My Pew, Your Pulpit: An Ethnographic Study of Black Christian Lesbian Experiences in the Black Church

M.A. Thesis

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By

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Abstract

When it comes to the Black churchwoman’s identity her place in the Black church is highly prescribed and restrained. Black churchwomen are reduced to roles such as ushers, nurses, Sunday school teachers, hostesses, secretaries, clerks, deaconesses, first ladies and mothers of the church. However limited the roles and identities of Black women are thought to be it rarely includes a queer sexuality. It is within this context that the Black lesbian church member has been marginalized, spoken for and in many ways silenced.

Using Foucault’s theory of pastoral power and obligational salvation, this paper demonstrates how the discourses that come out of the church combined with the secular and spiritual power of the church has enabled the Black church to continue to fulfill its traditional obligations to both the spiritual self - in which the goal is salvation - and to the social self - in which the goal is civil liberties and freedom, whilst also holding on to forms of homophobia which both damage the spiritual self of Christian lesbians and restrict their civil liberties and freedom.

Through the ethnographic study of four Black Christian lesbians this project begins to fill the profound gap in the knowledge, analysis and understanding of Black lesbian experiences within the Black church by unpacking: (1) Black Christian lesbians’ experiences in the Black church; (2) strategies they have developed for dealing with homophobia found in Black churches and (3) the spaces they find for themselves in the church in which they can create a sense of belonging.
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Introduction

The Black church is arguably one of the most central institutions to the Black community. Providing a crucial element for the survival of African traditions and ideals, the church in its simplest form is a symbol of hope, love and strength for the Black community. While progressive when it comes to matters of education, health care, social injustice, and the sorts, the Black church operates out of a conservative stance on issues surrounding gender and sexuality. This stance is both outdated and neglects the reality of the population of most Black churches. One of the many sources for the church’s stance lies at its foundational approach towards theology. Additionally, whether explicitly claimed or implicitly practiced, Black liberation theology is the heart and soul of the Black church.

Black liberation theology’s roots in two male centered, sexist periods of Black history: the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement leaves very little room for Black women to affirm their liberation, further silencing the Black lesbian voice and complicating her performance of self within the larger church performance. “Churches and the ‘God- talk’ that emerges from them are sources for both the oppression and liberation of Black women. Despite today’s increase of women in leadership positions, women continue to be outsiders”.  

experiencing the rewards of being in the culturally and spiritually enriching space of the church but also the hurt of being symbolically subordinate to men [and if you are homosexual, then also to heterosexuals]. “If the church does not share in the liberation struggle of [all] black women, its liberation is not authentic.” For Black lesbians, liberation is linked to their whole identity, not just the Black, female or homosexual side. Just as it is not possible to separate being Black from being human and Black from woman, it is equally impossible to separate being Black from being a member of the LGBT community.

The Black Christian lesbian constantly has to re-define her spirituality in order to fit in with the only community that she may have known. Out lesbian Christians rarely occupy positions of privilege within the Black church and community. More typically the privileged spaces available to lesbians within the Black church are those of economic, educational and class status; not of spiritual or institutional leadership. As a result of this as well as the restricted power and status of women generally within the church there are also very few opportunities within the church for advocating lesbian equality. The theological controversy over homosexuality makes it hard for any homosexual no matter how well versed in scripture, to come out or to gain senior positions. Homosexuals will find themselves in incessant conversations fighting for the legitimacy of homosexuality or hiding their sexual orientation to avoid those conversations all together.

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The church’s strong dissent against homosexuality has left many gay and lesbian people feeling that they are not welcome in the Black church. Because of that feeling many gays and lesbians find it easier to completely remove themselves from the church rather than stay in a place where their identity is a continuous point of dissension. However, for those who do stay they often find themselves in uncomfortable situations in which they are faced with the decision of either outing themselves and dealing with the ridicule, discrimination and rejection that may follow, or finding ways to alter the performance of their identities in ways that will mask their sexual identities and/or make their presence less threatening.

When it comes to the Black churchwoman’s identity her experiences become almost monolithic in nature, as there has not been much work done on the variety of lived experiences. Black churchwomen are reduced to roles such as ushers, nurses, Sunday school teachers, hostesses, secretaries, clerks, deaconesses, first ladies and mothers of the church. However limited the roles and identities of Black women are thought to be it rarely includes a queer sexuality. It is within this context that the Black lesbian church member has been marginalized, spoken for and in many ways silenced. Despite the recent growth in Black Queer studies, the lived reality of many gay and lesbian churchgoers has largely been ignored or relayed by third parties (Griffin, 2001). This either renders them invisible or takes away from the agency that comes when a person speaks for his/herself. Thus we are left with a gap in our understanding of what it means to be female, homosexual, Christian and attend a Black church.
This study begins to fill the gap in the knowledge, analysis and understanding of Black lesbian experiences within the Black church, which are often left out of most significant public debates on homosexuality and the Black church. Driven by the objectives of obtaining a better understanding of: (1) Black Christian lesbians’ experiences in the Black church; (2) What strategies they have developed for dealing with homophobia found in Black churches and (3) what spaces, if any, do they find for themselves in the church in which they can create a sense of belonging and feel the most comfortable. This study asks, in what ways does the Black church impact Black Christian lesbians?
One of the most influential texts to historicize sexuality and sex in the west is Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction Vol. I.* Written over four decades ago, Foucault charts the evolution of sexuality as far back as the 17th century Victorian regime. In great detail Foucault takes the reader on a journey that unpacks how Victorian ideals, the naming of the perverse, and censorship have shaped discourse on sexuality. This book is essential to the foundational work of my project as it helps to situate sexuality not just as something to be negotiated, dealt with and expressed privately by the individual but also as something that has been managed and shaped by public discourse over what constitutes our notions of the ideal and the perverse. Although, a highly influential book for the study of sexuality, this book does little to directly address and explore marginalized sexualities. Equally as useful as a historical text is Foucault’s book *Religion and Culture* broken up into three parts: 1) Madness, Religion and the Avant-Garde; 2) Religions, Politics and the East; and 3) Christianity, Sexuality and the Self: Fragments of an Unpublished Volume. This book documents his thoughts on Christianity, culture and religion. Of special interests to me are Foucault’s key concepts of pastoral power and obligational salvation. I will enlist his use of these terms as they most closely match my own understanding of how power works in the Black church. Foucault of course is not referring to the Black church, most of his analysis seems to be directed at Catholicism, so in using this work as a theoretical framework I problematize his general analysis while also fitting it into a
structure more suited for an in depth understanding of the Black church. This is book is significant to my work because Foucault deals immensely with the relationship between the power held by the pastor and its bearing on salvation, a salvation that he claims is not optional. His work represents a perspective that is absent from most scholarly works on the Black church and leadership such as Charles Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya’s *The Black Church in the African American Experience*; and Clayborne Carson’s *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charismatic Leadership in a Mass Struggle*. These works highlight the charismatic leadership of the Black church but do not as Foucault does address the elements of power that in turn makes salvation obligatory. Many scholars have written about the Black church examining the cultural, historical and spiritual significance. These include writers those like Henry Mitchell, Melissa V. Harris-Lacewell, Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, Andrew Billingsley, Dwight Hopson and Kelly Brown-Douglas, whose works cover topics such politics, tenants of Black faith, the seven major denominations of the Black church, the Civil Rights Movement and sexism. Mitchell’s *Black Church Beginnings: The Long-hidden Realities of the First Years (2004)*, attempts to locate the origins of the Black church by locating it not as an off-shoot of European religions but as a movement reflecting African traditions practiced long before arrival in America. Lacewell’s *Righteous Politics: The Role of the Black Church in Contemporary Politics (2007)* demonstrates how influential the Black church is in politics. Looking at the role that Black church plays in getting Black people to vote she explores presidential elections and argues that the church provides the Black community with much needed information that they would not get unless they sought out the information.
Lincoln and Mamiya in *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (1990) provides readers with information gained from a 10-year in-depth study of the seven major historic denominations of the Black church. The book looks at various aspects of Black faith like the role that women play, music and praise and politics both inside and outside of the church. Of special interest to my project is the book’s ability to paint a picture of the Black church’s history of addressing problems facing the Black community. Billingsley accomplishes a similar goal in his 1999 book *Mighty Like A River: the Black church and Social Reform*. Ronald E. Hopson and Brown-Douglas, Kelly in their piece, *Understanding the Black Church: The Dynamics of Change* (2001) explores the answer to the question, “what is the Black Church?” as well as looking at the dual roles the Black church plays as a religious center and social center. Instrumental to the foundational work for my project is their focus on the injustice done to women, gays and lesbians in the church. Gender disparities are prominent in the Black church and they outline the sexism and glass ceiling within the clergy. This work represents a shift in the analysis of theology and the role of social change in the Black church when it comes to matters of gender and homophobia.

This shift is evident in the other works of Kelly Brown-Douglas, Stephanie Mitchem and Karen and Garth Baker-Fletcher whose works examines Womanist theology and the liberating spaces it provides for Black women and LGBT people in the church. My decision to include Womanist works in my literature review is due to the inclusive nature it brings to its examination of the role of religion in people’s lives. Womanist scholars have often critiqued Black Liberation
Theology for its sexist attitudes and lack of affirming spaces for women. Douglass in *Marginalized People, Liberating Perspectives: A Womanist Approach to Biblical Interpretation* (2001) stresses the importance and advantages of interpreting the Bible from a marginalized perspective. Womanist theology asserts the claim that when we start to read the Bible and view the world in a way that recognizes that ‘last are first and the first are last’ only then will we begin to move towards true equality. *Introducing Womanist Theology* (2002) by Stephanie Mitchem and *My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-talk* by Karen and Garth Baker-Fletcher (1997) provide extensive definitions of Womanist theology and shows how its ideology can be used in different areas of life and social interaction. Womanist theology is one of the few spaces in which sexuality and theology are put into in depth conversations with each other.

Some Black scholars have critiqued the apparent taboo nature of sexuality in theological discussions. One such scholar is Kelly Brown-Douglas, whose work has been particularly relevant throughout my reading for this project. In *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (1991) Douglas examines how sexuality is addressed in the Black community and the Black church. Douglas’s discussion of the legacy of White attack on Black bodies argues for its influence in shaping the conservative stance of the Black church on issues of sexuality and homophobia within the Black community. Douglass also demonstrates, how this white attack coupled with the selective use of the Bible has been deployed to place value on heterosexual lifestyles and disavow homosexuality and she concludes by asserting the need for a theology of Black sexuality.
Another work that deals with the experiences of Black LGBT people is *Their Own Received Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* by Horace Griffin (2000). Griffin’s claim is that the Black church is only progressive in certain social matters and homosexuality is not one of them; thus, gays and lesbians have to fight to be seen as equal and moral within the Black church is similar to my own position. Griffin also argues that the Black church has continually failed Black gays and lesbians and that in order to fight homophobia gays and lesbians must stop letting Black heterosexuals speak for them. Yet in this particular work he does not provide a space for gay and lesbian people to speak for themselves. Thus as he points out there is a gap in our understanding of what it means to be Black, homosexual and Christian.

Furthermore, Griffins work suffers from the same issue that many Black queer works suffer from; Black gay men’s experiences are in the forefront of analysis. Black lesbian experiences are often afterthoughts that while included are often scarce in analysis and depth. When embarking on this project it became apparent that there is not much research being done on the spaces that Black lesbians have carved out for themselves within the Black church. My discovery of this has only led me to believe even more that there is a need for this in our academic discourse. While scholars like Patricia Hill-Collins, bell hooks, and Kimberle Crenshaw acknowledge the dual and at times triangular oppression that Black women face by being Black, female and sometimes lesbian, they do not look at the ways in which they cope with that oppression within religious spaces. As Collins argues, in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000) the ability to self-define is something that Black women have always
struggled for. The power that lies in being able to self define and shape yourself according to your own standards serves as the underlying mesh for this project. The unique contribution of this project lies in its ability to provide Black Christian lesbians with the space to, in their own words, define who they are and how they police their identity within religious spaces.
Research Design and Procedures

Using Grounded Theory as both a method and a form of analysis this study is based upon interviews with Black women who identify as lesbian, identify or once identified as Christian and attend or once attended a majority Black church. Grounded Theory as a method allows room for a systematic shaping of this research project that encourages reflexivity, the collection of rich data, and foci on participant experiences. A systematic shaping of the research means that the researcher is “simultaneously involved in data collection and analysis [and] that the researcher’s emerging analysis shapes his or her data collection procedure”.3 Starting with a set of research interests and questions I then chose semi-structured interviews as my ethnographic method.

Ethnographic methods are the most useful for this research, because they involve “direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures), watching what happens, listening to what is said and asking questions. It results in richly written accounts that respect the irreducibility of human experience”.4 Furthermore, Grounded Theory’s basic tenet of developing theories from data instead of hypotheses will allow me to maintain a certain level of interaction with the data throughout my project instead of just at the end of the project. This type of interaction enables me to gain multiple layers of understanding and ensures that the data is leading the direction of my project.

Participants were recruited through flyers and e-mails sent to LGBT organizations, especially those who serve Black populations. Advertisements were placed in community newsletters and other women were notified of the project from snowballing efforts, in which women who were already in contact with me shared the announcement with friends. From these efforts I wanted to find women ages 18 and up who identify as Black and/or African American, Christian, lesbian and who currently attend or have previously attended a Black church. The sample pool included women who previously attended Black churches in an effort to understand why some people leave the church. It was anticipated that what this might reveal are both the forms of homophobia that can be barriers to continued church involvement as well as the individual response/reaction factors that mean some women leave whilst others stay are able to overcome them and stay. It was not a necessity that the women attend any one particular type or denomination of Black church, only that the majority of the congregation be African American people, as my source literature focuses on the African American experience and the Black church movement in the USA. This project presents the narratives of 4 women and their experiences in the Black Church. The small number of women aids in the collection of rich, detailed data.

Women who were interested in participating in the project, during our initial contact completed a brief demographic survey to ensure that they meet the eligibility requirements. This survey examined the women’s age, religious affiliation/denomination and asks them to gauge their
participation in church. From there, the women were given information about the project and asked to participate in a semi-structured interview at a place of their convenience in which they will feel comfortable answering questions and maintain a sense of privacy. The interviews lasted approximately 30-60 minutes and were audio recorded with permission, for transcription. The interviews will took place between December 2011 and February 2012.

Prior to the start of the interview the women were explained the terms of the project and at this point consent was obtained. After this the women were given a copy of the consent form for their records. The semi-structure format of the interviews allowed for the use of an interview guide with a list of discussion questions to cover during the interview, while also leaving room for the participant to shape the discussion based upon their interests. The interview guide covered topics such as respectability, homophobia within the church, their spaces of comfort and implicit and explicit rules as these themes are essential to understanding the varied experiences of Black Christian lesbians. At the end of the interview the participant were thanked and explained the next steps of the project, which were transcriptions, and the creation of their narrative that would have the opportunity to review before its inclusion in the final project.

After the interviews with the women, the data was transcribed using the audio recordings and matched with any field notes. The transcribed interviews then underwent two steps before it reached the final narrative product found in part two of this document. First the women’s transcript were transcribed word for word including all pauses, repetitions, etc. this
transcription included both the voice of the participant and the interviewer. In the second step the text was re-read and my voice as the interviewer was deleted. By taking out all of my questions, “the interviewer’s role becomes backgrounded and the interviewee’s words become foregrounded”. However if my question was necessary in order to understand the answer of the participant then it was kept and incorporated into the answer in a manner that would not alter the meaning of the participant’s words, for example:

*Original Text:*

Interviewer: What is you earliest memory of being at church

Participant: When I was young (pause) like 5. We went to the corner church on our street. Our parents made us go all the time we used to go all the time we were in choir, at bible study, at Sunday school...everything!

*Text at step two:*

Participant: My earliest memory of being at church is when I was young, like 5. We went to the corner church on our street. Our parents made us go all the time; we were in the choir, at Bible study, Sunday school...everything!

The addition of the interviewer’s question did not take away from the original meaning of the statement; its inclusion is only to aid in the clarity of the statement and to ease the transformation of the interview into narrative form. In step two the focus is on removing the interviewer’s voice and editing the participants’ answers in a manner that will allow the responses to flow together. Once this step was successfully finished the narrative was proof read then sent back to the participant. This marked the beginning of step three. It was

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important that minimal editing took place because one of the main reasons for the project is to fill the gap of knowledge and understanding on Black lesbians’ experiences in the Black church.

Filling this gap is significant because Black lesbians find themselves marginalized in academic works, as there are much works focusing on Black gay men and religion. Thus their experiences become hidden and at best relayed by a third party. More meaningful engagement in the experiences of Black Christian lesbians can only come if one encounters and engages with the words of the women. It is not enough to have a work that examines the topic; it is necessary that the women have the opportunity to have their voices heard. Inevitable this means that there must be an ongoing dialogue between the women and the researcher.

Through multiple conversations with the participants the narrative was polished and amended. The women were given the opportunity to read the narrative and provide feedback to ensure that their words were presented in the way they intended. Once both parties were satisfied the finished narrative was set aside for inclusion in the final thesis project. Most of the women liked the draft of the narrative that was presented to them and did not request any changes. Only one woman expressed concern with the structure of her narrative. Once her concerns were addressed her narrative was included with the others. I ultimately chose to structure the project in this matter after reading Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis’s book entitled *My Soul is My Own: Oral Narrative of African American Women in the Professions* (1993). While not addressing issues of religion and sexuality, the book provided me with me an example of how provocative and useful it is to provide readers with narratives instead of mere excerpts from interview transcripts.
Etter-Lewis tells the stories of African American women who receive college educations and who later took jobs in professions during periods of history (1920’s-1940’s) in which their mere presence was despised. Her use of narratives demonstrated to me the power of such encounters with the emic, when it comes to understanding lived experiences. The later part of the book examines the use of oral narratives in telling the stories of Black women concluding that they are “a dynamic interactive methodology that preserves an individual’s own words [...] and understanding of her/his own life unabridged”. 6

It is important that the stories of the women shine through as the heart of this my project. It is not enough to have bits and pieces of their words accompanied with analysis but to provide the same story that captured my attention. It could be argued that this project is actually two in one, first the project of capturing the stories of women whose voices have been excluded from many works on the Black church and the second, which takes up the task of explaining and theorizing about the Black Christian lesbian experience in the Black church. Presenting in this manner allows for the reader to engage with the complexity of the stories, revealing multiple layers of meaning.

Data Analysis

Sociologists Glauser and Strauss (1967) and Corbin (1990) identified a set of procedures for the use of grounded theory as a form of analysis. These steps, as outlined below shaped how I approached data analysis:

1. Produce transcripts of interviews and read through small sample of text
2. Identify potential analytical categories (themes that arise)
3. As the categories emerge, pull the data together and compare
4. Think about how the categories are linked together
5. Use the relations among categories to build theoretical models, constantly check the models against the data – particularly negative cases
6. Present the results of the analysis using exemplars (quotes) to illuminate the theory

Using their technique the initial analysis of my data began with the original un-edited transcripts of the interviews. These transcripts were paired with the field notes taken during the interviews. Consulting my fieldnotes while reading the transcripts enabled further validation of the emerging themes from the transcripts. Once typed, the transcripts were printed double-spaced with a large margin on the left of the page for coding room. Each transcript was read and coded line-by-line using a numeral system in which each number corresponds with a theme. The coding process started with 5 major themes numbered 1 through 5. Passages that fall in line with the themes are coded with the appropriate number, the codes being:

1) Homophobia and coping mechanisms
2) Space
3) Performance and the presentation of self
4) Church rules and culture, and
5) Identity

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These codes were created prior to the start of analysis and were based upon the themes found in the interview guide. After reading the transcripts it became evident that these themes did not adequately explain what I found on the transcripts. As a result the themes were changed to:

1) Factors influencing attendance
2) Comfort
3) Respectability and
4) Flight or fight

These themes proved to be more useful and were used throughout the analysis. After coding the transcripts separate documents were created headed with the title of each theme, on this document was all of the in vivo codes (the actual words of the participant) from the interviews. This was used to develop a relationship between the comments of the women. I looked for similarities and differences that could be used as a basis for my arguments. Once this was finished for each theme a similar process took place that compared all of the themes and how they relate to one another, the findings of which are used in the conclusion.

Throughout the coding process memoing is done to keep track of ideas about how each of the themes relate to one another. Memoing is the process of taking notes while reading, it is helpful in noting repetition, in vivo codes (the actual words of the participants), potential hypotheses and negative cases that are those examples that do not fall in line with the emerging pattern. This method allows effective comparison, the emergence of patterns and later the discovery of unseen links. Memoing enabled the identification of negative cases that will not only disconfirm the previous patterns but encourage the inclusion of a variety of lived experiences of Black
Christian lesbians. These patterns lay the foundation upon which theoretical models to explain/answer my research questions are created.
In an effort to trace the history of sexuality Michel Foucault ventures to understand the Christian West’s moral impact on sexual attitudes and rules. Foucault in *Religion and Culture* (2009) identifies various aspects of Christianity that he says are linked to a certain type of power that exist outside of mainstream political power circuits. This power, which Foucault calls *pastoral power* is unique in the sense that it is centered on the pastorate. Foucault likens the power held by pastors in Christianity to that of a shepherd who leads and guides a flock, ensuring its well-being on earth until they are one day returned to the head shepherd: God. Foucault defines pastoral power as having the following elements: firstly, shepherds yield power over a flock rather than land. Foucault compares pastoral power to that of the Roman Empire in which governmental power was over a state or a city but not a flock even though citizens make up the city. This element is important because it highlights the significant difference between the power found in the church and those powers found other places. The power in the church is one that emphasizes the close relationship of those with power to those over whom power is exhorted. Secondly, shepherds gather together, guide and lead their flock. One way through which pastors often gather their congregations together is through fellowships. For it is said in 1 John 1:3 that our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. Fellowship then is the spiritual meeting place of Christ and his followers. Through communal activities pastors strengthen and deepen the bonds of camaraderie, trust, and faith in God. Thirdly, the
shepherd’s role is to ensure the salvation of his flock. The shepherd does this through constant, individual relationships in which the shepherd tends to the daily needs of each sheep in the flock. In this sense, argues Foucault, pastoral power is a beneficial power as the shepherd’s devotion “ensures at the same time the substance of individuals and the substance of the group”. Fourthly, there is the idea of duty, in which the shepherd agrees to sacrifice his life for his flock. The shepherd is obligated to his flock in the sense that they rely on his spiritual guidance to ensure both their earthly and ethereal well-being. He then is also obligated to God as his ultimate responsibility is to return the flock to God.

If pastoral power looks at the power that pastors have, then obligational salvation, argues Foucault, calls attention to the fact that salvation must be the spiritual goal of all believers, “Christian societies, did not allow the individuals the freedom to say, ‘Well, myself, I do not want to seek my salvation.’ Each individual was required to seek his salvation.” Under this guise obligational salvation is then characterized as having the following four aspects at the level of the individual supplicant: it is mandatory, it cannot be attained in isolation, it requires obedience and finally it requires a reflection and knowledge of the interior of self. Taking each in turn, Foucault explains that salvation is not a matter of choice and it is not sought alone; it is done by accepting the authority of another. By seeking salvation one accepts the authority of the pastor/shepherd allotting him a certain degree of power over your life. This power, Foucault ties to issues of surveillance and control through means of confession. Thirdly, obedience means

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that the congregation members says to themselves “I am humble…I accept the orders of whomever, seeing that he will give the orders to me and that I – myself, who am the last – would be able to recognize in this will of the other the very will of God.” And lastly, knowledge of the interior, interior here is being used to mean the inner most thoughts and personal acts of members of the flock. The pastor, who is seen as a master of truth both teaches truth and requires the truth from each of his flock. Truth then is reached through confessionals, the act of which reinforces, deepens and prolongs the individual’s relationship with the pastor. Confessions then are needed to produce truth about our lives, truths that in examination are used by the pastor to provide guidance.

Thus in order to apply the characteristics of pastoral power and obligational salvation to the Black church we must first locate Foucault’s conceptual framework. In doing this we find that Foucault’s work is saturated with the use of the “West” more specifically in regards to Christianity in the West. Yet the “West” denotes a very specific discourse, which is not very helpful to this project yet the “West” also encompasses a large geographical terrain that helps my endeavor because it is broad enough that the theory that comes out his discussion can be applied to the Black church; yet it also restricts how far I can apply his theory to the Black church because some aspects of his analysis are geared towards certain types of Christianity. For example, Foucault’s interest and characterization of confession seemingly speaks to Catholicism in that confession is seen as a sacrament in the Catholic Church that allows people to be granted

forgiveness not only by God but also by the priest who grants it. It is then through pastoral confession (confession done to a priest) that once can be reconciled and experience the true grace of God. There are other forms of Christianity that do not emphasize pastoral confession as Catholics do. It is befitting that Foucault’s discussion of religion finds itself at times stuck in Catholicism as he spends a great deal of time discussing the Roman Empire.

Foucault’s generalization of the West is both a gift and a hindrance to his work. To not fall prey to the same problem of over generalizing it is necessary to frame my use of the term the “Black Church.” It is important first to understand that there is no monolithic Black church. Defined as a multitudinous community of churches, the Black church is diversified by denomination, doctrine, worshipping culture, and socio-economic status.\textsuperscript{11} The Black church in the U.S.A is made of seven major denominations: the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E) Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A. M.E.Z) Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E) Church; the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Incorporated (NBC); the National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated (NBCA); the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PBNC) and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC).\textsuperscript{12} While the denominations vary the uniqueness of Black churches lies in its shared rich history, culture and prominence in the Black community. My use of “the Black Church or the church” then is a short hand reference to the significance of the Black church as one of the most central institutions to the Black community in America. It is

used to highlight a common birthplace and shared values towards its dedication to the spiritual and social well-being of its members. Allowing for the survival of African traditions and ideals, the Black Church is a symbol of hope, love and strength for the Black community.

Suitably, one way to understand how power works in the Black church is to apply Foucault’s theory of pastoral power and obligational salvation to the church. Doing this will put to conversation with each other two very important types of power found in the church, the first being the secular power the church has to deal with issues of education, health, politics, etc. The second form of power is the spiritual power that the church uses to nurture the spiritual and emotional health of its congregation. Allowing these powers to converse brings to light how these powers legitimize certain ways of knowing and doing.

However, Foucault’s approach becomes a little harder to situate in the Black church as it does not take into account the social and materials support that churches provide to their parishioners, especially in the Black church where shepherds exude power over their flock and land, contrary to the first point of pastoral power that says shepherds do not govern over land. Black shepherds do not govern over land in the same sense that the state governs but in the way that the Black church has concerned itself with providing the material needs of the community. In past decades when Black people were excluded and restricted from receiving certain services or going into particular spaces, the Black church was a safe haven. The church provided shelter and food to the unfortunate, boosted the morale and esteem of the
community and gave hope to the hopeless. Described as a nation within a nation by E. Franklin Frazier, the Black Church is involved in every aspect of Black life from birth to death.

While the services the church renders have changed with time, from teaching members of the Black community nonviolence as an act of resistance, to establishing schools, Black people have always had the church’s outreach programs to rely on. Black shepherds then have power over their people but that power is not limited to the four walls that make up the physical space of the church. Their power extends to the lands that function as outreach centers.

Foucault’s use of salvation needs to be problematized as it does not easily explain the complex tradition of the Black church. In the Black church salvation can be read in two ways: salvation for the spiritual self and salvation for the social self. Salvation for the spiritual self is the same salvation that Foucault uses, that is to say that Christians seek divine salvation that will lead them the promises land of heaven where God resides. However, salvation for the social self speaks to the Black church’s tradition of involvement in civic life and social matters. Reverend Jeremiah Wright, Pastor Emeritus and former Pastor of the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, is well known for his African rooted spiritual teachings. Rev. Wright’s congregation prides itself on being “Unashamedly Black and Unapologetically Christian,” serving as both a

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place of Black worship and a space to address injustices facing the Black community. In *Mighty Like a River*, Rev. Wright lists the goals of the Black church as:

- Commitment to God
- Commitment to the Black Community
- Commitment to the Black Family
- Dedication to the Pursuit of Education
- Dedication to the Pursuit of Excellence
- Adherence to the Black Work Ethic
- Commitment to Self-Discipline and Self-Respect
- Disavowal of the Pursuit of Middle-classness
- Pledges of Community Spirit
- Personal Commitment to Black Value System

From the list of goals we see that the Black church’s first commitment is to God but most of its duties are to ensure the overall well-being of Black people. It is not enough to be a spiritual haven for Black people; Black clergy must involve itself in all aspects of the Black experience. Although the political context in which the church operates has changed overtime, one thing has remained the same: the intense focus on freedom, “during slavery it meant release from bondage; after emancipation is meant the right to be educated, to be employed, and to move about freely from place to place. In the twentieth century freedom means social, political, and economic justice.” The duty of shepherds then is to address the self in a holistic manner that acknowledges that the spiritual and social are equally important and for most people inseparable.

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In order to address the self in a holistic way certain types of knowing are legitimized in the church. For example the pastor is seen as someone who provides spiritual guidance and at the same time holds the power to endorse political candidates; it is trusted that the pastor who knows and speaks the truth will never lead his flock astray. This trust in the shepherd gives him power to legitimate discourses that he feels are relevant in meeting the spiritual and social salvation of the flock.

Black liberation theology is then one discourse that has embodied itself in Black church culture. Created in the mid-18th century by Dr. James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore17 Black liberation theology situates itself as a blueprint for what love in action looks like: justice. It is the perfect marrying of pastoral efforts to address the salvation of the self in a holistic way. Black liberation makes is clear that spiritual salvation is important but until the day comes when everyone will meet God they must work to make the days on earth just and fair. One comes to understand oneself not only as a child of God but as your brother and sister’s keeper. More importantly Black liberation theology says that all oppression is not only a form of injustice but it goes against God’s will for man. This is significant because those same people who stood hand in hand, singing and fighting the injustice that affected all Black people in the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s are now being oppressed by members of their own community because of their sexual orientation. When there is a crisis in the Black community everyone is called to do their part. There is no preference given to certain groups of people, it does not matter what your

education level is, your sexual orientation, gender or age. Help is help and for that moment the Black community is a collective working for the betterment of their own. However, soon after the crisis is over one must deal with the reality that the church will never put out a call to fight the crisis of equality that Black homosexuals face every day. Prescribing to the school of thought that homosexuality is a sin prevents LGBT people from benefiting from the collective power of the Black church. The Bible, in 1 Peter 4: 8-9 says “above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling,” but for Black Christian lesbians the love is only skin deep and discourses like Black liberation limit the affirming spaces for Black Christian lesbians by serving as a constant reminder that the activism the Black church participates in is not for their benefit.

Black Liberation Theology

Whether explicitly claimed or implicitly practiced Black liberation theology is the heart and soul of the Black church. Fulfilling Black people’s need for a theology that dealt with identity and culture, Black liberation theology arose in a period when new Black voices were emerging and challenging the power structures that supported racism and white supremacy. As those voices were challenging the social and political status of Black people, a transformation was taking place within religious spaces to see God as different from the God of White Christianity and as someone whose interest in the oppressed would liberate Black people from the injustice of a

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racist America. Thus we see in response to the frustration of the 1950’s and 1960’s and also to the large number of youth leaving the church in search of a more action oriented approach to injustice, Black liberation theology comes into being, a theology that highlighted the importance of freedom but also gave the Black community a way to construct a meaning of God that correlated with their experiences.

Theology has been universally understood as: faith seeking understanding.¹⁹ In an attempt to articulate a theology that was not just an adaptation of White Christianity Blacks sought to answer questions such as: Who is God for African Americans? What does it mean to be Black and Christian for people situated in the midst of American racism?²⁰ Black liberation theology developed out of this need to make sense of the Black experience in America. It is thus “an outgrowth of the experience of being Black and oppressed in the United States. It is a theology that seeks, first, to speak to all Black people from within their own context,”²¹ that context being the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement circa the 1950’s and 1960’s. These two periods represent times in which Black solidarity proved to be of great significance and marked the birth of Black liberation theology.

²⁰ These types of questions are expressed in all of the works I have encountered on Black liberation theology.
The 1955 event of Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama is most commonly cited as the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. Mrs. Parks’ act of resilience that ultimately would lead to her incarceration was the catalyst of the movement lead by Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. While there is no denying that Martin Luther King is the most notable face of the civil rights movement, one must acknowledge that many “black ministers, most of whom were young and just recently out of the seminary, called upon their own and parishioners’ experiences in the South to give them strength and courage”. The Black church was instrumental in the push toward freedom giving Blacks a place to organize and spread their message of justice and equality for all. The Black church “had to follow the way of Jesus Christ, who came, died, and was resurrected for the freedom of the oppressed and, through them, of all humanity”. Such a mission made the church instrumental in building solidarity and cohesion among the Black community while simultaneously doing all it could to support civil rights activism.

On June 16, 1966 in Greenwood, Mississippi Stokely Carmichael, chair of the youth organization, Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) called for Black power. Reacting to the suffering that Black people faced, Carmichael’s words would come to represent a new generation of freedom fighters who demanded justice and rights for Black people now and mark the beginning of the Black Power Movement. The new slogan “Black Power” emphasizes the

“need for Blacks to stand up and take positive steps toward their liberation and enfranchisement [...] calling for the recognition that Blacks must inevitably choose between the “ballot” or the “bullet”. 24 Black people would no longer passively wait for their rights to be given to them, they would fight for them. Their parents’ non-violent rhetoric proved to provide very little success when up against the bombings, murders, and beatings used by Whites under a veil of legality that made their actions justified. Malcolm X, considered the contemporary father of Black Nationalism and one of the most notable faces of the Black Power Movement, “demanded black liberation ‘by any means necessary’.” 25

The power and popularity of Black Power defined most areas of Black life, including Black religious life, “African American Christians found themselves stuck with a theology that was suitable for the “We Shall Overcome” religion of [the civil rights movement] and white liberals but that was apparently insufficient and irrelevant to the needs of the African American community which was shouting ‘I’m black and I’m proud’”. 26 Black liberation theology provided Black people with a religious way that affirmed their culture, history and gave them a language that emphasized the need for freedom from the oppressing hand of white society.

Although Black liberation theology finds its roots in a political context significantly different from today it remains a significant part of Black religious life. Black liberation theology has continued

to live as a discourse that has shaped Black people’s interaction with the Bible and has also provided an ideal for how the Black church should address social and political issues facing the Black community. In praxis Black liberation theology seeks to give all Black people a liberating space for self-expression and affirmation. Yet Black liberation theology has been centered more on Black male liberation, leaving very little room for female liberation and a black female centered analysis of religious experience.

The Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement while, momentous for the fight for collective Black rights, highlighted the need for Black women to differentiate their experiences from those of Black men. The overshadowing of women and their contributions to both movements made it necessary that Black women speak for themselves. Women from both movements often suffered at the hands of a male- and sexist leadership. However, for the sake of the collective, women often overlooked their unfair treatment until it became imperative that they speak out against it. As Audre Lorde explains in her book Sister Outsider, to speak of sexism was to speak against the collective efforts against racism, “ignoring these acts of Black male oppression within our communities can only serve our destroyers. One oppression does not justify another”.  

Both movements were spearheaded by very notable, charismatic men who often unintentionally covered the hard work and dedication of many Black women who have worked

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relentlessly for the advancement of the Black community. In 1964, a statement was released by the women of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) criticizing the sexist behaviors and policies of the organizations’ male leadership.\textsuperscript{28} The authors of the statement list several different situations that women find themselves in, pleading with people to “consider why it is in SNCC that women who are competent, qualified, and experienced, are automatically assigned to the “female” kinds of jobs such as typing, desk work, telephone work, filing, library work, cooking, and the assistant kind if administrative work but rarely the ‘executive’ kind.”\textsuperscript{29} The qualms expressed in this letter are not issues unique to SNCC. Ella Baker, the first executive direction of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a church based organization led by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., also expressed concern with charismatic male leadership. She felt that there was too much of a focus on Dr. King “which prevented potential leadership from women, young people and other members of the community from developing.”\textsuperscript{30} Thus we see that women in both movements and various religious affiliated organizations all found themselves at odds with patriarchal male leadership.

In its essence Black liberation theology demonstrates that “just as ‘woman’ meant ‘white woman’ [during the women’s movement of the 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries], so ‘blacks’ meant ‘black

\textsuperscript{28} Manning Marable and Leith Mullings. Let Nobody Turn Us Around: An African American Anthology. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, Inc., 2009), 399.
\textsuperscript{29} Manning Marable and Leith Mullings. Let Nobody Turn Us Around: An African American Anthology. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, Inc., 2009), 400.

Unfortunate as it may be, Black liberation theology’s roots in sexist male leadership allows for only so much room for female liberation before Black women needed to create spaces for themselves. Churches and the ‘God-talk’ that emerges from them are sources for both the oppression and liberation of Black women. Despite today’s increase of women in leadership positions, women continue to be outsiders,\footnote{Karen Baker-Fletcher and Garth Baker-Fletcher. *My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-talk*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 28.} experiencing the rewards of being in the cultural and spiritual enriching space of the church but also the hurt of being symbolically subordinate to men. If you are homosexual, then is further complicated by being subordinate to heterosexuals. If the church does not share in the liberation struggle of black women, its liberation is not authentic.\footnote{Dwight Hopkins. *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 132.}

There is no way that Black women can be excluded from liberation theology with the assumption that the rest of the community will continue to survive.

Furthermore, the adoption of Black liberation theology demonstrates that as the definition of freedom has changed for Black people throughout the years so has the Black church to meet the needs of its people. In the fight to secure civil liberties “Freedom appears, almost by definition, to be the antithesis of government: freedom is understood in terms of the act of liberation from bondage or slavery, the condition of existence in liberty, the right of the individual to act in any
desired way without restraint, the power to do as one like...". This is what Black people wanted in the past, liberation from the bondage of preconceived thoughts that place them in the boxes labeled “other”. At the core of human existence is the desire to be free, to live according to one's own wishes. It seems that the simple principle of freedom is the foundation upon which people attempt to build their lives.

The struggle then to achieve freedom in all aspects of life, especially religious affirmation becomes hard for the Black Christian lesbian as the church maintains a very conservative stance on matters of sexuality that is not only outdated but does not reflect the majority of Black churches where Black queer people are members of the congregation. Providing affirming spaces for self-actualization is not only important to the psyche but it shows that all definitions of freedom are respected and validated. When a Black lesbian walks into church she stands there as a woman who loves God, who seeks salvation and wants to be a part of the rich culture that lives in the Black church. Denying her affirming spaces is to say that God loves her a little less, that while her status as a Black woman is admissible her homosexual orientation is a sin that cannot be accepted. Freedom for Black lesbians means acceptance and securing the same rights as heterosexual individuals.

For Black lesbians, liberation is linked to their whole identity, not just the Black, female or homosexual side. Just as it is not possible to separate being Black from being human and Black

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from woman, it is equally impossible to separate being Black from being a member of the LGBT community. Yet the Black church’s strong dissent against homosexuality has left many Black Christian lesbians feeling like they are not welcome. The Black lesbian constantly has to re-define her spirituality in order to fit in with the only community that she may have known. Out Lesbian Christians rarely get to occupy positions of privilege within the Black church and community. More typically the privileged spaces available to lesbians within the Black church are those of economic, educational and class status; not of spiritual or institutional leadership. As a result there are very few opportunities within the church for advocating lesbian equality. The theological controversy over homosexuality makes it hard for any homosexual no matter how well versed in scripture, to come comfortably out or to gain senior positions. Homosexuals will find themselves in incessant conversations fighting for the legitimacy of homosexuality, hiding their sexual orientation to avoid those conversations all together or finding new spaces that are affirming of their whole identity.
Blue, 23
She attended church when she was younger but has now sworn off attending church.

Memorable Quote: “I don’t feel guilty about being homosexual... well when it comes to church...to Christians I do.”

I would say from three years old to ten years old I attended largely African American, Baptist churches in East Cleveland, Ohio now I do not go to church. Honestly I did not feel comfortable in church so I stopped going. I can’t see myself going to church anytime soon or in the future. When I was ten I didn’t know why I didn’t feel comfortable but I did not feel comfortable so I just stopped going. Like I didn’t want to dress up in dresses and stockings and little stuff like that. I rather dress in jeans and a shirt and I couldn’t do that at that church. It felt like a rule. I mean they always say “well God doesn’t care what you’re wearing” but in practice it was different... just the aura, it didn’t feel right.

If power was a hierarchy and the people who have been in the church for a long time, you know the full blown Christians who have been going to church since they were younger and that know the pastor since forever are at the top with the power and prestige. Then lesbians would be like the peasants or something because we’re frowned upon based upon our sexual orientation and we are absolutely less respected, because of the Bible.
As for me, I’m not out in the church. I wouldn’t say that I hide it, but I respect people so I don’t make it known. When I don’t want to make it obvious, I don’t but obviously I like girls so I would make it obvious to certain people. I’m probably not even doing it out of respect, I’m doing it to avoid confrontation. I don’t like confrontation period and that’s in any area. If I didn’t hide it then they would go back to the bible and say its [homosexuality] is wrong blaaazeeehlah. And when they say that it makes me feel like I need to stop demonstrating it in order to avoid confrontation. The church probably doesn’t have rules that restrict how I express myself but they make me feel as though I have to restrict myself.

Homophobia to me is when someone is afraid of homosexuals... or the whole idea homosexuality and out of that fear they pass judgment. I wouldn’t say that they [Christians] are scared of us...they just...they just wish we weren’t here. They wish that our homosexual tendencies weren’t there and I don’t really care.

I can’t recall an experience within the church or with church members where I’ve dealt with homophobia. It’s mostly something I hear on the news...I don’t hear about it personally. If I had to deal with homophobia I would definitely ignore it.... I’m not the confrontational type at all. I’m trying to sugar coat this so it doesn’t make it seem like I don’t care but I really don’t care. I don’t know why, probably because it’s not me personally as selfish as it might sound. It’s there and I’m here and even if it were something that I had to deal with more personally I still
probably wouldn’t feel some kind of way. I’m going to do me regardless so I don’t pay attention to other people’s opinions of me. Even though I know they are talking about me. Personally I can’t feel a certain way...I don’t feel a certain way because they feel some way about homosexuals.

I’m not even out to my family and I don’t know what would happen if I came out. I’m sure that they know but we don’t talk about it because it might offend them. My family likes to pretend that they are religious. When it comes to the subject of homosexuality they like to play the card, but when it comes to anything else they are not. I will never come out to them, I been going on like eight years strong and this way I can avoid confrontation. I don’t really disclose my sexuality with anyone. That I know of, I don’t have any other gay family members so I feel like I don’t have anyone to talk to.

If I needed help I would defiantly not get it in the church. I wouldn’t feel comfortable seeking church services or talking to someone about personal issues. Sometimes there is a lack of privacy when comes to certain things and they might include what I say in their next sermon. They use experiences as examples and I don’t want to be an example. Masking my sexuality makes me feel comfortable; I don’t feel comfortable any other way and that is a big reason why I don’t attend church.
I would not consider going to a non-black church either, White people or any people...Spanish, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans I don’t mess with them. That’s like a double negative, absolutely not. So I’ve just cut out church all together. I mean they got the same songs, they give out the same message, it’s like the same thing. I don’t know what it is about them...I just don’t mess with them. But its not just non-Black churches if there was a Black affirming church I would not go. They would still be Christian so....naw. Just because the church as a whole affirms homosexuality doesn’t mean that they [the individuals] will do the same thing outside of the church. I can see them at the grocery store and they would probably act different. If the pastor were a lesbian, it would probably make a difference but I don’t know if I would go. That smaller lesbian ran church is less accredited in my opinion. Inclusion would have to take place within the larger church. In order for me to feel comfortable everyone would have to stop being homophobic. As for now from my experiences, I am turned off from the whole idea of church.
Winter, 22
She has maintained constant church attendance since her childhood. Winter is currently a member of the choir and enjoys her church home.

Memorable Quote: “My church has a “don’t ask, don’t tell” thing going on. Which I guess is ok because I would be uncomfortable if people asked me a bunch of questions but me being me I would answer them. I would discuss it with them, if I can persuade them to think what I think then perfect but if not then I would just try to just shed some light on the topic.”

My earliest memory of church is when I was young about five. We went to the corner church on our street. Our parents made us go all the time; we were in choir, at Bible study, Sunday school... everything. I think my parents just wanted to get my siblings and me out of the house. From what I can remember it was a pretty cool church but I don’t attend that church anymore. I have attended my current church for about a good eight or nine years...well since I was a ninth grader. I go pretty regularly and I am involved in the choir. The biggest difference between my current church and the other church is probably the population. My childhood church was a much bigger church so there were much more people. I can only remember ever attending the church I go to now and the one from when I was little. The main reason for why I switched is because I feel like I was obligated to go to that church because my parents made me go so when I got into the ninth grade I started going to the church that I am going to now and I fell in love with it.

I love everything about my church, mainly the people - even though back then when I was in ninth grade the congregation was like a good 15 people if that - everyone knows everybody and
everyone calls everyone their family. The pastor is very down to earth; he is welcoming and hands on, meaning he knows everyone on a personal level. The close-knit environment made me feel welcome...I felt at home. I could stop going there for months or even a year then just pop up one Sunday and people would be like “Hey Winter!” It’s an indescribable feeling.

My fondest memory lol don’t judge me - is when I was in rehearsal with three other girls. I normally attend rehearsal with my friend because her mother was in charge of the choir but she was out of town so it was just us three there practicing. I wanted to do a specific song on Sunday and another girl wanted to do another one and I was like well if Olivia (my absent friend) was here she would like my song and the girl said she wouldn’t and I was like bet! And then we got put in the corner [laughs] I was in the ninth or tenth grade being put in the corner!

I also, remember this one time when my pastor told everyone to put their phone on the altar and said they couldn’t get it back until after service because everyone kept texting on their phone. He did that for about two weeks, before service you had to go up there and put their phone down. He doesn’t do that anymore because my Bible is on my phone. I look at my phone for the Bible or for time but that is it. I don’t really have time to think about using my phone I would never be like oh pastor just said something really good I need to tweet this right now. The word should stick with you not just for that moment but also for the rest of your day you shouldn’t forget it so tweeting can wait. That is just one of those unwritten rules; when I’m not
in church and I’m on twitter and see people say “pastor just said...” I’m like are you tweeting during service?!

Now that I think about it I’m probably sure people won’t wear slutty clothes to church either so that is another rule. I do not wear anything that has my breast showing. I have worn ripped jeans before but nothing major. Basically I pick out stuff that is presentable not just for the church but for God because I don’t want to be in church looking like a slut [laughs]. I think that sometimes the rules about clothing restrict how people express themselves. A pastor can say “come as you are” and this, that and the third. Then they see girls with boy clothes on and are like go put on a skirt, or boys with tight clothes on and say wear a size larger or something like that. But in my church specifically I have only heard one homosexual comment come out of his mouth ever, and I’ve been going to this church for all these years. I think my pastor really just accepts you for who you are but of course I think he thinks it’s wrong.

Once he said something along the lines of there was a man sitting on his lap and then he stopped in the middle of his sentence and was like “oh no homo” then he laughs and says “we not going to talk about those homosexuals that will be another sermon. They can come back when they want to come back, we accept them but they can come back when they want to come back”. So it really was not that major but it actually made me feel some kind of way, I sat there and I was like... [makes a face] really?! Whenever anyone says anything about homosexuality I always become an immediate activists, I've been like this all my life. I was in my
head like really...you could have just left it at that or you could have just not have said what you said in the first place that led your sermon towards homosexuality. But that’s the only time I have heard him say something about homosexuality.

If he continued to say things about homosexuality I would have probably had a discussion with him about it. Because when I came out I actually came out in church, I was in Bible study. I ended up asking the deacon who was teaching the class a question because he kept saying that God knows the road we are going to take. So I said “God knows the path we are going to go before we know right?” And he said yes so I said “if God knows what path we are going to go why would he set us up to fail if homosexuality is suppose to be a sin?” At that time I was really struggling with coming to terms with being homosexual so I asked him and he did not have an answer, he was taken aback by it. My friend who I was going to church with at the time, Olivia, always says that she still will never forget the face that the deacon made when I asked him that question. He didn’t know what to say so that’s why I do not feel bad about doing what I do because no one can give me a straight answer about it. All they can say is that it’s wrong, that it’s a sin but no one can tell me why. They can say well God made Adam and Eve and to me that has nothing to do with anything. He made a male and female and that is perfectly fine. That paved the way to make another male and female, and a male and a male and a female and a female. So I think a lot of churches don’t fully disclose why it is a sin and that’s where my argument starts, well why is it?
That was my first time coming out to anyone. After Bible study Olivia asked me why I asked that question and I said because I think I’m gay. And she was like what? I was like yeah I think I am but I’m not sure. I was 14 at the time so you know I didn’t know any better, I still had not acted on it I just told her that I thought I was and wanted to ask those questions. It wasn’t until a year later that I acted upon what I felt that day. At that point I was just a kid who was all about academic. Even if I wasn’t into girls I was not into guys, I was all about my schoolwork. I think people just looked at me like oh she is smart and wants to go somewhere so that’s why she is not chasing after boys so I didn’t have to worry about trying to conceal anything.

Honestly, I did not know if I wanted to be gay, growing up in the church I kind of felt like I did not want to not go to heaven. I personally don’t believe in hell. I believe in the devil and everything else but not hell. I do not think you will go to hell when you die but I do believe that you cannot go to heaven. I didn’t believe that I would not go to heaven because they say that all sins are forgiven but with me not believing in hell I was like what will happen to me when I die? I was in my head like, “crap maybe I shouldn’t be gay”. My decision to come out was based upon my happiness God would not want someone to live unhappily. I would have never been happy if I did not come to terms with the fact that I was attracted to women. My biggest concern was where I was going to go when I die which is weird because they say you should not fear death but I was worried because I did not know where I was going to go...I did not want to not go to heaven cause I was gay.
God knows who I am and I am not trying to put myself through any extra stress because of my sexuality. If I’m going to be gay then I’m going to be gay, if I’m not going to be gay then I’m not going to be gay. It should not matter at all. I still believe in God, I still have a good heart, I still do good things, my sexuality should not have anything to do with it whether or not it is a sin because a lot of things are a sin and people still do them but those are not singled out like homosexuality and that is not fair. I’m more than positive, which is messed up, that lesbians are at the bottom of the chart at church. There would be adultery, infidelity, cheaters, and up under them would be lesbians. Society thinks that homosexuality is the ultimate sin but I don’t think that. A sin is a sin because if I wasn’t gay, I curse so there is a sin, if I didn’t curse... premarital sex there is another sin, if I never had sex, I lie you know on and on and on. No sin is more important than another to me each sin has the same importance.

I visited a church before for a couple of Sundays and every time I went the pastor would bring up homosexuality. I was like “seriously what the hell? Why do you keep bringing this up?” The church was such a popular church and had a huge congregation but I did not like it. I can’t pass judgment on a church that someone picks but I was like why are they coming here? He was too negative towards homosexuals. He always said God made Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve, I hate that saying, who came up with that? That is the worst saying ever! The sermons I went to focused on homosexuality instead of what he should have been preaching about such as faith and God, not just this one sin. He wasn’t focusing on premarital sex, he wasn’t focusing on cheating, he wasn’t focusing on stealing, he wasn’t focusing on lying so I’m like why is he
focusing on homosexuality? It was just not my church and that is the main reason I did not continue going there.

If I could say anything to all homophobic people [laughs] the PG statement is “no sin is greater than any other sin”. Do you call liars out like that? Are there posters that say, “you’re going to hell because you’re a liar”? No! No sin is greater than any other sin. I could get into a debate with homophobic people, sometimes I have but I choose not too. There is freedom of religion people can believe what they want to believe just as well as I can believe what I want to believe. Christians think Christianity is the way to go, while Muslims think Allah is the way to go and Catholics and so on. No one expects everyone’s religion and beliefs to be the same; everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion. You can think what you want to think about me being homosexual, I’m still going to be me so I don’t deal with it.

Homosexuality has nothing to do with the person you are it is just who you like and that is it. It doesn’t have anything to do with the way you think, the way you love, the way you feel, the way you eat, or the way you sleep. I don’t lie down at night and turn off my homosexuality [laughs]. The church should be open…that’s what they always preach - come as you are. I don’t think anyone should ever feel like they are not welcome. If that is the case then why is the church even there?
Chastising is what ultimately prevents lesbians from being completely comfortable in church. Even if people want to believe that it doesn’t happen anymore it does happen. It could be that one person who believes that homosexuality is the ultimate sin and sees lesbians holding hands and after church that person catches them and beats them up. I think that’s the reason that lesbians don’t feel completely comfortable to be themselves. It can be scary because you don’t know what people are thinking. I could be sitting talking to my girlfriend about what I am going to cook for dinner and all along the person behind me that despises homosexuality is upset because we are at church. Then who knows what will happen, the devil has a way of taking over you and making you do some stupid things.

Recently at my church I saw a gay couple at church with their arms around one another and no one said anything. I was thinking to myself my church is the [whispers] shit [laughs], for them to be able to sit there and do that. I wish everyone had an open mind like the people in my church… everyone in my church is so loving. I don’t know if I would have felt that comfortable with my girlfriend. I have never done that and I don’t know if I will… I don’t know…. I would hope I would be but who knows, maybe I would chicken out and be like, “ok let go of my hand” when the door opens. I would not want anyone to get beside themselves and say or do something. Plus I know the pastor personally so if he felt some kind of way he would probably text me that night and say I did not like that you came in with that girl. So I just wouldn’t want to deal with the aftermath so I would be like, “let go of my hand”. 
It may sound odd but I am very content with the way my church is. A lot of people don’t even have that to say because people are so hypocritical or homophobic or whatever. So I feel lucky and I would keep things the way they are. That may seem like I’m chickening out but I feel like within the church God should come first and nothing should take away from that. I started going to my church when I was in the ninth grade because my home situation was very very messed up and church was my way to get away. I would be at school, go to my after school activities and then go to church and would not get home until like ten at night so I didn’t have to deal with anyone I could just go to sleep then get up and do it all over again. I found a home in that church the pastor even calls me his daughter (pauses), I found a home and a safe space in that church. It is my safe space. When I am in church I want it to be all about church. I don’t even consider myself to be gay or straight I’m just in church, I’m a disciple, I’m God’s child.
Joy, 29
Joy has been heavily involved in church since she was a child. She has recently relocated to a new state and is in the process of finding a new church home. Her interview reflects over her most recent church home.

Memorable Quote: “Going to a Black church is just like going to a Black college to me, there is something special about being around Black people and having that community.”

I attended church pretty regularly until I moved to Ohio for school. In Chicago I was a member of a very large and popular Black church. Since living where I currently am I have visited one Black church and that was a different experience so I never went back. It was music for like an hour and a half and then there was a sermon for another hour...it wasn’t organized and I couldn’t handle it. I once went to Joel Osteen’s church... I don’t really think of it as a church. He’s more of a motivational speaker than a preacher. For me, the praise and worship section is such an important part of church to me and that was missing there for me. And the Black church that I went to here was not my type of music. Maybe I am picky but for me what defines a good church is music and a good sermon. Normally what I find at Black churches is that I get good music but not a really good sermon and at White churches I get a really good organized sermon but I don’t get good music.

I would like to find a church where I can be part of the ministry. Something’s missing in my life and I know it’s that. I loved being a part of ministry, as a child I was always a part of something, besides the choir, I attended Sunday school and all of the other kid activities. I moved around a lot as a child but I remember one particular church that is located in South Carolina. I remember
it being very kid friendly, so there were all types of activities that my brother and I were involved in.

My earliest memory of church is being in the choir when I was seven. I was not given the option of attending church until ten or twelve. And then I think both of my parents just said that if you want to go to church it’s your option, we moved a lot so that also played a part in them giving us a option as well. But both my brother and I were very involved in church up until I was ten. And then I decided on my own to go to church with my Dad. My Dad’s church is in upstate New York and we would go up there for the summers. Pretty much our entire family on my Dad’s side belonged to that church so it’s pretty much connected to the family reunions. It’s my fondest memory because my Dad’s entire family was connected to the church so it was like the entire congregation was my family. It just felt like an instant community. People knew me because of my Dad, so that kind of felt nice.

I started attending the church in Chicago with my aunt. I am so anti-dressing up for church and I like that this church was very, very open. There are three services and about 8,000 members. The pastor is into combining hip-hop into his ministry. Which is why I think I was drawn to this church, we can wear jeans, we could pretty much wear whatever we wanted to; dressing up is optional. I also attended evening services. So I would have the whole day to myself and then I would go to church at 6:00 PM. The evening service is more laid back than the morning services so I don’t really prepare for church…I don’t even bring my Bible to church. While there I was
doing drama ministry work because I’m a playwright so I was over the youth and adult drama ministry, so that’s what kept me there. As I have gotten older I think I have become more analytical. I definitely critique the sermons more and it made my church experience as an adult a lot different than when I was a child. At my church specifically, I noticed an abundance of how some of the sermons and other aspects of the church experience seemed so routine and everything is really traditional; people don’t like change. Young people around my age run most of the ministries, thankfully, so it was really easy for us to interact and get things done. But once we came up against someone on the board we couldn’t do anything too creative or too controversial because we have a church that is big in the media.

The only reason why church is important to me is because of ministry. Now, at this age I feel like there are a lot of things in church that have become unnecessary and routine to where there is no praise and worship or no passion in it. A lot of times, I would go to church and just be sitting there like “okay, I’ve heard this before and I’ve done this before.” A lot of that is my own personal issues and not completely the church’s fault. The way that I get church is by doing church and I could definitely get that same fulfillment outside of church with less restrictions. Particularly when it comes to the youth ministry. We always have to keep the kids indoors and at 6:00 they don’t want to be indoors so it was hard to teach them theater and keep their attention.
But hey, there are rules and you have to abide by them. You can’t bring gum in the sanctuary, you can’t chew gum in the sanctuary... all of that stuff. No using your cell phone, no texting. I would also say that there are definitely rules that dictate how someone expresses their sexual orientation. It’s hard for me to make those concrete because I did not come out in church. I actually dated a pastor at church [there are multiple pastors, so I did not date the head pastor that most people associate with my church] but other than to that pastor and the people that she told, I didn’t come out to anyone. So it is hard for me to define those rules but they are there. You know I thought dating a pastor would be a bigger problem than it was, but for her the biggest problem wasn’t that she was getting involved with a woman. I think that her biggest problem was with ethical issues that come along with dating a member of the congregation. But the pastoral staff is very open. One of the pastors that she’s closest to, counsels’ gay and lesbian couples, but there is no formal gay and lesbian ministry. There’s a singles ministry but there is no separate single gay and lesbian ministry. There are no out people in the singles ministry; I don’t think that people feel comfortable enough to do that. Other than the person I was dating at that time in church, I had a really close friend who was really close to a senior pastor and was trying to get him to start a gay and lesbian ministry. My plan if I had stayed in Chicago was to talk to my pastor in order to push for more homosexual friendly things.

Most of the people that I knew at church weren’t exactly open-minded and once I heard their boundaries I knew that I probably wouldn’t come out to them. I ended up spending some time with some of those people outside of church and I think that in some aspect not coming out
probably affected my relationships with them did because I knew that was a part of me that they will never know. But my sexual orientation did not impact me in the church because when I’m in the ministry that’s what I’m focused on. Now that I think about it, I wish that we could have addressed some of those issues in some of the writings (the plays and skits that are done for the different ministries) that I’ve done. It might have been nice to address homophobia in the church.

However, I wouldn’t define what I found in my church as homophobia. I would define it as being uber religious and having a really strict interpretation of what the Bible says. So I wouldn’t really describe it as homophobia, I would just say that the way that they interpret the Bible didn’t leave room for certain things.

I have had experiences in the past where the pastor was speaking hate. Both experiences were in New Orleans. I was living there and one church I went to, the pastor was going on this long discussion of homosexuality and how people should not be engaging in it. The other church, after Hurricane Katrina, the pastor was talking about same sex marriage saying that God did not create Adam and Steve or something like that. After which I took a hiatus from church. In New Orleans there is no church that is open to homosexuality, so I took a long break from church. If you could say anything to homophobic clergy members I would probably try to have a conversation with them and try to figure out how they came to their conclusion. I would
probably try to manipulate them into a different way of thinking and just point out that there’s a flaw in their reasoning.

I believe the value and level of respect given to lesbians depends on the church. In my church I think people would rather look over someone’s sexuality. When I was writing for the kids the pastor showed me a great level of appreciation. Fortunately, I have never had to worry about people judging me or respecting me less because of the way I dress I’ve always dressed the same. I don’t talk about my personal life so I don’t have to deal with my sexual orientation. However, it clearly becomes more difficult when I was dating one of the pastors. Having to be on guard like that makes it hard to form meaningful relationships with people in church. Not knowing how you will be received if you come out in church makes it really hard for gay and lesbian people. You ask yourself, if I come out and come back next week are you going to treat me the same way or are you going to look at me with eyes of judgment and try to “save” me?

I experienced a lot of tension between being a lesbian and a Christian when I was in college... I didn’t even come out until I was 21. So I had major issues when I was in college. I remember having a teen bible and it had this section about homosexuality that said it was wrong it created a lot of issues for me between being a believer in God and being homosexual. I felt guilty about being a lesbian until this girl that I was dating told me that it didn’t matter who you are, it’s all about your relationship with God. I think that was my turning point. I came out shortly after that. I’ve become more comfortable in who I am and I believe God wants to love whoever wants
his love. I use to feel like I wouldn’t feel comfortable going to church with my girlfriend and I wouldn’t be affectionate, well... I don’t know... at this point in my life I probably would be ok because I am much more comfortable in my skin.
Toni, 23
Toni attended church until she was given the option of attending. She now only attends church if her grandmother asks her to. She has expressed being uncomfortable in the church and maintains a relationship with God outside of church.

Memorable Quote: “If the world was about to end and it came down to if you’re gay or if you’re not gay and all of the straight people would be saved and I had to claim it or deny it, I would claim it. I wouldn’t want to be stuck with all of those heterosexuals.”

In the past the Black church was a space for Black people to come together and praise their God and to escape things that were happening to them. That is probably still significant now but I don’t think that you have to do that in the church [building]. So it’s not significant to me because I can have a relationship with God outside of church and I do. I pray everyday and I have a conversation with my God. Sometimes it’s cool to go to church and hear a sermon but I don’t think that is necessary. I listen to gospel music and I watch the Word network. I’m comfortable doing it at my home by myself. Now when I go to Black churches the sermon seems to be about homosexuals a lot. It’s weird that the day I decide to go to church they’re talking about homosexuals. I was told that it was because the pastor could feel my presence in the church and so now I feel guilty when I go and I think they’re talking to me. Needless to say, I do not currently attend church but I have attended Black churches in the past.

I could possibly attend church sometime in the future but it depends on the congregation and the pastor...all of that plays into it. The church I would attend is back in my hometown and I’m here for school so I guess that is one of the reasons why I no longer go to church. When I do go
home I’m never there on a Sunday and when I am I just don’t go. Wait, does Joel Osteen count? I watch that with my mom [laughs]. There is one church I’d probably go to here while I’m in school; it’s called Vineyard, which is a predominantly White congregation. I like the church they are very accepting of all people and it’s a very interesting vibe. I don’t like the music but I like the message. Plus when I go to Vineyard, I don’t have to dress up I can wear jeans, chucks and a cardigan, which is what I wear normally but I would never wear jeans to my grandma’s church. People will stare at you funny, you need to dress up at her church. As a child I was a tomboy and on Easter and Christmas I was forced to wear a dress even though I didn’t want to wear one. But it’s like what are you going to wear? It wasn’t until ninth grade that I wore pants on Easter. I was like I’m not going to go to church if I have to wear a dress and I guess it was more important that I went so I was able to wear pants. Come as you are, does not mean come as you are, it doesn’t mean like “oh I want to go to church today so I’m going to go.” I think it means come as you are with your problems, not physically because people don’t really like that.

My earliest memory of church is when I was four or five. I went to a Methodist church because my grandparents belong to a Methodist church. My mother did not like this church so I ended up going to a Baptist church as well. To be honest as a child the thing I remember the most is the music. The Methodist music is very boring and the Baptist church music was full of drums and shouting and things of that nature, those are the types of memories that stick with me. Well the music and Vacation Bible School. It was a week out of the summer, in July and we would do all kinds of different things. There was a class where you read the Bible and talked about it;
there was class where you dance to a gospel song and that was my favorite part, because it was fun. On Friday you got to present to your parents and the community and then on Sunday you got to present to the congregation and it was cool.

Yet, when I was twelve I was given the option of if I wanted to go to church and that is about when I stopped going regularly. Sometimes if someone wants me to go I’ll go, like when my grandma will ask me to go and for holidays. But other than that I have this thing that prevents me from really wanting to go. I think in eleventh grade I began to question religion and believe that most Christians were hypocrites so I didn’t want to be around it. It’s a personal thing I’m going through and I’m still going through it.

In high school I had to write a spiritual memoir as part of an assignment. In this assignment I began to question why Black people were enslaved, why they prayed to the same God as their masters, and why they took on the religion of their masters. I really couldn’t understand why, as slaves, they were praying to the same God their masters prayed to. I was also questioning homosexuality, coming out and the consequence of being judged by people. I was told I was going to go to hell for being a lesbian and I didn’t like the way the Bible was being interpreted. I was trying to understand myself and I experienced a lot of tension between being a Christian and a lesbian. I wanted to know why I am attracted to women if it’s so wrong and I thought that there must be something wrong with me. That was a brief period of my life and then I was like ok, it is what it is. I’ve never come out to the people at my grandma’s church (the Methodist
church) and at this point I’m like “whatever” and probably won’t. Some of them are my friends on Facebook and my page doesn’t hide anything. They can see my pictures and anything I post, I often post links about homosexuality and racism.

People are very judgmental and in the church people act like their shit doesn’t stink when they are doing just as much wrong as me having sex with a woman. I was being judged by Christians and told that I was going to go to hell. I was looking at these Christians that had three divorces and who had children out of wedlock and did all of these things but I was the one that was going to go to hell and to me that is homophobia. Homophobia is saying negative things about the homosexual lifestyle, telling people that they’re going to hell, not trying to understand it and just being totally against it because you don’t know what it is and your don’t understand it. So the answer is pray, let me lay hands on you...No! The most recent Black church I went to, I was not a member of but my friend was a member of the church; he wanted me to go so they could lay hands on me and I was like I don’t want people touching my face and crowding around me, that’s not going to change anything! He doesn’t believe that I am truly a homosexual because I had a relationship with a man, which to me means absolutely nothing.

Gay and lesbian people face a lot of obstacles that prevent them from feeling comfortable, they are told that they’re going to go to hell. And the way the Bible is interpreted creates that feeling of being uncomfortable. You hear people preaching about homosexuality, saying that it’s wrong, it’s a sin and that people will pray for you. I’ve been told that someone was going to pray for me
as if that’ll make it disappear. It made me feel like the person saying it was dumb as hell. But it was my friend’s mom who was said it so I wasn’t going to tell him that I thought that about his mom. So I just responded by saying yeah go pray for me and come check on me next week and see if I still like women.

I just try not to deal with those things because religion and how people feel about homosexuality are very touchy subjects and I don’t feel like arguing about it. They’re not going to change my mind and I’m not going to change their mind. I’ve been told homophobic things from someone who was homosexual! She told me I was going to hell and that homosexuality was something in my mind that I could over come. I found that very interesting because I used to date her. It is stuff like that…I’m not going to argue with that.

If I could say something to homophobic people I would say that this is not a choice, nor is it a sickness. If I never told a person that I was a lesbian they would probably think, “oh you’re okay”, but as soon as you tell them, it changes something about you in their mind and it makes no sense because I am the same person I was before you knew what I did behind closed doors.
Analysis of Narratives

The Factors influencing and Sustaining Attendance

One of the essential aims of this project is the attempt to understand why Black lesbian Christians continue and discontinue their memberships at Black churches. Out of the four women who were interviewed for this project, only one reported attending church regularly. Out of the other three, one has recently re-located and is looking for a church home and has been previously involved in church ministry. The remaining two, while they have attended church in the past, will not be attending church anytime soon. Thus the question becomes what are the factors that have contributed to two of the women’s sustained interest in the church and the factors influencing the other two women’s decision to ultimately leave the church all together?

Religion is often instilled in people at a very early age, as it reflects the beliefs of our parents/guardians. All of the women started attending church at a very early age. Their earliest memories of religious practice date back to their pre-school ages, when women spoke of attending church with parents and siblings. At such an early age church attendance and religious observance was at the direction of the adult; the women as children have no say in their attendance. Three out of four of the women spoke of their involvement in extracurricular activities, such as choir, vacation Bible school, etc. as frequent points of negotiation and
distress, in which the final decision, although guided by the women’s interests, was left to the adult. However, more often than not the final decision was influenced by whether or not the parent assigned positive value to a particular activity, for example Winter’s parents insisted that she and her sibling attend and participate in church activities, despite the fact that they did not attend church with their children. With the exception of Winter’s parents all of the other women reported that their families all attended church and/or would consider themselves religious. Thus one comes to the conclusion that they saw something significant about church and a result made their children attend. Justly, the same can be said for Winter’s parents who may have reasons for their absence for the church but was able to view church as important enough to have their children attend. These values then things that the parents, by virtue of having their child participate, hoped would become ingrained in their child.

Around their pre-teen years (ten-twelve) all of the women, report being given the option of attending church, so it is worth considering what factors contributed to these young girls willingness to sustain church attendance, Winter and Joy spoke about this specifically and across their narratives factors emerged as a explanation to their sustained attendance. These factor can them be grouped into three categories: 1) their involvement in church activities, 2) the association of their church with positive feelings and 3) an acquired sense of community. Firstly, both women reported being heavily involved in church as children, participating in the church choir, Bible study and Sunday school.
Joy: Sunday school, and choir when I was younger. When I was older, I was very involved in the youth ministry. Recently I was doing drama ministry work because I’m a playwright so I was doing the youth drama ministry. So that’s what kept me at church.

Winter: When I was young...like five. We went to the corner church on our street. Our parents made us go all the time we use to go all the time we were in choir, at Bible study...at Sunday school everything [...] Recently now I try my hardest to go every Sunday and do a lot of church related activities because Sundays at church is my way of getting through all the struggle the week has sent me. I catch the word every Sunday because I feel as if I need to with what goes on in my life.

As adults it has been their interests in specific church activities that have prompted these two women to continue their involvement; choir for Winter and drama ministry for Joy. Neither woman attends the same church as they did as children Joy has sense moved and Winter left her childhood church because she felt as if she was obligated to go by way of her parents. So when she got old enough to go to a church that she wanted to do she began going to her current church. As a result of their switch the women founds spaces that are more in-line with their personal values and interests like Joy’s love of theater and playwrighting and Winter’s desire for a close knit family structure. In addition to their immersion in church activities both women associate positive feelings with their church home. Winter’s love and devotion to her church stems from her troubled childhood:

Winter: I started going to the church when I was in the ninth grade because my home situation was very very messed up and church was away to get away, I would be at school, go to my after school activities and then go to church and would not get home until like ten so I didn’t have to deal with anyone. I could just go to sleep then
get up and do it all over again. So you know I found a home in that church, the pastor calls me his daughter...I found a home and a safe space in that church. It’s my safe space.

For Winter her church is a space of refuge, saving her from a period in her life in which she was vulnerable. This image that she has of her church as redemptive has in some ways indebted her to her church. Today, despite unfavorable situations she reported encountering in church as a result of being a lesbian she remains loyal to her church. Her use of the word “safe” is ironic, safe in relation to what? There is a bit of a gap between the time that Winter began attending her current church and becoming aware of her sexuality. Thus how safe she felt could be as a result of her awareness. Later as an out lesbian, Winter discovered that while the church had been able to provide a safe space for her as an adolescent in an unfavorable home situation, it does not provide the same safe space for her and other homosexuals. Winter described how being out in the church “can be scary because you don’t know what people are thinking”. It is very well possible that just as the church is progressive in certain matters and can be a refuge for some, for others it can serve as the impetus for their pain and suffering. The question then becomes how does one negotiate a situation like this?

For Joy, while at times skeptical of church traditions, she finds significance in her work with the drama ministry, “I would say the only reason why church is important to me is because of ministry”. Now that she has re-located she finds herself longing for the purpose and appreciation that she found in that the drama ministry. “I would like to find a church where I
can be part of the ministry. Something’s missing... I’m missing that in my life”.

The concept of ministry is an important one in Christianity. It is linked to the notion of one’s Christian life-purpose and the idea of doing good works. And as such it can be a strong guiding factor for many individuals throughout life. The use of the term “ministry” refers to the programs and services that the church offers to serve and help others as God has helped them. Dr. Pascoe’s, of The Institute for Biblical Teaching, definition of ministry is close to the conception of ministry most helpful for this work, “ministry is not about ritual or routine religion but a living relationship with God. It is not about numerical growth but spiritual growth. It is not about programs but about people - people who are wholly focused on God, powerfully filled with the Spirit, and happily united in a community of grace; people who vibrantly exalt Christ, openly perform works of faith, accurately teach the truth, boldly proclaim the gospel in word and deed”.

Although Winter is involved in choir, an activity that would be regularly regarded as a type of ministry she does not use this term. Joy uses this all including term to describe the activities and special interest groups that church members can participate in.

For Christians the journey of finding purpose is perhaps one of the most profound experiences of one’s sense of living a Christian life. It is in this pursuit or journey that one finds out who he/she is as a Christian and their personal gifts and capabilities. While it is not necessary that

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religion and purpose go hand in hand, it is taught that through Christ one discovers their greater purpose, “many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails” (Proverbs 19:21). The church is a space in which a person can discover their purpose through service. The service that Joy provided through ministry provided her with purpose and is what ultimately kept her at church. The appreciation that she got as a result of her work helped to create a space in which Joy felt connected to something larger than herself, a community that motivated her continued attendance despite her feeling as if she cannot fully disclose her lesbian identity.

Another reason sustaining Joy and Winter’s attendance is their sense of community. Both women reported feeling like they are a part of communities:

Winter: I feel like I was obligated to go to that church [her childhood church] because my parents made me go so when I got into the ninth grade I started going to the church that I am going to now and I fell in love with it. [...] Everyone knew everybody and everyone called everyone their family or auntie or uncle. The pastor is very down to earth; he was very welcoming and was very hands on. He knows his congregation, he knows everyone on a personal level and [...] I felt at home actually [...] it’s an indescribable feeling.

Joy: [Growing up] my Dad’s entire family was connected to the church so it was like the entire congregation was my family [...] it just felt like a community, an instant community. People knew me because of my Dad, so that kind of felt nice.

In these comments both women equate community with some form of family, be it biological in the case of Joy or fictive in the case of Winter. Seeing your church as an extension of your family is significant because people are not given the option of choosing their biological family, yet viewing your church as an extension of your family is a choice that is made. Family plays a very important role in how we come to understand and see ourselves in relation to the rest of the world. Providing morals, strength and support to most people the Black family fulfills the needs of individuals. Abraham Maslow in 1954 published a book titled, *Motivation and Personality* in which he studied what he called exemplary people and how they got to the levels of success they were able to achieve. As a result of his research the Maslow Hierarchy of Needs was created to illustrate the most important human needs and desires. On this pyramid are the most basic needs on up to the more complex needs (physiological, safety, social, esteem and self-actualization needs). For many their ability to obtain these needs are greatly affected by their family units. The family structure has the ability to provide physiological needs such as clothing and food; safety needs such as child care and housing; social needs by providing sense of belonging; esteem needs by providing emotional support and positive encouragement and lastly self-actualization needs through the cultivating of intrapersonal skills and strengthening relationships amongst family members. The church’s service to both the spiritual and social selves means that the church can fulfill all of these needs. As these needs are essential to human existence I offer this as a possible explanation of why the women see their churches as extensions of their families.
Having this sense of family, be it fictive for Winter or biological for Joy, makes it easier to find community within the church. Simply stated all of the members of a church are bond together by a common father (God), which makes everyone else a spiritual bother or sister. “I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters”37 (2 Corinthians 6: 16, 18). Thus not only are you as an individual responsible for your spiritual well being but also for the well being of your brother and sister. A responsibility that the Black church has traditionally fulfilled both inside and outside of the church through services that help meet the material needs of members such as helping with medical bills, providing hot meals, etc. This collective responsibility that is for all intensive purposes a pillar of the Black church has continued its relevance within the Black community. Nevertheless what happens when a part of your identity is not respected by the majority and deemed not worthy of the collective efforts of protection and support of the community?

Performing Christian Femininity

How does a Black Christian lesbian invests in a community that excludes and disavows part of her identity? How does a Black lesbian negotiate her place in a familial community that regards her sexuality as something that can and should be overcome? What emerges from the accounts of Joy and Winter is how they have developed a range of strategies for negotiating and

managing these dissonances. We can understand these practices as enacted technologies of the self that have enabled them to attain happiness and purpose in the church despite the potential risks of enmity they face by being lesbians. These technologies Foucault explains, “permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality”. The self is then an entity that is malleable, capable of undergoing constant states of change through means of negotiation. The narratives of these women make it clear that while they have a clear sense of their own authentic subjectivity, they knowingly when necessary play up or play down parts of their public performance of a gendered feminine Christian identity to fit what is deemed favorable for certain situations. In this manner we see statements like those by Winter who said, “when I am in church I want it to be all about church. I don’t even consider myself to be gay or straight... I’m just in church...I’m a disciple...I’m God’s child”. This separation, that is both an alienation from their lesbian identity but the identification with a feminine Christian identity, while easy for Winter to make is not so easy for Toni and Blue and has prevented them being able to find similar forms of community. In fact, for Toni and Blue their experience of being at church was more that of an outsider than an included member. Their decision to discontinue attendance stems from the restrictive nature of church, the negative feelings and experiences they associate with the church and just an overall sense of hostility from members of the congregation.

Both women expressed discontent with the rules of restriction enforced in the church that police clothing and assigning value to certain types of dress over others. ‘Proper’ attire is understood as being gender specific, dresses and skirts for women and pants and suits for men. Yet these rules neither match the women’s conception of themselves nor of gender nor gender dress codes generally.

Toni: Come as you are, does not mean come as you are, it doesn’t mean like “oh I want to go to church today so I’m going to go.” I think it means like come as you are with your problems, not physically because people don’t really like that. [...] as a child I was a tomboy and on Easter and Christmas I was forced to wear a dress but, I didn’t want to wear a dress. But it’s like what are you going to wear? It wasn’t until 9th grade that I wore pants on Easter. I was like I’m not going to go to church if I have to wear a dress.

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Blue: When I was ten I didn’t feel comfortable for some reason. I don’t know why I didn’t feel comfortable at that age but I did not feel comfortable so I just stopped going. [...] I didn’t want to dress up in dresses and stocking and little stuff like that. I didn’t feel comfortable. [...] I mean they always say well God doesn’t care what you’re wearing but...that’s basically what they said but in practice it was different

A restriction on attire is at its core a restriction on self-expression, as clothing is often seen as a form of self-expression. Such rules conflict with what the women express having being taught in the Church. Having been taught a theological view that claims that God does not care what people wear and wants people to come to Him as they are, it is increasingly troubling for these women that the church has fallen short of putting that into practice. What then are the options
of those who do not fall into acceptable codes of dress? For Toni and Blue the rules of restriction around attire are important reasons for their discontinued attendance. In Toni’s case, the impetus for no longer attending church is a little more complicated than just concerns around the church’s stance on homosexuality as she also questioned the historical foundations of Black Christianization in America:

Toni: I was questioning why slaves were slaves [...] and I really couldn’t understand why they were praying to God and they were slaves and their master prayed to that same God. And then the judging...the whole coming out and being judged by people and being told I was going to go to hell and the way that they were interpreting the Bible and it was just a lot.

 Religious motivations have been used widely to support some of the most horrible historical events in the world, from the human sacrifices that took place in the 1850’s by Buddhist monks in Burma to the Puritans persecution of Quakers. Slavery is another one of those events. The use of the Bible to justify the enslavement and inferior status of Black people is something that many Black Christians in learning about the history for the African American Christian experience will encounter. Toni while able to situate this history in a manner that comforts her still has a hard time dealing with the judgmental attitudes of the church people she has encountered.

Toni: People are very judgmental...I mean they are judgmental everywhere...but in church people act like their shit doesn't stink and they're doing just as must wrong as me fucking a women...having sex with women excuse me [...] being judged by Christians and told that I was going to go to hell and I was looking at these Christians that had three divorces and who had children out
of wedlock and did all of these things...but I was told I was going to go to hell.

Toni’s words resemble a sentiment expressed by all of the women. The frustration they feel comes from being taught not to pass judgment on others yet homosexuals are disproportionately judged and told they are going to hell in comparison to heterosexual misconduct. Winter notes that this is something she thought about prior to coming out and it is something that annoys Toni as she is constantly told that she is going to hell by people she feels have committed acts that would warrant their places in the fiery pits of hell as well. Regardless of being told this over and over none of the women believe they are actually going to hell. They all believe they were made the way God wanted them to be and are comfortable with their personal relationships with God.

The negative and often hostile attitudes of the people these two women encounter in their churches lives help to create an environment in which many of the women do not feel comfortable. For Blue the “aura didn’t feel right” in church and this has led her to cut out church from her life all together. The only way she would even consider changing her mind on attending church is if the church “stops being homophobic” but even that is an unlikely event and she is skeptical of it being able to take place in the Black church. In the same way, Toni recounts having a plethora of experiences with churchgoers who have negative opinions of her lesbian identity. These encounters have left a bad impression on her:
I’ve been told that someone was going to pray for me as if that’ll make it disappear...like how would that even help. [...] It made me feel like the person saying it was dumb as hell. But it was my friend’s mom who was saying it so I wasn’t going to tell him that. But yeah go pray for me...come check on my next week and see if I still like women.

What these interviews indicate is that the factors that impact whether these Black lesbians felt able to sustain attendance are very connected to personal as well as social environmental factors to do with the specific church they attend. Joy and Winter were able to sustain on-going church attendance into adulthood largely due to their involvement in church ministries, the positive feelings they associate with the church and the communities they have acquired.

On the other hand for Toni and Blue the assurance and purpose that Joy and Winter were able to find in church were not afforded to them. Hostility and negativity weighed heavy in Toni and Blue’s accounts of their experiences with other people in relation to church. The lack of assurance and purpose helped to create a feeling of discomfort in the women. Discomfort here is the antithesis of comfort and is marked by feelings of alienation, guilt and shame. Comfort and the lack thereof is an important theme that was found in the data and is important because as previously stated, historically, in the church’s attempt to address the spiritual and social selves the Black church was often one of few spaces that Black people were able to find comfort and refuge. Today the Black church remains one of the most important social and spiritual institutions of the Black community and for most people are associated with notions of comfort,
joy and enrichment. The women in this project’s ability to find spaces of comfort in the church are directly related to their attendance.

Comfort

I want to argue that one of the emotional functions of church attendance is to create a space of safety and comfort from the risks and discomforts of everyday secular life. One of the ways in which such spaces of safety and comfort can be created is when a space is associated with positive memories, bringing about a sense of comfort. I am using the term a ‘space of comfort’ here to refer to both the material locations and/or emotional spaces that soothe and console and thus are spaces of solace and reassurance harsh realities from unjust systems of dominance and oppression. However, comfort is a highly subjective concept, thus spaces of comfort are intersubjective and interactive locations in which individual and group, the personal and the social or public combine to produce particular effects. The women in this project interpret and experience comfort and discomfort in different ways. There were five major areas in which the women’s use of comfort can be categorized; those are privacy, judgment, the “aftermath”, guilt, and strategic presentations.

Homosexuals frequently find themselves at the receiving end of questions that are often invasive and quite personal. This invasion of privacy is uncomfortable for many. The questions, Winter admits makes her uncomfortable and they are the reason why Joy prefers to keep her
personal life to herself. Not only can Blue not imagine talking to people about sexual orientation, she further stated that she would never seek advice from church leaders as “they might include it in their next sermon…. they use experiences as an example and then they include it in their practices” (Blue). The possibility of being an “example” for the entire church population turns most lesbians off from taking advantage of church services, as they would require a level of transparency that leaves many lesbians uncomfortable, a transparency that can also lead to judgment. Blue sees the judgment that homosexuals face as a result of homophobia and fear. The women are all aware of the judgment and ridicule they face as homosexuals. Winter, however, tries not to judge those who judge her:

Winter: I went to a church a few times and every time the pastor would bring up homosexuality [...] I was like what in the hell do you keep bringing this up for? The church was such a popular church and I did not like it. I can’t pass judgment on any church that anyone picks but I was like why are they coming here? [...] I felt like it was too negative towards homosexuals.

The judgment and uncertainty that the women experience makes it hard for the women to create comfortable spaces. They are on guard for those who look at them ‘with eyes of judgment and try to save them’. Negative judgment is undoubtedly linked to what Winter describes as the “aftermath”. This refers to the various potentially painful and damaging consequences of ‘coming out’. For Winter the aftermath, a term she uses to describe the series of events that takes place after coming out, derives from the chastising gay and lesbian people experience in church.
Winter: Whether or not people want to believe that it doesn’t happen anymore it does happen. It could be that one person who believes that homosexuality is the ultimate sin and sees lesbians holding hands and after church that person catches them after church and beats them up. [...] Basically the aftermath of someone in the congregation saying something or doing something to them. It can be scary because you don’t know what people are thinking. I could be sitting talking to my girlfriend about what I am going to cook for dinner all along the person behind me that despises homosexuality is upset because we are at church. So you know and then the devil has a way of taking over you and making you do some stupid things.

While the threat of physical violence torments Winter, sometimes the more subtle forms of disapproval can do just as much harm. Lesbians are constantly being told that their sexuality will lead them to hell or somehow warrants the prayer and salvation of other congregation members. Toni recounts being told that someone was going to pray for her, to which her reaction is that of contempt and annoyance. All of the women shared stories of being told they needed to the intervention of others be that through prayer, being saved or the likes. Joy brings up the same notion of being “saved” by congregation members.

In the Christian concept of salvation, God sent his son Jesus Christ so that whoever believes in him will have eternal salvation, “for God so loves the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not parish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”³⁹ (John 3: 16- 17) And it is through the acceptance of Jesus Christ as your lord and savior that one gains salvation.

In this passage we see that the deciding factor for God’s salvation is his love for the world. A love that he has told Christians to have for everyone, “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing one to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” ”Do not murder,” ”Do not steal,” ”Do not bear false witness,” ”Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be are all summed up in this rule: ”love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law”\(^{40}\) (Romans 13: 8-10). Black Christian lesbians are often greeted with not so loving attitudes by people in the church, thus constantly hearing that they are going to hell or that they need to be “saved” becomes troublesome as they have already accepted Jesus Christ as their lord and savior and in doing so gained salvation.

Salvation to the women is a personal decision that they have already made. It is a relationship between the women and God that has already been formed. Thus communal salvation (a term I use to describe salvation by way of group prayer) is taken as an insult that reads like their current relationship with God is not valid or simply not present because they prefer women over men. The constant questioning of the women’s salvation and the offering up of a more legitimate salvation by way of heterosexual intercessors speaks to a certain religious essentialism in which heterosexuals have some specially relationship with God that makes their belief and worship more valid...more legitimate than homosexuals. As a result many of the women in this project reported feelings of guilt surrounding their sexual orientation and

religious beliefs. Guilt here is being used here to mean the women’s feelings of remorse, shame or responsibility for their sexual orientation. Blue said she normally does not carry around feelings of guilt about her sexuality yet “when it comes to church...to Christians I do”. A story Toni shares of her guilt demonstrates that the way the church leaders frame homosexuality often affects the atmosphere of the church and how members treat homosexuals.

Toni: It’s weird that the day I decide to go to church they’re talking about homosexuals. I was told that it was because the pastor could feel my presence in the church, [...] so I feel guilty and I think they’re talking to me.

The church leaves very little room for lesbians to occupy spaces of comfort, guilt free because as Joy states there is “a very strict interpretation of what the Bible says” in relation to homosexuality. That interpretation Toni states “creates that feeling of being uncomfortable...you hear people preaching about it, that it’s wrong, it’s a sin and that people will pray for you”.

To not make situations even more uncomfortable for themselves the women de-align (what I refer to as strategic re-presentation) themselves with things that could damage their already questionable status in the church. Winter, who is out at church, admits to not knowing if she would feel comfortable holding her girlfriend’s hand at church “I have never done that and I don’t know if I will. I don't know.... I would hope I would but who knows maybe I would chicken out and be like ‘ok let go of my hand when the door opens’”. Toni also describes the idea of holding hands with a girlfriend in church as being uncomfortable. She reports being comfortable
holding hands with a man in church, as she has done so in the past but would not be as quick to hold hands with a woman.

While public displays of affection are generally frowned upon in the church, there are small gestures that go unquestioned such as holding hands, sitting close and putting your arm around the back of your spouse’s seat. For heterosexual couples these actions are not things that require a second though and do not warrant looks from the rest of the congregation. Yet these same small actions become momentous if done by same sex couples. Lesbians who attend church have to constantly police their behavior and think twice about things that heterosexual couples do not. Winter demonstrates this double think when she states “Plus I know the pastor personally so if he felt some kind of way he would probably text me that night and say I did not like that you came in with that girl. So I just wouldn’t want to deal with the aftermath so I would be like ‘let go of my hand’”. Winter’s expressed behaviors become part of a larger performance of respectability that she does to maintain her membership in church, a membership that is maintained through a thorough understanding of the rules. For individuals such as Blue who dress in what would be considered a more masculine fashion and who do not manage to uphold what is deemed as respectable femininity, church membership is often revoked or at the least partially given up in exchange for personal autonomy and comfort.

How does confidence then factor into this equation? Joy is older than the other women and is the only person who reported being comfortable with holding hands with a girlfriend at church.
She accredits this with being more comfortable in who she is, a place she had to grow to. Her past insecurities paved the way for the future confidence she now has in herself, a confidence that the other women have yet to fully embody in church. Comfort while subjective and different for each of the women, is an interactive location in which the personal and private, the social and the public are all in dialogue to produce what the women interpret as comfort. Therefore, the church’s compliance is needed in order create a space of comfort that is inclusive of the Black Christian lesbian identity.

**Respectability**

Projects of respectability date back to the 18th century emergence of the bourgeoisie in Britain. Through the push for independence and the containment of the King’s power, the bourgeoisie argued for democracy by way of virtue, virtues that set them apart from the over indulgent and irresponsible aristocrats. The ideal and virtuous self was shaped by the bourgeoisie’s claim of rationality, discipline, self-mastery and chastity. A virtuous person was then deserving of the right to vote, to freedom and to democracy. Projects of respectability are linked to communal uplift and the obtaining of virtuous characteristics as to create an ideal self worthy of liberties41. These projects reject things that do not fall in line with what the vision of the virtuous self. Black people in America took up similar projects of respectability as they sought to fight against a system of racial discrimination that placed them at the bottom of society.

Black people occupied very few spaces of privilege and power; their perceived inferior status was reinforced by legislation that deprived Blacks of basic civil rights. In an attempt to fight for their citizenship Black people had to first confront widely circulated stereotypes that enabled and legitimized their second-class citizenship status. To counter these misconceptions like those found in the 1965 Moynihan Report, that portrayed the Black matriarchal family structure as the source of the deteriorating Black community, Black leaders pushed for the adoption of behaviors and representations could conform to Euro-American notions of respectability. They considered that these would not only change dominant perceptions of Black people but it would help in the moral and civic uplift of the race. The adoption of gender patriarchy and nationalist strategies in the fight for equality at this time defined the focus of the struggle, self-determination, communal uplift and respectability. “Nationalist groups stressed a sexual division of labor in which women learned and adhered to standards of cleanliness, housekeeping, hygiene, and education of children.”42 Meanwhile, ideas of respectability for Black men stressed the role of breadwinner and “masculine project(s) of self-defense and resistance”43. Consequently, things that fall outside of the constructions of respectability are deemed negative and opposed to Black communal progress. These discourses of respectability have shaped the spaces that Black women occupy and undoubtedly continue to impact the autonomy and status of Black lesbians, as their sexual orientation is not only seen as morally deviant but also as failing to fall in line with Black projects of respectability.

43 ibid
As much as things have changed in terms of challenging and expanding the ideals of women’s respectability, much has remained the same. Notions of respectability still influence gender conceptions and rules that make up ideals of the respectable Christian kingdom men and women. Not only are the women interviewed for this project aware of these rules and gender conceptions but they also understand that their sexual orientation is an aspect of their identity that works against them being able to attain that respectability.

The women all report the most power and respect are held by the pastor, his wife, first lady and pastoral staff such as the elders, deacons and deaconess. Blue uses the term “full blown Christians” to describe members whose devotion, longevity with the church and close relationships to the pastor provide them with high levels of respect. As for lesbians, she sees them as being the peasants in a hierarchy of power and respect in the church. Toni on the other hand does not see out-lesbians as being in the hierarchy at all. She believes that closeted lesbians would have more respect because people do not know about their sexuality; a respect that would later be revoked if word got out about their sexual orientation. Winter shares a similar idea of lesbians being less respected, “I’m more than positive, which is messed up, they would be at the bottom. There would adultery, infidelity/cheaters, and up under them would be lesbians. I think that society thinks that homosexuality is the ultimate sin [...] so yes I think we are completely at the bottom”. This reveals an emerging theme of hopelessness in the

Kingdom is a reference commonly made to heaven, where God the “king” lives.
responses to lesbian respectability. None of the women believe that their sexuality grants them respect. Joy is the only woman who says that lesbians can hold some level of respect “I think it depends on the church...in my church I think people would rather look over their sexuality”. Joy interestingly says that people would rather look over someone’s sexuality in her church yet she reported not feeling comfortable enough to come out in her church. Furthermore, she dated a female pastor who was also selective in disclosing her sexual orientation. So what was actually taking place in church is much different to what was actually happening. This sounds similar to the ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ atmosphere Winter described in her church. The point here is that there exists in Winter’s church a spirit of tolerance without acceptance and it is this that explains the apprehension and fear associated with coming out at church.

Respectability then becomes a careful performance demonstrating that one understands the rules. Joy and Winter’s performance of respectability begins with the service they provide to their churches. The active role they have taken undoubtedly adds to the projects of uplift that are in the church. Secondly, both women dress in fairly feminine manners. Winter describes her process of selecting clothes as one that takes into account being in the presence of God “I do not pick out anything that has my breast showing. I have worn ripped jeans before but nothing major. Just basically I pick out stuff that is presentable not just for the church but for God because I don’t want to be in church looking like a slut”. While their selection of attire is not far from what they would normally wear there is very little room to negotiate attire. Winter notes, “in general I think a pastor that is preaching the word can say oh come as you are and this, that
and the third. Then they see girls with boy clothes and be like ‘go put on a skirt’, or boys with tight clothes on and say ‘wear a size larger’ or something like that”. For lesbians like Blue and Toni who do not normally dress in feminine clothes and have no desire to dress in such a manner for church, it is harder to maintain a performance such as this. The basic logic here is that by blending in and making strategic choices that align one with spaces of value and privilege a person can easily perform projects of respectability. More generally, some of the women’s decision to not come out can also be read as performances of respectability. By not outing themselves the women align themselves with a perceived heterosexuality that carries respect and as a result privilege.

These performances of respectability are then survival strategies that help the women to negotiate their identity in the social sphere of the church. In doing this, the women are able to fully participate in the activities that they want to and to maintain psychological autonomy in circumstances that are not pleasing to them. This strategy then aids the women in psychologically resisting and not adopting the negative views of homosexuals taught in the church. Despite the belief that lesbians do not hold spaces of respect all of the women hold themselves in high esteem. They have been able to separate their self-identity from how homosexuals are characterized in the church. The women’s ability to do this enables them to demand respect on their own terms:

Joy: I remember having a teen bible and it had this section about homosexuality and how it was wrong. So I had a lot
of issues between being a believer in God and being homosexual [...] until this girl I was dating told me it did not matter who you are. It's all about your relationship with God; I think that was my turning point.

Blue: I don't like labels so if someone was to ask me [if I am a lesbian] I would say no and tell them I'm a human being who loves with all of their heart just like anyone else.

Winter: God knows who I am I am not trying to put myself through any extra stress. If I'm going to be gay then I'm going to be gay. If I'm not going to be gay then I'm not going to be gay. It should not matter at all. I still believe in God. I still have a good heart, I still do good things; my sexuality should not have anything to do with it - whether or not it is a sin because a lot of things are a sin and people still do them but they don't single out those sins like they single out homosexuality and that is not fair.

Toni: That this is not a choice, nor is it a sickness. If I never told a person that I was a lesbian they would probably think like 'oh you're okay', but as soon as you tell them, that changes something about you. But I was the same person I was before you knew what I did behind closed doors.

The women's statements challenge preconceived notions of respectability for churchwomen. In saying that, respectability is a socially constructed concept that seeks to police bodies and behaviors. This is a policing that in this context limits intimate relationships to those between men and women. It is safe to say that this aspect of respectability has caused tensions in the women; one that they have to first overcome in order to get to a place where they could first, embrace their attraction to women and secondly, despite negative assumptions about homosexuality, envision themselves as respectable. At a very basic humanistic level the
women’s comments speak to a desire to not have their sexual orientation have them labeled as “other”. The women love, hurt, and experience life’s ups and downs the same as every other human being. And since it seems to be hard for homophobic Christians to grasp that concept, it appears that these women are less invested in being seen as favorable in the eyes of earthly people, who are capable of mis-interpreting Gods words. Instead they are more interested and spiritually invested in being seen as favorable in the eyes of God. This is a grace that they believe is extended to them, as God is the creator of all life, including their individual lives and thus they are made in an image that is favorable to him. For them as lesbian Christians, God as the source from which all life derives has gained their respect and in return the women’s objective (with the exception of Blue) is to earn the respect and favor of God, rather than of people who do not hold any power when compared to the ultimate judge of all things right and wrong, God.

Fight or Flight

In 1915 Walter Cannon coined the phrase “fight or flight”. This widely used phrase was originally used to capture the physiological stress responses individuals exhibit as threats arise. This phrase becomes particularly interesting in relation to this project because a core question of the project concerns how Black Christian lesbians “deal with” homophobia. Deal with here is used to connote the possible physical and mental responses that are feasible when one encounters

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45 Walter B. Cannon in Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear and Rage; an Account of Recent Researches into the Function of Emotional Excitement.
homophobia. In this context the phrase “fight or flight” refers to whether or not the women when confronted with homophobia directly address it or flee from the situation.

The women in this project shared more accounts of fleeing from situations of homophobia than addressing them directly. It is important to note that the women have each experienced homophobia in different ways. Blue, for instance describes all of her accounts of homophobia as being indirect. She doesn’t recall having dealt with homophobia in person, and her encounters with homophobia as having always been through second hand sources. As a result she does not see them as personally threatening or feels the need to address homophobia. Furthermore she finds ways to ignore homophobia, “I would definitely ignore it… I’m not the confrontational type at all”. Blue’s non-confrontational approach not only keeps her from addressing homophobic remarks but it has also led her to refuse from directly dealing with her sexuality with her family. She believes that her family is aware that she dates women but has no intention of explicitly coming out to them. This is a decision that has less to do with her family’s religious beliefs on homosexuality and more about her protection, “I’m probably not even doing it out of respect… I’m doing it to avoid confrontation”. Blue’s need to avoid confrontation helps to explain her decision to leave church. If she doesn’t attend then she decreases the chances that she will have to confront homophobic religious people. In this sense, Blue is not fleeing religion per say but fleeing the people associated with Christianity.
The other women also gave examples of fleeing congregations. Joy described a long hiatus she took from church when living in New Orleans because of the homophobia she encountered at several different churches following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. After Hurricane Katrina one of the reasons given to explain the hurricane was God’s dissatisfaction with homosexuality.\footnote{Max Blumenthal. “Blaming Katrina on Gays, Israel, and Man-on-Horse Sex.” Huffington Post. Web. 11 May 2012.}

Unable to get away from this rhetoric, fleeing enabled Joy to distance herself from the homophobia that stood in direct opposition to her identity. Once she relocated in a new state she found a new church home in which she did not have to deal with the homophobia she found in New Orleans.

To the women, fighting homophobia is not always the best option, as they considered it, it does not seem to be worth the effort:

Winter: I could get into a debate about it, some I have or whatever but I mean I just choose not to. Its freedom of religion you can believe what you want to believe just as well as I can believe what I want to believe. Christians think Christianity is the way to believe, while Muslims think Allah is the way to go and so do Catholics. No one expects everyone’s religion to be the same, and everyone’s beliefs to the same. So it is what it is everyone is entitled to his or her opinion, you can think what you want to think about me being homosexual, I’m still going to be me so I don’t deal with it

Toni: Religion and how people feel about homosexuality it a very touchy subject...and I don’t feel like arguing about it. You’re not going to change my mind and I’m not going to change your mind. I’ve been told these things from
some who practiced homosexuality and they told me I was going to hell...they told me that it was something in my mind and that I could over come it which was very interesting because I used to date them. Its stuff like that...I’m not going to argue with that.

Toni and Winter both respect the rights of others to choose what they believe. Fleeing then is done as a way to save both parties from arguments that will ultimately not change anyone’s mind. Ironically the women’s decision to respect people’s right to believe what they want is not a luxury afforded to them, as they are constantly thought to have chosen their sexual orientation and are subsequently the victims of incessant questions. In fact Toni’s experiences shows that people do not respect her lesbian identity at all and offer up their opinions on it even when she attempts to avoid the conversations. Although fleeing may seem like the easy way out of dealing with homophobic situations, it is often the harder of the two decisions, as it requires the women to bite their tongue and accept the misunderstanding that others have about their sexuality. Despite any misconceptions other people may have about the women, they all believe that God knows the type of people they are; therefore there is no need to flee from him.

The tensions and struggles that all of the women have had in coming to understand who they are and how their religious beliefs fits in with their sexual orientation have all helped them on their road to spiritual peace. Winter for example when discussing coming out says that she did not know if she wanted to come out at first because of growing up in the church and learning she could possibly go to hell. Yet when she made up in her mind that hell was not a concept that she believed in she did not worry as much about her salvation:
Winter: My decision [to come out] was based upon my happiness number one, because God would not want someone to live unhappily. I would have never been happy if I did not come to terms with the fact that I was attracted to women. I just was like - ‘where am I going to go when I die?’ - which is weird because they say you should not fear death but I was worried cause I did not know where I was going to go.

Once Winter was able to formulate a conception of God that affirmed her identity and was more in line with her thoughts about salvation her sexuality became less of a struggle. Toni reported going through a similar struggle and asking herself why she was attracted to women if it was wrong. The Bible while often serving as a place where one can go for answers served as a place of confusion for the women as they all reported learning that being homosexual was wrong, yet at the same time being told God makes everyone according to his desire, two ideas that did not match up for the women. This discrepancy was something that all of the women report having to figure out without the help of anyone in the church. When Winter attempted to discuss this dilemma with her Bible study teacher he had no answers for her, she had to figure it out on her own. A former girlfriend helped Joy deal with her issues concerning religion and homosexuality.

The lack of spaces available for lesbians to receive God affirming counseling leaves them having to create their own safe spaces for exploration and self-discovery that often leads to the fleeing of religious spaces. The creation of these new spaces is profound because as earlier stated, the power of the shepherd/pastor lies in his ability to address both the spiritual and secular while also forging a path to salvation for all of his sheep. However for these women their paths to salvation were self defined and created. Therefore, while the pastorate power allows the church
to be very influential in secular matters of health, education and politics while simultaneously concerning itself with the spiritual and emotional health of its congregation, lesbian Christians do not benefit from the full capacity of the church’s power. To that end Foucault’s claim of salvation involving the acceptance of the authority of the pastor/shepherd is not true in the case of Black lesbians. In fact their refusal of the pastor’s authority is what allows them the opportunity to forge a relationship with God and a path to salvation that affirms their identity. It is this spiritual empowerment they achieve through an autonomously negotiated path to salvation that renders these Black lesbian Christians less dependent on the affirmation of their sexual identities by other people in the Church, as they believe they can gain personal access to that affirmation directly from God. When asked the question if at the day of judgment when it is just them and God, would they claim or deny their lesbian identity all of the women said they would claim it.

Joy: I would claim it [...] I believe God wants us to love whoever wants his love.

Winter: I would claim it considering the fact that he already knows so I would claim it because he would still know my faith in him and how it has remained throughout it all.

Toni: I would claim it. I wouldn’t want to be stuck with all of those heterosexuals.

Blue: I would claim it only because with God there are no shades of grey, either you are or you aren’t. I don’t like labels so if it was someone else I would say no and tell them I’m a human being who loves with all their heart just like anyone else.
Blue’s comment may seem like a bit of a contradiction but if we think about the church as mere symbol and not a place in which one must go in order to interact with God then attendance in this place does not provide any profound insights on the relationship a person has with God. Ergo a woman who does not attend church like Blue or Toni can still feel a strong spiritual connection with God. Toni believes that “in the past it [the Black church] was a space for Black people to come together and praise the Lord and praise their God and to escape things that were happening. That is probably still significant now but I don’t think that you have to do that in church. So it’s not significant to me because I think that I can have a relationship with God outside of church and I do”. Her decision to not attend church does not make her any less of a believer than someone who does. Claiming their identity in front of God proves that while the women may flee from homophobic encounters with some people they have no need to flee from God. This shows that the women do not fear negative repercussions from God, as they all see him as approving of who they are. To Winter a person’s sexual orientation has no bearing on the type of person they are, “your homosexuality has nothing to do with the person you are - it’s just who you like, that is it, that is all it is. It doesn’t have anything to do with the way you think, the way you love, the way you feel, the way you eat, the way you sleep”.

In attempting to address concerns regarding homosexuality the Black church has labeled the Black Christian lesbian identity as “other”. Winter’s comment challenges any misconceptions that characterize her as being completely different from other people on the account of her
sexual orientation. These Black women’s lives are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions between their own internally defined images of self and with their objectification as the other. And so, Winter’s plea asks to be seen as human...no more or no less complicated than anyone else. Although these women have found their own personal paths to salvation as Black lesbian Christian, it is important and consistent with the social justice mission that has defined the Black church movement in that it works to create an atmosphere that challenges both popular and religious discourses against homosexuality in order to engage with all of the diversity present in the Black church.

Conclusion

The Black Christian lesbian identity is one marked by an internal struggle to conceptualize God in a way that is affirming amidst a social church culture and theology that are not affirming. Reconciling the personal and the political is a point of tension for all of the women in this study. Their stories only represent a small amount of the realities of Black Christian lesbians. Sexual orientation and religious identity are not two separate identities that one lets go of in favor of another within particular contexts, rather they are in a constant dialogue with one another. For the four women presented in this project, their struggles with coming to terms with their sexuality and religion is expressed in their disidentification from the homophobic tendencies of the Black church and an embracing of a perspective of God that is more in line with who they understand themselves to be.

Disidentification is used here to highlight “the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship”\textsuperscript{48}. As previously stated the Black church’s strong stance against homosexuality has left many gay and lesbian people feeling as though they are not welcome. As in the case of Blue and Toni it was easier to completely remove themselves from the church rather than stay in a place where their

\textsuperscript{48}José Esteban Muñoz. \textit{Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics.} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999), 4.
identity is a continuous point of dissension. However, for Joy and Winter who have maintained membership, disidentification is a strategy that enables them to re-think their status as members of multiple communities that are sometimes at odds with one another. Disidentification for these two women becomes a way of sustaining attendance, navigating spaces of respectability, dealing with uncomfortable situations and embracing a notion of God that is affirming and redemptive. Although it is not clear if any of the women are familiar with Womanist theology as it was not a point of discussion in the interview, their ability to reconceptualize God as an extension of themselves is similar to Womanist theology as it pushes all Black women to trouble the male nature of God in order to be able to see themselves in God. This suggests that Womanist theology, if embraced by the Black church would open up spaces of affirmation and new ways of thinking about salvation for Black Christian Lesbians.

The anti-homosexuality discourse found in the Black church makes it a necessity that Black Christian lesbians forge their own paths of affirmation and salvation. However, by that same token the very presence of gay and lesbian Christians within the Black church highlights both the need and the failure of the Black church to serve as a symbol of hope, love and strength to Christian lesbians. This paradox compels the church to take responsibility for developing a stance on homosexuality that does not alienate homosexual members of the congregation. The patriarchal and hence heteronormative values of the church have shaped many of the discourses found in the church which has justified them through the use of scripture, but history shows that these biblical and church discourses and values are malleable. For example in 1
Timothy Paul gives instructions on how people should behave in church paying particular concern to the conduct of women. Women are encouraged to maintain proper unadorned attire, engage in passions and desires moderately, remain silent, be learners not teachers, and to take all concerns with matters of ministry or theology to their husbands. At the time in which this was written, women were subordinate to their husbands and it is this that shapes the assumption of women’s subordinate position in the church. Challenging these patriarchal values becomes the foundation for Christian feminist movements like Womanist theology. Today the glass ceiling for women in the Black church has been raised, if not totally eradicated, with women being able to take up leadership positions proving that progress is possible. Though it has often been church members – such as women - on the receiving end of marginalization and discrimination who have had to resist and demand change from their churches. Therefore a conclusion of this research is that it is not surprising that the same action needs now to be taken by the LGBT populations of Black churches.

The pastorate has the power to influence church discourse on homosexuality that could result in more affirming spaces for lesbians, but as the debates over President Obama’s recent announcement in support of gay marriage, it is yet to be seen if they will take up this challenge. Following President Obama’s announcement in support of gay marriage, it was reported that the first group of people that he consulted with were Black pastors, in an effort to control the

possible damage that such an announcement could make in the middle of his re-election campaign. President Obama’s call to prominent Black pastors illustrates not only his strong religious sentiments but also the magnitude of the Black church’s social and political power. And while many of the pastors did not agree with the president’s announcement their continued support for him will heavily impact whether or not their congregations continue to support the president at the ballot box. One Black pastor in particular has come out in favor of the president’s speech. He is the Rev. Otis Moss III of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, the senior pastor of the president’s former church. Reverend Moss III said during a Sunday sermon, "[Obama] is president of the United States of America, not the president of the Baptist Convention or bishop of the sanctified or holiness church. He is called to protect the rights of Jew and Gentile, male and female, young and old, gay and straight, black and white, atheist and agnostic". The YouTube video of Rev. Moss III’s announcement has received over 100,000 views and has the ability to legitimize and create discourses that will shape the way members think about both homosexuality and President Obama. This event is incredibly important in demonstrating the power of the pastorate in both the social and spiritual concerns of the Black community. Black Christian lesbians will only be given church endorsed affirmation if the official pastorate empowers them just as it was done for women in the past resulting in the multitude of female pastors seen in the Black church today.

Homosexuality and the Black Church continues to be at the center of discussion in both secular and sacred spaces. It is essential that in evaluating these discourses that one come into contact with the lived experiences of those for whom this topic matters the most, Black Christian gays and lesbians. While this project has helped to diversify the experiences of Black churchwomen and pushed the field of Black Queer Studies by bring Black lesbian voices to the forefront the real power of this project comes in its ability to let Black Christian lesbians speak for themselves; through the use of narratives. Through the narratives, you get a chance to take a glimpse into the lives of Black Christian lesbians in a way that is not normally easily accessible. This makes the women’s point of view accessible to a larger audience in a way that they have not been able to do previously as they have has been marginalized, spoken for and in many ways rendered invisible. The sharing of their stories not only provides the women with the sense of agency that comes when a person speaks for his/herself but also aids in filling the gap in understanding of what it means to be lesbian, Christian and attend a Black church. This project has revealed and thus illustrated four important realities: Firstly, the experiences and perspectives of Black Christian lesbians in the Black church; secondly, the strategies they have developed for dealing with homophobia found in Black churches; thirdly, the spaces, they find for themselves in the church in which they can create a sense of belonging. Finally and by no means least, this study has revealed the important responsibility of the Black church to give visibility, recognition and value to that which is persistently invisibilized, repressed and disavowed by the church; that is the presence and contribution of Black gay and lesbian people to the social and spiritual life of the Black Church in America.


