated on her with a man. For Theodore this experience, as well as watching *Brokeback Mountain* and seeing men cheating on their wives, were influential because:

M: To you gay meant you can still be sleeping with a man but marry a woman and sleep with her at the same time

T: Mmm hmm [agree]

M: Yes or no?

T: Yes, and I think that's what my mom always said.

M: So to you gay, I'm just curious and correct me if I'm wrong and maybe not at this time, gay didn't always have to be equated with two men living in their house.

T: Mmm hmm [agree]

Additionally, his mother was disappointed he did not tell her when his family found out he was gay. When Theodore was dating a guy who lived almost an hour away, his mother wanted to meet him the day before she went in for an important surgery. Though nerve wracking, the meeting was successful and his mother would constantly tell family members that she did not care what they thought about Theodore and his boyfriend: she loved Theodore and if they were mad that was on them. From this experience Theodore learned that his mother's love and

support, a love he had known since he can remember, was not wavering, and he knew that was the only support he needed and did not care what others thought. Conversely, his immediate older brother was the one who was told by a friend that Theodore was gay, after she found him on MySpace and noticed his interest was in males and females, and he has had the most difficult time coming to grips with Theodore's sexuality; this has caused a strain in their relationship but Theodore does not dwell on this because he has the support from every other family member.

When Tae moved to his grandparents' house in an Atlanta suburb as a seven year old, it was not easy. The time away from his mother was very tough on Tae and he cried often waiting for her to come. As an only child, he had a close relationship with his grandparents and aunt and uncle who were always around; his father was jailed and he had little contact with him. Around sixth grade a White boy lived in his neighborhood and had come to Tae's house to play as he always had. In the midst of playing in the basement, Tae and the young boy became sexually intimate, at the friend's request, as this young boy performed oral sex on Tae. During this act Tae's grandmother walked in and "that was an uproar." These two were no longer allowed to see one another and this influenced Tae because due to his grandparents' reaction, he knew this was a very bad thing. Thus, Tae refrained from any sexual contact with males until he was in high school.

As a 16 year old Tae was dating an older man, whom he met online, but nobody in his family was aware. Once the relationship soured the man threatened to tell Tae's family, thus prompting Tae to tell his mother. With his best female friend and her mother by his side, and with their encouragement, he told his mother. She cried and worried about his health, but Tae was ashamed and fell into a deep depression. Throughout this forced coming out experience, Tae's friends told him to either snap out of his depression or stop being their friend. Therefore,

Tae found the courage within himself to crawl out of the depression because he knew his life was not over. This experience taught him that he was strong, that his family would still love him and be supportive, even if they had agreed never to discuss his sexuality.

Even though Charlie has never had the official coming out to his mother and other close family members, save his cousin who is close to his age and gay, his mother's beliefs on sexuality have been influential. Being a woman with devout religious beliefs, she believed it was a phase, and sent Charlie to several therapists. Shuffling between several different therapists during his early teenage years, Charlie was unfazed by these people until he met one Black male who was a "former homosexual," who now had a wife. Meeting with this therapist was refreshing for Charlie because the therapist, although attributing his homosexuality to being touched as a child, could relate to what Charlie was going through. During family sessions the therapist would provide a space for Charlie and his mother to get things in the open, although there was no official coming out during these sessions. Recent events have led Charlie to note that the relationship with his mother, whom he loves dearly and respects, is less than perfect. Even though she was willing to meet his current boyfriend and his boyfriend's parents, this has proved too much for her:

I was just told that I was an outcast in my house as [of a] few weeks ago and it's hard to think about cause you know that's supposed to be your mother, supposed to love you unconditionally but find out that her love has conditions. My aunts, they're like "Do you boo boo, I'm with you regardless.

In terms of understanding their racial identity, all participants had family members tell them the difference between White and Black and in the case of Slick Rick, a teaching that he must never forget and appreciate the heritage of his parents' origin. For the participants, understanding a difference between the races caused confusion because they had White friends in school or dated White boys. Since Theodore's mother was biracial and had a White husband,



she was not close with her White family members except her mother, and made it her mission to teach them to be proud of their Black heritage. Tae's experience with his grandfather sums up how several participants were taught and grappled with race:

I would hear them say like "White people this, White people that." My grandfather was really the main one who said "White people and Black people, White people always doing something to the Black people." And it was angry but I never understood why. I never had an issue cause one of my best friends is White growing up.

### *Self-Determination*

Since the participants lived in households where sexuality was rarely discussed, many of them took the initiative to learn about being gay. In short, they established self-determination, seeking information through friends, the Internet, or other family members, most notably cousins (Zion and Charlie). The most frequent place to learn about being gay, whether it was sex or the community, was through social media. I will go into greater detail in the section on social media, but I bring it up here because their families were not having a supportive talk about being gay, except Theodore's mother who told him he should tell her if he was gay, which he never did. Accordingly, the participants sought out information online or through friends and/or boyfriends. For all of the participants, when their families would say something disparaging about gay people, albeit not very often, they did not take their family's word but rather aimed to find out for themselves whether their family's assessments or comments were valid.

### **Church**

For the Black community, religion and the Black church are cited as important aspects of the community (West & Gaulde, 2003), but not all of the participants attended church or came from religious families. Three out of the five participants attended church regularly as children and teenagers. For those that did attend, their association with church influenced how they understood their sexuality as race was rarely discussed or they do not remember it being

discussed. While he never attended church, Theodore was influenced by his biological father's family's negative attitudes toward gays, as they were churchgoing people. Tae remembers going maybe five times as child but was never forced to go. The few times he did attend he remembers being influenced by the preacher's negative sermon. Zion began to attend church once his father returned home to the family and became more interested in having his family attend. Slick Rick is the only one who regularly attended church from childhood, and does to this day, but noted that if the church discussed homosexuality he was unaware because as a kid he did not know the meaning of homosexuality. Based on their interactions within the church, thick skin and defying/transcending stereotypes were the two dominant themes.

### *Thick Skin*

Charlie's life was the most tied to the church, as he was a self-proclaimed soldier for Christ. He notes that his father's family held many different posts in the church and this influenced him, even if his interactions with his father were sporadic. Church was Charlie's life and some of his best friends came out of the church. In one instance, Charlie remembers being in his early teens and telling his pastor's daughter he was bisexual. During church the issue of homosexuality, which did not come up often, was discussed along with an exchange Charlie had with the pastor and his wife:

“Charlie we need to talk to you about something [our daughter/Charlie's friend] told us” and I was like “Oh, I hate you. I hate you [daughter/friend] so much” but you know they were just like “Uh, maybe you're confused, maybe you're just going through something, one day you'll come back to the Lord.” And I was just like “I'm with him now. We talked the other day, we homies. Like I don't understand what you're talking about.”

This interaction did not faze Charlie because he knew the Bible and knew homosexuality is not wrong and not mentioned in the New Testament. Due to this interaction, Charlie was continuing

to build his thick skin: he was forced to defend himself against an adult he respected and he would not let them plant seeds of doubt of his sexuality in his mind.

Since Theodore did not attend church the church indirectly influenced him. While living in the northern city, his churchgoing relatives would equate homosexuality with hell, which forced Theodore to grapple with what his sexuality meant, “The older people would be like “Oh, yeah they’re going to hell,” and stuff like that. So, I never wanted to go to hell so I used to always try to erase the thoughts of being gay.” Ultimately, this influenced him to create a thick skin because by listening to these religious family members, he had to find it somewhere in himself to reject their beliefs, even after he tried to erase the thoughts of being gay from his mind. Theodore built an armor around himself, one that deflected those who believed he and other gays were committing sin.

The few times that Tae attended church as a child he was greatly influenced by the bigotry coming from the pulpit. While not directed at his sexuality, Tae was turned off by the church because of their anti-gay messaging:

Church it started young, I don’t remember going so much but when I did go, I felt bad. I felt a pressure on me that was heavy. And the times they did touch on it, it was very judgmental and it was very negative and hypocritical and always heard like “If you gay you going to hell. If you did anything like that, you sinned and you need to be baptized and everything like that.” It was very looked down upon, very negative.

Like Theodore, Tae was under the impression that if one was gay they were going to hell, which made him feel shame. This experience led to him building a thick skin because he knew their negativity and attacks were ignorant and he was not going to let them bring him down.

### *Defying/Transcending Stereotypes*

While not overtly stated, I found these experiences in church to set the stage for the participants to defy the image and idea of homosexuality being wrong. In other words, because

they were told, even if infrequently, that their sexual identity, was wrong and that the sexual act was the problem, they transcended stereotypes that gay was only about sex; these participants demonstrated that their sexual identity was much greater than the physical and as they grew, they were part of a community of other gay males who were more than sexual partners.

### **Peers**

One of the most influential and important aspects of the participants' life history were the friends they made and the support system they created. Whether they were teased in elementary school and had little to no friends or they were well liked by everyone, it took time for the participants to get into the rhythm of building a close support system of friends where they were accepted without fear and judgment and could be themselves. I explore the themes experiential evolution and self-determination within the institution of peers because for the participants they learned that their friends would not reject them based on their gay identity and many grew to understand that they did not need to have only gay friends to feel supported. Simultaneously, many of the participants were strong enough to take the initiative and tell their friends they were gay even when the friends' reaction was unknown and could have ended their friendship. Also, while many of these relationships consisted of sexual majority friends, Slick Rick and Theodore relied on a still closeted gay best friend and lesbian friends, respectively. In Slick Rick's history, he and his best friend would use social media to explore their sexual identities, so much of this friendship will be explained in greater detail in the social media section.

#### *Experiential Evolution*

It was difficult for Tae to make friends in elementary school, so when he entered high school he was fortunate to find a group of males who did not tease him and appreciated his friendship. These friends were with him all day in and out of school since they were part of the step team. While he was beginning to form a close group of best friends, all Black and sexual majority, he began to experiment and explore his sexual desires for males. In his moment of exploration, Tae ended up secretly being sexually intimate with an openly gay classmate, something he is not proud of but he knew this was an easy entre into exploring his sexual desires with males. When this relationship soured, which consisted of one encounter, the gay male began telling people at school Tae was gay. Tae's best friends were ready to fight the young male for spreading lies. This put Tae in a precarious situation and he talked his friends out of fighting. Due to his friends' reaction to the gay rumor, he was still not certain they would accept him if he came out. However, during his sophomore year Tae ended up meeting and being intimate with another person from school, someone who also wanted to explore their sexuality. Late for practice one day, Tae's friends confronted him on where he had been; Tae responded he had gone to lunch at a nearby restaurant. His friends did not believe this and pressed him for an answer and a receipt since Tae was known to always save his receipts:

“So, Tae where were you?” I kept sayin you know “Restaurant.” So, they say [*sic*] “Ok, so whatchu have for lunch there? What you have to eat?” I said “The lunch special.” They all looked at [and] everybody started laughing and was like “Tae, tell us the truth.” I said “Ok, first of all before I tell you what's going on, I have to tell you that, I'm gay, I like dudes.” And they was [*sic*] like “Ok.” Some started laughing, some was like “I knew it, dada dada dada. I told you, dada dada dada.” But not in a disrespectful [way] you know just like “I knew something was going on, I'm not stupid.” Then they said “So, who'd you do it with?” and I told them that the guy who it was and they said “Ewe, Tae really? Him? At least do it better with someone else,” and we just all started laughing. I was like “Yo, I didn't think you all would be like this open or cool with it.” They be like “You know we don't care cause you still our dude at the end of the day. Like you know we just don't appreciate you tryin lie and tryin to pull over head like we stupid.” I was like “I didn't know what to tell y'all, I didn't know how to feel, cause I thought y'all's gonna stop being my friends and something like that.” They said like “Nah, Tae, like you our nigga for life, you're really

our best friend for life, so there's nothing [that] can really push us away." And they's like just started laughing and just clowning for the rest of the time. After I came out to them I felt so much better.

His friends were not judgmental and reiterated their support for him because he was their friend for life, but they did not want to be lied to again. When Tae came out to his mother he became insular and depressed, for which his friends told him he was ruining their vibe every time he came around. With their ultimatum, either figure out how to get out of this depression or they would cease being his friend, Tae realized they were right: life had to move on and he had their support so he was not alone. Tae was learning and evolving into a person who accepted his sexuality and understood that life would be fine with the support of his friends.

Charlie has vacillated through several different groups of friends: the other Black children in elementary school, the EMO (emotional or gothic) punk rock crowd in middle school, his church friends, and finally the group he formed while at the theatrical high school. In these varied eras of friendships, Charlie was able to confide in his friends and found that their support was unwavering, whether he admitted he was bisexual, a cover to soften the blow and provide a glimpse of hope or because he was still hashing out his sexual identity, thus providing him the chance to evolve into the strong young male he has become. Due to their support, Charlie managed to evolve from thinking he was going to be rejected because of his sexuality to learning from these experiences that his initial thoughts were wrong and his sexual majority peers provided ample support. Due to the fact that church was a part of Charlie's life, he had many church friends who stood by him even when their religion, either subtly or overtly, taught that being gay was a sin. He explains that their support was a surprise to him because, "My friends were a really big part of that. They supported me, even though that went against the norm of what was accepted because I had a lot of church friends growing-up and we're still friends to this

day.” Charlie felt comfortable with his friends at his first high school, friends who were mostly White rockers. At his second high school, the theatrical high school, Charlie found his best friends for life:

The people who I’m close with now are from that school and that school, it was a lot easier to be more open like if I was dating somebody I could walk around, we wouldn’t be holding hands like we could walk around together, we could pop it like a little peck on the cheek “Bye babe.”

Theodore had a variety of friends by the time he got to high school, but his close friends were mostly females, lesbian and heterosexual. Freshman year of high school, before his family found out he was gay, Theodore was dating a male in another state and so was one of his female best friends; they both claimed they were dating someone of the opposite sex. During class one day, after his female best friend confessed she was dating a female on the west coast, he wrote her a note confessing the person he was dating was a male. Because she came out first, Theodore’s mind was placed at ease knowing he was not going to be rejected and that he was not going through his gay sexual exploration alone:

It seemed like everybody that I was friends with in middle school started coming out to me. Mostly all the girls I hung around with turned out to be lesbians and it was just the perfect freshman year of me having friends that related to me.

In high school a new male came to school that became friends with Theodore’s best female friends. This young male did not tell anyone he was gay, but he had feminine mannerisms, which did not sit well with some people in the school. The young male would flirt with Theodore, who was not out to classmates, and it made Theodore uncomfortable because he did not know how to handle the attention in school. This experience, having lesbian friends and being intimate and friendly with another gay male, assisted Theodore on his journey. He realized that he was much more fortunate than others because he not only had the support of his family but his friends were a great system of support. Many of them could explore their sexuality by discussing the myriad

issues affecting teenagers and lesbian and gay relationships, things their sexual majority peers possibly might not relate. Also, Theodore's best friends were welcomed by his mother and sometimes they would seek advice from her, which was an experience that demonstrated Theodore's mother was not simply supportive of her gay son but also supportive of any young person trying to understand their sexual identity, especially those who had been rejected by their families or were living in unsupportive environments.

### *Self-Determination*

With all of the participants, being self-determined with friends comes down to the fact that they took the initiative and leap of faith to tell their friends of their gay identity. For many, the fear of rejection and changed friendship dynamics was something they agonized over before telling their close friends. This fear comes from their experiences in schools and home of seeing non-gay males as ignorant, judgmental, and teasing them and of non-gay males not understanding how they could be mentally and physically attracted to another male. Fear of rejection from friends and rejection from other Black people due to negative attitudes of homosexuals is something many gay males face (Herek & Capitano, 1995; Lemelle & Battle, 2004). However Boykin (1996) notes that the narratives of the Black community being more homonegative than the White community is misleading, as is also noted by Herek & Capitano (1995), and should be countered, which is what my findings achieve. Additionally, when the participants believe that the Black community is homonegative, they have bought into this narrative, which reinforces a racialized divide between Blacks and Whites, when the scholarship has shown that same-sex relationships in indigenous African communities was a part of life, not something that was demeaned (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). From this, the males were able to navigate through school and other parts of life (e.g. the Internet or attending Pride) with others



by their side, as their system of support; they were self-determined to make friends and be authentic and not hide their sexuality because others in the community may be averse to Black gay males.

### *Boyfriends*

Boyfriends, as part of the peer group, also influenced how one came to understand their intersecting identities and navigated through life.

### *Thick Skin*

Except for Slick Rick, who did not date males in high school, the participants were often dating men outside of school and interacted with them either in public settings or at their boyfriend's home. Being in public, whether affectionate or not, is an example of how the participants had to build a thick skin in case they faced public backlash. Tae explains that he never dated males from his school, which rings true for Zion and Theodore, and met these males online. Zion often met them on Facebook or he stole them from his gay friend from chorus, while Theodore met many males on MySpace. The men that Tae dated or met were often his age or slightly older than him. When they were in public, which was not in the gayborhood, Tae did not worry because:

I would go out with them. I would meet up with them, or I would go out with them go somewhere, watch movies, stuff like that. I can adapt very quickly so like if we're in a social setting where everybody's social...We go to the movies.

His thick skin, the ability to not care what people thought, was effective as he met these males in public spaces often not considered gay friendly.

### *Experiential Evolution*

Connected to building a thick skin is the theme of experiential evolution. Besides having several online relationships, Theodore was the participant who had the longest offline

relationship, almost two years. Through these relationships many of the participants have evolved from being more adventurous and quick to go from one person to the next into currently either having a serious and stable relationship or seeking out those serious long-term committed relationships. In my assessment, learning from each relationship, no matter how fleeting, was important because it allowed the participants to engage in relationships similar to their sexual majority peers, relationships that at the time had meaning and importance. The excitement of dating and acting on their sexual desires allowed the participants to explore their sexuality in ways that were not always in total secret, which is a testament to the support they built with their friends. In other words, they were able to discuss these relationships with friends even if the person they were engaged with was not openly gay.

During the summer between eighth and ninth grade, Theodore chatted online with a male his age who lived in his neighborhood, and Theodore ventured out with the understanding they would meet and talk. This encounter quickly became sexual, something that Theodore was not expecting nor wanted. Once the encounter happened Theodore began to freak out as he explains:

I just started flippin on him. I was like, “This is disgusting. We’re going to hell. I’m not gay” and like “This is over,” and I ended up freakin out and he was like tryin to explain to me, “This is this is the lifestyle that we live, and this is the lifestyle of a gay guy,” and all this. So, I had my brother come pick me up. I was just like so freaked out.

This moment reinforced stereotypical ideas of being gay, that is, sex being primary:

I felt, it felt natural but it was just the first thing we resorted to after like meeting each other was sex. So, it was just like no this is awkward... I think it goes back to me bein raised like where gay only mean[s] sex. The fact that we actually did have oral sex when we first met, it was just like, this is the typical stereotype of what straight people think of us.

The lesson learned from this experience taught him to defy the stereotype and narrative of gays being all about sex, because he was committed to finding a stable and monogamous relationship.

As he explored his sexuality, Charlie admits that he entered into relationships and engaged in activities that were not healthy. Learning from these experiences, he now has a much greater appreciation for himself and who deserves to be with him. While these middle and high school relationships influenced Charlie, his experiential evolution with a boyfriend came most from a relationship in college. He left his home and travelled a couple hundred of miles away to attend college in another part of the state and ended up meeting one male who Charlie thought was perfect, gorgeous with pretty eyes. Due to Charlie's issues with cutting and self-esteem, he was surprised this male wanted to date him. This person told Charlie he would give him money and put into his bank account but needed Charlie's debit card. Before Charlie knew it, the bank called and told him his account had been closed. While blaming himself, this lesson demonstrated to Charlie that he was too trusting and after some time realized he was worth much more. This event was one where Charlie evolved from someone who suffered from low self-esteem and fell for any man who showed interest, to a person who refused to be taken advantage of again and realized his self-worth. Also, because he was taken advantage of, this added to Charlie's thick skin being built: he could now handle a lot that was thrown his way because he had reached a low point in life and come out ahead.

### **Social Media, Television, and Movies**

Social media (i.e, the Internet and smartphone applications) figured prominently in the lives of all of the participants. Whether they used the Internet for initiating friendships, dating, sexual engagements, or chatting and trying to understand what it meant to be gay, social media has provided a system of support. While less influential by comparison, television and movies affected how several of the participants understood their intersecting identities and navigated forward.

### *Social Media*

Several different websites, social networking sites, and computer-mediated communications emerged as places where the participants turned for support and exploration. Whether it was Black Gay Chat (BGC), MySpace, Facebook, or Yahoo Chat, all of the participants engaged with other gay males to better understand what it meant to be gay. The themes of self-determination and thick skin surfaced when they discussed their use of social media in middle and high schools and post-high school.

### *Self-Determination*

From early ages, Tae, Theodore, and Charlie began using the Internet to find gay pornography as a response to their curiosity about the male body. They were self-determined to learn about the male body and explore their sexual desires through pornography since no family members nor was the school teaching about gay sex. Tae remembers being introduced to a pornographic movie in middle school and being aroused by the male body, going back time and again to watch. At one point, in middle school Tae was living in an apartment with his mother and she confronted him about the pornographic websites he had visited. He tried to lie that he was not on these sites, but she pulled them up for him to see and scolded him by telling him never to go on those sites again. Due to her reaction he knew this was a bad thing and he began to suppress these feelings. Though she never scolded him the way Tae's mother did, Charlie knows his mother found the Internet history on her computer, which he argues, is part of the reason why he has not had to come out to her: she knows he was watching porn so why come out and discuss this with her? When he looked at pornography on the computer, the images were of mostly White males but after a while he found Black gay pornography and found them comical and stereotypical: men were acting feminine yet presented themselves as masculine. What he

saw taught him very little about what it meant to be gay but rather more how not to rely on one's outwardly masculine or feminine presentation:

It was so funny cause it was these burly these like "Yo, yo, yo" but then how you gonna be a big old thug dude but then moan like a chick? I was like: ok, whatever...it just showed me you can't trust the man by his looks and how in the gay world it's like if he's manly then he's a man, if he's feminine then he's feminine, that is not the case. I was like: cool, open mind.

Beginning in fifth grade Theodore was also using the Internet for gay pornography. He watched non-gay pornography with his brothers and remembers seeing a link on the screen for gay pornographic movies. In the middle of the night Theodore would sneak down and watch White gay pornographic movies. The male body was intriguing to Theodore; he was attracted to it, and found pornography to satisfy his curiosity. His brothers found the Internet history and asked family members who was looking at pornography and they believed it to be Theodore, although he vehemently denied he was the one watching. In all of three of these instances, the participants took the initiative to find pornography and teach themselves about gay sex or to view naked male bodies, to meet the desires they were encountering.

The Internet was used for other purposes besides watching pornographic movies. Taking the initiative to make gay friends, find a romantic relationship, or to discover anything they could about the gay community, the participants made the Internet work for their needs. Zion, Tae, and Theodore used Facebook and/or MySpace as a means to communicate with other gay males who were either in school with them or who were friends of friends of friends. Tae and Zion, through their own self-determination, engaged with private Facebook messages to ease their way into meeting males or as a way to grab someone's attention and flirt. When they messaged other males, there was no hiding of their face nor did they send false images to attract males, and they did not present images that reinforced stereotypic ideas of Black gay males: feminine or down

low homothug as their images “speaks [spoke] to the material existence of “colored” bodies” (Johnson, 2008, p. 136). For Tae and Zion, presenting images that represented their authentic self without reinforcing the dichotomous narrative of Black and gay, demonstrates that they were carving out a space online to present counter images, non-totalizing images of what it meant to be Black and gay. Furthermore, I argue the openness they felt when sending images, speaks to the self-possession and pride they had for themselves; they found no reason to hide their racial and sexual identities. Additionally, Tae and Slick Rick were on Black Gay Chat (BGC) meeting men to date and get to know, respectively. While more cautious in sending images of their face, they did share images when they felt comfortable with the person with whom they were chatting. As noted in Zion’s story, Tumblr was used as a way for him to vent and share his story with others.

When he was in middle school, Theodore had a MySpace account in which he was connected to a lot of friends. One time he saw a picture of a guy in his underwear and that prompted Theodore to begin to search for gay males on MySpace. In the process of finding these men, he began to delete all of his school friends off MySpace and add the gay males; he also changed his profile to state that he was into “men and women.” This was done initially because he did find non-White women attractive and also wanted friends so females could still approach him. However, as he explained, he rarely spoke to females on MySpace. While chatting with these guys, Theodore would often exchange numbers, giving them his mother’s cell phone number. Late at night he would go into his mother’s van and talk to these males, and he always reminded them not to text him during the day. When Theodore got his own phone, she found it on her bed and opened it up to find scantily clad pictures of a guy, which Theodore covered by quickly explaining he was his female friend’s boyfriend. However, these relationships formed on

MySpace were not all about sex or sharing naked or half-clothed pictures, they were about Theodore meeting guys to talk and share their experiences, helping him to understand what life is like for gay males and that he was not alone on his journey.

While every participant explained that they used the Internet, the Internet was integral to Slick Rick's life history and exploring his sexual identity. As I explained before, Slick Rick met someone in sixth grade who everyone teased and called gay. These taunts did not faze Slick Rick, he liked the guy because they could laugh and talk about anything. It was not until high school that he and this guy began to go online and meet other gay males. Though he cannot remember exactly how it began, he remembers that freshman of high school year he and his friend went into the Yahoo chat room for gay males, which was entertaining for them. He notes:

The personalities, the type of stuff people said in the group. We would enter a group acting like we don't know each other but then like interacting with everybody and then we would be on the phone at the same time and be like: why did he say this? Or, this person is instant messaging me directly trying to get to know who I am, yada yada yada. So, that's where it really started.

What started for Slick Rick was his penetration of a space where he could learn more about the gay community, ask questions to gay males, and process comments being made or messages being sent to he and his best friends. This was done without Slick Rick disclosing he was gay because at this moment he was still questioning his sexuality; it was not until he got to college that he realized and admitted his attraction to males was not a phase and he was not going to marry a woman. It was in these chat rooms that he and his best friend chatted with many males but ultimately ended up meeting two males, one from another southern city and one from a northern city. They formed a group where they would either chat online or all talk on the phone. From these openly gay males, Slick Rick recalls their friendship "was kinda of like my low key instructional education class on gay life period, lingo, sex, cause I don't know they were far

more advanced than we were.” At school they made no mention of their online exploration but several times a week they got online and found a refuge. These online forums and chat rooms were used to mediate the tensions he felt as he began to understand and explore his sexuality; online was the safe place he sought which helped him develop a sense of self and made it easier to come-out as he entered college. Slick Rick, unlike Theodore or Tae, never worried about his family finding out because they were not technologically literate. For Slick Rick, having his best friend with him made this journey easier because he was not completely alone.

Beyond the chat rooms and the connections he made with two males out of state, Slick Rick, like Tae, went onto BGC. Interestingly, both Slick Rick and Tae used Black Gay Chat for two different reasons: Tae was looking for dating or sexual encounters while Slick Rick was more interested in friendships and chatting. Black Gay Chat (BGCLive.com, 2014) is the largest website that caters to the Black and Latino LGBT community but all are welcome. On this site one can put up a personals profile and also browse the many chat rooms and watch LGBT themed web videos: gay themed “soap operas” and accounts of navigating through society as a gay man. On BGC, both Tae and Slick Rick created a profile that represented where they were along their journey. Tae had a profile with several pictures, some body shots that were set to private since he was more open and willing to meet men offline. Conversely, since Slick Rick was not open and not yet comfortable with his sexuality, his profile focused less on personal photos as he was using the site to read the different LGBT themed stories or peoples’ personal narratives about being gay; BGC became an educative tool for Slick Rick. Since Slick Rick sought out these videos, he demonstrated self-determination to finding resources that fit his needs along his journey of exploration, and for Tae he invoked his self-determination to meet males to meet his needs at that moment. For both Tae and Slick Rick, BGC became a resource



where they learned not so much about themselves, but more about how the Black gay community functioned and the various types of Black gay males within the gay community.

While Slick Rick continued to grapple with his sexuality and was not one hundred percent sure he was gay, he still held out hope that he would marry a woman after college, he found chat rooms where he could communicate with males going through the same process. Thus, even though he learned from his mother's actions that gay was unacceptable, he continued to seek out support online and found places where he could learn more about his identity. Throughout all of the participants' life histories, they learned from their online experiences about the gay community and found the will in themselves to search online for answers they were seeking. Social media was the means of self-determination.

### *Thick Skin*

Another area where the participants had to build a thick skin when it came to dating is connected to their use of social media and their desires to be with a White male. Both Zion and Theodore had profiles on different social media sites and in both of their profiles stated they only wanted to date White males or they were not interested in dating Black males, Theodore and Zion respectively. In both instances, they were confronted with Black gay males who challenged them on their position and told them they were being discriminatory. Zion began to build up a thick skin since he was being challenged, and thus he had to stick up for what he believed and remained unbothered as he explains:

Z: it [who he dated] really didn't matter to me in fact I put on my profiles at the time that I actually didn't want to date Black people and I would receive an influx of messages from Black people like "Why do you hate your own race?" and "Blah blah blah," and it wasn't that it's just I'm more of a culturally diverse person like I like learning about different cultures and viewpoints.

M: When you would read those what would you think?

Z: When I read them I honestly would say “I don’t blame you.” Because half of the time we already have, well we as Black men, already have a stigma placed around us that we you know we’re no good and being gay and Black isn’t exactly the most peachiest of cobblers.

While in middle school, Theodore was confronted with the same messages, and like Zion, did not care and stood by his preference:

T: It was more of like a pushy type feel like they would like “Well why aren’t you into your own race?” and I can do better. I always thought of it, I didn’t think of it as being racist or cause they say I’m racist or I’m prejudice toward my race but I never thought of it as that I always thought of it it’s what I’m into like I don’t tell you who you into, I don’t question why are you not into other races and stuff like that, so you have a preference just like I have a preference and that’s what I always said it’s my preference if you don’t like it then oh well.

M: So you didn’t pay much attention to it?

T: No not really, I just be [*sic*] like ok whatever. Or they sometimes, most of em they wouldn’t even like hit me up because they knew they, I guess they some people actually respect that you not into that race even when with White guys they used to say “I’m only into White guys” and stuff like that and I just like I click back out their page like, why waste my time? Why argue with you about something that I have no control over?

Thus, for Theodore, dealing with the males who took the time to engage with him, allowed him to be confident in his preference and view the other males as judgmental since he was being judged while at the same time he did not care who the males challenging him preferred to date; why should this matter to these males since there are other Black males out there for them to date? Furthermore, Theodore elucidates why he only dated White males:

What made me interested in White men at first because I feel like, with gay men, well gay Black men, I feel like they were always so aggressive. I feel like they wanted to always have sex like I just always thought of gay Black men like that and gay White men, no matter what color, I mean what sexuality they was, they was always about goin to get money.

*Television and Movies*

Gay themed television shows and movies influenced several participants while they were in middle and high school. If they were not watching a gay themed television show or movie, as was the case for Slick Rick, several saw images of gay men being attacked on the news, which influenced how they chose to either stay closeted or present themselves in public. The themes of self-determination, thick skin, and defying stereotypes emerged from the discussions around television and movies as they oftentimes went hand-in-hand together.

### *Self-Determination/Thick Skin/Defying Stereotypes*

Logo TV is a network designed for the LGBT community. Slick Rick and Zion did not watch shows on this network, save maybe an episode or two of RuPaul's Drag Race, but other participants watched Logo TV and recall the influence the network's shows had on them. Charlie was the most influenced by television shows. He remembers watching *Noah's Arc* and *RuPaul's Drag Race* and seeing Black gay males represented positively. While he did not want to be a drag queen, he appreciated and admired RuPaul for being a queen and "running things," and the drag queens self-determination and thick skin to live life on their terms; all the obstacles they faced and overcame made them strong. Charlie also found the contestants on the show, not to be role models, but provided him with a sense of not caring what others thought because:

They're wearing wigs and dresses and shit like that, [and] I'm wearing khakis and v-necks. If they can do that in wigs and dresses, I can do this in khakis and v-necks. Like it was just being able to see, especially the Black queens on there just be so confident and ready and bout it.

Thus, whatever struggle he was facing, he saw these contestants as strong people who were self-assured and confident in their skin and drew straight from their example. *Noah's Arc* provided Charlie the opportunity to see four Black gay males who defied the stereotypes he often heard for Black gay males, which assisted in Charlie's own defying of stereotypes and being "in the middle." In explaining how *Noah's Arc* influenced him, Charlie reflects:

I've noticed in my life now like you know just dealing with the whole being Black and choosing whether to be thug or to be feminine. You know you can't be in-between. I'm in-between. I'm not like "Girl, yes honey," I ain't got no bag, I ain't got no heels, I ain't got no lashes, none of that. You know I ain't judging nobody if they do, don't get me wrong, but then I'm not a thug like I don't sag my pants below my ass. I don't wear baggy clothes, I don't wear snapbacks [baseball hats], I don't do all that. And it's not because I can't, you know it's just that's not who I am. So, I'm in-between like I'm a little feminine but I can get hood if I need to be. So, the whole fact that I have to be this way or that way and seeing on the show like a few of them were not, they didn't fit that. You know it was cool to be like, you know, I can be gay and be a little feminine but still dress like a dude.

Tae notes that *Noah's Arc* allowed him to see gay males having families and partners, and he realized that was attainable. Even though Charlie appreciated *Noah's Arc* and Tae found value in what it was presenting, not every participant valued the show, and some like Slick Rick, did not know it existed until after high school. Theodore did not like the show as it showed Black gay males "doing too much" and the males all acted effeminate, thus reinforcing the idea that Black gay males are sissies, which runs counter to how Charlie viewed the characters. Therefore, their images influenced Theodore to *not* be a stereotype.

The show that resonated with Theodore was *A-List of New York* on Bravo TV. This show followed White gay males in New York as they juggled a career and social life. For Theodore these men represented success and:

Independence, that I could be successful and not be judged. I feel like they made it, I can make it too, I can be independent in this world and make a living. They were out. They had boyfriends, they went to events. So, it was like ok I can be that way. I can go to dinners, I can go out in public and hold hands with somebody that I'm with and stuff like that. That's why I enjoyed that show. But *Noah's Arc* was the cliché of gay men

Though the main characters were all White, Theodore is quick to point out that one of the characters had a Black partner who was an executive. Moreover, Theodore was attracted to White males so this show was more attractive to him for that reason.

While Zion did not watch *Noah's Arc* and had very little to say about *RuPaul's Drag Race*, besides the time he turned it on just to anger his father, Zion connected to the movie *But I'm A Cheerleader*. Zion explains what this movie meant for him:

Z: *But I'm a Cheerleader* taught me cause I was relating to the character because you know she grew up with a Christian family: "What's wrong with you?" Like that part really hit hard when she like had to tell them or whatever, I don't think it taught me anything per se but it helped. It was like comforting.

M: How was it comforting?

Z: It was comforting to know that like, other people have gone through it and they can have a happy ending cause she ended up going with the girl.

Turning to this movie was a way for Zion to know he is not alone, that others whether fictional or not, have gone through similar problems with their families because of their sexual orientation. This movie, this experience, helped Zion as he began to build up his thick skin and understand there was nothing wrong with him, contrary to his father's beliefs.

Zion was not the only one who was influenced by a movie; Theodore sought out the movie *Brokeback Mountain* on his own. After discussing the movie with someone he met on MySpace, Theodore was in seventh grade and amazed that a gay movie existed. What *Brokeback Mountain* taught him though was what his mother taught him about gay males: many gay males are married to women and have affairs with other males, and after watching the movie he thought, "Ok, well when I get older I'm gonna be with a woman and then still sleep with men." Thus, this reinforcement from the movie did little to clarify what being gay meant, it only made it more opaque and he had to continue on his journey to understand there was a gay community beyond being down low.

In a final aspect of how television influenced the participants, Tae and Slick Rick move the conversation away from Hollywood productions and situate their experience in the news.

While growing up Tae and Slick Rick saw gay bashings on television and this fear led them to not want to be associated with the gay community. Slick Rick did not want to be gay because, “Pretty much the discrimination like you don’t wanna come out as that, you don’t wanna be that period because of what you see on TV...Or how you see gay people get bashed or made fun of.” As noted in the family section, his mother’s reaction to seeing gay males on television was enough to teach Slick Rick he could not share his gay identity with her because she will not accept him; he did not want to be a part of *that* community. Concurrently, Tae was influenced by the same types of images of gays being bashed and thus was informed on how he should present himself, as more masculine and discreet in public:

I saw on the news where a lot of chastising was on you know flamboyant homosexual men and then how people on a social network bash homosexual men, how flamboyancy caught so much negative attention. It was just one thing after another to where that’s not who I am or who I like to be a part of. I don’t [like] all that extra drama; I don’t like to be pegged as something that’s not me.

Throughout all of the participants’ life histories, social media, television, and movies, or a combination of all, were important in their evolution. They turned to these mediums as a place to explore and understand their intersecting identities. However, for most, they turned to them to understand their sexual identity; they knew what it meant to be Black as their family and peers were navigating through society and that was their common bond. These conversations of race could be had unlike conversations with them about being gay. In the final section of this chapter the participants explain how they currently use social media as way to present themselves and create new relationships.

### **Social Media Documents**

Social media was very influential in the life histories of the participants. It is important to understand how they currently are employing social media and how their usage has shifted from

the K-12 experience to their post-high school life because social media is the place where they share with the world their comfortableness with their intersecting identities. As the participants presented their social media documents, three themes surfaced: self-determination and thick skin were linked and defying/transcending stereotypes. Self-determination and thick refers to those participants who use social media, namely Instagram, to further their careers and have created a thick skin to handle, if any, criticism they receive to their posts or images. Defying/transcending stereotypes refers to those participants whose social media documents represent, their “authentic” identities since every participant explained that they want other Black gay youth to be themselves, not to follow others and not be a stereotype as defined by society.

### *Self-Determination and Thick Skin*

When Zion’s father lambasted him for being gay and told him that he has a hard enough time in this country as a Black male and now added being gay, Zion agreed that life would not be easy. However, Zion did not let his father have the last word. On Instagram Zion posts photos of his artwork and often gets clients from these posts. One particular photo stood out to Zion, and that was a picture he drew of a “celebrity” named Amber Rose. The dream of being successful and showing everyone that he is valid in following his artistic dream is summed up in this quote regarding his Amber Rose post:

I drew a picture of Amber Rose and she actually saw it and you see the amount of likes, yeah. That was my most liked picture and I’m pretty sure that’s the most liked picture that anyone from our high school has received, like I was pretty God damned proud of that one because a celebrity saw my artwork, that was pretty rad, umm, I ended up getting like six business deals out of that picture alone. It was just a really nice like that’s why I want my social media to be like, I want every post to be like that.

Zion is fulfilling his dreams and has realized the benefit that networking and sharing his work on Instagram can bring. He has evolved in how he uses social media and, because he has a

boyfriend, is not focused on meeting other guys, as he was in high school, or using it as a platform for venting.

As a model, Theodore finds Instagram very helpful as he promotes himself and seeks designers and photographers with whom he can work. In the photos he presents a masculine image because that is what most photographers want to see. Additionally, he used to tag the photo with “gay model” but his friend, who is also gay, told him that may turn off potential employers; Theodore disagreed as he wants to be known as a gay model but he has since taken his friend’s advice. Staying true to his word about having self-respect, most of Theodore’s photos show him fully clothed with a few showing his chest. In the full body shot photo he shared, Theodore is standing atop a mountain looking sideways toward the sun as one can see the clothes he is modeling. This picture represents Theodore the model, as he is demonstrating that “I can model the way I wanna model. I could pose the way I wanna pose. I[m] design, also model clothes too. This is the designer. These are his pants.”

For Zion, Twitter has become a place where he shares his thoughts without any filter. As his life history demonstrates, he has had a lot of experiences that have gotten him to a place where he is self-confident and does not care what others think. He shared a tweet that represents the unique individual he and others view him to be. His tweet captured the moment when he was at a presentation on the university campus and had a lit cigarette that wafted through the air. Alongside the tweet was a photo of a large animal with their middle finger raised. This tweet and photo encapsulates Zion and his life history because:

I always seem to be the person that’s kinda like out there. Like I’ve always felt like I’m the different person and even with the people that I’m living with I feel like I’m the different person, and they say that too. They’re just like “If you put Zion in a line with regular people you will be able to pick out Zion.” And I kinda like that about myself and that’s how I feel about my Twitter. I don’t tweet about the same things that people tweet about. I tweet whatever’s on my mind, how I feel, I retweet other



people, sometimes I retweet things that don't even make sense but I like them and they'll go on my timeline and that's all I care about is what I like.

In many ways this tweet represents all of the participants: they are strong Black gay males who have had to forge their way through life encountering racism and homonegativity, oftentimes alone or with a small group of friends, and they have reached a point in life where they have thick skin and do not care if others devalue them or look down upon them because of their intersecting identities. While it has taken time, they love themselves.

### *Defying/Transcending Stereotypes*

Every participant shared a document that demonstrated their self-confidence and showed the type of person they present to the world, online and offline. Whether it was from their Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook accounts these documents reveal something intimate about each participant.

Slick Rick talked about Facebook being the “cleanest social media thing that I have;” he noted that Twitter is often used for him to rant and vent. On Facebook, his brother is his friend and so are many of his former and current classmates. When Slick Rick goes on Facebook he will post pictures of himself and his friends, gay or straight. This is an example of how Slick Rick has evolved into accepting his sexuality because though he may not discuss it on Facebook, he does not hide that he posts many pictures with males some may consider gay. He also often posts inspirational quotes that he has found or that he creates. Charlie uses his Instagram account to stay in contact with family members and friends from all parts of Georgia who he met while in college. In the two pictures he shared, one was with his brother and the other was with his cousin and her baby. Family has always been important to Charlie and he wants to share with everyone how proud he is of his family. This is Charlie: a family man who is unabashed in his

love for them. While not his family, Theodore shared a photo of he and his best friend at dinner.

Like Charlie, he shared this picture because his best friend means a lot to him:

[She's] the best best friend that helped me like really define who I really am, the one I could talk to and call. The one I tell, told that I was. She like one of the first person I actually told that I was actually gay and not bisexual.

Tae uses Instagram to follow people who he finds attractive but more importantly those who have similar interests, such as weight training and being physically fit, and to show the world who he is. Since one can comment and like other peoples' photos on Instagram, Tae is not afraid to tell a man he is sexy. However, he did note that he does not appreciate when gay males make comments on his photos while using terms and phrases such as "Honey, child, baby you look sexy as fuck...I would love to..." I was like: whoa, it's too much. When you overboard that's when I delete it." By deleting these, I believe Tae is demonstrating that he is not a feminine gay male or a stereotype. He shared one very blunt direct message, a private message, sent by a gay male referencing sex, but he shared it to show that is not him, he chooses not to engage too many on Instagram for sexual encounters. The picture he did share has four panels with two panels containing the same photo. This photo illustrates the many facets of Tae, but also the pride he has with his intersecting identities:

The bright picture ones right here, they represent like calmness and happiness. I'm happy to be who I am, like you can see I'm light skinned but like I'm Black but I'm happy, and these two it shows like I could be different... Yeah, with the backpack. So I could be many things but I'm still Black too at the same time.

Being teased as a child in school and grappling with his sexuality, Tae has come to a place where he loves himself and shares that love with everyone on social media.

Using social media to find a romantic relationship may be viewed as not being self-determined and defying/transcending stereotypes, but I place Slick Rick's use of a dating smartphone application here because being self-determined does not connect with work but with

meeting a mate. In high school social media was integral to Slick Rick's progression into understanding his sexual identity, as he chatted with numerous gay males. Currently, Slick Rick has moved away from BGC and Yahoo Chat, and has since started using the smartphone application Jack'd to meet males to date. Gay males may use Jack'd for several purposes, dating, friendships, chatting, sexual encounters, however because gay males are on this for myriad purposes, some Jack'd users make Slick Rick upset because he is looking for someone to date not to have a casual sexual encounter. In defying/transcending stereotypes, Slick Rick has created a profile that does not provide misleading or stereotypic images to get a male's attention. His profile shows him sitting on his bed with no shirt and smiling into the camera; his other two public pictures are face shots. Even though a picture with no shirt may connote he is on for sexual purposes, he knows it is what catches a man's attention, yet he dictates how far he will go with someone once their messaging begins. These photos demonstrate how far Slick Rick has come in accepting himself and being proud of his sexuality, since he does not hide his face. It took him a few minutes to find a good conversation he had with someone but once he did he shared why and how he likes to converse on Jack'd. Their conversation was innocuous, filled with questions and the day-to-day "how was your day?" types of questions. Since he enjoyed the conversation with this male, they ended up exchanging phone numbers and at the time of the interview they had yet to meet but were planning on setting a date. Again, Slick Rick's use of Jack'd illustrates how he uses it for a romantic relationship; he is on to meet a partner.

### **Atlanta and Black Gay Pride**

The city of Atlanta is known for its visible Black gay community (Jarvie, 2006b). However, due to the participant's location outside of the city limits in more conservative suburban communities, and away from gay enclaves such as Midtown Atlanta, many participants

did not realize that Atlanta was considered by many a Black gay mecca. Even though Atlanta has the largest Black Gay Pride in the world (Ross, 2012), Zion, Tae, and Slick Rick had either never heard of or ever been to Black Gay Pride when they were living at home with their families. Slick Rick knew Black Gay Pride occurred in Atlanta but had no desire to attend; this can be attributed to the fact that he was not out in high school and still trying to understand his sexuality, thus not wanting to be seen out in public amongst gay males. According to Zion and Tae, both had not heard of Black Gay Pride, while in high school and Zion only realized it was an event last year, while Tae explains he was too consumed with high school to pay attention. Conversely, Theodore and Charlie had attended Black Gay Pride their junior year of high school. At 16, Theodore went with his lesbian best friends and his non-lesbian female friend, but admitted he never knew that part of Atlanta existed “like the voguing, all the extraneous that came with Pride.” Likewise, Charlie attended and loved every minute of the weekend, but he too did not realize there was a large visible Black gay community in Atlanta. Additionally, Tae does not remember the first time he attended but he does remember all of the sexy men. For these three participants, the theme that emerged regarding Black Gay Pride was defying stereotypes. While they were self-determined to go and find out on their own what the event entailed, it is my opinion that it was what they encountered that led them to continue to defy stereotypes of what it means to be Black and gay.

### *Defying/Transcending Stereotypes*

Before they attended Black Gay Pride, Theodore and Charlie were becoming aware of what it meant to be Black and gay: either down low and thuggish or a sissy; they did not subscribe to either other of these tropes. When they arrived at Black Gay Pride they saw many males, but from Theodore’s experience those males fit one of the two stereotypes and were half-

naked but for Charlie he saw those categories plus the males in-between. As Theodore recalls these males were not presenting themselves in a manner that he supported:

I was kinda uncomfortable. I used to say that I didn't wanna go back cause I didn't like the way gay people presented themselves [*sic*]. I'm like y'all don't act like this everyday, so why this day of our celebration, why are y'all dressin' half-naked and doin all this extra stuff? Dressin like females and drag queens...I was like I don't have to do all that, and I'm still comfortable yet I'm still comfortable in my skin.

These images reinforce the ideas that Theodore already had about gay males: they were all about sex or showing off their bodies. Also, this supported his belief that Black gay males were messy, doing too much, and not being successful like their White counterparts, which he understood to be true due to "A-List New York." Theodore has always refused to slip into a stereotype, according to society's standards, of what a Black gay male should be and this experience was a chance for him to see in person what he had heard and what he did not want to be.

For Charlie the experience was wonderful and provided him a chance to see all the things that the Black gay community had to offer. Before he went with his lesbian friends, he went shopping so he would look good and he was excited to see what Black Gay Pride had to offer. At this time he was beginning to be more confident in himself and by attending Black Gay Pride, coupled with him being on Black Gay Chat (BGC), he remembered thinking that he was not alone in this world; even though he had seen images on television and some in school, this was the first time he saw a large visible community. Charlie's assessment of Black Gay Pride is that, while there were some unsavory parts (e.g. fights he witnessed), he thoroughly enjoyed himself:

I met really cool people. I danced with some really cool people. Umm, I did some things I should not have done... But it was so much fun. Seeing the drag queens, different kind[s] of men that were there. You know they had the feminine men, the thug guys, you had the in-betweens, you had people with their shirts off no pants on all drawls, thongs, you saw angels and wings, you saw dance teams. I was just like "This [*sic*] is so much culture in this lil, in this little vicinity." It was so much fun just to see who we as a people and as a sexuality can come together and be like we're one, we're separate but we're one. We we're all our own individual person but our lives are all the same. We all live the same situations.

Since Charlie stated he never was a sissy or on the downlow but rather “in-between,” the fact that he saw others who were “in-between” and not fitting the stereotype was a confidence booster.

### **Conclusion**

This study is about how the participants have productively navigated through society. While how they believe they are productively navigating varied for each participant, they all noted that being strong and being able to withstand forces that try to keep Black gay males down was necessary.

Having been teased and having had a low self-esteem, which led to cutting, Charlie is now able to be himself and has created a drag persona for when he feels like performing at the local university. After years of teasing and slipping into a depression because of his forced coming-out, Tae now boasts of being successful in college and life is smooth and calm. Tae accepts the challenges that come his way and he knows that if he can manage through the stressors of high school and all he has battled, he can continue to be successful because:

Now since I'm out here by myself, I already know how to deal with stuff, hardships by myself. So, this is a trait that I learned and pulled out of the archives and say ok now I'm apply[ing]it to like now. And I still navigate easily. So, it's jus[t] everything I learned.

While in high school Slick Rick became cognizant of his sexuality and shared it only with one best friend and those he met online. Today, Slick Rick is able to be an out and proud Black gay male with a vibrant social life and a core group of friends he calls “The Boys,” all of whom he met while in college. Slick Rick continues to grow and learn, and his goal is “not to be basic,” not be the person who has little going for them; he continues to work hard to get what he wants in life even if that means still living at his parent’s house almost 45 minutes from his friends. As

for Theodore, he realized long ago he was not going to please everyone, so he has to live by “bein myself and not tryin’ to pretend to be somebody I’m not.” Theodore found the strength to be himself because of his supportive family, especially his mother. Though his mother died two months after he graduated high school and after he moved up north to begin college, he came home and has altered his life plans, yet still does not forget the love and support his mother gave him so he could be who he wants to be without fear. Zion, whose life history opened this chapter, has found success in never giving up and following his dream. Still living with his parents when the interviews were conducted, he shared in interview three that he was moving out of his parent’s house and in with his boyfriend. Much to his surprise his parents did not argue or put up a fight. Thus, while still not a perfect relationship with his father, Zion has found the strength inside to be productive by bettering himself and begin to live life on his terms. As has been shown through his use of Instagram, Zion makes sure he continues to never stay stagnant and is always moving forward, just like all of the participants.

## **Chapter 5: Implications**

I want them [teachers] to still treat us like human beings. We’re no different than anyone else. We [are] no different than a straight guy or a straight girl. I mean we just like the same sex. So, I think we need more support to be comfortable with who we are and because not all kids get the same support that I got, not all their parents accept them for who they are. I feel like that’s their job with working with students, is to help them and find them and guide them along the way because at the end of the day they’re [teachers] like their [students’] second parent because the parents are not with them for those seven to eight hours out the day. So, I feel like teachers are definitely like the second parent and they should be the kids second if not first biggest supporter.

-Theodore (interview, 2014)

Theodore’s advice to teachers who work with sexual minority youth is to treat youth the same. While idealistic on the surface, Theodore’s call echoes that of Kevin Kumashiro (2001)

who argues that the role of educators should not be to continue the “othering” of sexual and racial minority students, but rather teachers should have of an understanding of what causes the othering to occur and in the process dismantle oppressive systems that cause the othering. He notes this occurs through critical pedagogy and anti-oppressive education. In other words, the burden does not fall squarely on the oppressed youth (e.g. LGBT youth, racially oppressed LGBT youth, or racially subaltern groups) to change the racist and heteronormative climate in the school, but rather it is through a teacher’s pedagogy and through the units and lessons created, in conjunction with sexual minority youth and knowing and understanding sexual minority youths’ life histories, that the oppressive racist and heteronormative system within schools and society will be disassembled.

This chapter follows in the same vein as Vernon Polite’s (1999) work when he examined Black male achievement at an urban Catholic school. From his findings, Polite posited that in order for systemic change to occur in the school, six factors must be taken into account and implemented including continuing professional development for teachers that focuses on “multicultural learning, communication, cultural, and social styles with an emphasis on African Americans” (p. 106). Based on his findings, that is, he imagined a school climate that has yet to materialize. It is from Polite’s plan of action, his call for systemic change, that I am presenting four policy and curricular changes for schools to implement in order to allow for systemic change to occur and begin the process to break down heterosexism and a heteronormative environment that creates challenges for sexual minority youth. These recommendations not only bring the lives and experiences of Black gay males out from the shadows as they become a part of the school community, while not continuously being “othered,” but these recommendations are to benefit all students and faculty, including those in the sexual majority. Thus, in order to



break oppressive systems, those who wield even a modicum of power in schools, or occupy spaces of privilege, should work with those who are being “othered” to benefit all students to stop the reproduction of a heteronormative environment. The narratives of the participants have aided in how this can occur because the males in this study found their own path and through *experiential evolution*, found a few peers and teachers in school who were supportive. Ultimately these males blazed their own paths because their schools did not allow for the lives and experiences of Black gay males to be heard, be visible, and be respected in the same manner as their sexual majority peers; their community, their intersecting identities, were not a part of any discussions within the school save a gay-straight alliance in Theodore’s school. I build from the insights of their life experiences in making my recommendations.

While there have been pieces written that articulate ways schools can address the needs of their sexual minority students through curricula and professional development (Crocco, 2002; Espelage & Rao, 2013; Franck, 2002; Greytak & Kosciw, 2013), I provide four changes that middle and high schools serving majority Black students can undertake in order to not only become supportive environments for Black sexual minority youth but for all youth and educators who in turn, ideally, will work together to break down the system of oppression within their schools and ultimately society.<sup>1</sup> From the narratives of the participants I propose that schools should: (a) bring in Black gay activists from their surrounding community; (b) provide professional development for teachers on heterosexism and how a heteronormative school environment functions; (c) comprehensive sex-education curriculum that includes discussions of sexual minority identity and sexual health; and (d) implementing a “Who Cares” campaign. All of these connect to the themes presented in this dissertation because educators and other students

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the fact that this study examined Black gay males, many were either in majority Black schools or schools where Black students made up at least half of the population. These ideas can be implemented in all schools, however the focus must include an understanding of the racist system, which is endemic in our nation.

need to understand that there are Black gay males in majority Black middle and high schools who are not meek and mild or are forming a sense of self. Once educators and sexual majority students know and understand the identity development of and plight of those like the Black gay males in this study, then the school climate should change to be more welcoming and safe for all students; there may be Black gay males in their schools whose experiences mimic that of the participants in this study.<sup>2</sup>

Implementing these suggestions will not be easy since they illuminate and challenge the heteronormative environment in schools, something that many educators and peers may not believe exists or believe they are complicit in reproducing. Concurrently, while writing of the experiences of Black queer teachers, I heed the advice of Brockenbrough (2012) who points out that “[T]he experiences of queer educators, black or otherwise, are not likely to improve until schools complement policy-level protections with genuine ground-level initiatives that directly target the homophobic dynamics of teacher-student encounters and other aspects of everyday school culture” (p. 758). Therefore, these suggestions move beyond calling for legal protections or anti-discrimination policies for sexual minority students, which are important and should not be ignored, but rather these suggestions are action oriented generated from the participants in the study and follow Paulo Freire (2000) who calls for praxis in order for oppressive systems to be broken and for social change to occur. Before I continue, I must note that these suggestions vacillate between addressing the needs specifically for Black gay males to addressing the needs of sexual minority youth and their sexual majority peers. It is my belief that if the Black gay male experience is used as the starting point because of the social and political forces they are faced with challenging based on their intersecting identities, then all forms of oppression based on sexuality and race might be eliminated.

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<sup>2</sup> As with qualitative research, this small sample size is not to be generalized.

## **Black Gay Activists and Community Members**

The theme of self-determination emerged because the participants took it upon themselves to learn about their intersecting identities. Whether they had gone online or found another gay student at school, the participants noted that their schools did not do anything to discuss the sexual minority community save maybe a gay-straight alliance. Throughout the participant's investigations of what it meant to be Black and gay, images from media presented Black and gay as either homothugs or married men on the down low or flamboyant feminine males. Due to this process of self-investigation, the participants have demonstrated their agency. However, in order to mediate their struggle to go online and meet someone, or to challenge images they could not identify with, I propose that schools bring in Black gay males from the community to become a part of school dialogue. My vision is that these community members do not come in on an "as needed basis," for an assembly or to run one or two workshops. Rather schools should create a partnership with these community members so they are engaged in myriad aspects of all students' lives with a focus on those Black gay males who are trying to understand their intersecting identities. These students need not be "out," because their identity formation is incomplete and this provides a space for their growth to continue through dialogue with community members. Schools can begin a mentoring program with these community members and Black gay males where questions are asked and the community members' experiences are illuminated; this harkens back to the idea that many sexual majority youth believe they are alone in their process, something that was touched on by several participants, notably before they went online and found support or met people. Additionally, these community members can be there for the sexual majority peers in the form of community forums to answer questions, no matter how ignorant or sophisticated they may be, about the Black gay community.

These forums should also occur in tandem with sexual majority allies to illustrate the power that comes with joining forces to better understand peoples' experiences and journeys.

By having these members become a part of the school community, I call attention back to Kumashiro (2001) and Theodore's words, because singling out gay youth to attend meetings with these community members illustrates and perpetuates the otherness of being gay, as if the sexual majority students and teachers do not need to engage with gay members since they do not identify as gay themselves. This connection to outside school members also allows one to challenge the notion that Black does not equal gay or one is less Black because they identify as gay, issues confronted by study participants (Johnson, 2005).

Work has been done elsewhere to highlight off-campus spaces where the needs of Black sexual minority youth are being met (Blackburn, 2005; Brockenbrough, 2014). In Atlanta there are several places where schools can go to begin partnerships and find community members willing to come to the schools, such as The Evolution Project (n.d) and In The Life Atlanta (2015).<sup>3</sup> However, before schools seek outsiders, schools should find those educators within their schools that are out and would not mind co-participating in this mentoring and educative process with sexual majority colleagues who are allies. Allowing for Black and gay or gay teachers to be "out" and open at school can be problematic due to the homonegative attitudes of co-workers, parents, and students (Brockenbrough, 2012; Mayo, 2007), so reaching out to these teachers must be done in a way where they are protected from potential backlash.

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<sup>3</sup> "The Evolution Project is a drop-in community center for young black gay/bisexual men and transgenders individuals between 18 and 28 years of age. This is a safe space that helps young people to connect, develop strengths and skills, support each other, have fun and achieve positive goals" (The Evolution Project, n.d., n.p.). In The Life Atlanta is an organization that host Black Gay Pride and whose mission is to "promote unity, pride, self-empowerment, and power visibility within Atlanta's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA) community of African descent through education, advocacy, and coalition building" (In The Life Atlanta, 2015, n.p.).

Of course all of this is predicated on the fact that school administrators must believe these connections with Black gay community members are warranted. While examining out gay and lesbian teachers, DeJean (2007) notes that one's social location is important, as is the support of the administrators and other faculty. Thus, for the participants in this study many lived in socially conservative suburbs and this mentoring or bringing in of community members may be difficult to begin because of the fears of parental backlash. I argue that schools should not bow to those pressures if they understand that this is beneficial for *all* students and the rest of society and understand why parental backlash is occurring in the first place. It should be noted that these community members in no way are representative of *all* Black gay males. Instead the partnerships with these community members allow for dialogue and learning that moves beyond stereotypic ideas of what it means to be Black and gay. Community projects that bring students closer to those within their community can be generated from these partnerships.

### **Professional Development**

What would I like them [teachers] to know? Support those who need it most, like just try to lead a positive message. Never put your own thoughts or perspectives on someone who's still learning, who's still growing. So if they're under you, you gonna have a more impressionable thought and outlook to them. So, you may say one thing that's minuscule to you but could be monumental to them. So, be careful what you say.

-Tae (interview, 2014)

Tae's comment underscores the need for educators to become educated about how to work with not just Black gay students but all of their students. As Tae notes, through their pedagogy and other actions, a teacher's beliefs are placed upon their students, which is known as implicit curriculum (Sadker & Zittleman, 2012). Therefore, it is important that teachers not only shift how they interact with students but also what they teach. Broken down into two parts, this section looks at: (a) how teachers must become aware of how schools, through students' and teachers' actions, have created and reproduce a heteronormative environment and (b) addressing

ways to create formal educative curricular changes that go beyond “mentioning” of sexual minority issues and people to myriad curricula and lessons.

I must stipulate here that while I have laid out a specific plan, I also do not want this to be misconstrued as a top-down measure. The plan presented is merely an idea of how one could proceed and what resources one can use when hoping to deconstruct heterosexism and heteronormativity. Also, this is not meant to come from a perspective that teachers know nothing or very little of how heterosexism and heteronormativity function, but I argue that if many teachers did know then schools would not continue to be places of heteronormativity in which sexual minority students feel marginalized.

When implementing a professional development plan, I am also suggesting that administrators go to the students and teachers to generate ideas of what they want taught and want to learn, which will lead to the best ways educators will go about doing this. Thus, a group of Black gay students may decide they wish to tackle the stereotype of Black gay males being flamboyant or down low. It becomes incumbent upon the males to create a professional development plan, to address this topic and breakdown misunderstandings of these stereotypes and how they can be limiting and restrictive. Working with teachers and other community members, students will become much more than perceived passive students who are dehumanized by teachers (Freire, 2000) but instead will have shared power with teachers and administrators to change the hostile school environment as their experiences dictate.

#### *Awareness of Heterosexism and Heteronormativity*

As has been noted, harassment of sexual minority or perceived sexual minority and non-gender conforming students has been an issue in schools in the United States for a long while (Espelage & Rao, 2013; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012). Through

teacher professional development, the harassment these students face should be placed on equal footing with other types of bullying (e.g. racial, economic, and physical). However, an illumination of the bullying faced by sexual minority youth is not enough. Referring back to Kumashiro (2001), there must be an understanding of why this harassment occurs. What factors have caused the climate for harassment to exist? In order to do this, professional development needs to be done in a manner that does not merely touch on the issue of harassment but teases out all the nuanced forms in which heterosexism and a heteronormative environment are manifested in schools and society. This includes discussions about the social construction of sexuality and gender and performativity, the reproduction of gender and sexuality done daily by people (Butler, 1990). Teachers will begin to grapple with how they and their students reinforce and reproduce a heteronormative school environment that has become difficult for sexual minority students, the confusion they must contend with, and the fear associated with not living their sexual identity truth, even if the student is open with their sexual identity. This also becomes tricky in certain social locations due to the influence of religion on whether one agrees or disagrees with homosexuality. The issue should not be about whether one's religion dictates that same-sex relationships and intimacies are a sin but rather understanding that these systems of oppression occur and students are being ignored within schools; their humanity and basic rights are being ignored.

I want to call the reader's attention back to Tae's confrontation with a female step coach. The minute this teacher told Tae not to flaunt his sexuality, I argue, she did not approve of his sexuality because, to his own admission, he did not flaunt his sexuality at school. Thus, if she had been a part of a professional development examining the ways in which teachers reproduce a heteronormative environment in school through a heterosexist mindset, she might have stopped

herself and realized she was displaying a form of harassment based on her beliefs and, I argue, a narrow understanding of sexuality. It fell upon Tae, a teenager, to deflect her comment and realize he was doing nothing wrong. Had Tae not had other experiences where he had begun to build a thick skin and have the support of his male step coach and friends, this encounter could have had a negative influence on him and caused him to have more angst and questions about his sexuality.

Through professional development, again which should not be seen as a one-time or two-time session but should be ongoing, there should be examples of the stereotypical images often presented in the media about Black gay males: down low or flamboyant (Bowleg, 2011; Hill, 2009; Hill Collins, 2005). By examining these stereotypes and images, teachers can then be introduced to myriad other more diverse images of Black gay males because, as the participants have noted, they are in-between both of these images. (There is no one image that represents being Black and gay but rather allowing for images other than the two stereotypic ones will provide a challenge to those who believe in the two binaristic images and hopefully will allow them to view their Black gay students beyond the stereotype). These professional development sessions must include examples of Black gay males who are successful and, accept their intersecting identities, and confront the struggles of living in a heteronormative world. As I have mentioned previously, the literature, more times than not, focuses on the HIV rates of Black gay males, which is reinforced through the national narrative of Black males being down low; Black gay males are more than this, even if it is partly their reality (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). If teachers can read life histories of and meet Black gay males who are or are not HIV positive and who are proud of their intersecting identities then it is my belief that the connection to HIV and the stigma of being doubly oppressed (Black and gay) will allow teachers



to see their students as self-determined proud males who may be politically and socially oppressed but are empowered to live their truth.

All of this is based on the presumption that educators do not know how a heteronormative environment functions, that all believe the bianaristic stereotypes of Black gay males, or that Black gay males in schools lack self-determination or are beginning to employ a form of self-determination. However, there have been examples of educators who find “teachable moments” throughout the day to bring sexual minority issues into their lessons (Brockenbrough, 2012; Mayo, 2007). It should not simply fall on the “out” or “not out” gay educator to facilitate discussions of sexual minority equality or harassment, but all teachers must be versed to discuss issues confronting the sexual minority community. Also, as I will discuss in the next section, it is not about “teachable moments,” but about altering curricula to meet the level of multicultural education that Banks (2001) calls “the social action approach.” Conjointly, as Zion, Tae, Charlie, and Theodore noted, they all had teachers who they could turn to and discuss whatever was going on in their lives, including grappling with their intersecting identities; Charlie had one teacher who was an out lesbian and challenged gender norms through her dress, and he could talk to her about sexuality during their one-on-one conversations. I suggest that those teachers who act as surrogate parents to their sexual minority students or sexual minority teachers who do not, should be a part of the planning and implementation of professional development addressing how to not only support their students but how to begin the process of changing the school climate so sexual minority students are not looked at and do not feel like they are second-class students. Once there is an understanding of how heterosexism and heteronormativity function, then there needs to be a concerted effort to build programs within the schools to dismantle the heteronormative environment, which should “de-other” the sexual

minority population. A detailed outline of a professional development is included in Appendix D.

### *Formal Curricula*

While teachers are engaged in ongoing professional development analyzing how heteronormativity works in schools and society, there should also be an element where teachers create and implement units of study and lessons that bring the experiences and lives of Black gay males to the forefront, which will lead to other sexual minority issues being presented. When writing about this I need to be clear that I am drawing on Banks' (2001) social action approach to teaching as opposed to the additive approach, and I do not wish this to be a top-down mandate from the teachers imposed upon the students. Instead, I envision constant dialogue between the students and teachers and units of study come from these conversations. There may be certain questions students have regarding sexuality and race and these questions should be met through lessons and projects rather than seen as "teachable moments." A detailed example of a unit of study is provided as a lesson in Appendix E.<sup>4</sup>

In this age of standards and testing, teachers may not know how to incorporate discussions and lessons of race and sexuality in their classrooms. I suggest teachers find ways to implement the required state standards and teach the curriculum provided by also infusing their lessons with material on how Black gay males have influenced their subject matter.<sup>5</sup> For instance, I am thinking of literature and openly Black gay writer Bruce Nugent. The lesson becomes less about sharing that he is gay but that he is a gay writer *and* how his contribution to the field of literature has been beneficial; this can also lead to questions about why his name

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<sup>4</sup> I would also suggest looking at *Rethinking Schools and Teaching Tolerance* to find other lesson plans or units dealing with race and sexuality.

<sup>5</sup> This is the beginning but hopefully changes in policy will move away from scripted curricula and top-down standards, changes that can be supported by the work teachers will be doing with units of study and lessons based on these implications.

might be lost in his field or not mentioned as often as other famous Black writers. Could his sexual identity have anything to do with this? Does the teacher even realize his body of work exists and he has been celebrated in certain areas? By bringing his short stories into the classroom, students can see someone who did not shy away from his intersecting identities and Black gay males in the class can have someone they can more closely identify with than authors who did not write about being Black and gay or who chose, or were forced, to hide their intersecting identity because of social pressures, something they may relate to as well.

Conjointly, McCready (2010) provided curricula suggestions where he called on those engaged in Afrocentric studies to not ignore the gay community but to share in their lessons and units that in many indigenous African cultures, what society now calls homosexuality, was not an issue, was not named such nor was it something where people were ostracized. Therefore, I repeat McCready's call to have social studies or religious studies teachers provide lessons where students research why there is currently an anti-homosexual wave of attitudes and legislation in several African countries, when historically same-sex coupling and rigid Western ideas of gender performance were not an issue in many communities on the continent (Roscoe & Murray, 2001). This can also be done as a starting point to why African countries get more media attention as if these countries are worse than say Russia where anti-homosexual crimes have become laws, too (The Council for Global Equality, 2015). In addition, King (2011) calls on us to advance the praxis of *critical studyin'* to "generate[s] knowledge of African people's heritage that can engage teachers, students, and parents in culturally grounded critical reflection and analysis within the Black Studies intellectual tradition in the interest of the group well-being of African-descent people" (p. 347).<sup>6</sup> Through *critical studyin'* of their diasporic roots, Black gay males will begin

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<sup>6</sup> King credits S.E. Anderson with coining the term *critical studyin'*

to understand their ancestors' ways of being when it comes to same-sex relationships, intimacies, and non-gender conforming performance.

Middle and high schools can also include courses that tackle issues of race and sexuality, much like is done in higher education. There can be courses specific about race and sexuality or about social movements where the LGBT movement is studied while at the same time students are getting a clearer picture of how racialized this movement has become, how Black and Brown bodies (as well as others) have become "othered" and their racial identities overlooked within the larger LGBT movement (Stone & Ward, 2011; Vaid, 2012). Also, schools can create courses of social media, where, taking from the participants, students can learn how to utilize social media to advance their goals and promote themselves professionally as well as personally; this also provides a chance for Black gay males to see how other Black gay males do not hide their sexuality when they are promoting themselves professionally and they get to see that social media can be used for more than dating or sexual encounters. For instance, some participants are using social media to not hide their identity, but to show the pride they take in their intersecting identities. Currently, Theodore utilizes social media to obtain modeling jobs. He presents the many sides of his personality that illuminate his proud African heritage.

### **Comprehensive Sexual Health Education/Sex-Positive Education**

Advocating for the inclusion of sexual minority sexuality into comprehensive sexual health education programs, as well as sex-positive education, is not new (Harden, 2014; Greytak & Kosciw, 2013; Lamb, Lustig, & Graling, 2013; Williams, Prior, & Wegner, 2013). Greytak and Kosciw (2013) have created a detailed list that includes having teachers discuss how sex occurs for all types of people. After hearing from the participants, I am proposing that teachers reach out to Black gay males or trained professionals to come in and have frank discussions

about sex and safe sexual practices with the students. Brockenbrough (2014) notes that case workers at a Black gay centered organization did not shy away from answering students' questions about sex because they wanted the center to be a place of open dialogue and discussion, a place where youth can learn about sexual practices outside of school where they were oftentimes ignored. So the same openness and honesty could occur if outside professionals are brought in as part of the standard curriculum. Also, when Black gay males see someone who looks like them, who for all intents and purposes, shares similar racial and sexual identities, then they provide a space within school for the gay students to confide in and seek advice. Though these males may belong to an organization off campus, the youth may not be able to attend the organization for logistical purposes or for fear of their parents finding out, which is why bringing the males into the school is important. While the topic may be uncomfortable and uncharted for many educators, it is an area that must be addressed because when currently discussing sex in schools, sexual minority students become invisible. One area this is done is through sex-positive approaches to comprehensive sexual health education (Harden, 2014; Lamb, Lustig, & Graling, 2013; Williams, Prior, & Wegner, 2013). Unlike abstinence-only sexual health education, a sex-positive approach

encompasses a variety of sexual behaviors, sexual identities, and gender identities that are traditionally viewed as deviant, including not only sex that has been deemed deviant on the basis of age or marital status (such as teenage sex) but also lesbian, gay, and bisexual orientations and experiences. The term sex-positive does not imply that abstinence from sexual activity is viewed negatively or that all sex is necessarily positive or healthy. (Harden, 2014, p. 457)

Concurrently, Lamb, Lustig, and Graling (2013) note that there are several curricular programs that are sex-positive such as "Streetwise to sexwise: Sexuality education for high-risk-you" and "Our whole lives." Conjointly, The University of Oregon (2015) has created a smartphone application, SexPositive, which allows users to ask questions and find information. Public

schools can provide the same kind of services that shift the onus off of teachers and can mediate ignorance of a sex-positive education that some educators may have. These programs can be utilized as a starting point for educators that are fearful of engaging discussions of sexuality.

Even though the participants went online to research how to perform gay sex, many were entering online spaces that showed Hollywood versions of sex. While their sexual majority peers will encounter the same images (of themselves) in movies, these students have a balance at school with, depending on location, comprehensive sex education classes; the Black gay youth do not have such an opportunity. When this occurs in class, the sexual minority students are getting sent a message that their lives, health, and sexual well-being do not matter, which ideally will shift with the change I have presented.

Greytak and Kosciw (2013) note that when addressing LGBT sexual health in schools, it is important not to attach it to stigma, to conflate it with sexually transmitted infections. Taking that a step-further, it is important for educators to not overlook the rate at which Black gay and bisexual youth are infected and diagnosed with HIV (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014), but to address this subject without pathologizing Black gay and bisexual males. There are myriad factors (e.g. stigma and socioeconomic factors) for the rising rates of HIV amongst Black and gay bisexual males (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014), but these factors must be understood within the greater system of institutionalized racism, which has allowed for these and other factors to germinate because of the political and economic disinvestment in the Black community (Kenn, 2011; Omi & Winant, 1994). Due to the fact that most sex education curricular programs do not include discussions of sexual minority peoples (Greytak & Kosciw, 2013), I posit that another reason for the rates of HIV is the lack of attention paid to Black gay and bisexual males. By addressing this issue and acknowledging that being Black does not mean

the disease is inherent to Black gay and bisexual males and by addressing healthy sexual practices, hopefully rates will decrease because better, more informed, and sound educational opportunities will exist for Black gay and bisexual males.

### **“Who Cares” Campaign**

The last recommendation I have for educators is something that Zion suggested be implemented in schools: a “Who Cares” campaign. Though this phrase is reminiscent of the old adage “sticks and stones make break my bones, but names will never hurt me,” I view the “Who Cares” campaign in schools differently, and this campaign can be useful for all students. First, this campaign should entail examining the myriad structures that cause students to care about what others think of them, whether it be looks, wealth, or grades, etc. They should then examine how influenced they have become to care when maybe they should examine ways to develop a more dynamic sense of self without relying on the judgments of others. Second, this campaign can be used to research examples of figures that have blazed a path against the grain of society and are still standing against the opposition they have faced. Third, educators and students can use this campaign to bring together all different groups who are concerned about impressing one another (who can outdo who) and meeting socially constructed and restrictive norms; this can be a bridge to bringing students together that may not normally connect. Fourth, by advocating for students to believe that impressing others should not matter, a “Who Cares” campaign, which is based off of basic human rights, provides a chance to be student-led and can become the impetus for social change that can remove oppressive conditions within the school; through working together and seeing that students from many different backgrounds face unnecessary pressures to conform, the pressures may lessen and the need to harass eliminated or severely blunted. In other words, the “Who Cares” campaign becomes not a relativistic campaign, but one that addresses

the larger social issues of exclusion and dehumanization (Freire, 2000). For example, if one cares about what others think (and I am speaking here more of a popularity contest and fitting in rather than caring out of concern to better oneself) and disowning their identities to “fit-in” then they are being dehumanized in the process. Thus, this campaign allows one to take pride in their intersecting identities and understand that the communities in which they belong or identify with are as equally important and valid as the ones from which they are seeking approval.

This campaign is not meant to overlook the harassment and tell a student to turn a blind-eye, nor is it meant to be a flippant way for one to say they care about nothing. Rather it follows in the similar fashion as the “It Gets Better” project aimed at LGBT youth, a project that tells LGBT youth the world around them gets better (It Gets Better Project, n.d.). For some youth it does not get better as they may be kicked out of their homes or do not have the means to find support either online or offline. Thus, the “Who Cares” campaign starts with the student understanding the factors around them that causes them, if they do, to feel pressure to fit in, especially sexual minority youth who may feel pressure to be like their sexual majority peers as they grapple with understanding their outsider status as sexual minorities. Also, sexual minority youth may distance themselves from other sexual minority peoples based on narrowly defined stereotypes and think twice about participating in LGBT events on campus or how they dress for fear of being ridiculed or ostracized. With the “Who Cares” campaign, students are not given a false sense of hope that lives will automatically improve if they hold out, but instead this project gives them the opportunity to find it within themselves, in tandem with the support of others, to live their truth and enter into a school where the pressures cease and they are welcomed for who they, not as “others,” as they will in turn be welcoming to others unlike themselves.

### **Next Steps/Further Research**



This study was designed to answer five questions and understand: (a) the narratives of Black gay youth and what their narratives reveal about the factors that have supported or undermined their ability to successfully negotiate their intersecting racial and sexual identities; (b) in what ways institutions influenced Black gay youth identity formation, and to what degree growing up in Atlanta has contributed to identity formation; (c) the manner in which Black gay youth have either experienced or created social networks of support; (d) how Black gay youth have used and currently use social media to create networks of support, navigate their intersecting identities, and present themselves; and (e) ways educators and policymakers can learn from narratives of Black gay youth to best support them in their personal, social, and educational growth. Through all of the narratives a picture has emerged of Black gay males who continue to have, *thick skin*, which has assisted in their ability to *defy/transcend stereotypes* and be *self-determined*. From these participants' narratives, students and educators can learn that one's intersecting racial and sexual identities do not mean Black gay males have a negative self-worth, or that facing the challenges of understanding these identities is too great to bear. While their life histories show it has not been easy and the struggle of grappling with both identities has been difficult, all have come out of this process, which continues, stronger and prouder of their intersecting identities than when they started. These participants' narratives demonstrate that they have not nor will they give into oppressive racial and sexist forces. On the contrary, through their *experiential evolution* these males have built for themselves a self-possession that is an inspiration to not just their peers and educators but for this researcher.

Now what? What has this study opened-up for future research? I wish to continue exploring Black gay youths' understanding of their intersecting identities by looking at the social location of other Black gay youth (e.g. rural Black gay youth or Black gay youth in

predominately White schools). Does *racial shelving* occur in predominately White schools where they may be judged more on race and less on their sexuality or do they perceive they are more accepted for their sexual identity and less for their racial identity? Do they believe that they are judged equally for these identities? Several participants did not view race as an issue and dated White males in high school, so I hope to interrogate the ways that the idea of society being post-racial have influenced their understanding of race, and how this may be reinforced within their educational experiences. Additionally, I wish to interview sexual majority peers to get an understanding of how they have come to support their gay friends within a school that may devalue gay people or the threat of harassment for supporting gays is real. How have the bonds between these two groups been built and what can be learned from the ways in which they function? What can be learned and implemented from new research to help blunt oppressive heterosexist forces? Last, as several participants noted, they had, what I have called a surrogate parent, and I wish to probe this in greater depth and interview both teachers and students to gain insight into the ways in which these connections form and function. What about the ways that Black gay educators interact with and support other “out” or “not out” Black gay male students? How do these relationships form and function? Last, when this group reaches college and/or the workforce, how has what has been formed from their experiences shifted or continued to grow? In what ways are they handling the forces they are encountering based on their experiences within schools, families, and other institutions that have influenced their identity formation?

In the introduction to a special issue of *Curriculum Inquiry*: “Queers of Color and Anti-Oppressive Knowledge Production,” Ed Brockenbrough (2013) calls upon scholars to continue the small but burgeoning work being done in the area of race, sexuality, and education.

Specifically, Brockenbrough's call is one this study has added to and one I wish to take up in future research. He explains:

further studies are warranted of how queers of color negotiate their identities and educational agendas across an even greater expanse of educational backdrops. Such inquiries are essential for developing nuanced understandings of how to support strategic queer of color community-building and political mobilization efforts within particular types of educational spaces. (p. 431)

Whether through future research or providing assistance and professional development to educators and other students, I will continue the important work of furthering the conversation away from viewing Black gay youth (and Black males) from a deficit perspective to one where these males are understood and seen for their resiliency, self-determination, and pride in their intersecting identities.

### **Conclusion**

While writing this chapter I met with a former student who is Black and gay and grew up in a conservative mostly White Atlanta suburb; he is Charlie's boyfriend and introduced us. During our meeting he posed a question to me that speaks to what this study and implications chapter aim to accomplish. He is currently student teaching in an upper-elementary school class, and he told the story of a Black female calling a Black male "faggot" and "gay." My student is torn, should he do something and if so, what? Is it too dangerous to confront the female and risk her calling my former student gay in front of the class because he has reprimanded her? Does he take this as a moment to explain what these names mean and how they hurt? Should he comfort the young male or is that too risky if his colleagues know he is gay and is getting "close" to a perceived gay student? Even though the dynamics are different due to his status as a student teacher, these are questions he has about the future: as a proud and open Black gay male, what is considered acceptable behavior and what is not? Would he be judged unfairly for supporting the

perceived gay student, the victim, because he is a gay teacher? These are not simple questions with easy answers. However, it is my hope that implementing the plan I have laid out, even in the elementary school—especially through teacher professional development—these issues will cease and the school setting will be one where *all* staff and students are supported and none are viewed as “others” who must watch their backs.

When it comes time for educators to implement ways to support their Black gay male population, which in turn should influence all students, Tae’s comment sums up how teachers should interact with Black gay males in their school:

Let them [gay males] speak and let them vent because nine times outta ten that’s all they need to do. Cause if they could let out that little frustration or negativity they have inside them, then they’ll go back to their senses and continue to progress as they were. And if they weren’t, that’s when you [teacher] step in [and ask] “Is there anything I can help you with?” or “I know this person who’s really good talking about this situation.” Don’t shut them out because when someone is talkin regardless about the subject, they need someone to talk to. (Interview, 2014)

Through these recommendations and the suggestions of others in the field, I believe Tae’s wishes will become reality and teachers will not feel intimidated or pre-judge these males with ignorant beliefs but rather they will be there for their Black gay students to listen and provide support.

When all of this occurs, it is my hope that the lives of Black gay males in schools will move from a group being invisible and “othered” to a group that is respected and appreciated for their resiliency.



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## Appendix A

### Interview 1 Semi-Structured Questions

#### Preliminary Demographic Data

- Year of Birth and Age
- Sexual identity
  - How do you identify (e.g., gay, queer, etc.)?
  - What level of “outness” would you say you are?
  - When did you first disclose your sexual orientation to others?
- Family history—what type of household did you grow-up in and are you currently living in?
- What is your current educational and employment status (in high school, in college, working a job, etc.)?
- In what part(s) of metro-Atlanta did you attend elementary, middle, and high school? What are the names of the schools you attended?
- Did you grow up in the church?
- What are the names of any school or community-based organizations with which you affiliate or work?

#### Elementary School

1. Tell me about your childhood.
  - What moment/moments stick out for you, especially ones that shaped who you are? Why?
  - Who were the people most involved in your childhood? And how so?
  - Who had the most influential impact on your childhood? Why?
  - Did this influence your life at elementary school? Explain.
2. What do you remember about how your family discussed race? Sexuality? What did they say?
  - Can you recollect a moment that sticks out in your mind when they discussed race, sexuality? What "lessons" did you learn from this?
  - Did they every discuss LGBT rights and social issues affecting the community?
3. Tell me about the moment(s) when you first recognized that you were Black and came to understand this as significant. How about when you knew you were gay?
  - What did these moments teach you about race and/or sexuality?
4. When you were in elementary school, what moment(s) helped you begin to understand your racial identity?
  - What about your sexual identity?
  - How did this differ from your family’s discussions of race and/or sexuality?
  - Whether these moments were similar or different, how have they helped you define your identities and presentation of self?

- Tell me about a moment when your peers helped you understand your racial and sexual identity. How about teachers and administrators?

5. Who were your role models during this time? Why?

- What about them made you gravitate to them? Describe how they came to be your role models and what you have taken from them?

6. Is there anything else you would like to share about this period in your life? Are there any other moments that stick out to you that we have not discussed, moments that have impacted your life and who you are?

If relevant:

7. Provide with me a moment or two when you began to understand sexuality from church? Did this conflict with your family's, peers', and school's views?

### **Middle School**

I will follow the same format as above with slight variations.

1. During this time in middle school, how did you navigate through school dances and dating? Can you speak on a moment(s) when this conflicted with your sexual identity? How about your racial identity?

- What did you learn from these experiences? Where did you find support?

2. Explain to me your relationship with your family during this time. Were they more or less supportive of you than in elementary school?

- How about your peers?

3. How did you begin to express yourself during this time?

- Describe how you presented your racial identity and your sexual identity.

4. If applicable, how and where did you generally find support in middle school?

- Explain to me why and how this happened and what it meant for your sense of self.

## **Appendix B**

## Interview 2

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

#### High school

1. Talk about your experiences in high school. What was it like being a Black male?
  - Tell me about a moment when your racial identity seemed front and center.
  
2. What was your high school like for gay students? How did this impact how you dealt with your sexuality?
  
3. Provide me with a sense of where you turned for support during this time. What prompted this and what was the outcome?
  - How did this support network look?
  - Who did it include?
  - What kind of support was offered?
  
4. Who were your role models during this time? Why?
  - What about them made you gravitate to them? Describe how they came to be your role model and what you have taken from them?
  
5. What was your social life like during this period?
  - Did it consist of only gays, only straights, a mixture of people? What was your scene?
  - Did you have a support system? What did this consist of and how did you build it?
  
6. Was there a visible LGBTQ community at your high school? If so, explain how that influenced you and whether you were a part of it or not.
  - If you were a part of it, why did you associate and what did you learn about yourself in the process?
  - If you were not a part of it, why? Take me through the process of why you chose not to associate.
  
7. If there were other Black gay males or other gay males at your school, did you identify with them, whether you were friends or not?
  - What occurred that made you realize you were like them or different from them? What did this mean to you?
  
8. When and why did you disclose your sexual identity? To whom did you disclose your identity?
  - Describe your feelings before, during, and after this event.
  - What were their reactions?
  - Explain how this has impacted your life.
  
9. What was dating like for you? Romantic relationships? Speak on those moments and what you did and why you did what you did.

- What did you learn about yourself and your sexuality and race through these experiences?

10. Like middle school, there are many extracurricular events and groups. Were you in any extracurricular clubs? Describe your time in these clubs and how they supported or conflicted with your sexual and racial identities?

- If your school had a gay-straight alliance or some club for LGBTQ youth, were you a part of it? Why or why not?
- Explain how you came to know of the club and the impact it had on you.

11. Tell me what you knew about the gay community during high school. What experiences did you have in understanding the Black gay community?

- Is there a specific moment when you first interacted with the community? Describe that moment. If not, why did you not interact with them?

12. When did you become aware of LGBTQ organizations in the community? Tell me about how you came to find out about these organizations and what you understood them to be. Were you involved with any of them?

14. How did you present yourself during this time period?

- In what ways would you describe your presentation or presentations of self?
  - What informed these presentations?
  - What was the reaction from family, peers, and others?

15. During high school, what were your family's views on sexuality, views that were presented to you either directly or indirectly? Did this change from your time in elementary and middle school?

16. How do these experiences in high school compare to your experiences in elementary and middle schools?

- In what ways do they piggyback on one another?

### **Present Life**

1. Describe the gay community you are or are not involved with here in Atlanta.

2. Share a recent moment when you faced a challenge related to race-sexuality, but overcame it.

3. Through all of these life experiences, what have you learned about yourself? How have your views shifted and evolved over time about being Black, gay, and male?

4. Would you describe yourself as “productively” navigating through family, school, and society?

- What does “productively” mean to you?

**Appendix C**

**Interview 3  
Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

**Social Media**

1. Tell me about how you got connected to social media.
  - What were the events leading up to this?
  - What did you hope to, or do you, gain from using social media?
  
2. Describe one or two applications you cannot live without.
  - Explain to me what in your life prompted you to go to these applications?
  - How are these applications useful for you as a Black (gay) male?
  
3. Provide me with two examples of social media documents that speak to your identity, that are snapshots of you.
  
4. Why did you choose this document?
  - Can you explain this photo or set of photos?
    - Who are the people? What is the setting? What do the gestures mean? Why did you choose this outfit?
    - Who is the target audience for this photo or set of photos?
    - What do the comments say? How have these interactions with your photo(s) informed your sense of self and/or your self-presentation?
  - What do these photos say about you as a Black (gay) male?
  - How does this photo or set of photos challenge common understandings of race? Sexuality?
    - Do they align with what you understood race and sexuality to be when you were younger? Explain how you got to this process of understanding them in the way you currently do.
  
5. Tell me about the text messages, tweets, SnapChats, or Facebook updates and posts you are sharing.
  - Why did you choose these?
  - What do these say about your life experiences?
  - Take me through them and explain: (a) when and why they were created (what were the circumstances of why they were created)? (b) what do they offer you as a Black (gay) male? And (c) what did you want the audience's reaction to be and what was their reaction?
  - Is this document a representation of yourself or something you wish to be?
    - Provide some context on why this is a representation of yourself or not.
  
6. Tell me about your presentation of self on social media.
  - Is what is presented in your public, "offline" persona related to what is presented "online" in social media?
  - How and why are these self-presentations similar or different?
    - Explain why this is? What events occurred that made you conscious of this presentation of self?
  
7. Does your immediate family engage with you on social media?
  - If so, what is their reaction to some of your posts and pictures? Provide an example.
  - How has this informed what you post?

- Does this affect your offline relationship with them?
  - Provide me some details and examples of how this affects you or how the dynamics of this online/offline relationship came to be.

8. Walk me through a typical day of how and when you use social media.

9. In what ways has social media provided you with support as a Black (gay) male? Why do you consider social media to be valuable or an important of your life?

- Alternatively, have online interactions ever caused stress or conflict? How did you handle or negotiate this?

10. What would your life as a Black (gay) male be like if social media did not exist?

## **Appendix D**

### **Sample Professional Development Plan**

This is an ongoing process and can take many forms (e.g. done as in-service days, part of faculty meetings, after school grade-level meetings, etc.). I would also suggest districts and the state adopt a similar plan as part of the requirements for certification renewal. Additionally, the plan I



am presenting is something that would occur once a month for one school year but should not cease after the first year; many new teachers will be joining the school and the topics of heterosexism and heteronormativity are ones that are very layered and should not be discussed in one year and discarded. As a former elementary school teacher I have seen this process play out in regard to content areas: one year the faculty meetings focused on math while the next year it was reading then the following year it was writing and then it went back to math and the cycle continued. While this plan not be best for large all-school faculty meetings, I would suggest breaking teachers into small groups during these meetings to allow for intimate conversations. Since this is new, I would suggest bringing in scholars from local universities and colleges or people from sexual minority organizations within the area to come begin the facilitation. Lastly, this plan follows in line with praxis (Freire, 2000), where dialogue, reflection, and action create change.

### **August**

This piece should begin with setting the tone for all of the sessions. Thus, honesty and ignorance should be allowed and laid bare so teachers can move forward and begin to ask questions they have had, whether ignorant or not, that can move the sessions forward and will inform the facilitators on what to discuss and put the session's focus; this may also be a group effort where there is no one facilitator.

- Gather teachers perceptions of the climate of their school for their sexual minority youth, specific attention to the Black sexual minority population
- Present the terms heterosexist and heteronormativity by handing out the pieces:
  - <http://www.csun.edu/~psp/handouts/Heterosexism%20and%20Heteronormativity.pdf>
  - Cardabo, D. (2005). Privilege. In E. P. Johnson & M. G. Henderson (Eds.). *Black queer studies: A critical anthology* (pp.190-212). Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Teachers should reflect on these pieces and ask any questions necessary. Then they should begin to create a journal of where they see examples of heteronormativity occurring in their lives (home, church, school, playground, etc.).
- Provide a copy of
  - Ingraham, C. (1994). The heterosexual imaginary: Feminist sociology and theories of gender. *Sociological Inquiry*, 12(2), 203-219.
- Create a plan with teachers for what teachers want to get out of these sessions and the purpose of these sessions

### **September**

- Teachers present what they found in their daily interactions with a focus on their school.
- According to their findings, or ideas and things left off from last month's session, the session will follow as necessary.
- Review the Ingraham article and begin questioning and dialogue.
- Show the following video from Butler regarding performativity and gender <http://bigthink.com/videos/your-behavior-creates-your-gender>; discussions to follow
- To conclude:

- What plan of action will they take to blunt their own reinforcement of heteronormativity and how will they intercede when their students demonstrate ways of reinforcing heteronormativity?
- Continue journaling

## October

- Review their journals and continue dialogue and reflection
- What ways did they combat what they did or what they saw being done in their classroom or school?
- Pose the question: What policies in schools are in place to support sexual minority youth? Any specific to their school? Why is this an important topic to discuss?
- Provide bullet points from the National Climate Survey:
  - Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., Bartkiewicz, M. J., Boesen, M. J., & Palmer, N. A. (2012). *The 2011 National School Climate Survey: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth in our nation's schools*. Retrieved from: <http://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/2011%20National%20School%20Climate%20Survey%20Full%20Report.pdf>
- What have they seen in schools that relates to the findings of this study?
- After looking at this study and the findings, are policies enough? Based on what has been read and examined thus far in the sessions, what else can be done to combat this school climate?
- Continue journaling and read for homework:
  - Mayo, J. B. (2007). Negotiating sexual orientation and classroom practice(s) at school. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 35(3), 447-464.
  - Hoshall, L. (2013). Afraid of who you are: No promo homo laws in public school sex education. *Texas Journal of Women and the Law*, 22(2), 219-239

## November

- Review journals and articles they read from October
- Since this study and plan is focused on majority Black school settings, introduce indigenous African cultural views and ways of same-sex relationships and gender roles.
  - Gather teachers beliefs on this, what do they know?
  - Hand out article and have teachers read and share their thoughts and questions: <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/4/homosexuality-africamuseveniugandanigeriaethiopia.html>
- Hand out the article to read for next month's meeting
  - Tamale, S. (2013). Confronting the politics of nonconforming sexualities in Africa. *African Studies Review*, 56(2), 31-45.
- Continue journaling and plan of action to blunt their reinforcement of allowing heteronormativity to occur and ways they will intercede when their students demonstrate the reinforcement of heteronormativity.

## January

- Review Tamale article and answer questions and thoughts as well as a review of their journals
- Seek responses to the perceptions of Black sexual minority peoples in pop culture

- Examine images in pop culture of Black gay males, Black lesbians, and Black transgender people by presenting clips from TV shows such as *Noah's Arc*, *Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *Empire*, *Orange Is The New Black*, or other TV shows, movies, or music videos on this subject.
  - How do these images feed into reinforcing stereotypes of the Black sexual minority community?
  - Begin the discussion on if these images are fair presentations or what is missing.
- Provide the article to read over the break and to be discussed in January
  - Hill, M.L. (2009). Scared straight: Hip-hop, outing, and the pedagogy of queerness. *The Review of Education Pedagogy*, 31(1), 29-54.
- Continue journaling and add pop culture references from social media or television that show examples of stereotyping and heteronormativity.

## February

- Review the Hill article and images they found on television
- If possible, bring in sexual minority students from the school to discuss their experiences in the school or community members to come in and share their life experiences living within the area
- If they are not available, hand out the article:
  - Barracks, C. (2012). Mother to son. In K. Boykin (Ed.), *For colored boys who have considered suicide when the rainbow is still not enough* (pp. 41-50). New York: Magnus Books.
- Provide the readings for homework and reflection:
  - Chambers, V., Terah, T. & McCready, L T. (2011). "Making space" for ourselves: African American responses to their marginalization. *Urban Education*, 46(6), 1352-1378
  - Barracks, C. (2012). Mother to son. In K. Boykin (Ed.), *For colored boys who have considered suicide when the rainbow is still not enough* (pp. 41-50). New York: Magnus Books. –included in case the article is not read during the session

## March

- Create a plan with all that is known to begin to introduce the topics of sexuality, race, heterosexism, and heteronormativity to their students. What ways will teachers bring this into their classrooms? This plan is not limited to the sexual minority students but all students to see how they are complicit within a system they may be unaware exists.

## April

- Discuss their journals and what has been occurring in their classrooms thus far based on March's plan

## May

- Review what has been done to combat the reproduction of a heteronormative space in school. Has anything been done?
- How will this continue next year within the school and within professional development?

As a culminating activity, teachers should write a reflection of the process and what they will continue to do to confront heterosexism and the heteronormative environment. Also, units, lesson plans, and projects should be created with students that tackle issues of heterosexism and heteronormativity.

## **Appendix E**

### **Unit of Study for High Schoolers: Marginalization in the Twentieth Century**

**Objective:** This unit will explore myriad issues that have been marginalized throughout the twentieth century and create pragmatic plans to blunt marginalization through the production of new knowledge.

**Culminating Assignment:** Once students have explored myriad issues (racism, classism, immigrant rights, sexism, etc.), they will design their own plan of action, a social justice themed project which not only brings forth and presents these issues to the mainstream, but also explains in what ways have what they learned about the suppression of such issues informed how they will challenge current issues that are being marginalized. The plan seeks to ask:

1. What can students do within this plan to teach educators and policy makers about suppression of such issues and to not allow for this marginalization to continue?
2. In what ways has this marginalization occurred at the benefit of another group (the White, male, Christian, heterosexual power structure)?

This plan will be presented to educators, school board members, state legislators, the State Board of Education, and the State Department of Education through a paper and summary of points which also includes a graph or two illuminating the disparities in the marginalization of such issues in school curricula, textbooks, and/or standards.

Objectives for the unit and lesson taken from Common Core and the Georgia Department of Education<sup>7</sup>:

**English Language Arts** (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015a):

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3](#) Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.7](#) Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment (e.g., Auden's "Musée des Beaux Arts" and Breughel's Landscape with the Fall of Icarus).

**Math** (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2015b)

- [CCSS.MATH.CONTENT.HSS.ID.A.3](#) Interpret differences in shape, center, and spread in the context of the data sets, accounting for possible effects of extreme data points (outliers).

**Science** (Georgia Standards, 2006)

- **SAP3.** Students will assess the integration and coordination of body functions and their dependence on the endocrine and nervous systems to regulate physiological activities.
  - Describe how the body perceives internal and external stimuli and responds to maintain a stable internal environment, as it relates to biofeedback.
- **SAP5.** Students will analyze the role of the reproductive system as it pertains to the growth and development of humans.
  - Explain how the functions of the reproductive organs are regulated by hormonal interactions.

**Social Studies** (Georgia Standards, 2012):

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<sup>7</sup> While I am providing objectives mandated by the state of Georgia, I do so only because these objectives are mandated and may make it easier for schools and teachers to justify creating and implementing such a unit. Personally, I am against top-down (Sadker & Zittleman, 2012) objectives and believe that standards and objectives must be generated from the student.

- **GA SSUSH23** The student will describe and assess the impact of political developments between 1945 and 1970
- **GA SSCG7** The student will describe how thoughtful and effective participation in civic life is characterized by obeying the law, paying taxes, serving on a jury, participating in the political process, performing public service, registering for military duty, being informed about current issues, and respecting differing opinions.
- **GA ELACC9-10WHST1:** Write arguments focused on *discipline-specific content*.
  - a. Introduce precise claim(s), distinguish the claim(s) from alternate or opposing claims, and create an organization that establishes clear relationships among the claim(s), counterclaims, reasons, and evidence.

### **Race, Sexuality, and Citizenship: Black Gay and Bisexual Marginalization in Twentieth Literature<sup>8</sup>**

#### **Book:** Giovanni's Room

- In the 1950s, David is a White young adult male from Long Island, N.Y. living in Paris whose girlfriend has gone to Spain to reflect on potential marriage plans between the two. David meets an Italian, Giovanni, at a gay bar and they begin a whirlwind romance. During this time David is conflicted with his sexuality and his disconnect to his father back in Long Island, N.Y.

#### **Discussion Questions<sup>9</sup>:**

- Though White (Irish), in what way is David's representative of the Black (Baldwin's) experience in the United States and abroad, specific to France?
- In what ways does David's alienation represent the social climate in the United States at the time of this publication?
- How does Baldwin call the reader's attention to the tensions within how one defines their sexuality? How society defines sexuality?
- What has been learned about the struggle David has gone through due to his sexuality? In what ways do heterosexism and the heteronormative system reinforce this struggle for David?
- Which scenes demonstrate the struggles of David? Giovanni? How do are these scenes crafted and what can they teach one about the marginalization in society and history of the issues presented in this novel?
- Connecting to a character in the novel, who can you relate with and why? What does this relation help explain about your own struggles with race, sexuality, and/or social alienation?
- In several scenes, David and Giovanni engage in sexual relations, as do David and Hella. Examine ways in which the body and its reproductive organs react to the multi stimuli the characters are engaged in and feel. What biological entity has caused David to have these sexual feelings for both characters?

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<sup>8</sup> This lesson is one of many implemented throughout the year and is not to be relegated to an English classroom but must be used in conjunction with all subject matter—a thematic unit where all classes are exploring this topic.

<sup>9</sup> These questions are a guide if students do not have questions but student questions should guide the discussion and may very well tap into these themes presented in these questions.

**Supplemental Material: Two videos with James Baldwin**

*Both videos speak to how and why suppression or ignoring of such marginalized issues and Black peoples' experiences become enacted by the White power structure.*

**Video 1: James Baldwin: Interview (Florida Forum, Miami)~~1963**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FpRziHGxeEU>

**Video 2: James Baldwin - On Being Poor, Black, and Gay**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s-rfiG6ubVc>

This lesson could be used in conjunction with other Baldwin books, notably “Notes of a Native Son,” which may allow for Black gay male students to connect at a deeper level with his work and his experiences, and with other writings by such authors as Bruce Nugent, Langston Hughes, and Audre Lorde.