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"*Shouting it Out*": Religion and the Development of Black Gay Identities

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Abstract Using an intersectional framework, this paper analyzes the behavioral and interactional responses to anti-gay religious teachings among young Black gay men. Drawing on 26 semi-structured interviews and 18 months of ethnographic observation data, I highlight the role non-religious youth development organizations play in the negotiation of contradictory religious and sexual identities among young Black gay men. My findings illuminate new patterns in the understanding of personal narrative reconciliation while simultaneously highlighting new directions for research in the roles that youth-led spaces play in socialization practices. While previous research on religion and sexuality has relied primarily on interview data, this study uses ethnographic data to supplement interviews with youth to further elucidate the community building and collective negotiations of religious teachings. Ultimately, I argue that these young Black gay men work collaboratively to repurpose religious messaging in order to justify their sexualities; to reinforce positive behaviors and explain everyday occurrences with religious exclamations (e.g., call and response, shouting); and to create new religious communities.

Keywords Sexuality · Religion · Identity development · Community · Organizations

> *Many churches demonize a lot of people…You need a spiritual discernment to know what church to go to and where you get your lessons from. —Lawrence*
>
> *I heard this at church on Sunday: You can't prevent a snake from biting you, but you can stop the venom from getting into your system —Henry*

Many Black gay men will be exposed to religious messages about sexuality. The opening quotes highlight the critical tensions between on the one hand sexual and racial self-identification and on the other hand religious teachings experienced by young Black gay men. Lawrence[1]

[1] All names of people and places have been changed to maintain participant confidentiality.

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illuminates the deeply felt dilemma to negotiate negative messages from church communities about sexuality while still practicing his faith. Henry, in contrast, appropriates a religious lesson from a sermon he has heard in church to counter anti-gay ideas and messages. These two quotes highlight the role of religion, including both the rampant, negative religious-based messages and the more positive aspects of belonging to a religious community, in the socialization of young Black gay men. Drawing upon observations of religiosity in a secular organization catering to Black gay men, this article addresses how these young men mitigate negative experiences with religious institutions and teachings to make sense of their presumed incompatible religious and sexual identities.

Youth-serving organizations have played constructive roles in assisting LGBT youth and young adults to explore their identities (Boxer 1996). However, we know less about how young Black gay men in an organizational setting negotiate religious messages of racial and sexual identity. Drawing on previous work that has identified the delegitimization of anti-gay religious teachers (Pitt 2010) and the importance of personal religious spirituality for youth (Kubicek et al. 2009), I analyze the role of participation in youth development organizations in helping youth to 1) receive authoritative messages on religious teachings and 2) work collectively to reclaim and repurpose religious messaging. Furthermore, by combining both individual religious experiences with collective faith expressions, this analysis contributes to the knowledge of lived religion in everyday life.

Specifically, this article will show how young Black gay men in one community-based organization 1) appropriate religious teachings to explain hardships and homophobia, 2) negotiate a religious and sexual identity following negative religious messages throughout childhood related to homosexuality, and 3) use the organizational space to recharge and recreate a sense of religious community. Using participant observation, the study illuminates strategies that youth employ within the non-religious organizational space to internalize gay-friendly religious messages deliverers of those messages. Additionally, I analyze the ways that organizations can intentionally and unintentionally be structured to imitate religious worship services—in particular, Black church related practices, such as, shouting[2] and call and response.[3] Taken together, the analysis suggests that while religious dogma can transmit damaging homophobic lessons that youth struggle with throughout young adulthood, aspects of religious teachings and communities can be used within LGBT organizations, both structurally and substantively, to aid youth as they face adversity and transition to adulthood.

Reconciling Contradictory Religious and Sexual Identities

Churches and religious institutions have been major political, social, and moral pillars of Black communities (see Morris 1986), but they have also been associated with homophobia. While some studies have documented the health benefits of religiosity (Foster et al. 2011; Koenig et al. 1998; Oxman et al. 1995; Pardini et al. 2000), others have documented the many ways that anti-gay theology has negatively affected the church's response to HIV/AIDS,

[2] Shouting is a religious practice often found within Black churches that as been linked to African dances. In contemporary Black Christian churches, this dance is often linked to the Holy Spirit and one being taken over with the spirit, to the point joyous movement (see Holmes 2004).

[3] Call and response is associated with the Black church and is a collective experience where the pastor or preacher is encouraged and his/her message reinforced through the vocal expressions of the congregants (see Costen 2010).

homosexual behaviors, and the development of LGBT identities (Alder et al. 2007; Fullilove and Fullilove 1999; Smith et al. 2005; Ward 2005). Consequently, scholars have found mixed evidence of the role of religion among young Black gay men: Generally, belonging to a religious community may be beneficial, but blatant homophobia can prove quite harmful (Kubicek et al. 2009).

Research on the levels of homophobia within varying *ethnic* communities has been inconclusive. On the one hand, high levels of religiosity and religious practice among Blacks have been positively associated with high levels of disapproval for homosexuality (Glick and Golden 2010; Lewis 2003; Negy and Eisenman 2005). Given the strong historical ties of the Black community to religious institutions, researchers have argued that Blacks are more likely to be exposed to negative attitudes about their sexualities on a more consistent basis (Barnes and Meyer 2012). Negative religious teachings may be more problematic, because LGBT people of color are more likely to reside within communities of color rather than predominately white gay enclaves (Cantu 2009; Moore 2010b; Ocampo 2012), perhaps contributing to the amounts of racially-based homophobia to which they are exposed. That is not to suggest that predominately Black religious environments are more homophobic than others, but rather that the importance of religion within the Black community would subject its members to more instances of anti-gay sentiments, homophobic teachings, or even openly derogatory remarks. Given the contentious relationship between homosexuality and the Black church, it is important to examine the mechanisms youth employ to combat negative religious-based criticisms as they transition to adulthood.

At the same time, studies that have focused on Black gay men, have highlighted the many ways that a sense of religious community and involvement with church activities, social gatherings, and services can be beneficial to the psychosocial development of LGBT peoples (Pitt 2010; Walker and Longmire-Avital 2013). Much of the research that has examined the ways that LGBT people who are also religious has, understandably, identified how they might negotiate these identities within religiously centered organizations and churches (Fuist et al. 2012; O'Brien 2004; Pitt 2010; Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000; Thumma 1991).

Considering the central role that the church plays in the Black community, we may expect that religious culture and teachings will play a role in the socialization of young Black gay men, even in non-religious contexts. For instance, participation in religious communities may play a role in assisting Black gay men as they deal with everyday challenges related to HIV, while still transmitting negative views of homosexual behavior (Foster et al. 2011). These impacts can be seen in the case of Los Angeles County, where, following a positive diagnosis of HIV, African-American MSM (men who have sex with men) are the group least likely to be linked to care within three months and the group least likely to reach viral suppression (Frye 2014). Research has suggested that LGBT affirming churches in Los Angeles, specifically, have often provided a safe space for those coping with the effects of HIV infection (Leong 2006).

In the sociology of religion the concept of "lived religion" has been advanced to study and understand individual expressions, practices, and beliefs that are incorporated into everyday activities (McGuire 2008; Talvacchia et al. 2014). As articulated by McGuire (2008, 16), "The focus on individual religion necessitates examining not only people's beliefs, religious ideas, and moral values (i.e., cognitive aspects of individual religion) but also, and more important, their everyday spiritual practices, involving their bodily and emotional, as well as religious, experiences, and expressions." While this focus on the individual religious experience indicates a shift away from formal worship, McGuire (2008) also asserts the role of collectively

derived and constructed religious experiences, realities, and worlds. The focus on lived religion illuminates a way that religious practices can be used to justify and make sense of everyday challenges and setbacks among the lives of the young adults in this study.

Previous research that has considered the religious practices of Black gay males has identified the multiple ways by which they respond to religious based stigmatization. Relying on Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, Pitt (2010) observed that a primary method of combating the negative messages that come from religious authority among Black gay men is to discredit or delegitimize the deliverer of that message. He argues that given the likelihood that Black gay men remain strongly connected to the Black community, they are more likely to experience these poignantly anti-gay moments in a negative way (Pitt 2010). Likewise, Kubicek et al. (2009, 15) found that among young Black men who have sex with men, positive religious messages were typically incorporated into a "personal or individual relationship with a higher power," while negative religious messages were either "reframed or rejected" over time. Shallenberger (1996) found similar tendencies to adopt individualistic spiritual practices among a population of primary white lesbians and gay men. These studies, however, do not explain why or how young Black gay men come to internally hold and publicly display Black gay identities to others in their social worlds. By examining the individual lived religion practices of young Black gay men further, we can elucidate the pathways to claim a Black gay identity within broader hostile external environments. My research seeks to identify how exactly young adults in Los Angeles are able to repurpose and reclaim a religious theology and practice all their own within an organizational space dedicated to encouraging the successful coalescence of their identities: religious, sexual, racial, and otherwise.

Theoretical Frameworks

Intersectionality provides a practical framework for analyzing the marginalization and self-identification development of young Black gay men. Advanced by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality was employed to assess the politics and interconnectivity of racism and sexism among women of color. Other research rooted in Black Feminist theory has advocated for the use of intersectionality as a framework that addresses the multiplicative impacts of race, gender and sexuality (among others) on the individual (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991; Hancock 2007; Moore 2010a, 2012). Its analysis centers on the systemic institutions of oppression that come to bear on life trajectories by exploring experiences of marginalization and subjugation of multiple minority identities.

Due to dual systems of oppression that work to stigmatize homosexuality and perpetuate racism to which Black same-sex individuals are subjected, the multiplicative effects of these minority identifications have rendered Black LGBT peoples outcasts within both the Black community and the mainstream white gay community (Han 2007). Manalansan and Martin (1996) have characterized these experiences as those of the "double minority," or those who identify as both a racial and a sexual minority. By understanding these links between multiple systems of oppression, the cumulative matrices of sexism, classism, racism, and heterosexism can be illuminated. As Baca Zinn and Dill (1996, 326) explain, "The idea of a matrix is that several fundamental systems work with and through each other. People experience race, class, gender, and sexuality differently depending upon their social location in the structures of race, class, gender, and sexuality." Intersectionality therefore provides a practical framework to further understand the unique experiences of gay Black youth as they grapple with homophobia and heterosexism.

In order to further understand the intersection of multiple identities in this study, it is useful to look at identity development theories. Contemporary research on identity development and conceptualization of self considers the individual as "a storyteller who draws upon the images, plots, characters, and themes in the socio-cultural world to author a life" (McAdams and Olson 2010, 10). Understanding the developing person as a continual author who is working to narrate a connected life story is important to youth who are working to create innate conceptualizations of self that rationalize current experiences, especially for stigmatized gay youth. Laumann et al. (1994, 291) write, "Development of self-identification as homosexual or gay is a psychologically and social complex state, something which, in this society is achieved only over time, often with considerable personal struggle and self-doubt, not to mention social discomfort." In grasping these different social aspects of identity construction and narrative building, religion and religious beliefs may play a major role (Yip 2003).

Intersectional theories have been used to understand the socialization of adult racial and sexual minorities. These studies examining Black gay male identity (Crichlow 2004; Hawkeswood 1996; Hunter 2010; Icard 1986) have highlighted how race, sexuality, and religion tend to shape and inform the proclaimed identities of Black gay men. Icard (1986) highlights the ways that Black men who are dealing with conflicting sentiments concerning their sexual identities can either become "gay Black men" or "Black gay men" by electing to place precedence on either their racial or sexual identities. Furthermore, sociological studies by both Hawkeswood (1996) and Hunter (2010) emphasize the ways in which Black gay men understand their gay identities. They argue that, while many works consider that either race or sexuality must dominate as a primary identifier, for many cases, Black gay men articulate these aspects of self as equal and inextricable (see Bowleg 2008).

Employing an intersectionality framework allows this project to uncover the processes that influence the specific social location of these sexual and racial minority young men. By understanding the strategies that young Black gay men employ in response to particularly homophobic experiences, this project elucidates the ways that youth are trained to respond to these homophobic attitudes by their peers. The current study builds on previous research by examining the role of *non-religious youth development organizations* in the negotiation of contradictory religious and sexual identities among Black gay young men as lived religion.

Data Collection, Setting, and Analysis

This study draws on ethnographic and interview data that was collected at a Los Angeles community based HIV prevention and treatment organization, UpLiftLA, over an 18-month period. I conducted 26 semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Each interview lasted between 30 and 120 minutes and covered four major themes: racial identity development, sexual identity development, gender identity development, and organizational involvement. All respondents ranged in age from 18–31 and the age of the average respondent was 24. I also collected ethnographic data at weekly meetings over an 18-month period. While initially the young men were wary of my presence as a "researcher" within the space, my identity as a young Black gay man and my regular participation in the weekly discussions facilitated recruitment of the young men into the study. After a few weeks of my consistent attendance at weekly meetings, the young men's fear that I would "just *use* them for research" was dispelled. They began to feel more comfortable with my presence and participating in my project, eventually

incorporating me into the group as an insider. My research expanded from collecting ethnographic fieldnotes at weekly meetings, to offsite events (i.e., educational presentations, conferences, and balls),[4] and informal social gatherings (i.e., clubs, birthday parties, brunch gatherings and dinners). The framing of these young men as "transitional youth" by the organization is distinct as they are considered to be entering a new phase of maturation, "emerging adulthood" (Arnett 2007). Understanding this population as emerging adults, we can more readily identify the pedagogical nature of the space as a place to "work out" the conciliation of seemingly disparate identities.

UpLiftLA, a non-profit organization founded in 1992, houses a youth-driven leadership and health-education program that services primarily young Black gay men. It is located in an inconspicuous building in the downtown area of Los Angeles. Focused on reaching young people aged 14–29, the organization has been particularly instrumental in working with the local gay House/Ballroom Community and Latino party crews, leading to a significant presence of young Black men within the space. To the passerby, it would appear to be just a common warehouse, but upon entering one finds a staircase leading to a suite of offices housing the youth organization. The only marker on the door is a small sign advertising the organization's name.

Young men travel from all across Los Angeles County (and sometimes neighboring counties) to this organization for their weekly leadership meetings and HIV testing services. Young men who arrive early stay in the room next to the main meeting space where they share food, exchange the latest gossip, and enjoy a little television. As the time draws near for the meeting to begin, the participants transition into the main room where chairs have been organized in a circle.

These weekly leadership meetings cover topics such as HIV/STD prevention, dealing with "the cards" dealt in life, establishing positive gay relationships, and sexual roles. In addition to these leadership meetings, UpLiftLA offers HIV/AIDS prevention services, health education, STI testing, and individual counseling. Given that identifying and finding LGBT communities of color can be difficult (Moore 2006, 2010a, b, 2011), I selected the organization UpLiftLA because they were well-known among the Black gay community, targeted the population that I sought to find, and would provide a consistent sample over time.

Over the course of my time at UpLiftLA, I observed 125 different gay youth of color (almost exclusively Black) at the weekly leadership meetings. Almost 70 % of the young men only attended between one and three meetings, which limited my ability to follow-up for one-on-one interviews with the entire sample. Ultimately, I conducted 26 in-depth interviews with self-identified gay, bisexual, and pansexual Black young men. At any given point one might move to another state, find themselves coping with homelessness, or become scarcely seen following unemployment which made it even more challenging to locate potential interview respondents. Of those I interviewed, 56 % were employed, 26 % were fulltime students, and the remaining 18 % were unemployed. While my interview approach resulted in a non-representative sample of the group, by combining interview responses and ethnographic observation I was able to record how people talk about spirituality and religion on an individual level, as well as observe their behaviors and actions within a larger group context.

[4] Associated with the LGBT African American House/Ballroom community, balls are a form of competitive performances where "houses" and individuals compete in a variety of categories (see Bailey 2013).

The majority of all respondents identified as primarily Black or African-American (n=24/26) and preferred masculine descriptors (i.e., male, man, he, his, etc.) (n=25/26). As part of the study requirements, all interviewed participants identified with being members of a larger Black community via their geospatial locations and by participating in social circles dominated with other Black-identified young adults. Seventy-eight percent of respondents self-identified as either gay or homosexual, while the other 22 % self-identified as either bisexual or pansexual. Throughout this article, I use gay as an all-encompassing term that includes those identifying as pansexual or bisexual as these youth frequently included themselves as part of a "Black gay community." The majority of respondents were residents of California at the time of the interview and almost 80 % are originally from Los Angeles (n=20). Interviews were conducted in person for 24 members residing in Los Angeles at their choice of location (e.g., respondent's home, local café, public park, etc.), and for two respondents living out of state interviews were conducted via Skype video call. All names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect participant privacy and confidentiality.

I organized and analyzed ethnographic fieldnotes and interview data through a process of abductive analysis that involved closely analyzing primary data in light of relevant theoretical literatures (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). In this study, the relevant literatures included sexual socialization and coming-of-age studies, sexual identity formation, intersectionality, Black attitudes towards homosexuality, and the role of institutions in identity formation. In light of these literatures, specific occurrences in in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations stood out. The analysis focused on instances when youth instructed others on how to perceive their racial and sexual identities through religious teachings; specific references to negative words including sin, hell, and damnation; and religious exclamations or expressions such as shouting, "Hallelujah," and "Yes God!" I grouped all such instances together in separate documents and examined for variation and common factors through processes of coding and memo writing. I then reconstituted the resulting analysis based on how youth viewed their own sexuality and how group interactions sanctioned and valued particular displays and manifestations of being gay Black men. Once an elementary set of analytical themes arose, I continued data gathering aimed at finding negative cases. I coded ethnographic observation data separately line by line with emerging themes that were related to interview data. I distinguish interview and ethnographic data by using "respondents" or "R" for interview data and "fieldnote excerpts" for ethnographic observations.

Sinning Without Reconciliation

In light of a majority view among Christian religious communities within the United States that homosexuality is deviant, youth raised in church-going communities and families are frequently subjected to anti-gay messaging from an early age. Such exposures lead to varied and tenuous relationships among gay youth with Christian communities (Talvacchia et al. 2014). My findings reveal deeply rooted religious and sexuality conflicts among many of the respondents. More than half of respondents (15/26) expressed that family, friends, and peers had negative responses to homosexuality. In each interview, respondents (R) were asked to describe the messages that they had received about identifying as gay, bisexual or pansexual. Some of the words used to describe their sexualities included: "abomination" (R3, R25, R4, R21, R16); "a sin" (R3, R8, R12, R19, R25, R2); "[all gays are] going to hell" (R8, R17, R25, R21, R20, R13, R11);"morally wrong" or "immoral" (R25, R21, R15, R13); "against God"

(R16); "[should be] prayed away" (R3); "damnation" (R17); "[gay is] bad in the Bible" (R24); and "against God" (R16). These responses highlight the deeply rooted negativity of religious teachings to which these young Black gay men have been exposed.

Gay Identities and Church Communities

What do such negative messages mean for a Black gay man coming of age? Two respondents provide concrete examples of how these interactions have shaped their identities. Gary was a 26-year-old preacher's son who spoke poignantly about his childhood experiences and realization that he was gay:

> This is going to sound so cliché, but I always knew I was different. And I remember learning about homosexuality in church and always being very interested because I grew up in the church and because my dad's a pastor. So, always being very interested in homosexuality, I would always look up stuff about it in the Bible. So even though I probably didn't identify as gay until like college, I had crushes on boys in high school; but, I didn't realize that's what it was at the time.

From this example, it is clear that Gary's early church experiences sparked an interest in his own sexuality that went unrealized until college. It is well known that people who are in deeply religious communities, where homosexuality is discouraged, have harder times accepting their own homosexual identities (Buchanan et al. 2001; Clarke et al. 1989; Wagner et al. 1994). Gary noted that the Bible was his point of reference in understanding homosexuality. While some LGBT people have come to interpret religious texts in ways that validate their sexualities (Yip 2005), using the Bible as a guide to understanding sexuality, especially homosexuality, proved discouraging in Gary's case. Additionally, being the son of a preacher heightened the conflicting interactions of religion, race, and sexuality. Even with his own interest in "looking up" homosexuality within the Bible, this did not help him to recognize these feelings or orientations within himself as "crushes." As he noted in the longer interview, Gary received specific messaging that equated homosexuality with "sin," "abomination," and being simply "morally wrong," as he matured within a Christian church environment. He told me the story of having found the obituary of a gay uncle and the subsequent conversation with his mother:

> I was asking my mom about how he died and he was gay. There was something around [his sexuality] and he was murdered. I think it had something to do with him being gay and very flamboyant—that kind of stuff. So I asked her does that mean he's in hell, and she said yes. So those were the things, the very early messages I got and in many ways still continue to get.

Illuminated in this passage are the major ways that being gay and flamboyant are seen as reprehensible. Gary's mother explained that his uncle was murdered because he was gay and flamboyantly expressed his sexuality. Instead of condemning the act of violence against a family member, his mother extended judgment on the victim by suggesting his eternal damnation in hell.

These early experiences tended to be particularly derogatory for these young men who recalled that others and they, themselves, were often condemned to hell. One interview respondent, Rahsaan, had very strong memories of the negative messages that he had received growing up. A 21-year-old bisexual man, Rahsaan invited me into his home and rehashed

some of the disparaging messaging. At the end of a small cul-de-sac where he lived alone in a modest sized apartment he told me:

> Well [being] Black and bisexual the first message that I received was that I'm going to hell, it was a sin and it was a choice I made on my own. My parents really didn't approve. Well they *definitely* didn't approve of any homosexuality at all. The message I got after that would be that any gay man had HIV and that they were sick or disgusting. That was pretty much the first two messages that I got about that.

Rahsaan, much like Gary, emphasizes that his sexuality was viewed not only as a sin or condemnation to hell, but also as "disgusting" and a pathway to disease. From his response, it is evident that the messages Rahsaan received regarding homosexuality were not only disapproving, but also associated homosexuals with being diseased and morally compromised. The connection between homosexuality and disease has been longstanding. Rahsaan's family drew heavily on popular discourse about homosexuality as a disease, which is often rooted in biblical teachings, biological histories, and psychological assessments of human sexuality. While homosexuality was officially removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association in the early 1970s, the emergence of HIV in the subsequent decade effectively re-categorized homosexuality as not just a disease but as a "death sentence" (Colvin 2011). As HIV/AIDS was first known as Gay Related Immune Deficiency, or GRID, equating homosexuality and disease has become inescapable in recent history (Altman 1982). The association of gay identities with HIV and disease further stigmatize gay identities and complicates religious identities.

The experiences of Gary and Rahsaan, coupled with the other widely shared religiously based anti-gay lessons among the youth, demonstrate the shared individual experiences that create the need for a space where these young men can learn and practice their religions in order to make sense of their everyday lives. In the following sections, I turn to participant observation data of the interactions that have occurred within UpLiftLA, where the young men come to reconcile some of these negative messages, repurpose religious teachings, and practice religious worship as a group.

The Recharge: Structural Parallels in the Development Space

While the young men certainly struggle with the anti-gay messages they are receiving from religious clergy, they still place value on the emotional and communal aspects of the religious experience. Sociologist Timothy J. Nelson has explored the religious service as an "emotional worship." In particular, his 1996 work on African-American worship services examined how these spiritual services follow an emotional order (Nelson 1996). In spite of sending anti-gay messages to LGBT youth, religious institutions frequently awaken a thirst for continued personal spirituality and the security of a moral community (Foster et al. 2011). While the young men found themselves at odds with anti-gay religious messages, they still searched for a communal environment that echoed the collective religious spirituality of the church. These aspects of religious institutions may spillover to other social spaces to help these young men cope and explain varying experiences throughout their life trajectories. This section explores these individual expressions of religious worship and aspects of religious collectivity within the non-religious organization.

The space of UpLiftLA is a secular site for the youth to come and discuss how to negotiate the social, political, and institutional challenges in their lives that arise with negotiating seemingly incompatible racial and sexual identities. On numerous occasions, the young men of UpLiftLA evoked behaviors and traditions that are clearly rooted in experiences within religious environments. Based on the clearly negative experiences and language that many were exposed to from a young age, we might expect that they would reject religious affiliations and associations. However, these young men tend to use the weekly meetings as an opportunity to create religious and spiritual spaces. The young men that frequent UpLiftLA repurposed the experience from religious environments and worked to maintain aspects of their religious communities that they found favorable.

One particular instance of religious creation was how the participants used the entire space and meeting time as an emotional outlet and worship space. These young Black gay men treated the space like a sanctuary, albeit not a religious one, and they imbued the space with religious emphasis. Often I heard about the reverence the young men held for the space as I gave them a ride home or to the nearest train station. During one such ride, Darrius spoke to me about the importance of UpLiftLA to his weekly progress in saying, "I hate missing the meetings. Not to be blasphemous, but it's like church. I feel energized when I leave." Comments such as this, about UpLiftLA, highlighted the importance of the space that it plays in his weekly life. Similar to a church experience, UpLiftLA meetings were energizing for Darrius. Perhaps this is because the weekly meetings structurally, behaviorally, and thematically mirror church services. Meetings are held at the same time every week, the young men come together to learn how to make sense of their lives, and they learn how to navigate social challenges. Other participants echoed Darrius's sentiments about the "energizing" impact of the weekly meetings. Take this interaction between Avery and Torian, for example:

> **Avery:** Yes, I go to church and I tithe, but I can still have a drink and have a sip and see. I need to pour more into myself. Coming to the groups, we're learning to pour into ourselves, and starting to add to ourselves first. Coming to the group is like coming to the recharge. Each time you come in here there's no bias, malice, or bullshit; it's about being with family and being yourself and growing.
> **Torian:** Like church!

In this conversation there are many elements that solidify UpLiftLA meetings as a place to invite growth and energize and "recharge" oneself, which assisted the attendees in dealing with their own life challenges. These aspects of the meeting means that it serves a purpose similar to that of church for these young men—here they can use the space to prepare themselves for the world outside, much like a Sunday service. Additionally, Avery notes that coming to the meetings is like being with family and being able to "[be] yourself," which signals that what is valued most is also the camaraderie and community created by the organization. While the role of the weekly meetings is clear in this exchange, Avery also notes that he continues to attend church and *tithe*. This suggests that the meetings do not fully replace the role of church, but rather that these sessions are supplementary religious spaces.

The significance of the weekly meetings is clear for these young men and they encourage one another—again, much like the ways Black churches work—to spread the word about the services and opportunities offered at UpLiftLA. They are encouraged to become *organizational evangelists*. One particular week, the young men were discussing their coming-out stories and the experiences they had with family and close friends. After the two-hour

conversation with all of the guys, the group facilitator, Henry wrapped up the meeting and encouraged the young men to bring others to next week's meeting:

Henry: Bring a friend cause you never know who may need…
Justin: Healing…
Henry: Yes!

Justin finished the group facilitator's sentence with "healing" and collaboratively added to what he believes the meetings could impart upon attendees. The healing referred to is not medical but spiritual healing. Henry also encouraged the participants to bring people back to the group, paralleling the church service by creating a common goal to convince others of the powerful religious undercurrent of the space. The young men were urged to share the experiences they have had with others, who may be in need—other young Black gay men who are looking for spaces like these. In the next section, I further highlight the behavioral aspects that are rolled over from African-American religious traditions and incorporated into the lived religious practices of the organizational community: *call and response* and *shouting*.

Call and Response

In addition to serving as a Black gay community, surrogate church, and a spiritual source to recharge energy, the young men experienced the weekly meetings as involving other aspects of church services. When Henry, the group facilitator, spoke to the youth about the importance of why he chose his topics for discussion, the youth reinforced the message with church praise and encouraged his weekly lesson or "sermon." In the following example, as the group facilitator was closing out the weekly meeting with a final lesson for the week, participants Marquis, Jalen, Patrick, and Justin all vocally respond to Henry's lesson about blessings that are coming to them in life:

Henry: We stay in moments because we tend to relive a story; we think it defines us. A lot of things are waiting for you…other blessings
Marquis: Hallelujah!
Jalen: You speak! Yes! God is sending you all that!

Here the participants' exclamations were reinforcing and encouraging Henry to continue with his lesson. He then built on this idea of future blessings by turning to an example that involved dating the same person from the past, which elicited further verbal expressions of support from the group. With exclamations of "Yes God!" and "Praise God," the young men engaged in open call and response with Henry, who took on the role of group pastor. One participant encouraged Henry's speech saying, "Yes! Yes God! You have a sermon Henry!" In describing Henry's message as a "sermon," the young men were positioning themselves to receive a "God sent" message as if it were a church lesson. Through verbal expressions of agreement such as "Hallelujah!" and "Yes, God!" the participants recreated a church-like experience in the secular organizational space. This spontaneous call and response has been tied to the foundations of African-American religious traditions and preaching, connecting Black religious practices to those of African origins (Pattillo-McCoy 1998).

After nearly two hours, Henry finished the meeting by wrapping up with a message he wanted to leave with the group. He said, "People are your characters; you decide what they can do in your story. You have to take the power and take the pen. Keep writing." Henry's "sermon" not only focused on the role that each person plays in his or her own life, but he also

urged his "flock" to remember that God still has a hand in the making of each life trajectory. As a facilitator, Henry used his position to teach a message of God's acceptance and involvement in the young men's lives that may counter the messages and lessons that they expressed in their individual interviews. From this exchange it is evident that the organizational space mimics that of a religious worship space in many ways. Similar to a church's pastor, Henry's position as group leader gave him authority to deliver religious teachings to the young Black gay men of the organization. The weekly meetings provided Henry with an opportunity to pastor within the space and to impart his own individual religious interpretations, knowledge, and lessons into the lives of the young men. Much as a pastor is seen as a religious and spiritual guide, Henry fulfilled this function for the young men who attend UpLiftLA.

Call and response patterns also occurred when a group participant said something that was agreed upon by the other young men, both when it referred directly to church or religion and when it was used to agree with a life outlook. In one such instance, the young men use religious exclamations in order to express agreement with another's thought or worldview. One such occurrence took place during a December meeting where the young men were discussing what they planned to achieve in the New Year. While many of the participants shared goals for new jobs, furthering education, or even finding relationships, Kyle, a younger member of the group, spoke of aspects of himself he wanted to leave behind in the New Year:

> Kyle shares with the group that he wanted to get rid of this attitude and meanness. Henry, the group facilitator, exclaimed, "Yes God! Yes God!!" Kyle, who is sitting right next to me, is visibly annoyed by this exclamation, but continued to speak: "I'm getting rid of my femininity, I'm gonna give trade [in the new year]."

Even though Henry's exclamation of "Yes God! Yes God!!" bothered Kyle, evidencing that people might agree that he was "mean" or had an attitude, it also showed Henry's support for Kyle's desire to change. This verbal exchange between the facilitator and Kyle could be found in religious environments where one may deliver a testimonial, or expression of change guided by divine intervention. In this case, though call and response was used to illustrate agreement outside of an explicitly religious conversation, it brought religion to the forefront by inserting "God" and appropriating symbols of religious worship. Expressions such as this one show that religious teachings and practices from church environments carry over to other experiences in the lives of these youths and can be re-purposed for everyday usage.

Religious exclamations can also occur when the meeting content is expressly about religion. An example of this happened during one meeting where I observed the participants talking about their experiences growing up in church. Two participants, Ian and Avery, discussed perceptions about dating differences across sexualities and racial groups. Specifically, Ian, a young Latino man who infrequently attended meetings, agreed with Avery's perception of the similarities between the gay and straight communities when it came to dating and expressed his agreement via religious exclamations. Henry, in similar fashion, called out the names of those who were raising their hands to speak, assigning numbers to Avery and Ian in succession. Avery began, "You go to church and you act like you are a 'kid.'[5] People will ignore it and act like they don't see it like: 'He's got a girlfriend he's getting married.'" Ian's turn came next and he was visibly excited to share his perspective with the group. He started by emphasizing how different it is in the Latino church. He said, "It's

[5] Here "kid" is used to mean gay or homosexual (see Hawkeswood 1996; Johnson 2008)

completely different. Once the Pastor knows, you're out!" The group seemed rather shocked by his comments and all agreed that their own experiences had not been the same.

This particular meeting was striking because, among a group that is usually exclusively Black or African-American, Ian was seen as an authority on the Latino experience. By providing a clearly divergent narrative of the Latino church, he inadvertently strengthened the common experiences among these young Black gay men. Avery noted that within Black churches, pastors know about their gay members but frequently ignore their sexualities or take a "don't ask, don't tell" approach. Conversely, Ian argued that in Latino religious communities you are kicked out of the church—drawing a stark contrast to the church experiences of the majority in the space. While it has been asserted that churches provide the foundation for moral sexual practices within Black communities, organizations such as UpLiftLA provide an alternative to the "don't ask, don't tell" approach or the hidden romantic relationships that tend to occur within Black church environments. This point is particularly important because it suggested that a central function of the organization was to offer participants a space to openly express and integrate their religious, sexual, and racial identities.

Another idea expressed in this exchange between the young men is the significance of religion and religious spaces to romantic relationships, both gay and straight alike. Flowing organically into this topic of relationships, Avery and Rahsaan discussed the church as a "hookup spot." Avery shared that among his friends the "kids" attend church for status within the community and to be seen by others within the space. When Rahsaan expressed shock that the church is a place where gay men might meet one another, Avery replied, "Ohhh yeah! My friend calls them "Chays," the church gays; they go to the club but never get a man from the club, but rather always get their man from church." Ian exclaimed, "Amen" in response. Avery shared that churches can serve as a place to meet a potential partner, in particular through using geospatial locating applications that are highly used within LGBT communities, particularly among men who have sex with men (Holloway et al. 2014). This information and the belief that church was an ideal place to find a romantic partner was seconded by Ian, who gave an "Amen" in typical call and response patterns found in church religious settings.

These examples of call and response are telling because they identify multiple themes and patterns within the space. First, the young men use religiously derived exclamations to show support within the space for messages shared, both religious and nonreligious. Second, the existence of contrasting narratives by some group participants connects the bonds of Black participants by highlighting communal experiences among the majority of the group. Third, racial, sexual, and religious life experiences converge in the weekly meetings and allow for rich discussions among the participants, reflecting the important religious socializations that have occurred in their lives and how they come to create meaning in the space.

Shouting

Expressions of agreement can also be religious but non-verbal in the space. In one such instance, Avery used another form of religious expression commonly seen within African-American religious spaces, "shouting," to support a message about friendship to Torian, who had sought out the advice of the group after a recent conflict with a close friend. Henry gave Torian the floor to speak, and he began to tell a story about his college friend. He shared that when his mother passed away a female friend's father wanted to give him money for his loss. However, the friend never gave him the money but kept it to herself. Many of the young men exclaimed, "Oh hell no!" Avery directly addressed Torian, asking, "How do you call her a

friend?! I don't wanna be ratchet, but you need to reevaluate this so-called friendship cause that's not even a friendship!" Others expressed agreement through exclaiming "Amen!" and "Yes!" Avery got up and shouted, giving a "praise dance" with his feet moving quickly around his seat and raising his hands high toward the sky.

In this scene men used both religious exclamations and religious praise dance expressions to emphasize agreement about defining the friendship in question. Again, the conversation was not about religion but rather focused on helping one of the group members with an interpersonal relationship. By using a style of dance expression that is typically seen in African-American churches, Avery added a religious element to this agreement and adapted this practice to the secular space. Shouting in this space signaled several messages. First, as a marker of the African-American religious tradition, shouting and similar behaviors (e.g., call and response) highlighted a connection to the larger African-American community and religiosity. Second, members of the group who are seen as the most "religious," an evaluation that is based on their outward behaviors and the frequency with which they mentioned church attendance, often utilized these expressions. (Often the most religious members are given nicknames such as "Sister Gloria" in the space). As examples of religious worship, these "holy" participants set the standard for the ways that emotional connections with God are enacted. The take-home message suggests cohesion of sexual, racial, and religious identities for these young men.

These observations have illustrated how religious language and expressions are used in everyday conversations that occur during the weekly meetings at UpLiftLA. They emphasize the similarities between the church space and organizational space in their roles for young Black gay men. Many structural parallels can be found between these two social institutions: 1) Meetings occur weekly at the same time and on the same day, 2) Agreement is frequently expressed through call and response or praise dancing, and 3) A leader (pastor or lead facilitator) acts as guide through spiritual and personal revelations. Furthermore, these weekly occurrences give the young men an opportunity to engage one another not just about topics of religion, but also to use their religious expressions to discuss everyday events and relationships and to challenge negative religious messages.

Reclamation and Reinterpretation

In spite of the many negative experiences that young Black gay men encounter in churches, many of them worked to recapture religious, spiritual, and organizational aspects of church outside of it. As such, these results parallel other sociological accounts of queer women's religious practices in Los Angeles, who, regardless of religious individualism, still sought a sense of religious community (Wilcox 2009). The meetings at UpLiftLA presented the young men with a weekly opportunity to interpret events of good fortune that occurred in their everyday lives. As we already saw, participants frequently used the religious term "blessings" to explain these positive changes in their lives. This notion of "blessings" comes from church teachings, where blessings are used to designate positive events and celebrated collectively as a community. In this context, the young men suggested that God is favoring them through unexpected gifts or positivity. Importantly, in the repurposing of church language and practice these young Black gay men attributed these blessings to their acceptance of themselves as gay.

An example occurred in one meeting where Henry guided the participants through an interactive exercise to develop strategies to combat challenges. Henry created a large brick-pattern with index cards on the main wall in the discussion space. Each index card displayed a different word. I could make out words such as "judgment," "negativity," and "failed relationships" written on the cards. As the conversation began, Henry invited people to talk about the different challenges that can create "walls" or "barriers" in life. When one of the young men spoke, he asked him to pick a word from the wall that resonated with his own inner barrier. One of the participants, Reginald, talked about having overcome his personal self-doubts and insecurities. Henry honed in on Reginald's use of the word "insecurities" and handed him that card from the wall. Behind the "brick" was another card with a more positive word written. The card behind Reginald's read "blessings." Reginald began to speak about how just tonight on the train a woman told him that he should and could be an actor. He talked about how she commented on his energy and gave him a card to a casting director contact that would sign him on the spot. Malachi piped up with shouts of agreement and the other young men encouraged Reginald to add detail to the story. Reginald continued, "You know I'm bad at telling stories…" Building from Reginald's own admission of his storytelling, Malachi added that the woman gave Reginald the card and told him to pretend like he *personally* knew the director himself. Reginald picked up his card, saying that he had gotten rid of his insecurities and now different blessings like this experience on the train were coming into his life.

This activity opened an opportunity for Reginald to construct his train experience that day as a blessing that could only come to fruition after having sorted through his own personal doubts. Henry had facilitated this interpretation by planting the work blessings as part of the activity's structure. Yet, the young men also discussed blessings organically as they interpreted their own lives. In the following passage, Jalen admitted that when he finally came to openly express his sexuality, new changes or "blessings" came into his life:

> God is starting to bless me, and my arms are wide open; God is just blessing me so much right now. You'll take steps and God or whomever you believe in will be right there with you.

Jalen's exclamations of God's work in his own life happened upon his own self-acceptance. Jalen emphasized the blessings as a result of accepting his own sexuality, an interpretation that stands in stark contrast to many of the ways these young men have been taught about God and sexuality.

An understanding of the broad spectrum of other participant's relationships with religion was also evident within the group. These young men worked to ensure they were inclusive of other's beliefs no matter what they might have been in order to acknowledge the varying paths that one may take to respond to the anti-gay messages that they have heard throughout life. Jalen emphasized this by saying not simply "God," but also "whomever you believe in." While statements such as these were somewhat inclusive, there was no question that there still existed an implicit expectation that *everyone believed in something*. As such, it reinforced the norm of religion and spirituality within the organizational space.

Group participants also reinterpreted the similarities between their own lives and that of religious figures. Young men in the space reconciled the negative lessons that they had accumulated over time through religious teachings to the many challenges Jesus faced.

Some of the young men felt that while they may be different from others, they couldn't be wrong because God himself was ridiculed. One night, the participants recalled their coming-out narratives. Elijah told to the group:

> God created everyone and how I live my life. I'm too old to beg people to be my friend; I have to make myself happy before I help anyone be happy. Myself, I come first! Let 'em talk! They'd talk about me when I'm a billionaire, and they'd talk about me if I were broke too. Let them talk! They talked about Jesus Christ too!

Here, Elijah highlighted that he must find his own path to happiness and that he knew people would continue to talk about him no matter the circumstances. He argued that *all* people are created by God and therefore should be accepted by others. Elijah suggested that he had come to accept himself and that he was "too old" to fight for unreciprocated friendship. By aligning his own experiences with those of Jesus Christ, Elijah expressed an attitude of perseverance and apathy towards the opinions of others.

Young Black gay men exploring their gay sexualities within a church-going family face a dilemma. It is very likely that they have heard denunciations of their sexualities at home and in church; yet, they still find themselves clinging to certain aspects of organized religious worship. The young men in this study maintained at least some minimal connection or belief in a divine being, even if they did not practice at a church or with a religious congregation. Moreover, in order to reconcile incongruence in their racial, sexual, and religious identities these young men appropriated religious practice and teachings and imported them into a secular space. By creating a place for the discussion of religious teachings within a gay-affirming environment, these young men are able to retain supportive elements of the religious church experience: community and collective participation.

Conclusion

Captured in this analysis are the many ways that local community organizations can serve as spiritual and religious spaces for Black gay young men. The organizational space of *UpLiftLA* provides these young men with an opportunity to recharge, repurpose, and engage one another with spiritual beliefs, as well as resources to resist the religiously rooted homophobia that the youth in this study experienced. Rather than reject religion outright, the majority of these young men have elected to redirect the same negative lessons that were taught against their sexualities to create new meanings that explain challenges within their daily experiences. That is to say, while some youth have rejected religious messaging or focused on a more personal religious relationship with God, they are simultaneously engaging in communal religious discourse with one another within these organizational contexts in an affirmative manner.

Many of the young men in this study either remained in their home churches that espouse anti-gay sentiments or left churches altogether. The proclivity for Black LGBT people to live and socialize in ethnic, not LGBT, communities (Moore 2010b) means that the decision to leave one's church is not an easy one. Over the last 40 years, churches for Black LGBT persons have opened in Los Angeles, such as The Renewed Church of Los Angeles and Unity Fellowship Church of Christ, among others. As these churches gain larger footholds into the local communities it will be imperative to reassess the newer generation of LGBT young adults worshipping within these communities.

While this study is limited to one organizational space, its findings highlight the important ways Black gay young men are creating religious spaces among LGBT organizations, even if that is not the focus of the organization itself. Organizations targeting Black LGBT youth should recognize the important role they may play in the religious trajectories of these youth by continuing to provide spaces where these ideas can be collectively discussed and negotiated. It also may suggest that *explicitly* working to provide alternative religious spaces for this population could provide a stronger connection with a target population frequently looking for ways to draw spiritual meanings outside of traditional Black church environments. An intersectional framework has allowed for a deeper understanding of how Black gay men are negotiating their identities. Much like the findings of Schnoor's (2006) intersectional analysis of gay Jewish men, these young men are using religious values and practices to add meaning, purpose, and sense to their gay identities.

Within religious settings Pitt (2010) has argued that Black gay men may delegitimize deliverers of anti-gay religious messages. Other research has suggested that these experiences may then lead to a personal or individualistic relationship with God. Researchers have found that the community aspects of the religious experience are of the utmost importance to sexual minority young adults (Yip et al. 2013). I find that in addition to these processes in religious settings, the Black gay young men in this study import elements of the emotional and community aspects of religious spaces to build new communities and give authority to new messengers of God. The structural elements of the weekly meetings parallel religious sermons and teachings found in traditional Christian churches, and it allows for the youth to retain and recreate aspects of their religious experiences that they each hold dear. Here, youth have lessened the credibility of religious clergy by rejecting incompatible messaging and transferred that credibility to a new space with a new religious and spiritual leader. In doing so, these participants are doing religious work, creating meaning of their everyday experiences through a religious lens and practicing religion (Bender 2003), thereby creating paths of resiliency.

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