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Los Angeles

Making Black and Gay Okay:
Unspoiling Identity Among Young Black Gay Men in Los Angeles

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Sociology

by

Terrell James Antonio Winder

2017

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Making Black and Gay Okay:

Unspoiling Identity Among Young Black Gay Men

in Los Angeles

by

Terrell James Antonio Winder

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2017

Professor Marcus Hunter, Co-Chair

Professor Stefan Timmermans, Co-Chair

This study examines the development of stigma management techniques and identity socialization by using the case of young Black gay men. Drawing on the work of Du Bois and Goffman, I articulate how through intersectional stigma, the multiply marginalized are burdened with what I term the *multiplicative consciousness*, or the necessity to see one's self through the eyes of multiple oppressors. This multiplicative consciousness opens the pathways for new ways to respond to stigma; specifically, I identify a new stigma response strategy that I term *unspoiling*. Using participant observation, in-depth interview, focus groups, peer ethnography, and content analysis, I assess the socialization roles of three social institutions in the development of multiplicative

consciousness and deployment of the unspoiling stigma response technique: media, non-profit organizations, and chosen families.

In the section on media representation, I examine the role of the first Black LGBT cable television show *Noah's Arc* to highlight how representations have lasting impacts on the behaviors of its audience. Additionally, I look to the web-based series, *FreeFall,* to illustrate the potential for diverse narratives and new forms of audience participation in media representation. In the non-profit organization section, I add to Hunter's 2010 typology of identity negotiations, discuss the impact of religious based-stigma on the identity formations of these young men, and explicate how group interactions within the organizational space lead to the development of new stigma response strategies. The final section on chosen families details the messaging and role of intentionally constructed gay parenting relationships on the life trajectories and aspirations of the young men; furthermore, I illustrate the potential for these relationships to act as support networks for gay life in Los Angeles and beyond.

My research shows how through these three socialization institutions, some young Black gay men come to reject existing strategies for stigma management (i.e. covering and passing) and instead develop ways to adjust their personal view of a stigmatized identity through *unspoiling*. Ultimately, this work illuminates the pathways that young Black men may follow in Los Angeles to create meaningful identities, to construct communities, and to *unspoil* their identities as Black gay men.

The dissertation of Terrell James Antonio Winder is approved.

Darnell Hunt

Ian Holloway

Marcus Hunter, Committee Co-Chair

Stefan Timmermans, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2017

For the young Black gay men of UpLift LA, past and present.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables……...vii

Acknowledgements……viii

Vita……...xi

Introduction: Making Black & Gay Okay…….....1

Section 1: Media Representations of BGM……..20

Chapter 1: Noah's Arc: Mainstream Images of Black Gay Men…….……...24

Chapter 2: Freefall: New Media and User Created Representation……...54

Section 2: Local Non-Profit Organizations……..78

Chapter 3: Negotiating the Incompatible: Race & Sexuality at UpLiftLA…….87

Chapter 4: You Have Internalized Self-Hate: Unspoiling Identity in a Black LGBT Community Organization…….102

Chapter 5: Shouting It Out: Religion and the Making of Black Gay Identities……117

Section 3: Intentional Kinship Families…….....

Chapter 6: "They're Like My Backbone": A Family by Design……...140

Conclusion: Unspoiling Towards Destigmatization: Living a Shameless Black Gay Life……158

Appendix A: Data Collection Methods……..161

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Guides...……..171

Appendix C: Interview Respondent Demographics……...174

References…….175

LIST OF TABLES

Table I Religion Based Anti-Gay Stigma……..…….79

Table II Anti-Gay Stigma (Secular)…….....80

Table III Race-Based Stigma Messages…….....82

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Chapter Five is a version of "*Shouting it Out*": Religion and the Development of Black Gay Identities. *Qualitative Sociology*, 38(4):375-394.

Terrell J. A. Winder

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Introduction: Making Black and Gay Okay

Reflect on how the following young men explain the importance of different pathways to their own understandings of Black gay identity and community within Los Angeles:

> Growing up, I didn't have a real gay community or know many gay people. I only knew what I saw on television and the only show that looked like me was Noah's Arc so that's what I thought the life was about.
>
> --Jordan, 26

> "I continue to be involved with UpliftLA because there's really no other like youth-driven type program, [and] because I've grown and I've seen others grow. We've completely come out of our shells. We've kind of grown up together a little bit, and that relationship is just there like that. That relationship is there. And it's a safe space where young, Black, gay dudes can come share their stories and really connect. And I really enjoy that in a sense, so that's why I continue to go."
>
> --Tyler, 24

> "My gay mother[1], she's my mother to guide me through the gay life...Yes. She's been my source of all information when it comes to the gay community. She gives me the ups; she gives me the downs. She tells me what to do, what not to do and her experiences... So, I'm very lucky to have her because a lot of people don't have that, or even know that you could go out and find someone like that…I think, I mean, I'm lucky with her 'cause I know some people don't have that…"
>
> --Justin, 19

Taken from my interviews and fieldnotes, these excerpts reveal key insights into the intersection of racial, sexual, and gendered identity. Specifically, each quote indicates that young Black gay men draw on three distinct arenas to confirm and affirm themselves: 1) media representations, 2) community organizations, and 3) families of choice. In so doing, these men reveal the power of such sources of socialization and identity politics to inform a process of de-stigmatization. This process of de-stigmatization, or what I call *unspoiling,* will be explored across these three pathways that have emerged as distinct areas upon which young men in Los Angeles may draw to create identities, define communities, and construct their realities about the world. By examining how these young

[1] While Justin discusses his "gay mother" this term is not an indication of gender. That is, his gay mother identifies as a man, but plays the role of mother in his navigation of the gay social world.

Black gay men are actively resisting notions of a stigmatized identity through a process of unspoiling, we gain further insight into projects of identity and community de-stigmatization. The study examines how young Black gay men instruct and guide one another to project their identities and how they are responding to and actively resisting stigmatizing messaging about their identities.

There are many social, health, and policy factors that designate young Black gay men as a key population to understand. In general, studies of Black LGBT people have found that they are more likely to be connected to a racial community than an LGBT community (Battle, Pastrana Jr., & Daniels 2012; Moore 2011). Some studies have also highlighted that Black LGBT people report high levels of medical insurance, information about health, particularly sexual health for young Black MSM is problematic. Nationwide, Black gay MSM are the most seriously affected by the HIV epidemic and are acquiring the virus at the highest rates across all groups; in Los Angeles, specifically, Black gay MSM under 30 represented the highest rates of diagnoses in 2011 at rates three times higher than Whites and Latinos (Frye 2014). These epidemiological facts have created a landscape in Los Angeles that has incentivized the creation of health organizations that target this population to promote health and wellness. This project focuses on the lives of many of the young men that frequent one such organization UpLiftLA[2], and how they creating meaningful lives in the face of these different social and physical challenges. Specifically, this project addresses the following research questions: 1) How are young Black gay men in Los Angeles responding to anti-gay stigma? 2) How are these young men creating and locating outlets to express Black gay identities? and 3) How are young Black gay men socialized into local Black gay communities? Together these questions seek to illuminate the pathways that young Black men may follow in Los Angeles to create meaningful identities, to construct communities, and to *unspoil* their identities as Black gay men.

[2] All names and identifying information have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect confidentiality in accordance with IRB protocols.

In the ensuing pages of this work, I use a wide array of data to investigate the three socialization domains frequented by the young men in this work. Additionally, through the examination of these three domains I build on the work of WEB Du Bois and Erving Goffman to develop a theory of unspoiling. I explain how the process and effect of unspoiling prioritizes the social experiences of the stigmatized rather than the comfort of "normals" (Goffman 1963). Using an intersectional framework, this project also seeks to contribute to understandings of the multiply marginalized by building on DuBois' notion of double consciousness. Brining intersectional scholarship to bear on the theory of double consciousness, I offer the term *multiplicative consciousness* to capture the burden of having to see one's self through the eyes of another; yet, unlike Du Bois whose work focused on the effects of a racial veil, I contend that those who suffer from memberships in multiple stigmatized identity groups are burdened to see themselves through the eyes of *many* oppressive forces.

Identity Development of Racial and Sexual Minority Youth and Young Adults

Generally, gay men of color are subjected to racism within the gay community and experience various degrees of homophobia within communities of color (Han 2007). LGBT people of color are also often the primary victims of anti-LGBT violence and struggle to reap the benefits of increased acceptance of LGBT sexualities in the wider population (Meyer 2015), due in large part to ethnic residential segregation (Moore 2010b; Ocampo 2012). Previous research has highlighted the supportive role of the house/ballroom scene[1] (Bailey 2010; 2013), the internet (Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop 2004), social media (Pullen & Cooper 2010), and community organizations (Armstrong 2002) in the lives of young gay men of color responding to homophobic environments. Yet, we know less about the types of processes that affect sexual and racial identity negotiations that occur within these spaces and the spillover effects of these processes into other everyday situations.

The sociological literature on homosexuality grapples with the dilemma of whether same-sex

attraction is an innate characteristic or a learned behavior (McIntosh 1968). While this debate continues for academics and laypersons alike, those who identify as gay, lesbian or anything other than heterosexual have struggled to lay claims to their identities as legitimate. Many researchers have documented the creation of the "modern" gay or homosexual as one where a public identity is claimed in addition to a private sexual lifestyle (Plummer 1981; Warren 1974). Warren's study of gay identity and community in the 1970s, draws a clear distinction between homosexual acts and gay identities, suggesting that those who claim a gay identity are affirming their connections with a community of other gay identified people by attending clubs, social gatherings or other public events (1974). This 'sense of self' Warren defines to as an existential identity. McIntosh makes a similar argument in that she suggests in Western societies there has been an emergence of the "homosexual role" as a social actor who lives a lifestyle beyond simple sexual acts (1968).

Sociological studies that have examined Black gay identities have highlighted the ways in which race, sexuality, religion, and social spaces shape and inform the proclaimed identities of Black gay men (Crichlow 2004; Hawkeswood 1996; Hunter 2010a). Both Hawkeswood and Hunter emphasize the varying ways that Black gay men understand their gay identities and that while many expect that either race or sexuality must dominate as a primary identifier, for most cases Black gay men find these aspects of self as inextricable. While these studies have articulated how Black gay men might identify, they do not tend to explicate why or how these identity expressions came to be for these Black gay men. Furthermore, we gain new insights into the development and production of these Black gay identities by looking to the agents of socialization that these young men engage in the daily round.

Du Bois's theory of double consciousness offers a way to understand how the racially subjected "self" is constructed under the conditions of racialization. In particular, his writings guide us to understand the complex burden of having to view one's self through an oppressive lens:

> **It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body (Du Bois 1903, p. 2).**

As sociologist Jason Orne suggests in his interpretation of double consciousness, we might consider this as "a pair of bifocals, allowing the wearer to simultaneously look through the top—seeing the situation as the powerful likely see it—or through the bottom—seeing the situation through the eyes of the marginalized" (2013, p. 235). This peculiar burden offers sociologists an opportunity to better understand the subjugated self. While in its original form, double consciousness takes up the particularities of the Black experience in the Unites States, intersectional scholars have noted that when trying to comprehend the dilemma of women of color, queer people of color, and other multiply marginalized groups, the consciousness may be split into even more parts (Collins 2002; McCall 2005; Orne 2013.) That is to say, when one is othered by multiple groups, how do the stigmatized orient their new view? Here I offer the term *multiplicative consciousness* to capture how those who negotiate multiple marginalized identities simultaneously come to view themselves and to capture the burden of *multiplicative sight*. That is, they are no longer just the racialized other nor are they merely split in two, but rather their consciousness is split infinitely into the multiple lenses that come with an intersectionally oppressed existence. Multiplicative consciousness, then, allows us to make sense of the specific contexts under which everyday actors are moving and negotiating multiple stigmatized identities continually.

Coming Out: Stigma Management and Destigmatization Theory

Given the ways that social environments can affect identity development, dominant social narratives of stigmatized identities can undoubtedly have lasting effects on the social interactions and presentations of those individuals. In his work, Goffman articulates three separate stigmatized classes of people: 1) those having physical or visible handicaps (e.g. blindness), 2) those of unnatural

desires or hidden/concealable identities (e.g. homosexuals), and 3) those that are born into a stigmatized 'tribal' group (e.g. Black Americans) (1963). Yet, contemporary explorations of those with stigmatized identities often focus on the management of one identity and not on those groups of individuals who may find themselves consistently living with multiple stigmatized identities.

Since Goffman's 1963 work on stigma, much has been said about how various stigmatized individuals come to manage their identities in everyday interactions with, what he terms "normals." In particular, by focusing on what O'Brien (2011) and others call backstage work, we can glimpse how groups of stigmatized people prepare to face difficult interactions. Goffman theorizes about two responses that stigmatized people use in interactions with the non-stigmatized: "passing" or lessening the conspicuousness of a stigma, and "covering" or diminishing the imposition of a stigma on others; other scholars have subsequently built upon these responses by positing new directions for the management of stigmatized identities (Goffman 1963; O'Brien 2011; Rohleder & Gibson 2006; Orne 2011; Yoshino 2007). For example, in a study of HIV infected women, Rohleder and Gibson (2006) present the concept of a "defended subject" to name how study participants were actively working against a notion of a stigmatized identity within their local community. Additionally, scholars have noted how flaunting one's stigmatized identity can be used as a strategy for either inclusion or highlighting difference towards destigmatization (Saguy & Ward 2011; Yoshino 2007). In contrast, I illustrate that unspoiling, unlike flaunting, is not always an articulation of difference in the face of shame, but rather a focus on the adjustment of the stigmatized identity as equally normal.

Notably, some scholars have sought to understand how individuals prepare to face the non-stigmatized (Goffman 1963; O'Brien 2011; Rohleder & Gibson 2006); by those within the LGBT community, "coming out" has been conceptualized as the process of openly identifying one's sexuality (or gender-identity) and electing to share that identity publicly with others (de Monteflores

and Schultz 2010). The overwhelming majority of discussions regarding "coming out" describe this as a linear process or set of stages that an individual undergoes when they reveal their stigmatized identity to other individuals in their lives (see Coleman 1982). While it is true that coming out itself can be a form of stigma resistance, before one can come out about an identity, they often must come to accept that identity for themselves. Unlike coming out which often prioritizes the sharing of a stigmatized identity with an unstigmatized other, I center unspoiling on the self-reformulation of a positive social identity associated, in this case, equally with sexuality and race.

As argued by Kitsuse (1980), and taken up by Saguy and Ward (2011) in their work on "coming out as fat," coming out can be understood as a "master frame" to describe the outward social proclamations of many groups. As such, other scholars have advocated for a more nuanced understanding of "coming-out" and called for research to focus on the theoretical bounds of "coming out." With his theory of "strategic outness," Orne argues that LGBT persons must consistently and will always find themselves "coming out" to new social characters and under certain social conditions may choose to not confirm or deny their true orientation (2011). That is, rather than understanding coming out as a social accomplishment, we might examine coming out as a management technique itself. Given its many applications across topics, "coming out" is often used imprecisely in sociological literature conflating common-sense understandings with academic theorizations. In order to add to the theoretical clarity of "coming out," I distinguish the process and the decision to "come out" from an unspoiled identity as a position that is less concerned with stigma management and focused on articulating a stigma response that shifts onus of the stigma from the stigmatized to the stigmatizer. In this sense, unspoiling can occur before an explicit coming out to intimate members of one's social network when the individual is fully comfortable with the identity or occur following a coming out that left a stigmatizing afterthought with the individual.

Intersectionality: Stigmatized Identities and Matrices of Oppression

Scholars who study the role of organizations document the role of these spaces in helping groups and individuals to develop collective identities. Gamson argues, "The welcome notion that identities are 'interactional accomplishments' (Hunt et.al 1994) has not been met with careful regard for the question of how those interactions are structured, shaped, and limited by the organizational and institutional contexts in which they take place" (1996, 237). Therefore, continued exploration into the micro-interactional identity work found in organizations is warranted especially among those who are marginalized. Prior research has explored the role of social support groups in aiding HIV-positive, women sex workers who are trying to simultaneously negotiate HIV-related stigma and sex-work stigma (Logie et.al 2011). Berger (2006) offers the term "intersectional stigma" to understand marginalized populations that are negotiating multiple stigmatized identities simultaneously. As Simien writes of Berger, "the combined status — intersectional stigma — serves as a catalyst for political action that subsequently leads to the formation of support groups, workshops, and classes" (2007, 264). Therefore, this project seeks to contribute to the knowledge concerning the micro-interactions within the organizational space that work to create unspoiled sexual and racial identities in response to intersectional stigmatization.

Employing an intersectionality framework allows the focus of this project to uncover the processes that influence the specific social location of these sexual and racial minority young men. Intersectionality, as articulated by feminist scholars, is a framework that seeks to recognize the inextricability of race, gender, class, sexuality, and age (see Collins 1989, 1999, 2000, 2005; Crenshaw 1990, 1994; Hancock 2007). This dissertation takes an "intracategorical" (McCall 2005) or "group-centered" approach to intersectionality in order to highlight diverse and heterogeneous experiences of sexual and racial minority young men (Choo & Ferree 2010; Moore 2010a, 2011, 2012). By understanding how the social positions of Black gay young men inform their conceptions of self, we can shed light on the ways that racism, heterosexism, and stigmatization situate these young men

in extremely tenuous social positions; specifically, we can identify the strategies they learn and co-create within organizations and subsequent social networks to respond to the negative social forces they have experienced. Specifically, this project also elucidates the ways that young men are trained to respond to site-specific homophobic attitudes by their peers through participation in organizations that target their positive development into adulthood.

Living at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, the young men in this study highlight new strategies in the management of their identities in their collective identity making process and moving towards an outward process of destigmatization by engaging in unspoiling. As such, these young men participate in backstage stigma management rehearsals (O'Brien 2011) to unspoil their identities internally for themselves. While the traditional stigma management techniques "passing" and "covering" are suggested and sometimes put forth as viable options within the space, unspoiling is a different stigma response, which I argue seeks not to prioritize acceptance from the "normal," but rather encourages the individual to reject stigma and to assert one's identity as the new normal. In the sections that follow, I explore the literature of the three domains of socialization that are examined in this work.

Contemporary Media Representations

Research on the impact of media in the development of individual identities has been long established. Much of the research that has been done on these topics has focused on the role that media plays in the development of racial or gender identities. In particular, these representations are molding the perceptions of young Black men for themselves and outsiders and they find themselves orienting and responding to these common perceptions (Omi & Winant 1986; Mastro 2009; Mastro & Stern 2003). Additionally, scholars have advocated for the study of media as an integral part of the socio-contextual situations in the development of LGBT identities (Hammack 2005; Gomillion & Guiliano 2011). Bond and colleagues have suggested that given the proclivity of young LGBT

individuals to feel isolated with anti-gay sentiments in their social world, they may turn more quickly to the Internet and other LGBT-specific media to help assist the development of their identities (2008). These increasingly positive representations of LGBT persons have great potential to shape the socio-cultural contexts of the lives of LGBT people. Combining the results of research on LGBT people and on representations of race, it is logical to assume that when searching for role models, young Black gay men may be struggling to find positive depictions of themselves in mainstream media.

Noah's Arc has represented one of only two cable television shows that have focused exclusively on the lives of Black, gay men. Set in Los Angeles, the show has been studied for its impact on television and analyzed for its depictions of these lives. Yep and Elia (2012) assert that while the show might be heralded for increasing visibility of the lives of Black gay Americans, it does little in the way of challenging heteronormative social standards in American culture. Additionally, in their close reading and analysis of the show, they argue that this visibility is not enough, and that the show primarily asserts a new "homonormativity" with "characters [who] emulate their White middle-class counterparts and their material possessions (e.g., homes, cars, clothes, products, etc.) [which] are highly characteristic of the much cherished and sought after American middle-class life with all of its benefits including social capital" (Yep & Elia 2012, 907). Conversely, Stephens (2011) argues that the show's focus on portraying "[Black gay men's] collectivity" rejects a notion of white homonormativity by addressing culturally specific health and social issues. Johnson (2010) contends, along similar lines, that while flawed, Noah's Arc distinctly attempts to address issues that are particular to the lives of Black gay Americans. Yet, while all of these critiques make claims about the relevance and impact of the show, they fail to adequately account for the true amount of information presented across episodes.

Additionally, user-made shows on content sharing sites such as YouTube offer new pathways for representation in the lives of Black gay men. These user-created shows also leverage the ability for users to create online communities based on the narratives displayed in their work (Burgess & Green 2012) Thus, I also look to examine the role that these new forms of representations play in the identity formation and stigma response of young Black gay men.

Community Organizations in LGBT Life

Youth-serving organizations have played constructive roles in assisting LGBT youth and young adults to explore their identities (Boxer 1993). Sociologist Elizabeth Armstrong's research on San Francisco's gay identity organizations in the post-1970s identifies the progression of many organizations from simply political organizations to ones "whose central goal was the elaboration or display of identity" (2002). The role of organizations in developing both *collective and individual identity* has been documented by social researchers focusing on organizational theory, but deserves more exploration. While research has increased on sexual and racial minority youth, there is a dearth of information on the role that organizations play outside of the political realm. Therefore, this project seeks to contribute to the knowledge concerning the micro-interactions within the organizational space that work to create these sexual and racial identities.

Much of the recent literature has focused on these organizations as "support groups" for young gays and lesbians and for those dealing with mental illness or HIV/AIDS (De Vidas 2000; Sandstrom 1996; Hays et al 2003). For many youth and young adults, these community organizations are their first introductions to other LGBT youth and create social support networks for attendees as they negotiate their sexualities and other life challenges (Nesbith, Burton, & Cosgrove 1999). Yet, as these communities have become devastated by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, major federal funding sources have necessitated programming to promote positive sexual health and HIV prevention programs like evidence-based intervention, MPowerment (Hays et al 2003). While

much research uses community-based organizations to understand disease prevalence or to access the population, few studies have focused on the community space itself as a socialization force or examined the unintended effects of these spaces among these minority LGBT young adults.

Gay Families: Intentional Family Networks

While created kinship networks are not solely found among African Americans, their importance has been identified with some studies suggesting that as many as two of three African Americans reporting a created kinship network (Chatters, Taylor & Jayakody 1994). Additionally, research on LGBT communities has identified the creation of *intentional families* as networks of social support among LGBT communities (Oswald 2002; Muraco 2006; Levitt et al. 2014). Lying at the intersection of these two identities are those who are both Black and identifying as LGBT; within this population, these social support networks of created families have taken on two forms: the competition-based House Ballroom community and *gay families*. While the two are not always mutually exclusive, "houses are formed by parents who coach their children to compete in dance and artistic performances at community- held balls (Kubicek, et al. 2013), whereas gay families are focused primarily on their children's personal development and may or may not be involved in performance" (Levitt et al. 2014).

Much of the research on these intentional families among Black LGBT people has focused on the House/Ballroom community; far less is known about other configurations of gay families. Research on the ballroom community has identified these national networks as social support systems made up of Black and Latino LGBT individuals who come together in multiple families to compete in categories centered around gender expression, artistic dancing such as vogue, and runway categories about "realness" (Kubicek et al. 2013; Bailey 2014). Scholars studying these houses have focused on the resiliency characteristics of these groups and their ability to help LGBT people of color cope with the "negative effects of stigma and life stress on risk-taking behaviors"

(Kubicek et al. 2013; Kipke et al. 2013). Bailey's ethnographic account of Detroit's House/Ballroom community highlights the role that these competitive performances play in the lives of its members; he argues that through this performance, subjects are able to find social support, create fictive kinship networks, and gain economic support or sustainability while simultaneously practicing self-representations and co-constructing a "minoritarian community" (2013).

While research on the House/Ballroom community continues to rise, we have much less information about the other form of gay families within these communities. These "personal gay families" (as my informants would say) are created in hopes of intentionally designing networks of support and guidance for young Black gay, bisexual, and transgendered individuals. Scholars studying these families in the US South have identified the importance of these families for LGBT youth and young adults as they combat social stressors (e.g. poverty, racism, heterosexism, etc.) within their everyday lives (Levitt et al. 2014). In a review of the literature about intentional families and created kinship, Oswald asserts that these networks are often fighting for recognition in a world that does not socially or legally value their existence (2002). The limited knowledge we have of these families creates a clear need to better understand the rituals, practices, and social roles of these intentional families within LGBT communities.

The examination of these three domains offer new insights into the socialization experiences, identity formations, and stigma negotiation practices of young Black gay men. Through the in-depth investigations of these areas, I uncover a new form of stigma management response that I call unspoiling. In the next section, I lay out the tenets of unspoiling and detail how the study of unspoiling practices can lead to further development of destigmatization theories.

Unspoiling: A New Stigma Response Strategy

Living at the intersection of multiple stigmatized identities, some young Black gay men engage in unique processes of collective destigmatization that add new options to how stigma is

negotiated among the stigmatized. Here, I address a transitional step in the process of destigmatizing one's identity that goes beyond covering or passing one's identity by instead centering the need for a positive self-concept; a process that I term *unspoiling*. Unspoiling is the process that a stigmatized individual undertakes to learn and to express an un-stigmatized and accepted presentation of self—an unspoiled identity. While coming out often involves the sharing of personal sexuality information with intimates (family, friends, etc.), unspoiling prioritizes the comfort and experience of the individual who is seeking an authentic public identity presentation in both intimate and non-intimate settings. Unspoiling addresses an adjusted presentation of self (Goffman 1959) in three ways: 1) it requires the individual correction of identity to remove a sense of self-stigma, 2) it shifts the onus of stigma from the stigmatized to the stigmatizer and 3) it leads to the creation of a public image that embraces an identity through self-advocacy and group-activism. At these three levels, the emphasis of unspoiling one's identity is to normalize being gay and Black in the public sphere at both the individual and community levels. In many ways, this project elucidates how those who are negotiating stigmas can reject the sense that their identities are sources of perpetual victimhood, and rather can find alternative ways to respond to the imposition of stigma. That is, the process that I outline rejects covering and passing as acceptable strategies to negotiate stigmas associated with being Black and gay.

Young Black gay men who often fear isolation from family and friend networks search for connections to other similarly identified Black gay people as they navigate processes of identity development (Icard 1986; Loicano 2011). Organizations function as a social support network by assisting the young men in this study with understanding and solidifying gay identities through building community with other self-identified gay organizational members. By studying the interactions in the organizational space, we gain insight into the continuous negotiation of these identities as they are re-shaped, challenged, and fortified through collective backstage work

(Goffman 1959; O'Brien 2011). This project highlights responses to external monitoring of racial and sexual identities, while simultaneously displaying the dialectical processes of creating socially-appropriate Black gay identities through stigma management rehearsals (O'Brien 2011) within a community-based organization, through messages of new and contemporary media, and in chosen gay families. While we often know that individuals experience social stigma, we must investigate further the move to actively reject the shame associated with these identities in seeking to project an unspoiled identity and to achieve social destigmatization. As such, this dissertation examines various backstage rehearsals (Goffman 1959) that counter anti-gay and anti-Black stigma, which outlines the intermediary step of *unspoiling* and provides a set of conditions under which these identities have the potential to become destigmatized within the larger society.

A Note on Terminology

Throughout this text, I use the term gay as an all-encompassing term to discuss a community of young men who identify along a spectrum of sexuality from gay to bisexual to pansexual. In so doing, I am not seeking to collapse these categories into just gay, but rather in order to highlight how this population discusses a sense of gay community. Additionally, the young men in this study shy away from using the word queer to describe their identities or politics and as a reflection of that, I stay true to the terms that they use to identify themselves. The term "queer" itself has been the subject of extensive debate with some arguing for its reclamation and others still reeling from the lingering effects of the term as a derogatory slur. As for the men who identified as bisexual, they often would qualify their bisexuality by insisting that it meant they were basically gay or weren't sure if they were simply trying to avoid being stigmatized as gay.

Another decision made in this text is the use of Black as a racial identity marker. While some of the young men in this study use terms such as African-American, Jamaican, or Multiracial or "Half-Black, Half-Asian," I use Black to signify their participation in a Black

community space. For many of these young men, the term Black represents not only their racial identity but also a cultural affiliation with Black culture in Los Angeles. I also actively capitalize "Black" to emphasize its use as both a racial and an ethnic marker.

Finally, I use the term gay family throughout this text to represent the support network of "gay mothers," "gay fathers," and "gay brothers/sisters" with whom the young men create and maintain relationships. Most recently the term gay family has become associated with same-gender partners who have children whether from a previous relationship, adoption, or surrogacy, yet before this became popular usage in LGBTQ scholarship, gay families have been around for gay youth. Unlike other work that has focused on these support networks as only related to African American House Ballroom communities, I examine these families that cut across ballroom houses. Building on scholarship of kinship among Black Americans, I use family to signify the closeness of these relationships and to remain true to how the young men discuss these relations.

Data Collection & Methods

In this dissertation, I draw on multiple data collection methods to give a robust picture of the socialization practices of my research participants. I first began by collecting ethnographic fieldnotes at a Los-Angeles non-profit youth arts and health agency. I spent over 200 hours during three years as a participant observer by attending the organization's weekly young men's leadership circle. In addition, I attended various birthday parties, balls within the African-American house ballroom scene, outreach events, retreats, brunches, and club events. To supplement my fieldnotes of the organization, I also conducted in-depth interviews with 50 self-identified Black gay, bisexual, and pansexual men. These interviews provided basic demographic information of the young men who frequented the organization and covered topics such as the formation of racial, sexual, and gender identities. Taken together, my ethnographic data and interviews acted as an insight into the behaviors and rationalizations of behaviors of many of the men in the space.

As a starting point for the data, the relationships fostered in the organizational space helped to identify two other sites of socialization within the lives of the young men of this study: media and chosen gay families. In order to understand the impact of media representations, I first began with a short survey about the types of Black gay media that the young men had experienced. I then conducted a content analysis of two seasons for two shows, the cable LOGO original television series Noah's Arc (2005-2006) and the ongoing web-based online series Freefall (2013-2014). To supplement information about these shows from my content analysis, I also conducted interviews with the creator of Freefall and the lead actor from Noah's Arc; analyzed online comments for both shows; and, held a focus group for young Black gay men to view the show's pilot episodes.

Finally, to assess one form of relationships formed outside of the organization, I collected interview and ethnographic data on two gay families. These gay families refer to the relationships that are formed by the young men by electing a chosen gay parental figure to guide him through living a publicly gay lifestyle. Additionally, I used two peer ethnographers to collect data on their families when I was not around.

Collectively, my ethnographic data, interviews, focus groups, content analysis and peer ethnography data provide a strong triangulation of information about the young men who lie at the heart of this study. When used together, the data allow me to observe socialization behavior, identity narration, and representations of Black gay lives in order to fully assess stigma negotiation and socialization processes (See Appendix A for a detailed discussion of data collection methods & analysis).

Outline of the Dissertation

The subsequent pages of this dissertation are organized into three sections that focus on the various social institutions that inform the unspoiling and identity socialization processes. Section One covers media representations of Black gay men across two empirical chapters. Chapter One

examines mainstream images of Black gay men with a particular focus on identity socialization messaging of one show, Noah's Arc. In particular, I highlight how the effect of representations can inspire unspoiling of stigmatized identities. In Chapter Two, I look to user-created online new media as a restructuring of our conversation around representation. Here I draw heavily on focus group and online forum comment data to illustrate how the young men decode the intending messaging of the show by focusing on Hall's (2001) circuit of culture.

In the three chapters that comprise Section Two, I examine the role of non-profit organizations in the development of Black gay identities and highlight the space created for instruction of unspoiling to others. Chapter Three builds on the work of Hunter (2010) and considers the racial and sexual identity negotiation of young Black gay men. Specifically, I add a fourth categorization to Hunter's (2010) three-type model of identity negotiation. In Chapter Four, I detail how stigma response strategies are debated and deployed in the organizational space. I argue that the unsuitability of existing strategies such as covering and passing create the conditions under which unspoiling emerges as a form of stigma response. In Chapter Five, I examine the role of religious teachings in the development of Black gay identities. In particular, I highlight how the young men work to repurpose and reinterpret stigmatizing religious messaging to create meaningful life narratives.

The final section, Section Three, turns to the experiences of the young men within their intentional kinship families. Chapter Six, the final empirical chapter, argues that intentional gay families that form among these young men can serve as major socialization agents and transmit strong authoritative messaging about identity formation and stigma negotiation. In particular, I articulate how these families act as a catch-all support network for young men who may be ostracized from biological family, who are looking to find replacement male role models, or looking

to augment bio-family support with catered information about living as Black and gay in Los Angeles.

Finally, in the Conclusion I trace how the process and ultimate effect of unspoiling work to inspire some stigmatized social actors to work towards larger group social destigmatization. In so doing, I call for a deeper dig into the "on the ground" methods of social destigmatization and ask what are the potentialities and limits of these strategies (i.e. covering, passing, flaunting, and unspoiling). Ultimately, I conclude that through unspoiling we are left to consider what a true vision of the destigmatized identity would reveal and charged to examine further the conceivable future of the (de)stigmatized identity.

Section I: Media Representations of Black Gay Men

Depictions of GBMSM in media undoubtedly have effects on the social development of YBGM in many regards, both intentionally and unintentionally. Whether young men find themselves moving across the country to live like Noah and his friends, or simply modeling their hometown lives after the relationships in these shows, their impact cannot be questioned.

Depictions of BGM in mainstream media have been few and far between. While the landscape has changed from year to year, only recently are their major GBM characters written into sitcoms. Many of these depictions play on the common stereotypes of the general public's association with gay men as effeminate and weak. One need only remember the hysteria caused by the "DL" or down low phenomenon of the early 90s which lodged the fear into the heart of black America that any man could potentially be sleeping with another man behind the backs of his unsuspecting female companion (see McCune 2014).

Shows such as the CW's LA Complex highlight these stereotypes in the tense relationship between Tariq, a young Black gay record producer, and his newest client, the DL rapper, Kal. Set in Los Angeles, Kal and Tariq's relationship revealed the issues with living undercover in a secret love affair; while it's often revered in the BGM to have a DL man, the dangers of being found out are taken to new heights on the show when they're discovered together in the studio. In the scene, Kal accuses Tariq alone and lodges uncountable punches to his face. The subsequent back and forth apologies and makeups of their relationship give viewers a sense of ultimate turmoil and doom that comes with these secret downlow unions.

As for depictions of openly out gay Black characters, Lee Daniel's Empire features the Black gay son of a musical empire. Jussie Smollet's character Jamal is an acclaimed singer-songwriter in the show whose storyline the first season deals with how his father, Lucios Lyon (Terrence Howard) receives his sexuality. Throughout the course of the show we see this wealthy, but troubled, Black

family struggle with murder, backstabbing, cheating, and prison terms, all the while by highlighting the relationships of the characters including Jamal's. The show itself has been a major hit garnering millions of viewers every week; news outlets such as CNN have also reported that over 60% of the show's audience is African American which highlights just how far-reaching these storylines can be (Pallotta & Stelter 2015). As a prime time show on a major network, Empire's narratives spread deeply into the homes of viewers and projects identities and stories of the unknown into the lives of its fans.

While Empire has gained much appreciation from the Black community, it also has its critics. Among those who argue against depicting the violence, drugs, and other legal offenses in the show, the character Jamal has also seen much backlash. Countless videos have surfaced by angry Black community members and leaders alike denouncing what some call the force feeding of a Gay agenda down the throats of a Black America. One preacher went so far as to argue that the show depicts the rest of the cast as immoral, deceitful, and corrupt in order to portray the gay Jamal character as the only sane member of the family. Needless to say, representations of Black gay men in media still are not widely accepted or normalized enough to help counter the idea of a gay agenda or the secretive downlow cheater. As much as these shows speak to the larger Black community with these depictions, young Black gay men (and women) are starved for representation. Save for the HERE TV series The DL chronicles and Logo's Noah's Arc, no scripted network or cable television show has focused exclusively on portraying the lives of Black gay men.

The advent of reality television has introduced many new figures to the limelight. Given that over 65% of cable television is reality television (Hunt & Ramón 2015), it may be the newest avenue to diversify representations of marginalized groups. Yet, many of these selections reinforce the stereotypes of the emasculated gay Black man. One need only consider *Big Freedia: Queen of Bounce*, the queen of New Orleans bounce music's show on Fuse; *Fashion Queen*s, hosted by the heel and

make-up wearing Miss Lawrence and Derek J on Bravo; or Oxygen network's show about gay and gender non-conforming dance troupe the *Prancing Elites* to understand the lack of diverse portrayals of Black gay men in mainstream media. While these representations bring "real" depictions of Black gay men from reality television to the American public, there is still a new for diversifying these portrayals as the examples given here all highlight a particular archetype of Black gay men.

One space where new content about the lives of Black gay men (and other marginalized groups) has emerged is online web series. User-led platforms, such as YouTube, Vimeo, and Veoh, among others, have offered anyone with an idea and a camera a platform to showcase the stories they'd like to share. Creators of exclusively Black gay content have crowdfunded and raised money in efforts to distribute various shows set all across the country. Web-based shows such as Drama Queenz, FreeFall, and Steel River to name a few, have populated these online venues and created new depictions of BGM. These web series represent a new way for artists to tell stories that go untold in mainstream media and add to the diversity of content. Furthermore, as some scholars have argued, watching shows with the ability to comment via social media has facilitated the building of communities of viewers (Burgess & Green 2013) who are able to directly connect and "talk back" to writers, actors, and directors as the shows are being filmed. With social media, these communities bring circuits of culture more closely together, tying creators, products, and consumers seamlessly together.

In the following two chapters, I analyze the most popular of cable shows focused on the lives of BGM, Noah's Arc, and one of the popular YouTube series, FreeFall, exclusively about lives of Black gay men. I investigate two seasons of each show as cultural objects and explore the circuit of culture (Hall 1992). Using interviews with creators and actors, focus groups with BGM media consumers, public comments on episodes from BGCLIVE, and qualitative analysis of the seasons, I assess the intent, impact, and content of these programs. As other scholars who have studied the

queer user-created shows and advocated for further insight into the commentaries from audiences (Dhaenens 2012), I assess the impacts of these shows in the lives of BGM and to illustrate the types of identity negotiation messaging transmitted by these shows.

Chapter 1: Noah's Arc: Mainstream Images of Black Gay Men

In order to assess the impact of a cultural object such as a television show, the object must be analyzed from multiple angles from production, the object itself, and its reception from audiences. In this chapter, I have attempted to capture all three of these aspects of the role that Noah's Arc played in the lives of the young men of this study. Previous studies have articulated the importance of examining the cultural norms and "societal values" that are transmitted via the cultural object (Shively 1992). To better understand this relationship, Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding in media is useful here. Hall's work on representation calls to interrogate both the intended message in the piece by its creator, encoding, and to relate this to the significance and interpretations drawn by audience, or decoding.

The theory of media communication that aligns with encoding and decoding is useful here to understand the role that shows such as Noah's Arc and FreeFall (Chapter 2) play in the socialization processes of young Black gay men. As such the meanings that are created around these identities are important because as I will detail below, for many of my respondents they blur the lines between fantasy and reality. We can think about these representations and probe the type of messages that are encoded about this population's daily life to display how these are merely messages and not directly tied per se to behavioral outcomes. For example, as Hall writes, "We know, as Gerber has remarked, that representations of violence on the TV screen 'are not violence but messages about violence': but we have continued to research the question of violence, for example, as if we were unable to understand this epistemological distinction. That is, we can see that the episodes themselves are not reality, but messages about these identities. Thus, Noah, Ricky, Chance, Alex and Wade are not actually people living as Black gay men but rather their representations of men are messages about being in a so-called Black gay life.

Knowing that these representations transmit messages about Black gay lives, I sought to explore questions that would elucidate the intended message and the received message from audience. In particular, I ask what messages about Black gay identities are transmitted by the show? How are Black gay men using the messages about their identities in their everyday lives? Do Black gay men find these messages to be reflective of their lived experiences? And to what extent are the messages shaping the audience? How has the audience shaped the message? These guiding questions are explored in the sections of Chapters 1 and 2. To follow the layout of this circuit, I begin first with information about the creators' and actors' intentions for the show, the messages that are apparent in the material itself, and then turn to online comments and focus group data to highlight audience reception.

Actor Interview

In an undated interview with the Los Angeles-based Black AIDS Institute, creator and director Patrik Ian Polk comes to discuss the muse for his successful Logo TV series, Noah's Arc. In this interview, Polk discusses how a summit of Black gay men convened by the institute to discuss AIDS around 2002 "helped spark the birth of Noah's Arc" as an artist's way to speak to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. On the impact of this convening, Polk comments that "Out of that retreat, I left with the idea that there were Black gay men that were thriving and successful." In many ways, the goal then of Noah's Arc served to deliver this same message to viewers around the world—that even in the face of stigma, trials, and discrimination, Black gay men can not only survive, but thrive.

The importance of the show itself cannot be understated. In a media world that was dominated by depictions of white gay men and lesbians, Noah's Arc emerged as the only show that focused singularly on the relationships, social interactions, and life experiences of Black, gay men (Yep & Elia 2012; Eguchi, Calafell, & Files-Thompson 2014). The importance of this representation on a cable show at this time cannot be understated. Coming off of the heels of a period in the US

television market of overrepresentation of Blacks on TV (Hunt 2004), some Black people were not a part of this imaging of Blackness. That is, Black queer identities were marginalized further during this time which exacerbated the dearth of role models for young Black men who were seeking images that included their sexualities.

Looking Behind the Scenes: Encoding Role Models, Friends, and Family

Drawing on Hall's theory of encoding messages in television productions, I examine the intentions of the creators of these images and the representations they sought to leave with their audiences. In order to identify these aims, I spent time with the actor, Darryl Stephens, who portrayed the titular character, Noah, from Noah's Arc. We engaged in a discussion about the goals of the scenes and the lasting impressions that the show had on him as a Black gay man, but also how the role itself represented a challenge for a Black gay actor in a landscape without said representations.

We began our discussion about his goals and aspirations when beginning to take on the role and any barriers to his becoming Noah; Darryl confided that he was met with resistance from his agent about taking on another "gay role." He recalled hearing, *"We don't want you to take it, you just did this movie and you were gay and it's just too much gay shit."* This interaction lead to a strong response from the actor who shared further that "*they were trying to get me on a soap opera. So, I parted ways with the agency actually based on that conversation, like, 'You don't get it.'*" Stephens's desire to pursue this role even in the face of critical advice against assuming the role mirrors the moves against stigma made throughout this work. His decision to part ways with the agency and simply saying "You don't get *it*" emphasizes the ways that some men are able to resist negative impacts of taking on stigmas to their identities by making it a problem of the stigmatizer. In this case, Stephens's agent aims to dissuade him from the role by emphasizing the stigmatizing potential of continually taking on gay acting roles, to which Stephens decides to break ties with this agency and put this problem on their lack of

understanding. The *it* in question might be considered to be the importance of taking on these roles, the need for representation, or even the plight of Black gay men. Ultimately, his act of resisting the influence of his agent was an act of *unspoiling* by rejecting the suggestion of stigma that might be associated with his taking on the role and making this a problem of the agent.

Our conversation continued when I asked Stephens about the scenes that he felt were most memorable for him to portray on screen. Immediately, he offered a scene from the first episode that he believes played into the fantasy element of the show:

> **DS: The scene in the closet after the first episode, which is ridiculous. That a man has sex and crawls into the closet of the man he had sex with, in his apartment, to call his friends to talk about it. Crazy, right?! There's something very sweet and naive about the way that that played...that really sort of in my mind set the tone for the entire show like it. Yes, these are heightened circumstances and nothing would necessarily play out like this in real life but if you can get on board with that moment in the closet I do think that you can follow what's through the rest of it. Like it might work for you.**

While Stephens comments that this scene in particular may be seen as "ridiculous" and that in real life nothing like this would actually occur, he simultaneously believes that buying into this initial fantasy is what hooks audience members into the show. He suggests that you have to suspend the reality that this is fantasy and come to "get on board" with this moment as a true possibility. He also comments on a scene that is the first time that outside forces come to bear on the Black gay identity in the show. Part of what makes the show have the fantasy element may have been that the major issues of family, societal oppression, and self-hate are either totally absent or easily thwarted. Yet, in the second season, the series introduces the effects of the outside world:

> **DS: The scene when he gets gay bashed is pretty heavy; We could be dealing a lot with relationships and really living inside of a gay Black bubble. Didn't really have many interactions with family asking about how our, the characters, families were responding to our lifestyles or any of that. We were really strong Black gay men that lived their lives fiercely…then the outside perspective came in and it was jarring. Because none of that really mattered.**

These comments on the subject matter of the show highlight a few elements that continue to blur the distinctions between fantasy portrayal and reality of Black gay men. The show decidedly took a more distanced approach to the influence of stigmatizing views of the outside world. Notably for Stephens, the show doesn't address their biological families or even show relationships of the characters engaged with or speaking to biological family. Instead, the only mention of family occurs in the episode that addresses Chance's desire to get married in the church his family attended, but his family is nowhere to be seen in this episode as they have relocated in retirement. This removal from sight of biological family creates the pathway for the creation of strong support among the characters; they become the family they need for each other. Given the data and information about homelessness among LGBTQ populations and the oft-repeated fear of those considering coming out to family, the depiction of a chosen family rather than biological one highlighted the possibilities of well-adjustment and success regardless of family's response to the sexuality of these men. Additionally, Stephens's slip between "our" and "the characters" highlight the realism of the show and how much of the show represented a realistic realm for its depicters as it did viewers. He commented further on this stating: *"I think a third season would have involved families and there was even talks of Neicey Nash playing one of my relatives which is why in the 2nd season I would say "woo-woo-woo" which is Niecey Nash...I was literally thinking I'm going to PULL her in, manifest Neicey as my sister. Because I think that that's a really important part of the Black gay experience: how our families react; I think the final episode in season 1 was the Black church there's another thing."* Thereby solidifying that the major issues faced by Black gay men were glossed over in the series, instead to limit the issues to universal issues of love and relationship (especially in season 1 of the series).

Stephens comments on the jarring nature of the episode in season 2 where Noah is gay bashed, thus calling to attention the importance of this scene for shattering what had up to this point only been a show that dealt with relationships, love, and the daily round. Introducing the

outside influence of the view of others in affect splinters this fantasy life, but simultaneously reinforces the sense of realism in the show by engaging with topics that viewers might be facing. In essence, staving off the outside world for much of the series allowed the identities and intimate relationships of these fictional Black gay men to shine through as the primary force behind the show's messaging about the reality of Black gay lives. That is, this allowed for these identities to be displayed as *unspoiled* in that the characters' everyday lives were unencumbered by the stigmas held by others, and rather they prioritized their own comfort with themselves.

As the discussion of the show's impact continued, I asked Stephens to reflect on what he felt the impact of the show was for others as he had experienced it through fan encounters and feedback. His comments highlighted the importance of representation for other Black gay men:

> **DS: It's hard to qualify that as someone on the inside but from what I hear and what I understand it was a glimpse into the lives of people who were never shown on television before. A group of Black gay friends, you just hadn't seen that before and for those people in the communities that we represented, the Black community, the gay community and where they overlap...I think it was important because representation is extremely needed and extremely important for our self-esteem and for our understanding of how we fit into culture and just that level of affirmation that you don't get.**

This reflection on the significance of representation brings to the surface the questions of cultural fit and how the actor views his role in the socialization of others. He notes that the show brings together two communities that are often thought to exist separate from one another and the ways that being on the margins within both communities meant that this representation addressed the intersectional nature of Black gay life. Furthermore, he notes that this is not just about depictions of singular Black gay men, but rather an acknowledgement of the *group* of friends and affirming how these friends fit into cultural groups where they may feel ostracized. He continued on to say that initially he hadn't truly grasped what it meant to provide this representation until viewers noted the

emotional responses to the series. He commented on the tensions between working as an actor and reconciling this "work" with the impact that it left on its audience:

> **DS: …Going into it, it was really kind of a gig. It was like "okay we're playing characters" and then it became "oh...yeah…" The first couple times I heard from people who would get emotional about it, it was really overwhelming for me because I hadn't grasped how important it was to see. Had I been 10 years younger and seen that show at that age with other actors I'm sure it would have had an incredible impact on me as well but because I was in it I'm just thinking we're doing this...You fucked up that line whatever...that's what I'm seeing. I'm seeing those things and people are like "Oh My God, finally something that looks like me and my friends" or my son, who I'm not talking to or my uncle that the family's weird about...That sort of response was really emotional and incredible because actors don't get the opportunity to affect lives in that way very often.**

Only in retrospect does the actor note how important the show was for those who were consuming this messaging. He believes that his ability to impact the lives of this audience is different from what actors are typically able to do with their work. By envisioning what he imaged seeing the show would have been like for the younger viewer, he takes us to consider the impact of representation on the socialization of emerging adults and adolescents. To hear responses from audience members that remark "finally something that looks like me and my friends" shows how this show was awaited for by those seeking representation.

A Lasting Impression

Part of understanding the impact of Noah's Arc on its audience is understanding the hopes of its creators and how they envisioned the representations of Black gay life to linger with others. The final question asked of Darryl Stephens allowed for a deeper exploration of the goals of the reach of the program and invited him to consider what he hoped young people who watched the show might take away from it:

> **TW:** *One thing you would hope people would learn from the show, what would you tell some young Black gay boy who was watching the show—what would you hope they take away from it?*
> **DS: What was really important to me which I didn't realize when I was trying to figure out the character but as the character become more clear...was that we were representing for the so-called "sissies" and we had 6 feet under with the Black**

> **boyfriend who was the cop and you'd never clock him from miles away...and the homothug things were big and everybody was fitted caps and tank tops and the baggy jeans...it was okay where are the kids who don't fit into those archetypes going to find themselves reflected in the media. How are they going to know that it's okay to be that? It was really powerful to me when Chocolate spoke to me like "Oh I can be myself because of this"...Hearing young people feel empowered and emboldened to be their authentic selves because of the characters that we were depicting was probably makes that show one of the most important things in my life because I do think the message I'd like to impart, that I hope the show imparted was that you should have no shame and be exactly who you are. And that the so-called gay community that you will find with be racist and ignore you to a large extent, and the Black community which will be homophobic or ignore or persecute you to some extent--you can exist in the middle of that and still be your fabulous self. You don't need to take on their racism or their homophobia, you can find a circle of friends and a family that you create that will empower you to navigate through this world without shame. That's what I would hope people would get from that show.**

As seen in his response, Darryl commented heavily on the ways that Noah served to represent the more effeminate side of Black gay men in an effort to empower those who were seeking representations of themselves in media. Yet, he also argues that the show gives exposure to a variety of depictions of Black gay men. The show was intended then to operate as a vehicle of *unspoiling* by projecting the positivity into the stigmatized lives of the other. That is, in many ways, the show served to make ordinary the extraordinary conditions of these Black gay men who had overcome the racism and homophobia of the stigmatizer. Stephen's final quote here is emblematic of the core of this project: "you can find a circle of friends and a family that you create that will empower you to navigate through this world *without* shame." In this sense, the show brought to life the possibility of a lives that have successfully spurned a negative perception of the Black gay man in America. Additionally, his comments highlight the potentiality of being socialized into a Black gay life in a way that is empowering, destigmatized, and supportive. This desire to leave audience members with this belief contributes to the ways that the show itself bends the notion that this is fantasy towards an arc of reality in its messaging by hoping that those who watch the show actively work to create similar social support communities and social dynamics.

Representing Black, Gay Men

Logo's Noah's Arc follows the lives of four Black gay friends living and loving in Los Angeles, California. With many scenes set in the famous gayborhood of West Hollywood, the show centers on the life of the titular character Noah, played by Darryl Stephens, as he meets and begins a relationship with a "straight" screenwriter, Wade. Noah's character is consistently surrounded by his supportive group of three friends: the college professor Chance, small business owner Ricky, and the HIV prevention counselor Alex. Following this circle of friends as they negotiate dating and relationships, sex, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and life in Los Angeles as Black gay men, Noah's Arc was the first scripted series of the budding MTV owned network LOGO.

Across two seasons, writer-creator Patrick Ian Polk takes us to the tensions surrounding the out and fashion forward Noah's budding relationship with a presumably straight, conventionally masculine Wade. Through the trajectory of their relationship drama, we come to learn of Wade's struggle to identify his sexuality and Noah's desire to be with him. As viewers are introduced to the highs and lows of the budding romance between Noah and Wade, we also witness the relationships between his friends and their partners/families: Chance, the professor, who is dating the businessman Eddie and raising Eddie's daughter from a prior relationship; Alex and his relationship with the noticeably built medical provider and firefighter; and Ricky, the entrepreneur with multiple partners who struggles with committed relationships.

The Season 1 opening was broken up into two parts entitled My One Temptation Part I and Part II. We are immediately thrust into the first scene showing the four friends, Noah, Chance, Ricky, and Alex skating along the beach in sunny Venice, California. As the friends work to stabilize one another, Ricky shoots flirty glances to passersby and gathers phone numbers and we like Noah bump into Wade on the path. Wade is engaging in conversation with Noah who introduces him to his friends. Noticeably swooning and almost childlike in their giggling in his presumably masculine presence, Alex, Chance, and Ricky all seem to be taken with Wade immediately. This is apparent

from the repeated refrain "I'm married" from both Chance and Alex to Wade, but clearly said aloud more for their own benefits. As Wade leaves, he sets up a time to meet with Noah in their "usual spot." Once Wade is presumably out of earshot, the three friends turn to Noah with a chorus-like refrain of "usual spot?" waiting for Noah to explain more. Noah details that they write together and that Wade who can be seen talking to a woman in the background is straight. Thus, begins the viewer's interest in the evolving relationship between Noah and friends and between Noah and Wade.

The other evolving storylines in these first two episodes highlight the variety of men to be seen on the show by delving into the relationships of the friends Chance, Alex, and Ricky. We are introduced first to Chance's latest relationship development when the boys reconvene in the next scene to help me to move in with his partner Eddie and his daughter Kenya. The guys all ask about the swiftness that they are moving in together and juxtapose this with Ricky's inability to settle down. Alex, we learn, is the most stably monogamous of the group. Ricky begins to discuss his hang-ups with monogamy and being a "family man" in contrast to Chance's moving in, he says "I always thought being gay, we got to avoid all that bull." He argues that he finds monogamy dull against the view of his friend majority. Alex counters that his relationship with Trey has been monogamous for almost 7 years and it's still "hot as ever." Ricky replies that it's fine because Alex and Trey dated for almost two years before cohabitating, but that Chance's relationship is too new to move in after just 6 months.

This scene highlights the ways that the friend group discuss their life choices and the ins and outs of being in relationship. We are brought to question the relationship between gay sexualities and monogamy in so far as Ricky sees his sexuality as a site of liberation from the confines of monogamy, whereas his friends see monogamy as a legitimate and desirable social decision. In addition, the friends project messages to its audience about the appropriateness of cohabitation for

gay couples. While the earlier scene comments on Chance and Alex being married, the show's timeline is set in the early 2000s well before the legal judgement ruling same-sex marriage legal in California and its subsequent overturn in the infamous Proposition 8 voter referendum of 2008. As such, we can assume that marriage here is used to connote a committed relationship with the intention of it being long-term, even without the legal rights that come with marriage. Yet, we can see that the lack of marriage legal rights makes the question of cohabitation a tricky one in the discussion of relationships between the men onscreen. It asks the question of viewers in similar relationships the question: "When do I move in with my partner?"

Other questions about relationships are raised in these beginning episodes through the interactions between Alex and his partner Trey. It is made known that they are in a committed relationship, but during a scene when the guys are together with Chance, Ricky is working on fixing Trey's computer for Alex where he learns that Trey has been using an online gay dating website called "HotMaleBooty.com." The site designed presumably to resemble the popular site Adam4Adam, is full of profiles of various men across the country who are looking to engage in assumedly sexual behaviors with other men from the site. We learn that Trey has been using this website under the username, Big Poppa. The men crowd around the screen to see what Trey has posted on the site and it reveals pictures of his body that obscure his full face and a profile that reads: "Already in a relationship. Looking for Cybersex only. Must be discreet." The ensuing discussion raises questions for the audience around the boundaries of relationship. What counts as cheating in a monogamous union? Does seven years of monogamy mean "dull" as Ricky would have us believe? How will Alex handle this situation with his partner and what will this mean for this example of long-lasting same sex Black love?

The show progresses as we follow the lives of Wade and his friends across the remaining 7 episodes of the season. In the next episode following the series opener, Wade begins to struggle with

the closeness of Noah and his friend-group, beginning to question the relationship of best friends, Noah and Ricky. In an effort to have Wade learn more about his close friends, Noah has Wade attend their brunch—which Alex lets him know that is usually "no husbands". Tensions rise when Ricky playfully grabs Noah's head and jokes about nipples resulting in Wade storming off and Noah running to his side. When Noah tries to assuage Wade's fears about Ricky with "Been there; done that" it backfires by making Wade question if there still remains a romantic connection between the friends. In this episode, we also learn of the ways that Alex and Trey have come to resolve this question of infidelity and online sexual behavior. The couple appears to agree that cybersex doesn't truly count as "sex" outside of their relationship and begin their own online adventures together which reinvigorates their sexual relationship; yet, we also learn that Alex has started to become tired of the many sex toys and props that Trey works to introduce to the relationship. As we see the many scenes of Trey bringing home new toys, we can hear Alex discussing with his friends (Noah, Ricky, and Chance) that he just wants to put some "normalcy back in [his] sex life." Ricky counters that he doesn't believe that sex and normalcy should ever be in the same sentence. As for the relationship between Chance and his partner Eddie, Chance finally decides to relinquish his old apartment that he has been secretly visiting for personal time away from his new shared home. In the scene that follows, however, Chance attempts to drop off food for Eddie at the office and happens across his desk where he receives an instant message from a faceless online profile named DL Thug Lover; it reads, "1213 Vernon Street. See you at 7!" From this point, we can discern that there is a question of infidelity at hand and Chance's surprise and suspicion are apparent on screen as well. Immediately finding this scene, we are transported back to Noah's apartment where they have come together, again, to discuss the situation at hand. Ultimately, the guys end up going together to find Eddie and when he's spotted through the window of a house with a young man, Chance very nonchalantly drives his mini-van through the façade of the home.

The next episode in the series flips the script, so to speak, where Noah goes to meet Wade and his straight friends. The episode seeks to explore how Noah negotiates being more feminine in his gender expression and Wade's fear that his friends won't accept his new relationship and sexuality. Working to maintain an appearance of heterosexuality, Wade calls Noah his "boy" and makes him "butch it up" to meet his friends.

Online Comments

The 10-year anniversary showing of Noah's Arc provided a timely source of data to assess the impact of the show on the lives of LGBT people, particularly Black men. In airing this marathon, online users were able to use social platforms that frankly didn't exist when Noah's Arc originally aired. While Noah's Arc began airing in late 2005 through 2006, platforms such as Twitter were just being released in early 2006. Furthermore, the airing network did not have an account itself until 2008 and the show's creator joined much later in 2009. With this knowledge, the common practice of "live-tweeting" shows and events was unheard of at the time of the show's original showing. In stark contrast to the web-series of today that I turn to in the next chapter, Noah's Arc didn't appear to have the same level of social media influences from its audience because there existed no viable way to contact creators, networks, and writers directly through these mediums.

In looking and examining the "live-tweets" of Twitter users during this marathon session, I am able to ascertain the types of responses and conversations that pertain to the shows as they aired. While this is undoubtedly not indicative of the first air-date impressions, the comments that the young men share are retrospectively nostalgic. Their comments underlie the importance that media can have in the socialization of Black gay lives and highlight the staying power of the stories and representations of Black gay lives that have shaped a generation of Black gay men over the last decade. As Twitter user _ReignNYC tweeted, "**Social media wasn't alive when #NoahsArc was born. Now you get to see how many fans you have and how many lives you've impacted!"** It

is true indeed that with the comments and interactions shared between viewers during the anniversary we can glean the show's impact.

Representation: Seeing Yourself On Screen

One major theme that emerged from these comments is how important it was for viewers to see themselves in the content—namely, representation. As the only cable television show exclusively focused on the lives of Black gay men, Noah's Arc was a space where young Black gay youth were able to see themselves reflected in television. For many, this was the first time they felt validated in their lived experiences as Black and gay. Take comments from user DamoneWilliams to the show's creator PatrikIanPolk: **"I remember SNEAKING to watch #NoahsArc. (sigh) @PatrikIanPolk gave me a mirror, that my religiously indoctrinated ass never had."** From this comment, we can quickly glean the importance of the show for giving a representative mirror for this viewer, especially in the face of religious stigma. Much like the other young men in this study, religious stigma proved a major barrier for self-actualization in the case of this viewer, and that actualization was aided through the relief of the television show itself. Other users echoed these sentiments in their appreciation for seeing their, presumably, Black gay lives on screen:

> JosephG14: @PatrikIanPolk #NoahsArc truly changed my life and gave me the opportunity to see myself #10years #StillSnatchingMyEdges 10/19/2015 8:28:49 PM
>
> JosephG14: Just to think... I was 13 on my couch watching other people like me on television #NoahsArc 10/20/2015 2:07:53 AM
>
> MamboNoir: #NoahsArc was the first time I saw gay black men on tv. Didn't realize it at the time but it was important I saw myself represented on tv. 10/20/2015 4:12:31 AM
>
> Phreak_Quency: 10 Years Later & I still watch @darrylstephens as Noah & see my life. My A.R.C. has changed, but my plight in love still the same #NoahsArc 10/20/2015 10:47:12 AM

These comments collectively give a sense of the importance of representation for this viewership. In

particular, one user notes that he didn't know at the time that this type of representation would have greater significance in his life, but this re-airing of the material afforded him this retrospective. Why might this kind of representation be important? Some users point to an answer to that question in their tweets about the show's role in their personal socialization into a Black gay life and its possibilities:

> J_thejuiceman: #NoahsArc was the show that helped me realize just how much I craved affirming black queer identified friends/safe spaces. 10/20/2015 4:16:42 AM
>
> MisterBurge: #NoahsArc showed me that black gay love was REAL & POSSIBLE for me. ✌ ✌ Seeing "Me" on TV was everything. https://t.co/BVvAqWOxZN 10/20/2015 4:42:18 AM
>
> _justobrian: I remember the first time I saw #NoahsArc ! Oh. My. God. Talking about humanity affirmed! I love you @PatrikIanPolk ! <3 10/20/2015 4:55:14 AM
>
> _KiingJr_: #NoahsArc is such a big part of mine and so many other gay men's reasoning for understand who we are... Thank you. @darrylstephens 10/20/2015 5:28:23 AM

For these commenters, Noah's Arc provided them with affirmation of their identities as Black gay men. In particular, they note how this was the first time they recognized their own need for gay "safe spaces" and similarly identified friendships; they saw images that confirmed that their love could be "real and possible"; and it provided them with a sense of their individual humanity. The point that one's humanity is affirmed is a critical point to recognize even the existence that in some way their combined sexuality and race could call into question their humanity to begin with. We must contend with the ways that shows like this act as a beacon of unspoiling for those young men who question whether or not they can even call claims to humanity. With these deep appreciations for the show, there is no question that the show had a lasting impact and influence on the understanding of self, as the last commenter notes. In many ways, this begs the question how much of the show was simply a reflection of the lives lived by these young men or how much they

mirrored their lives after the show. I suspect that the show's being rooted in the experiences of its Black gay male creator and its resonance with a like-identified population underscores a common cultural experience as it pertains to this intersectional identity.

Fundamentally, the question of representation is one that is critical to understanding the ways that Black gay men experience their interactions with other social actors in everyday encounters. That is, representations are the ways that gay characters and specifically in this case Black gay characters come alive in the minds of viewers. As important as the representation is for those who identify similarly, as too is important the ways that outsiders come to view those who hold these identifiers dear. This *mental representation* (Hall 1997 p.18) serves to create the schema under which all further interactions with people who embody this presence are governed. That is, as actual Black gay men come to interact with those who hold these representations, whether in challenging or confirmatory ways, these representations often can set the landscape for the actions that should be anticipated by the stigmatized.

In several ways, this takes us to question who has the power to decide the representation of a particular group. As noted before, the history of the show as a production of Logo TV is one that is tied in the struggle between self-representation and those who are in power to control the imaging of said group. In other words, what makes Logo TV the home for Noah's Arc rather than the BET Network? Those who are in power and controlling images have the authority to greenlight productions of series that often fit into the language of representation that come to reinforce what image they'd like to project of the culture. There is no coincidence that the majority of the white-owned Logo network displays predominately white programming that executives believe their audience *wants* to see. Given this desire to meet the demand of particular imaging it shows that many of these shows are targeted for what they show regardless of their "authenticity" and that those at the top of the structure ultimately have the final say in what will be aired for all to see.

Another theme that emerged from the discussion of the show was that the show provided not just representation, but actual redemption for some of its viewers. Comments about the show's life changing role highlights the show's ability to project particular qualities such as courage, hope, inspiration, and pride. b

Giving Courage and Saving Lives

Many of the Twitter users also shared their thoughts on the ways that the show helped them to negotiate the stigmatized views that they had of their own identities. Much like the selection above, these young men echo the sentiments that the show saved their lives and allowed them to see their own humanity.

> Deja_Speaks: I have as many firsts from #NoahsArc as I do from my own life. @PatrikIanPolk @darrylstephens gave me hope, a voice...saved my life. 10/20/2015 3:32:40 AM
>
> Deja_Speaks: From the corny and absurd to the racy and soulful. I loved those men and began to love myself. #NoahsArc 10/20/2015 3:37:40 AM
>
> HEYKAYBEE3: #NoahsArc inspired to tell my own stories of my own people in SA. Still waiting for the courage to try. #NoahsArc 10/20/2015 5:16:17 AM

In the comments above, the tweeters share the role that the show played in allowing them to exercise self-love. In many regards this represents the powerful role that these sorts of representations can play in the unspoiling process by giving Black gay men a way to begin the corrective work of seeing their racial and sexual identities in a positive light. Tweets by user Deja_Speaks highlights how Noah's Arc for many was a "first" in its ability to expose viewers to scenarios and encounters that may come to pass in the lives of YBGM. Furthermore, the process of seeing love in the representations of these men on television gave "voice" to similarly identified people who then allowed them to begin the process of self-love, the first stage in a corrective unspoiling of identities. The show's reach here is underscored by HEYKAYBEE3's comments about telling stories of those living in South Africa. The show's mere existence beyond the content

seems to reinforce the importance of representation for these users.

Twitter users also commented on the significance of the show as a force to encourage their ability to come out to others. Users attribute this courage to the show and its creator for its life-changing role:

> onyxcox: 10 years ago I watched a show that made me come out as a proud black gay man #NoahsArc. Thank you @PatrikIanPolk You changed my life 10/20/2015 2:59:32 AM
>
> MisterBurge: #NoahsArc is literally 85% responsible for giving me the courage to come out. 10/20/2015 4:37:57 AM
>
> knockturnalpro: Watching the 10th anniversary of #NoahsArc is pretty much celebrating 10years of my coming out lol thank you @PatrikIanPolk ! 10/20/2015 5:06:06 AM

As seen in comments by onyxcox, MisterBurge, and knockturnalpro re-watching Noah's Arc during this reunion allowed these viewers to celebrate their coming out processes. Notably, these three users mention the courage and pride that it took for them to share their identity with others. In many ways, we might consider this as the effect of unspoiling. That is, through the positive depictions of Black gay lives, these young men learned that this combination of identities was something to be prideful of rather than self-admonishing. The repeated expression of gratitude to creator Patrik Ian Polk directly show how his role is the teacher of the unspoiling strategy. Polk was effectively able to send his own message of positive Black gay identities using television as a medium to Black gay men across the globe who were searching for ways to affirm their existence. In addition to this affirming, the show gave its watchers examples of romance and love between two Black men.

Role Models: The Need for Living Examples

Users often mentioned the importance of the show in depicting the possibilities of Black gay relationships. As one of the first show of its kind that depicted the inner-workings of fictional Black gay relationships, it exposed a generation of Black gay men to a very specific understanding of their

sexuality potential:

> jay_tweets5: Still my first example of black gay love #NoahsArc 10/20/2015 4:06:01 AM
> DamoneWilliams_: The first time Noah and Wade have sex — my god. At 15, I didn't know what to do with myself. #NoahsArc #Noah10. 10/20/2015 4:55:31 AM
>
> DamoneWilliams_: Had no idea two Black men could love on each other that way. Beautiful. #NoahsArc #Noah10. 10/20/2015 4:55:47 AM

Users jay_tweets5 & DamoneWilliams_ display the role of the show as a depiction of the prospects of Black gay relationships and inspire them to internalize this message. We might consider here that the goal of these representations were for others to see the normalcy of Black gay relationships. For certainly, heterosexual couples go through the similar patterns and questions that are depicted across the relationships of the main characters. Yet, for those who identified as young Black and gay, the show represented something beyond even their imaginations which we might conceive of as limited by the representations that they had seen up until this point. These depictions of relationships resonated with viewers and some even mentioned their quest to recreate similar relationships to those on screen:

> 1986ZanderB: I remembered being a teenager 10yrs ago when #NoahsArc premiered! And always wanted to find a love like Noah & Wade. Thanks @PatrikIanPolk 10/20/2015 5:09:59 AM
> destiny6181: Finished watching Noah's arc. I have to say, it is a fantastic series. I gotta find my own Wade in life This show taught me a lot #NoahsArc 10/20/2015 2:32:13 PM
>
> justcallmeotis: I would totally go sneaking up like Alex did! #NoahsArc #Noah10 10/20/2015 7:07:33 AM
>
> J_thejuiceman: #NoahsArc also helped me think about what I wanted out of love.... Life helped shape what that show cultivated for me
>
> sexyvirgojutsu: Still to this day, my best friend yells at me to stop giving away my "boogina" @PatrikIanPolk #NoahsArc 10/20/2015 9:41:02 AM

The preceding tweets emphasize what viewers have learned and what they sought to aspire to

emulate in their own lives based on what they saw in the series. The first two comments above detail how the users sought to find a relationship like the one between Noah and Wade. From this we might consider what it means to find a relationship partner like Wade who struggles with his sexuality for much of the series seems to echo a fascination with masculine representing men or the allure of snagging a "straight" partner. Other comments display the viewers seeing themselves in the behaviors of the characters. For example, justcallmeotis notes that much like Alex who creeps up on the apartment of his boyfriend Trey's friend due to suspicions of cheating that he might do the same. As seen in the passages above and in the section prior about representations of love, J_thejuiceman's comments represent the way that media can inform a life process. That is, Noah's Arc gave lessons about what Black love and relationships could be and that his life helped him to refine those lessons to fit his own trajectory. Most significantly, he declares the show as the impetus for this realization which codifies the shows impact as foundational to making sense of his desires.

Want it Back!/Starved for Representation

As I have outlined in the prior sections, Noah's Arc undoubtedly left an indelible mark on the lives of these online commenters. Given the show's short lived existence on the LOGO network, many of these commenters are looking for completion to a show that they clearly became enamored and invested in the lifelines of the characters. As this show is the only of its kind to be on cable television, many of the viewers during this special marathon sought to argue for it to be returned to the air:

> angelofglory22: @PatrikIanPolk @LogoTV The world wasn't ready 10 years ago but we are ready now. I vote we bring back Noah's Arc #NoahsArc #LOGO 10/21/2015 5:02:49 AM
>
> DamoneWilliams_: There are so many questions, man. We deserve some closure. A movie, set back in L.A., where the guys tie up loose ends. #NoahsArc #Noah10. 10/20/2015 10:29:48 PM
>
> Ludarrius: Now @logotv since we are celebrating #noahsarctenthanniversiary can

> we PLZ get a reunion movie or tv show of #NoahsArc @darrylstephens 10/20/2015 5:26:34 AM
>
> The_Remmington: @darrylstephens we need a #NoahsArc prime time season and a sequel to the movie! The time is now! 10/20/2015 4:00:15 AM
>
> NYHotShotta: Speaking of that can we get a 3rd season of #NoahsArc or another show off its caliber? https://t.co/SnwEkbB1rm 10/20/2015 3:32:45 AM
>
> CalebRoyal82: @PatrikIanPolk Please bring back #NoahsArc, I can't take another queer show without Black people. For the love of God!!! 10/11/2015 1:43:33 AM

Comments here detail the way the show has so many unanswered questions for its viewers. Knowing this was the case for the show, creator Patrik Ian Polk offered the 2008 film *Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom* two years after the cancellation of the original series. Yet as the young men note, there are still lingering loose ends for these stories. As angelofglory22 notes, the public attitude towards homosexuality changed drastically between 2005 and 2015. In 2011, NORC at the University of Chicago published a comprehensive report of shifting attitudes toward homosexuality which chronicle a steady decline in those who considered homosexuality "always wrong" between 1991 to 2010 (Smith 2011). Additionally, the airing of this 10-year marathon comes directly on the heels of the June 2015 United States Supreme Court ruling that made same-sex marriage legal across the country. The echoed sentiment of brining the show back to the air because the world is "ready now" was echoed by many of these viewers.

CalebRoyal82's comments highlight the significance of understanding the intersectional nature of the show and its audience. While acknowledging that queer shows may exist, there is a dearth of representation of Black "queer" people on screen. This cry for more shows that depict Black gay lives is echoed by other commenters, as well:

> MRTYREL2U: Many took #NoahsArc for granted back then, now 10 years later and we still don't see many gay men of color on the screen #Noah10 10/20/2015 7:01:42 AM
>
> Skylar_Writer: #NoahsArc was a show for #LGBTQ members, allies and friends of

> all ethnicities. @LogoTV shouldn't have canceled it. #NoahsArc @PatrikIanPolk 10/20/2015 5:25:49 AM
>
> BrazenBlueZ: I remain surprised that there have been no other shows about #QPOC #QTPOC in the 10 years since #NoahsArc debuted. #Noah10 10/20/2015 4:54:17 AM
>
> justcallmeotis: I wonder how many queer black artists have written their own version of Noah's Arc out of lack of representation? #NoahsArc #Noah10 10/20/2015 4:23:52 AM

From these comments, it is clear that this show unlike many others represented the struggles of gay people of color in ways that have not yet been done again. The sentiments shared here display a clear desire for more representation of Black gay lives on screen and beg the question of why these stories have ceased to be told in similar ways since this groundbreaking show.

Through the examination of these comments, I have shown the impact of this show on the lives on its online viewers. The Young Black gay men in this study echo many of the sentiments and nostalgia shared here by the online community. In order to capture the way that the young men in Los Angeles process this show, I turn to data from a focus group with 13 Black gay men during a leadership retreat. The data that follow highlight how important the show was for shaping the life trajectories, friendships, and relationship aspirations for these Black gay men.

Screening Noah's Arc: Lovers, Friendships, and Possibilities

Among the young men in this study, a small group gathered together for a weekend retreat where I was able to screen the pilot episode of Noah's Arc. Following this screening, the young men engaged in a conversation about the episode and more generally about the significance of the show for their lives. Almost immediately after the end of the episode, one respondent, Leon, shared his positive sentiments of the show:

> **Leon: I loved Noah's Arc. It's actually one of the reasons I moved to LA. I really love the way they portray Black, men in spite of the terrible acting or writing. The thought of like you know a group of Black gay friends who you know get you and are there**

for you and support you. You know and unapologetically crazy with your fashion like I thought all of those things were just beautiful and Black love and all of that. So, it's actually one of the reasons I moved here.

It is evident from Leon's comments that the show had a strong impact on his life trajectory and the importance of the representations of Black gay identities shaped his own behaviors. Notably, he repeats that this show is "one of the reasons" that he moved to Los Angeles. From his words, we also can tell that the show gave him an opportunity to envision what a group of friends who become a support network could be like in Los Angeles. Much like Leon, others in the group began to discuss how they enjoyed the show and that it opened their eyes to new possibilities of Black gay identities. Take Dennis, for example, who states that he came to view Noah's Arc later in his life, but still remembers the show fondly:

Dennis: It's a little nostalgic for me like I didn't watch this until I was in college it was like sophomore year and my boyfriend at the time was Filipino-American and he actually found it and then showed it to me, because I wasn't really exposed to a lot of Black gay figures and like to watch it and to compare it to how it was then...being more around and living the lifestyle I can so much more relate to the characters than I could then. But at the time it was funny I thought was this really how people act? Is this really how the community takes hold or shape? And now finally to be in the community, some people are just like the caricature of like Chance, some are like Ricky you know so it's a little bit of everything so it was good to reflect on it then.

While Leon heralded the show for exposing him to a life he sought to create in Los Angeles, Dennis was surprised by the depictions of Black gay life that he was not aware of in his own life. He remarks that only now that he is living in Los Angeles can he see that some of the people he has encountered are actually exaggerations of those characters in the show itself. In his comments, we can also glean that Dennis did not formerly have a community or bond like the one depicted in the Noah's Arc series; yet, we can also see that while he thought the life was funny at the time, he has come to see it as a form of realistic depiction. His sentiments present a cyclical question, are the men that he has come to encounter actually modeling their lives after the show or are they the men whom the show was modeled after?

The conversation about the show remained quite positive throughout the focus group. Other young men, especially those who were not transplants to Los Angeles, celebrated the show's ability to display various Black gay lives and specifically the possibilities of Black gay relationships. Consider Jaron's and Henry's subsequent comments about the show:

> **Jaron: I think it showed a different side to each gay lifestyle like just different gay men in general. Just like for some of them for them to have a relationship for 7 years it showed the like being together for a gay man for that long is possible and like it also showed that sometimes you're going to have blips in your relationship. It showed a lot of different sides, a lot of different aspects of just gay African-American life, in general.**
>
> **Henry: I like that it showed gay relationships; it showed adoption; it showed facets of what a gay life can consist of and I like that the images were positive images as opposed to what gets portrayed on other societal tv shows and stuff.**

As evidenced in the comments above, the depictions of Black gay relationships had particular resonance for the young men in this group. Jaron's noting of the length of the relationship between characters Trey and Alex highlight the importance of these depictions for the viewers. The lack of examples of serious monogamous relationships is a repeated refrain in much of the literature that explores the relationships of gay men. Fighting through stereotypes of promiscuity and deviance, this long-term relationship signified a possibility for them even in the face of challenges or "blips." Additionally, Jaron and Henry both note the ways that these positive images are varied and show an array of Black gay identities and relationship configurations. Henry adds that it showed adoption or what a family could look like headed by two gay men, and he also mentions that this show is different from the other representations of Black gay men on television. Knowing the history and timing of this show, there weren't many representations to be compared to beyond the occasional feminine hairdresser and the memorable Men on Film characters from the 90's In Living Color. For these reasons, the show stands out as giving a positive view of a range of Black gay masculinity, careers, and lifestyles.

The conversation about the show changed slightly when Rahsaan brought up the case of the character Wade's sexuality. Much of his questions relate to comments of the online users who allude to the allure of Wade as a partner who may be considered on the downlow or "DL." Rahsaan in particular discusses how he had similar situations to Noah's inability to pin-down Wade's sexuality at the outset of the show:

> **Rahsaan: I think like a couple things; well first it was funny to me that Noah and his lil' DL friend, Wade because I used to be so oblivious to like DL men. Like and I would get exposed to DL guys like more than I would have like gay encounters. So, I used to go through hell trying to figure out "is he straight? whatever, whatever" So I didn't have friends to call and be like how do I find out? do I go look at this and that? Eventually, I just started smoking weed and I would look at somebody like, "well why would you be in the same vicinity as me, like why would you even sit here and spend this time like clearly you're attracted to men. like even if you haven't like been gay in your past". And the little store scenario, it just took me back to when I was in Friar tux and the customers would be DL too and they'd be on football teams and some be in the industry and how they would like press up, not so extreme. But they would go overboard flirting and it would just go way over my head and now I look at this stuff and kind of just laugh. So, I definitely can like catch on to it a lot quicker. [00:26:03] And the other flipside was just like to see an abnormal life or what is seen or perceived as an abnormal life be like very normal. Like you watch My Wife and Kids, or like all of these soaps and whether it's boring or not, we like live these lives so everything in the show is like very, very, very realistic, but it's just not something you see heavily on TV. But it's very, very realistic.**

Rahsaan's personal identification with Wade's narrative of struggling with his sexuality and the complications that come with dating someone in this place is readily apparent. Yet, he mentioned that unlike Noah who had friends to rely on to discuss this potential partner's sexuality, he needed to figure these things out on his own. He also notes that as a retail employee himself, he found the scenes of DL men who are attempting to make a pass at Ricky a very similar experience to his own. Rahsaan also brings up another significant impact of this show for him that relates to comments made by Henry and Jaron in the prior section in that he views the show as exposing an "abnormal" life as rather "normal." In noting this, Rahsaan brings to light how these representations of Black

gay life, while not frequent and numerous, have served to *normalize* the experiences of Black gay men who identify with the show.

Other young men who discussed the show remarked on how impactful the series was for them as they learned about their own sexualities. As the conversation among the young men continued, more of the young men began to speak up about the impact of the show on their personal development. Similar to the young men who remarked online about working to clandestinely watch Noah's Arc, Sheldon remarks that it was a way for him to begin understanding his own sexuality:

> **Sheldon: That was actually one of the first shows that like introduced me to being like gay cause like when I was younger, like I didn't...like I knew that I was but I didn't want to express it so I held it in. and so like it was one of the like escapes for me to look and see how do gay people act and what they do. I got a lot of, I feel like, my traits from that show just because I loved it so much. I remember I used to like hide trying to watch it cause I didn't want anybody to catch me...you know...it just really opened my eyes to a lot of things that I didn't know was out there.**

It is clear from Sheldon's comments that this show was a guilty pleasure of sorts and provided him an escape from his current (at that time) reality as he struggled with what it meant to be gay. In many ways, the show was a medium for him to express his own gayness since he felt repressed as a child. Sheldon continued:

> **Sheldon: Like, Noah and Wade's relationship was always something that stuck with me because I always wanted them to be good with each other, you know. Wade to finally be like, this my boyfriend or whatever cause I know he was uncomfortable with that situation. It was always that one thing that kept me on my toes like damn, he's doing this, he's doing that, so their relationship was really powerful.**

Not only was the show an almost guilty pleasure for Sheldon, but also the relationship between Noah and Wade resonated strongly with him. He confides to the group that he found himself rooting for their success and for the veil of secrecy in their relationship to be lifted. We might consider this a hope for himself as well, a parallel that the relationship be accepted and that he finds comfort in his own sexuality.

As the conversation continued about the episode, I probed the group if the felt that their lives currently were similar or dissimilar from the show. While much of the previous comments had centered on romantic relationships between the characters, other relationships also were of note to the group. Some of the men in the group began to discuss the elements of their lives that they found in the show. For Leon and Kelvin, the friendships on the show stood out as things to obtain or to create:

> **Leon: I actually feel wonderfully blessed in the sense that I have, I guess I willed it, and have that kind of friend group. I have people I can call, call four or 5 people and be on the hold-up bitch somebody else calling, hold up let me snapchat this one...so it's like fun cause like I never knew that. Cause growing up Noah's Arc, for me, was one of those transforming shows. Cause I had no idea of what being gay was, especially what being gay and Black was. I knew I was gay, but I didn't know what that looked like. So, it was.**
>
> **Kelvin: At the time, I didn't...it was more so still with a straight crowd. Whereas, I was the token gay and so when this show came out it was like okay so there is that type of companionship where we're not competing with each other, trying to sleep with each other, we're actually being friends. So, it took me awhile to establish those types of friendships, um but it helped me understand that it could be possible.**

Leon's comments highlight the ways that he feels he's been able to cultivate the ideal friend group in Los Angeles. He argues that this life is fun for him and he finds joy in being able to manage having multiple people to communicate with in a close network of friends. Noah's Arc then represented for him a way to see himself with a similar friend group that he "willed" into existence. Adding to Leon's comments, Kelvin states that at the time of the show's airing he did not have a friend group of Black gay friends. Through his comments, we also can glean the perceptions that he held of others within the gay community prior to the show. That is, the show and the representations of Black gay friendships allowed him to believe there could be strictly platonic and supportive friendships within the community.

This conversation about friendship proved emotional for one of the young men in the space. Nathaniel struggled with the conversation around friendship among the young men on the retreat as

he was new to the group. Notably, he hadn't been familiar with the guys prior to the weekend so this conversation opened a window for him to express the show's relevance, but also to engage the group further:

> **Nathaniel: Well, for me, I had friends like that um to the point that an hour ago I was in the bathroom and just bust out crying real bad cause I miss my friends. I feel like I'm here with all of y'all but like I think of my friends. You all have cliques and I feel like I can't fit in, I feel weird...So I went to the bathroom and cried and came out and said it'll be alright. It's all good. So, when I seen that, it reminds me of my friends. So, in my group they see me as the baldheaded guy, they see me as more the married type, the more family type. and my friend now is more like Noah.**

Nathaniel shares the difficulty that he's had with witnessing the closeness of the friends in the show and the friends during the retreat. His feeling of not fitting in and that the show reminded him of friends that weren't able to be with him evoked strong emotions from him. He also notes that he sees himself and his friends in the characters of the show thereby emphasizing its resonance. His emotional confession of loneliness gathered shock from the group but also reassurance that he did in fact belong. Leon, in particular, spoke to Nathaniel and the other men in the space and reinforced the relationships built among themselves but also in the reality of the friendships represented on screen:

> **Leon: It is difficult, I will say, that. It is hard to be around a group of people especially when you're a Black man--I feel we have intimidating spirits. Each and every one of us in our own rights, because of our experiences. But, I will say is that I have been in awe of how amazing open and honest all of you have been and I think that if you want those sort of friendships, one thing I sort of loved about the show as it progressed into the second season was that you learned that it wasn't like fallacy--like everything looks like fantasy until it just isn't. It's a dream; it's a fantasy...so everyone in this room could be someone who you are close to and who cares about you. Just like earlier when he asked how you doing; we genuinely want to know how you are...because you know it's...I mean those relationships don't just pop-up, you create them. And you nurture them and they grow…I'm sitting here talking to you; I sang happy birthday to you. I care.**

Leon's commitment to support Nathaniel highlights the ways that these groups of young men can come to support one another in his expression of truly caring for him. He also comments on the

"intimidating spirits" of Black men, which highlights his perception of how difficult it can be to come together within a space. Here, his remarks call to mind the obsession with the hypermasculinity among Black gay men and the view that Black men can be intimidating not just for others, but even among themselves. Leon also discusses the fact that while the show is scripted *fantasy* the issues that arise in the second season of the show break that sense of fantasy for the viewer and create a true sense of the realistic issues faced by Black gay men. That is, he argues that the show may have seemed to just be fantasy, but as it began to deal with the outside forces affecting Black gay men, the show became a model for how to confront these issues and a dream for the impact individuals can have on the structural forces that they face within this population. He simultaneously reinforces the notion that these support relationships and networks between Black gay men need to be created and maintained. He ends his remarks back to Nathaniel and to the group: I care; ending here we see the potential for support networks to change the ways that Black gay men work together to unspoil their identities.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the unique role that traditional media can play in the socialization and stigma response strategies of young Black gay men. In particular, I find that fictional role models can shape the life trajectories, identity formations, and collective identity behaviors of Black gay men. Additionally, I argue that Noah's Arc set the landscape for positive representations of Black gay men and also molded the outlook of what reality could be for Black gay men living unashamed of their identities. While this may have been the more specific goal of the show—to normalize Black gay identities in everyday life—the young men who watched this show also took lessons about relationships, love, and friendships from these episodes, which have subsequently influenced their engagements with their immediate social environments.

Using Hall's circuit of culture, I detail how Noah's Arc became a massively important

cultural object that reflects both the LGBT landscape of the mid-2000s and the life trajectories of its audience. Screening the pilot episode of Noah's Arc allowed my focus group participants to recall the impact that the show had on their lives while simultaneously triggering their nostalgia and desire for seeing representations of themselves back onscreen. Through the examination of their conversations and the affirmations of online viewers, it is apparent that their socialization into leading lives as Black gay men have been shaped by the impact of media.

Ultimately, by examining all elements of the circuit, I find that these shows can play an active role in the lives of its audience by giving them courage to embody their identities, encouraging them to live openly in their races and sexualities, and to how goals are transmitted from creators/actors and taken up by their audiences. As the interview with Darryl Stephens revealed, his hopes for the young men watching the show were to leave with an empowered sense of identity and the charge to create the types of intentional communities that offer them support in living lives that are unashamedly Black *and* gay. The focus group respondents highlight how they have not only sought to create similar connections with other Black gay men, but also demonstrate in real-time the types of communal support that are espoused as the hope for the show.

In the chapter that follows, I turn to another show that centers representations of Black gay men, FreeFall. As a user-created show on YouTube, FreeFall's creators answer the call of the viewers in this chapter who are looking for more representations of themselves on screen and offers a new way to engage with its audience through a truncated circuit of communication.

Chapter 2: Freefall: New Media and User Created Representation

In this chapter, I turn to a second media depiction of Black gay men to create a contrast between what representation can be on traditional media platforms and new user-created content platforms. Much like the examination of Noah's Arc in Chapter 1, I have examined the intentions behind the show's creation and sought to explore how this show was received both by online and in-person audiences. Through the examination of user-created content, we are able to see how anyone, but specifically members of this target population, are able to leverage their resources and to create portrayals of realities within their everyday lives. Additionally, by comparing user-created content and traditional media my project illuminates the potential for new types of representations that are directly connected to members of marginalized populations and the influence that they may have on the types of depictions that become their caricatures on screen. I find that these new media platforms offer novel ways for Black gay men and other marginalized populations to take ownership over their representation and to advocate for stronger modeling of their everyday experiences.

Unlike traditional media, user-created online content is driven by a system quite different than that used to fund shows that appear on cable television. The emergence of online platforms for user-created content such as Youtube, Vimeo, and Veoh, has opened the opportunity for those who may not be able to break into traditional media to create their own narratives about Black gay men. Additionally, the use of platforms such as Kickstarter, Indiegogo, GoFundMe has allowed people who may not have been able to fund these projects to create buy-in from their audiences. In many ways, this has meant that shows that have been invested in fiscally by its audience are often quite responsive to their desires and hopes for what to see. This closer relationship between creators and audience is undoubtedly a product of social media and the facilitated access to creatives that it creates.

Again, in this segment, I focus on representations of Black gay lives in that these actors are not portraying their own realities but a scripted characterization. Thus, I seek to identify the significance of signs about relationships, negotiating HIV and sexual health, and identity management for the characters of the show. Unlike traditional media, the impact of direct audience feedback creates a shorter circuit of culture which shows the influence of reception comments quickly on the media product. Also, the treatment of similar topics is approached from a very different class perspective in FreeFall which allowed for enriching debates among the young Black gay men of this study.

The following sections of this chapter are focused on the creator's intention, the show's content, and online and focus group reception. Additionally, throughout this section I refer back to discussions of Noah's Arc as it serves as the reference point for not only the creator of FreeFall, but also as the foundation of the discussion among the young Black gay men. Ultimately, I detail how user-created content offers new opportunities for marginalized populations to have control over their representations.

Interviewing the Creator: Intentions, Hopes, and Goals

Similarly, to my interview with the actor who played Noah on the Logo series Noah's Arc, I sought to get information about the intentions for the show FreeFall. I was able to interview the creator of the series about how he envisioned the show as a part of representations of Black gay men and what inspired him to begin this project. Specifically, creator Lamont Pierre discussed the influence that shows like the Wire had on his creative process and how he hoped to add to the landscape of existing Black series:

> **TW: You say the Wire inspired you, were there other shows that inspired what direction the show was going in?**
> **LP: Honestly, no. It was just The Wire at the time. I was familiar with the shows that had done well before whether they be Queer as Folk, Noah's Arc, the DL Chronicles...heard about those shows and knew I didn't want to be any of those**

> **shows, even though …I was inspired by the edginess from QAF. But I always felt like with the Black series, with the exception of DL Chronicles cause that was very [impressive]...It was a very well done series and I still think that about that project, but as far as the other series...nobody's showing the edginess, nobody's trying to show how diverse gay Black men can be. It's even you look at the Dl Chronicles, you look at Noah's Arc, you know it's even beyond those depictions. There are still other personalities and characters that we still haven't seen on screen in any way. Going and revamping the show, I was thinking about how can I do something different, how can I stand out from what's already known. I'm real big on not trying to follow what everyone else's done or be stereotypical; I wanted to be as original as possible. So, I was thinking well there is no show like this and even though it is an obviously gay show, all the characters are gay in it or most of the characters are gay in it, I wanted it to have mainstream potential. I was a big fan of the Wire and it was on HBO for a very long time; it did very well, and it was the type of show that got a lot of respect cause it was very well done. I used that kind of model. I just went with that--it was pretty much the Wire for me.**

Pierre's comments detail the influence that HBO series The Wire had on his development of the FreeFall series. While he notes his appreciation for other shows that have depicted Black gay men on television and the groundwork that they have done, he simultaneously critiques the limits of those representations of Black gay men. Notably, he offers that he intended to create a show with crossover "mainstream" appeal signaling his own hopes that his web-series might become a cable show eventually. For Pierre, the sexuality of the actors is obvious through the presentation of their relationships, but the show itself revolves around the types of drama that are portrayed in the Wire—stories of drugs, murder, and dysfunctional government.

Much like the desire to diversify representations of Black gay men on screen that were espoused by the online commenters and focus group participants in reference to Noah's Arc, Pierre takes up this call with a show of his own:

> **LP: I feel like a lot of times, African American creators, artists...we're not always as creative as I think we can be particularly when it comes to films and series. And I just feel like you look at television and you see these shows that are mostly or all White and they're very imaginative, you have so many options and so much variety. And I don't feel like when we create shows or make films, that we use all that we can. I was feeling that when it came to content for LGBT men or Black men. When we came out with Freefall I think it had been a while since there was a show. I think Noah's Arc was the last thing and that had been off the air for a few years at that**

point so if anything...there wasn't any, maybe one or two, web-series that were out at that point. That kind of like spurt of web-series, Black gay web-series, they didn't really come until after we were already doing our thing as well.

Following his sentiment that creators of shows about Black people or LGBT people lack creativity or are stifled in that creativity, Pierre notes that FreeFall emerged to fill a creative and representation gap about the lives of Black gay men. He also casts FreeFall as a forerunner as one of the first web series that focused on this population. He continued on to say:

I feel like it was an untapped audience and they deserve content that reflects them just like everybody else wants content that reflects them. So, I felt like in that sense I was doing something that needed to be done; and that was what it was for me. I felt like there was a void and I knew I wanted to see characters that were more interesting a little more complex, well-rounded, fleshed out that were Black gay characters. So, I took a risk and I did it.

These continued comments position the show as a creative addition to the landscape of Black gay representations. Pierre calls to mind the belief that role models and reflectiveness is crucial for audiences and their ability to see themselves in media content. He considers this "a risk," to represent Black gay men on television in varied ways. Pierre's commitment to diversifying the representations on screen lead our conversation to consider what he hoped for his target audience to take away from his offering. He offers the following, which highlights how he anticipates young Black gay men will learn new ways to enact their identities from use of an online platform and to be educated about the lives of Black gays in America:

LP: I think I want them to realize that there are all sorts of depictions of another life. There are so many different ways to look at it and to recognize we are a slice of that. Maybe you like the show or maybe you don't but have an appreciation that we're showing another side that has not been shown and that maybe you haven't seen yet. I def. want them to take that away because I think it's important to be aware of as much as you possibly can when you come to make your conclusions about something it's always different feelings and stereotypes and whatever about not just being gay or being a gay person in America or being non-gay, or being Black or whatever...the more information that you let yourself be privy to or educated on the better. I think that there's an honesty in Freefall and I think there's a frankness that you don't always get, even in real life and I'm a big proponent of being frank and honest, not disrespectful, but I think people hold back too much in their feelings and

> **I think something under, a subtler thing to take away is to take more risks in your fears. And to be more honest about how you feel...I think that can get you pretty far. I just hope people enjoy the stories and the characters.**

From Pierre's response, he reveals that his goal is to inspire a drive for education among his viewers and to build awareness of diverse role models that can encourage the sharing of feelings and emotions with others. Pierre also seems quite indifferent to people's reception of the show and more stringently resolute in his goal of providing diverse representations regardless if the audience "likes" FreeFall. Yet, we cannot take this to mean that Pierre is not attuned to the attitudes of his audience, but rather that he intends to bring Black gay lives, even the ones that are not necessarily celebrated. While he may find some people not particularly welcoming to these kinds of representations (i.e. Black gay men engaged in violence, drug deals, etc.) he expresses an appreciation for the immediacy of the online platform and his ability to engage his target audience in a unique way:

> **One of the things about it being online is that it's so immediate. You know people watch the shows while they're at the bus stop, or on the train, while you're bored at work, you know. It's so immediate and that's what I love about it. And everybody's expressing themselves...I don't know if you've had a chance to see my other show, Myles and Kyle which is more socially-conscious because it deals with a homelessness gay youth who ends up getting into a relationship with another gay man who is dealing with some mental illness issues.**

The online platform allows users to respond to the show and offer their feedback or critiques of the show to one another and to the creator. Additionally, as a show that had long periods between each episode, this interaction offered the opportunity for the audience to influence (or feel that they had) the trajectory of the show. As I will show later in my analysis of these online comments, the men who consumed this media created an online community around the storylines and engaged one another in sometimes tense discussions around the show's themes and messages.

Show Analysis

FreeFall is an online series that follows the lives of three Black gay roommates named Nico, Xavier (X), and Cameron (Cam). Unlike Noah's Arc, the show aims to decenter the roommates'

sexualities and instead chronicles their experiences dealing with drugs, deception, and crime in Atlanta, Georgia. As the author writes, the title of the show itself hints to the challenge of the show's characters to "maintain their personal relationships—and sanity—before they fall too far." The series opens with a scene of X and Cam, involved in a secret relationship, going to pick up their roommate Nico from his job as a banker. We are quickly introduced to the troubles that they all face in money, relationships, and clear illicit drug use as X and Cam have a molly before a sexual encounter. We also glimpse a meeting between X and the son of his drug boss's son Chad where we learn there is an outstanding money balance to be paid. Finally, we are introduced to the character Ty who calls Nico to confess a murder that he was involved in by showing the exact spot to Nico as he appears to breakdown on screen. This opening episode sets the tone for the series and gives the clear indication that there will be many plot lines and that every character in some way is equally primary, unlike Noah's Arc which more clearly centers on the life of Noah.

Following this initial episode, the audience is guided through the many twists and turns as murder after murder and drug deal after drug deal play out on screen. I will highlight the major plot shifts and emergent themes for the three main characters across the episodes chronologically. In the next few episodes of season 1, we learn that Nico and his childhood friend Tyson are quite close and as such, Nico feels indebted to helping Tyson with his illegal situations and dilemmas. Tyson apparently works for a big drug dealer in the community as a henchman of sorts by punishing those who have crossed the boss or gone unpaid in the deals; ultimately, he recruits Nico to help with hiding the murders that he must complete as a cleaner (e.g. hiding bodies or disposing of them in ways that make it hard for police to pin murders on them). We also come to meet Cam's ex-boyfriend Tony who proposes to him, even while Cam is still dating Xavier. Tony also divulges that he is dealing with ulcerative colitis and asks Cam for financial assistance in the range of $2000-5000; Cam tells him that he doesn't have money of that amount "just lying around," but Tony is skeptical

since he has always known Cam to be a planner and saver. We also see the many difficulties that arise in conversations between Cam and X as the secrecy of their relationship is texted by outside parties. Nico meets again with Chad who comes to collect payment for a drug deal, however he admits that he doesn't have the money. Chad responds by propositioning Nico with sex as payment, but when Nico declines Chad knocks him out and graphically rapes him anyway using only spit as lubricant. This scene in particular, leaves a lasting impact by bringing to light cases of male sexual assault which is largely considered underreported. Specifically, it also reveals complicated and deceptive relationships between friends and partners of the show. Notably, episodes 4 and 5 of the first season include an opening and closing plea for the audience to support the show's campaign to fund the rest of the season. The actors detailed a $10,000 campaign to "[fight] the stereotype that Black LGBT audiences do not monetarily support its own artists." They also offer that it's the responsibility of people who want to see these images on screen to support the show monetarily or else they shouldn't complain about the lack of representations in Hollywood.

From here I will focus on many of the repeated tropes of the show across the first two seasons with less attention to the chronology of the individual episodes. One of the many foci of the show is the repeated scenes of sexual encounters and negotiations of sexual interactions that may seem questionable for viewers. In addition to the example above involving rape, the next example of this I will highlight is a scene where Cam and Tony are discussing the past transgressions of their relationship, and Cam comes to remind Tony of how he formerly removed a condom during sex and didn't tell Cam. This theme is quite important as of late with major media sites such as Independent, Huffington Post, and Jezebel running articles about this type of sexual assault deemed "stealthing" in April 2017. Other notable sexual debates included a case where Cam is involved with a new partner after his breakup with X and decides to clean one of his wounds by licking his blood away unaware of the fact that this partner is HIV positive. This scene in particular left a lasting

impression on the online audience, as I will detail in the following section. It brings to the surface questions about HIV status disclosure, safe sex practices, and taboo sexual behaviors. This example stands in contrast to an experience where X goes to an area of Atlanta known for prostitution and solicits fellatio from a male prostitute. In this case, he agrees to paying $20 dollars for "some fly ass head" and is taken aback by the prostitute's insistence for using a condom during oral sex, to which the prostitute says "safety first." These conflicting messages about sexual practices perhaps highlight the many tensions that plague the experiences of Black men who have sex with men by focusing on safe sex for HIV prevention as one of the most highly impacted demographic groups.

A second recurrent theme of the show is the perpetual violence played out in the lives of the men as they negotiate drug deals gone wrong. Many of the threats that come out between the characters also involve much discussions about whether or not they are threatened based on the phenotypical differences of the characters. For example, a common repeated refrain references the characters who are fairer skinned as less threatening than those men who are darker skinned. In one instance, Nico is going to fight X and in taunting him he says, "[I] ain't afraid of no light skinned nigga." References to the phenotypical differences often accompany these instances of violence in ways that mirror discourses around darkness and danger and the play into the colorism within African-American communities. A widely popular example of this conflation of heightened danger and darker skin is the case of OJ Simpson's skin being darkened when he appeared on the cover of Time magazine in 1994. Another instance of repeated violence is in the relationship between Cam and Tony which shows clear manipulation as Tony fakes a robbery with an accomplice to coerce Cam into fiving him the money for his disease. He also works to re-traumatize Cam to keep him controlled and with him in relationship. Additionally, extreme violence and cover-ups appear in the second season as Cam and X work at a new club they elect to open together. The club is moderately successful, but soon a murder happens in the club and the group decides to find a way to cover-up

the murder and move the body in order to protect the image of the club as a safe destination. The consistent murders, cover-ups, and forms of manipulative violence on the show reinforce examples of negatively toxic relationships among the characters.

As mentioned above, it is seen in episodes 4 and 5 of the first season that the show begins to solicit funding from its audience to support production of the continuing series. As the series continues, so do the campaigns connected to the causes important to the production and cast. Another such campaign that appears on the show is the hashtag goal #Mission Mainstream. This campaign aligned with the creative team's desire to push the show as a pickup for mainstream traditional networks like HBO or Showtime. The show also seeks to encourage viewers to engage with the creative team by stating their allegiances to certain characters via social media such as Twitter and Facebook with the hashtags #TeamCAM or #TeamX. This encouragement to discuss the show and raise the profile of the show via social media leverages the uniqueness of the show as a user-created show and simultaneously strengthens the relationship between the show and its audience by having them vow their allegiances. Another campaign launched by the show also involved the development of a line of loungewear available for purchase. This campaign, "Sexy Can Be Dangerous," sought to leverage the many on-screen relationship dramas to make a pitch for ameliorating conversations within relationships. As described on the official Youtube campaign, "FREEFALL's "Sexy Can Be Dangerous" initiative brings awareness to the issue of pre-emptive communication in sexual relationships. The campaign encourages healthy and honest dialogue as a critical tool in comfortable and safe sexual behavior regardless of the short or long-term circumstances or expectations."

As I detail here, the show takes its viewers through twists and turns and becomes progressively more "dangerous" in its storylines as the seasons progress. In the section that follows, I examine the response from online commenters who watch the show and choose to offer their

opinions about the series. In so doing, I am able to show not only what themes emerge as important for viewers, but also how they narrate the ways that they leverage these media messages in their own lives.

Everyone's A Critic: Giving Feedback in Online Comments

In this section, I begin to explore the audience reception of the series FreeFall by turning to the comments on the gay dating site Black Gay Chat or "BGClive." A major theme emergent in these comments is the power of critique and feedback. Many of these comments reflect explicitly positive only or negative only attitudes, yet most comments had a major critique about the issues they found often coupled with some concrete suggestion and an ending with encouragement for the show to continue. For example, take the following selection of comments that offer both criticism and praise for the series:

> *Date posted: 2014-05-16 18:31:41* ***no1else704***
> **Hey guys I'm a filmmaker myself and I love the webisode but this episode here was really hard to watch. I can't get into the characters because of the bad lighting. I can't see their eyes. The camera person needs to go to film school to understand basic cinematography rules like the 180-degree rule. The unmotivated hand held work was very distracting. You're asking for the viewers to come back ever week and now pay for the full episodes can we please get better audio so we can hear them clearly without all the yessing and audio gaining the camera mic is doing. I love the story but for Pete's sake up the production value.**
>
> *Date posted: 2014-07-12 02:46:00* ***nubianhere***
> **you can barely hear the audio, also, they [could be] a little more compassionate and nurturing toward the kid, even if they do not know who he is, the cues and the camera is off, sorry but the scenes are not making a lot of sense, please look carefully and pay attention, director. sorry for the criticism but my standards are high**
>
> *Date posted: 2015-06-20 08:42:58* ***tydell***
> **I am going to give this a thumbs up because you have so many things going on which would give a potential TV network something to [choose] from. I have stated before you all have too many thing going on at one time at last count you have six or seven plots in this web episode alone????? Best of luck. Have you reached out to LOGO??**
>
> *Date posted: 2013-10-03 17:28:53* ***songwriter23***
> **After watching this whole entire series, I honestly appreciate the actors hard work. Me being more. Although I seen some strong moments. It all comes with more**

determination, consistency, and hardwork of practice, really being in that moment to making the audience feel what is going on in that very moment. The storyline was a little shaky, but overall, I am a fan of these young men. I LOVE the guy that played as Nico, I find myself attracted to him personally as far as relationship wise. Im just excited to see what else happens.

Each preceding comment offers its perspective on the story, episode, and overall production of the show. As ***no1else704*** begins this section, he leverages his own background in film making to offer a strong critique of the production quality. Yet, while giving this harsh feedback on the show, he simultaneously seems to appear like a loyal viewer who is committed to following the story. This sentiment is very similar to those of ***nubianhere,*** who argues that the show's production issues with audio are impeding his ability to understand the story. Others commented on the competing storylines or plots in each episode. User ***tydell*** found the "six or seven plots" to be too distracting, however he still encourages the show's creators to reach out to cable network Logo to launch the web series in a traditional media platform. ***songwriter23's*** remarks show great enthusiasm for the show's content and strong appreciation for the actors and their portrayals of the characters. He even goes so far as to say he finds the character Nico a viable relationship partner for himself, again bending the lines between fiction and reality. These comments collectively reinforce a strong investment in the show even in its imperfections.

The comments on the video also often seemed to reflect an awareness or perhaps a hope that the show's creators were actively monitoring the feedback from its audience. While many lodged critiques, the online comment platform on BGClive contributed to the ability for the young men to engage one another about their critiques and to highlight disagreements with perspectives. Take for example this exchange between ***dime_boo*** and ***thunderguy*** :

Date posted: *2013-10-30 17:00:15* ***dime_boo***

thunderguy :Great series, keep up the good work. Cool the way it keeps you in suspense trying to guess what will happen next. Pay no attention to some of the comments from your world reknown critics here criticizing the actors good work. Bitches complaining about who is a believable actor and can carry

a scene who cant read or write a decent subject, verb agreement sentence, let alone act or give a proper critique. Keep up the fantastic work guys

I know you're not referring to me because I know exactly what I'm talking about when I give a critique. I've studied all parts of film production and have hands on experience. I obviously like the show, however if I see where some areas can be better, I have every right to give my honest feedback. There's nothing wrong or malicious about it.

Btw, everyone actually are critics. Audience feedback is a great thing (whether good or bad). Critiques should be use to help them strive to do better and perfect their craft and /or product. And finally, it doesn't take a rocket genius to notice bad acting or a terrible storyline. Blowing smoke up someone's ass is doing them more of a disservice. Remember that. Good day.

The interaction above shows how the young men on the site create community among one another by debating the significance and usefulness of critique on the site. **thunderguy** begins by offering encouragement to the show's creators and actors and appears quite bothered by the critiques of others on the site. He offers that their critiques are not to be taken seriously since they, in his view, have issues with reading and writing and aren't giving worthwhile criticisms. User **dime_boo** responds directly to **thunderguy**'s comments as if they are directly referencing his prior critiques of the show. He argues that the use of the comment field should be a space for giving feedback to the show's creators and actors as a way to create a better product for the audience. His comment suggests that he believes he is genuinely providing honest and constructive feedback to the show's team and that in many ways, he believes this has been received. As seen in the following, the audience feels connected to the show through the belief that they are actually being heard and that the storylines resonate with their ideals of gay life:

Date posted**: 2014-05-11 16:39:56* ***cautious-1
man I love this series... started watching it yesterday and I've completed every episode... all the characters are dope in their own way. Ty is sexy af to me and I think I got a crush on Cam lol but all yall are dope!

Date posted**: 2014-06-03 20:15:58* ***jadira_amari
good for the drama missing in my life.... is that how it goes you know you and your ex break up and then they hook up oh yea that is how it goes been that damn long...

Date posted**: 2014-05-26 15:09:57* ***cautious-1
Nice ass story line... this series reminds me of a gay version of "The Corner."

Date posted**: 2014-06-22 23:43:05* ***blackminister30
Cam is such an asshole. And his ass so weak. I hate to have someone with such attitude around me.

Date posted**: 2014-12-04 10:16:06* ***0ne2g0
THANK YOU, u guy's are listening to the viewers i actually enjoyed this episode i see that you're trying to get back on track and the episode was long OMG i can't believe it, but keep it up guys i'm excited again!!!!

As seen above, the online audience find themselves engaged with the characters and draw references to other shows that they believe are reminiscent of other shows like the HBO miniseries "The Corner." Additionally, the users feel connected to the characters and often comment on how these are people who have been in their lives or who they would like to see in their relationships. ***0ne2g0*** comments detail his great appreciation for how he believes the cast and crew of the show are listening to reviewer comments and changing the show's trajectory based on this feedback. These sentiments highlight a deep connection with the show and an identification with the narratives within.

Gender Expression & Sexual Positioning

Many of the comments online also focused on the aspects of the characters that displayed varying degrees of sexual activity, comfort, and gender expressions. Specifically, the online viewers discuss the ways that perceptions around masculinity and gender expressions can help them to discern the sexual position preferences (i.e. top, bottom, versatile) of the men on screen. Furthermore, these understandings of the linkages between sexual positioning and the potentials for relationships bring to light the ways that the spectrum of gender expression has a direct bearing on the structure of romantic relationships within the community. Take for example this exchange between **blatinodlpapi10** and **jackal101 :**

Date posted**: 2014-12-16 23:33:38 2014-12-16 21:27:07* ***blatinodlpapi10

jackal101: **i wonder did the muscle boy with dreads take it up the ass becuz he sho nuff looked like he was ready to ride the donkey and yes his secret is out**

Of course, he took it up his ass. Men like that tend to be submissive bottoms in bed.

As seen in this discussion, the young men discuss an ambiguous sexual encounter on the show where they are unsure of whom penetrated whom in a sexual scene. The perception that the character was a "submissive bottom" is echoed by **blatinodlpapi10** seemingly as he draws from personal experience to note that men who appear like this character (i.e. with muscles and dreads) are often bottoms during sexual encounters. In addition to those commenters looking for signals of bottoms, other were surprised or even incredulous of the sexual positions played by the characters:

2015-02-12 23:30:16 ***blackminister30***

mindramblings now when in the hell did Tony give you a "I like dick in my bootyhole" vibe? That man screams top.

Ahahaha, He may not like d*k in his bootyhole but Cam fcuked him before in Season 1. Here is the episode. In like 19min to it.**

The series of comments between ***mindramblings*** and ***blackminister30*** above highlight the ways that the perceptions of Tony for ***mindramblings*** were that he identified as a top. Yet, as ***blackminister30*** comments, whether he likes to receive penetrative anal sex or not, he has engaged in it on the show. This conversation specifically mirrors research that has shown that men who have sex with men may use their own masculinity perceptions to project sexual positions onto others, which may have strong implications for the structures of their relationships (Tskhay et al., 2014). For example, these masculinity perceptions and their influence on relationship formations can be seen in the comments by ***blatinodlpapi10***:

Date posted: *2014-08-07 00:24:48* ***blatinodlpapi10***

TY IS THE SEXIEST MOFO ON THAT SHOW. THAT IS MY IDEAL MAN, WITHOUT ALL THAT DRAMA OF COURSE. RAY IS FUCKING ANNOYING. HE IS ALWAYS MAD.HE NEVER SMILES. CHAD AND NICO WOULD HAVE BEEN A BETTER COUPLE. IF IT WERE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN NICO AND TY'S CAKES, I WOULD TAKE NICO'S GOD DAMN. LOL. HE DID PUT SOME WEIGHT THIS SEASON THOUGH. LOL. HIS FAT ASS. THE HEALTH INSPECTOR, WAS

> HITTING ON X, LOL. THEY ARE NOT A MATCH. BOTH ARE BOTTOMS, JUST LIKE X AND CAM ARENT A MATCH, THEY ARE BOTH BOTTOMS.

The belief that the gender expression or masculinity displays of various characters can explain not only sexual positions, but also the relationship woes faced by the characters is argued in this comment. The commenter finds comedy in the interactions between the characters and believes that certain characters on the show cannot be a "match" because they are the *appear* to be the same sexual position. These reactions give us a glimpse into the ways that the show influences conversations and interactions among its viewers as it pertains to sexual positioning and thus relationship mate selection.

Creating Relationships, Safer Sex, and HIV Disclosures

Another issue that is frequently discussed on the online forums by the viewers is the show's dealing with HIV status and its impact on relationships. Unlike the discussions of HIV that tend to be more informational in tone and addressed head on in Noah's Arc, the depictions of HIV on FreeFall tended to be surrounded in secrecy, suspicion and doubt. In many ways, the confusion of the actors within the show is similarly reflected in the comments of the online viewers:

> ***Date posted**: 2015-02-11 18:11:57* ***horis***
>
> > He wanted someone to love him just for who he is then let them know his status and hopefully that they love him so much that they will forgive him and move on yet it still should have been Expos are known in the beginning but I understand why he waited.
>
> ***Date posted**: 2014-11-11 22:15:32* ***blatinodlpapi10***
>
> > great episode. Approved. lol. I did not see NICO. Where the hell is Nico? If the dude Cam is fucking with is HIV POSITIVE. It is his responsibility to tell CAM. But, even if he did tell him, cam is not on planet earth anymore. He wouldn't pay attention. I don't think cam's character is valuable to this series anymore. I wouldn't be mad if his character was killed off.
>
> ***Date posted**: 2015-02-11 10:03:48* ***blackberriesman***
>
> > Im sorry if a man lie to me about his status i will no longer be his man... you put me at risk when lying... i should be the one to make that decision not you... i really hope

> he leave this guy not because of his status because of him lying... It sad that dude cant have a normal life because hes selling his self for money...i think they need to start chaperone there supplier so that there product dont get mess up... Im not for sex slave, but we need to know that theres other ways to make money... yes i do agree that sex sell quicker then most things but u can still make way more money if you put your mind in soul to something that u know will work. I cant wait for the next episode
>
> *2015-02-11 08:10:46* ***blackberriesman***
>
> > **mrsinglephl** : This is really getting real, but I think dude should have told the info bout his hiv status in the beginning of the relationship. Honesty can go a long distance verses leading one on in life we all make hard choices. Good show!***
>
> I so agreed yo

This collection of comments detail the tensions that emerge in relationships on screen when one character is found to be HIV positive. In particular, this character decided to wait to reveal his HIV status to Cam and thus didn't allow Cam to decide if he wanted to continue the relationship. Commenters agreed that the decision to withhold his HIV positive status was a major problem, thus showing how the general consensus among them appeared to be a desire to get this information in their own relationships. In addition, the comment by ***blatinodlpapi10*** argues that Cam's friend Nico knew his new partner was HIV positive and therefore should have divulged that information to Cam, as his friend. As such, this particular point stands directly in contrast to HIV educators and understandings of private health information. That is, most people argue that the only person who may share someone's HIV status is that person themselves. Yet, this conversation brings to bear the responsibilities of friends in relationships and it seems that online viewers feel that friends should be warning their friends of the HIV status of potential partners.

HIV also became a strong topic of discussion for online viewers when the show depicted a sex scene between Cam and his partner where they engaged in sexual blood play. It visibly bothered some of the men and their disapproval is quite apparent in their feedback:

> ***Date posted****: 2014-11-23 15:03:30* ***blatinodlpapi10***

> **This show is out of control. I mean, what message are they trying to send by showing someone sharing blood during a sex act? SMH. WTF**

Date posted**: 2014-11-23 14:09:26* ***zane828

> **this was some stupid shit ...dude sucking the blood off the other dude's finger thts some nasty shit ..**

Date posted**: 2015-02-18 07:47:58* ***searchlight

2015-02-18 04:36:59

> **blackminister30: I just remember that Cam sucked this HIV guy open bloody wound in one of the previous episode. Cam may be positive now.**

I want to say drinking the blood is different but I don't know :c

Further comments on the relationship Cam's sexual experience with blood highlight the impact that the show's messaging can have on its viewers. Commenters feel that this sex act is nasty, unsafe and perhaps promoting the transmission of HIV disease. Additionally, the final comment from ***searchlight*** suggests a lack of knowledge about HIV transmission as he is unsure if ingesting blood would make someone potentially HIV positive. Thus, the ambiguity of the message in the show about blood play and status disclosure is reflected back by its audience. These comments overall show a wide range of attitudes and investments into the characters and storylines of the FreeFall characters. In the section that follows I explore the attitudes of the young men in the Los Angeles focus group to this show to build further understanding of the impact of these sorts of representations and messaging.

Screening FreeFall: All Representation Matters ?

Following the screening of the show detailed in the previous chapter, Noah's Arc, the young men viewed the pilot episode of FreeFall. Almost immediately after the conclusion of this episode the young men began to discuss its content, most notably in direct comparison to Noah's Arc. The young men had strong feelings about this show as well as only a few were familiar with it prior to

the screening. Their comments were forceful and the first interaction below highlight the tensions around representation and realistic living as portrayed on the show:

> **Leon:** The quality--terrible. Just being honest, I could not hear them. I hate the stereotype that they perpetuate. I think it's a story that sets us further away from our goals which if I look in comparison, especially after watching Noah's Arc, with equally bad writing…
> **Kenny:** some people do live that lifestyle, some people do live like that and some people live like Noah's Arc
> **Leon:** They do. Not saying that at all. But, what I'm saying is that that's not a story necessarily that I want to hear. And that's my thing. That stereotype of you know we live in like trap-houses, and we are standing out on street corners, and our friends are drug dealers, or bank robbers. And our boyfriends are in the closet or trap kings. I mean whatever like that thing I just...it's a thing, it's a whole thing, it's an umbrella and it bothers me. That stereotype bothers me.

This initial reaction and interaction between Leon and Kenny bring out the conflicted reactions to the characters and storylines that are explored in FreeFall. Leon specifically details his disapproval of the perpetuation of what he feels is a stereotype of rough living among the population. He draws a clear juxtaposition of the messaging in Noah's Arc compared to FreeFall and believes that the show sets back the projected image of Black gay lives on screen. Yet, when Kenny argues that people live both like the men in Noah's Arc and FreeFall, Leon still feels that the show casts a negative light on the lives of Black gay men.

Other men echoed Leon's comments about the show and found the depictions to be overtly negative in their portrayal of gay identities. Take Travis's comments for example which fortify statements made above about the show's undesirable imaging:

> **Travis:** Unlike Noah's Arc I thought it showed being gay in a negative life. I thought it was very sad, just the whole storyline as just sad to me. It was very depressing to watch that. Just even from the beginning he's standing on the corner we're all wondering what is he doing? Is he ho'ing? Where is he coming from? Like all things, I was assuming were negative. I couldn't perceive anything positive from it. Um I feel like it had no message at all it was no type of uplifting message. It was nothing positive in it. And it was just I feel like a lot of gay men won't relate to that kind of lifestyle like...just because it's like I don't know...not positive. It just showed a darker side of the gay life. Like the side that no one really talks about.

Travis's comments build on Leon's perception that the show only show's gay lives as negative and he finds these messages to be "depressing." He feels that gay men who may be watching this show

might struggle to connect with the show's stories and characters. Yet, his final remarks suggest that while he might find these depictions problematic that there may in fact be some truth to these types of experiences within the gay community. He states that it's the "side that no one really talks about" which implies that this is an unspoken secret within the community—the oft-experienced struggle. This conversation continued and others spoke up who were unclear about whether these storylines are okay to show on screen. For instance, another young man Khalib detailed his disagreement with only showing positive life narratives and outcomes for Black gay men:

> **Khalib:** Although I really didn't like that film at all like I really didn't get into it, but I feel like. In order for us to be on TV I don't feel like we always have to be in a positive light every time we're seen cause that's not real. Like we need to have some shows where we do show how different people act. And Noah's Arc kind of did that in a way, but I feel like that film just it was more...I don't want to say more realistic, but it was kind of like...more relatable...cause a lot of people know about those things and kind of like…yeah I don't want to just see like, of course I want positive stuff, I just don't want only positive stuff like we're in
> **Julian**:…Like fantasy-land
> **Khalib:** Like I want to see some struggle...like some real, hard, shit.

While Khalib immediately expresses his distaste for the show itself, he also comments on the show's realism factor. He argued that this show is more realistic because it showed the struggles of the characters and less positive experiences of Black gay men. Khalib acknowledges that the issues seen on the show remind him of people that he knows and he'd rather see this than "fantasy-land," as his close friend Julian offered. Khalib believes that highlighting these negative things that can happen in life, the show is more relatable and that this type of balance is needed to show the diversity of the lives of Black gay men. Yet, he also ultimately still wants the positive representations that are the work of Noah's Arc.

The previous two interactions about this pilot episode bring to the forefront the conversation about representation that online commenters and focus group participants had in regards to Noah's Arc. To them, there is a glaring lack of representation of the experiences of Black gay men on screen, yet many feel conflict about showing what might be considered negative

portrayals of their experiences. One of the men in the group explained his own dilemma with the need for representation and the types of representations offered by the show:

> **Nicholas**: I'm a little torn after watching this and it brings up a question. Other than Noah's Arc, how many Black gay all-cast TV shows have you all seen? So that came out what 2005/2006...Ten years ago? So for me when I see Freefall, although I have the same sentiments as some folks in the room, I also recognize in terms of media, I don't always get to see that experience represented on TV. And although that may not be my experience, that is someone's lived experience. And I feel like people write from their lived experiences. And I for me, again that may not be my experience what has me torn and not being so upset, mad, why they would try to do that...what has me excited is that we are producing our own content and we're putting it out there...And so I want to throw that out there cause although that may not be our experiences in this room. Someone probably actually is experiencing that...and I know people who live the lifestyle just like that...so that's why I asked how many other shows have you seen, other than Noah's Arc if it's only been...if this is your first time seeing another show like that...it means that we need to make more content to diversify the stories cause otherwise we only have those two representations.

As Nicholas states, he feels undecided about the struggle between desiring diverse representations and perpetuating stereotyped caricatures of Black gay men. He notes that the drastic time difference between Noah's Arc's original airdate and the emergence of this show which for him signaled a huge dearth of representations of Black gay lives. Additionally, Nicholas argues that what is more important than the negativity of the storylines is the fact that Black gay men are creating content and controlling the distribution of that content themselves. While he may draw problems with the fact that the stories portray negative images of Black gay men, he rationalizes that the creators and writers are Black gay men who are likely writing from their own perspectives and experiences. Thus, instead of drawing an issue with the direction of the depictions of the characters, he argues that the discomfort that many of the young men mention should be evidence that even more media should be created to diversify further the representations of Black gay men.

Finally, another young man in the focus group had been noticeably quiet as the other men expressed their disapproval and attitudes towards the show. Yet, he felt it was important for him to talk not only about the show's content, but also the reception of others in the room. Rahsaan discusses his view of the group and show as it relates to his own experiences with men on the DL:

> **Rahsaan:** I thought all the feedback was interesting. You know, at first, when I was first watching it I was very thrown off. It took me a minute to understand what was going on. And then immediately after like 5 minutes in I was just immediately like taken back to the years between like 2006 to 2008 because it was just like my first boyfriends were...I was around like 16 or 17 and I had been throughout the DL lifestyle which is a completely different lifestyle than what you'd think based off Noah's Arc. And you got to realize that a lot of men aren't out, a lot of men aren't comfortable, a lot of men are in the streets...like these are real hood lives that people live. I mean I would have boyfriends from like Long Beach and Compton and I've lived on both sides of the tracks...you know a very great lifestyle and then on the other side I came from South Central, LA...so it's very common at that age to be around gang violence to watch older men selling drugs, to see even experience it and not having family support, but at the end of the day they're grown men and end up fighting for survival and end up fighting to find jobs...I've had boyfriends I've had out of the country...I been in situations where I wasn't with them that long and they would get arrested and go to jail and come out and just leave me with money out of nowhere. Or like with random information leave you with coats and stuff...so it was like I was kind of watching that...It was actually worse than a lot of what I saw on there...It was just weird because you didn't get the whole love and in the bedroom and stuff like that...It really wasn't like that.

Rahsaan's initial comments display his own insights into what he calls the DL lifestyle. He argues that there are many, many men who are having sex with men but who do not identify as gay and who are not "out" about their relationships with other men. Also, even though the show is set in Atlanta, Rahsaan notes that he sees similarities between these depicted lives and the men that he has dealt with in Los Angeles and abroad. He goes so far to say that his personal experiences were even more troubling than those within the show. He offers that the young men in the room may not recognize that some are living like this and for him it was devoid of the romantic complexities depicted in the show. He also tells that he has been in a situation that many of the other young men thought to be extremely unrealistic during the pilot episode where Nico notices a duffle bag full of cash in the backseat of the car. This scene struck a chord with the group as they made exasperated sighs and had looks of confusion; however, Rahsaan shares that his own experiences were quite similar with being left with bags of money with no explanation.

Rahsaan continues to detail his own take on the show and in particular how he feels that the show is even more realistic than the depictions seen on Noah's Arc:

> **Rahsaan:** Before I could say how bad it was written or whatever, I have to realize it is actually an experience; probably the other half of an experience for a lot of the LGBT community. There's a whole underground world of gays that never experience--like we're an eclectic elite few group of people who are like daywalkers in the gay lifestyle and the other half never experience that. There's gay people that will never go to a club, that will never tell their parents, but they have DL friends they have DL boyfriends...they do the drug rings; they roll in high profile gangs, drug lords or whatever the case is and that's the type of shit they run into. And it kind of reminds me of like those crazy 90s books and read all these crazy drug stories and stuff, but I mean somebody went through that. I don't know what it's like in ATL, but I can certainly say, a lot of stuff that was in there I probably say through and it was just funny to me. Now I'm 24 and I shake my head and I cannot believe that I have lived through some of that stuff. I was like very like I said I'm from South LA...I was very preppy, like my mother raised us well--she sent us to school, but I still had the rough edge and I was very innocent so I would always attract people who could kind of tell that I like men, but tell that I wasn't really out there like that...and they would draw me in and the layers would kind of like, peel back and unfold over time of what they were into and I would somehow back out of it or somehow it would fall flat. Some people I would lose connections with and wouldn't hear from until like a year or 2 years after and eventually in my life I kept evolving and changing over time…and moving to nicer areas, and doing better for myself and going to school and stuff. And I mean at that time, even before I met Henry, I was going through streets, I was going through courts, I was going through a whole lot. So that was just my experience with that.

The above selection points to Rahsaan's view that the majority of Black gay men are actually living lives that are more similar to the depictions in FreeFall rather than those in Noah's Arc. He argues that there's an entirely different world that perhaps the other young men are not aware of in their day to day. Additionally, while noting that this seemed more realistic to him, he adds that part of the shift in his own life came from experiences meeting people like the community organization group facilitation leader Henry.

The tensions that are displayed in these discussions among the young men of the focus group highlight the strong desire among the young men to see varied representations of Black gay men on screen. These comments also underlie the importance of diverse representations and the significance of perspectives for the reception of these shows. That is, the comments of the young men show a tension between the desire for representation and the hope to conceal a portrayal of life that they believe displays them as wayward or socially deviant. The dearth of stories about Black gay men on television have created a conundrum for these young men that won't be solved unless more

creators take up the helm and develop content for television that expand the representations of Black gay men on screen.

Conclusion

The examination of FreeFall in this chapter offers a strong parallel to the show Noah's Arc that was explored in Chapter 1. The creation of this show as user-created content provides a different window into the possibilities for diverse on screen representations of Black gay men. Much like the comments from BGCLive, the creator of this series seeks to eventually break into the traditional television market, following in the steps of other successful crossover online creatives (e.g. Issa Rae from HBO's Insecure who began with The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl). Examples of successful cross over shows like HBO's Insecure highlight the potential for user-created content via social media platforms to become a new way that different populations can break into traditional media.

In several ways, the intended goal of the creator was clearly reached in his desire to expand and diversify the types of Black gay men on screen given the way that the young men so clearly see the difference between the boys Cam, Nico, and Xavier and the circle of friends on Noah's Arc. The emergent tension that develops between a desire for representation and negative portrayals brings to light how much importance representation and the quest for role models plays in the lives of these young men. Additionally, the discussion among the young men bring to light the ways that the tension between scripted fantasy and reality can become blurred with these shows that have particular resonance with the lives of its audience. For example, one young man in particular found FreeFall to be more realistic than Noah's Arc while the majority of the group found themselves identifying with (or aspiring to) the middle-class lifestyle portrayed. These dilemmas bring to light the question of how marginalized groups struggle with the desire for representation, but not representation that might contribute to existing stereotypes about their daily lives.

By again using Hall's circuit of culture to understand the desired intention of the creator and how encoded messages are decoded by the audience, I am able to ascertain not only how intended messages are received, but also, I reveal the unintended or secondary messages of the text. That is, the desire to show diverse representations was certainly met, however, the type of representations that the creator portrayed clashed with the desire or yearning for *positive* role models—expressed both by the young men in the focus group and those online commenters. Yet, as Rahsaan notes, these negative representations are true as well and one cannot simply cast a blind eye towards these harsh realities of the difficulties that many Black gay men face. He admits himself that he had benefitted from his relationship with the organizational men's group leader Henry.

The next section of this dissertation focuses on the ways that organizations such as this one can play a role in assisting young men who are working to mitigate negative influences on their lives with a focus on stigmatizing experiences in particular. Across these next chapters, unlike the shows explored here, the influence of role models and how young men deal with issues in reality have ramifications for the decisions that these men make to solidify their racial and sexual identities and how they elect to deal with everyday stigma.

Section II: Local Non-Profit Organizations

In light of a majority view among Christian religious communities within the United States that homosexuality is deviant, youth raised in church-going communities and families are frequently subjected to anti-gay messaging from an early age. Such exposures may lead to varied and tenuous relationships among gay youth with Christian communities (Talvacchia, Pettinger, & Larrimore 2014). My findings reveal deeply rooted religious and sexuality conflicts among many of the respondents. More than 80 percent of respondents (41/50) expressed that they had heard negative responses to homosexuality from family, friends, and peers. In each interview, respondents (R) were asked about the messages that they had received about identifying as gay, bisexual or pansexual. Some of the words used to describe their sexualities included: "abomination" (R6; R7; R8; R36; R37; R39; R43); "a sin" (R1; R3; R18; R25; R41); "[all gays are] going to hell" (R5; R18; R19; R23; R26; R27; R28; R38; R42; R43; R46; R48; R50); "morally wrong" or "immoral" (R43; R48); "against God" (R1; R37; R46; R36); "[gay is] bad in the Bible" (R47); and "against God" (R36). These responses highlight the deeply rooted negativity of religious teachings to which these young Black gay men have been exposed. Table I displays all of the messages rooted in religious sexual stigma that were reported in this study.

Table I

Religion-Based Anti-Gay Stigma	Respondent(s)
It's not with God; against Christ	R1; R37; R46; R36
it's a sin	R1;R3; R18; R25; R41
Going to Hell	R5; R18; R19; R23; R26; R27; R28; R38; R42; R43; R46; R48; R50
God's going to look at you and cast you in a fiery pit	R5
an abomination	R6; R7; R8; R36; R37; R39; R43
It's the devil	R28
against God	R36
damnation	R38
immoral; morally wrong	R43; R48
wrong in Bible	R47

In addition to the stigmatizing messages that these young men heard about their sexualities rooted in religious experiences and teachings, they also reported hearing many messages about their sexualities that were not explicitly tied to religion but that were equally as negative. Some of these messages are rooted in social stereotypes that cast doubt on the health of LGBT people, their gender expressions or masculinities, and their being socially "right." Specifically, respondents heard the following: faggot, fag, or battyman (R15; R20; R21; R22; R23; R28; R29; R32; R42; R46; R48); you'll get AIDS/HIV/diseased (R16; R15; R18; R19; R26; R37; R38; R41; R49; R50; R31); "gay" (R10; R11; R15; R20; R21; R32; R33); and gay is not okay, not right, or wrong (R7; R19; R25; R27; R30; R40; R41; R46; R33). These messages are just a few of the more common messages that the gay men in this study heard from experiences with family, friends, religious institutions, and schools, among others. Table II displays all of the messages rooted in secular sexual stigma that were reported in this study.

Table II

Anti-Gay Stigma (Secular)	Respondent(s)
you won't get accepted	R1
it's demeaning	R1
you're not supposed to be gay	R3
gay is not okay/not right/wrong	R7; R19; R25; R27; R30; R40; R41; R46; R33
man was not supposed to be with man	R7
it was a phase	R8
not to be a sissy	R8; R20; R22; R28; R48
"gay"-negatively	R10; R11; R15; R20; R21; R32; R33
unacceptable	R12; R45; R33
faggot; fag; battyman	R15; R20; R21; R22; R23; R28; R29; R32; R42; R46; R48
you'll get AIDS/HIV/disease	R16; R15; R18; R19; R26; R37; R38; R41; R49; R50; R31
sick/disgusting/mentally ill	R18; R37; R43
it's a phase	R21; R45
Stop being soft/Be a Man	R22; R48
punk	R22
Black men aren't gay/bi	R25
bad	R26
Child molester	R26
demonizing	R27
will have a hard life	R27; R41
Shouldn't be gay	R28
Don't be the catcher, be the pitcher	R28
Going to die	R29; R50
Fruitcake	R32
Walk/Talk like a girl	R34
nasty	R36
unnatural	R36
never be respected	R36; R50
Tinkerbell; Fairy; Queer	R39; R42
Taboo	R41
Social outcast	R47

The young men in this study are also negotiating stigma associated with their race. As Black (some multiracial or mixed) men in the US, they reported hearing several negative perceptions of their identities from others. In every interview, in addition to discussing sexuality, respondents (R) were asked to describe the messages that they had received about identifying as Black. While 80 percent of respondents reported stigma-based messages regarding their sexuality, a slightly smaller group 60 percent (30/50) reported stigma-based messages about their racial identity. Some of the more commonly reported stigmas included the following: black people are thieves or he'll rob you/steals (R7; R11; R16; R19; R30; R41; R50); black people are ghetto (R23; R31; R41; R47); black people are gang-bangers and thugs (R29; R31; R36; R50); and black people are violent, dangerous, or aggressive (R39; R41; R18; R30; R50). Unlike the stigmatizing comments regarding sexuality, comments regarding race were more individualized. That is, there was more variety in the responses from participants in the study in regards to race. Table III displays all of the different messages that were reported in this study. Additionally, one noticeable difference between messages about sexuality and messages about race is that respondents were more likely to have positive messages that accompanied the negative stereotypes they heard about race rather than sexuality. These positive messages included pride in their heritage, embracing slogans such as "Black is beautiful," and celebrating the creativity of Black people.

Table III

Race-Based Stigma Messages	Respondent(s)
you're a mutt	R1
you think you cute because you got good hair; Being mixed is superior	R1; R20
you"ll be watched in stores	R3
you'll be harassed by the police; police hate us	R3; R22
you always get looked down on	R3
black people are thieves; they'll rob you/steal	R7; R11; R16; R19; R30; R41; R50
black people are inferior to white people	R7
be on welfare; government dependent	R8; R11; R18; R42
selling drugs	R8
a statistic	R8
High school dropout; Not intelligent; Can't read	R8; R19; R27; R29; R39
Not black enough	R15
aggressive/violent/dangerous/ a threat	R18; R30; R39; R41; R43; R50
have kids at a young age	R18
bad people	R19
bottom of the pit/barrel/totem pole	R19; R31
dirty/poor people	R19
Black is whack	R20
Odds against us; Life will be difficult	R22; R40
super sexualized	R22; R41
Ghetto	R23; R31; R41; R47
Disruptive	R23
Blacks are ignorant	R27; R35
Don't be gay	R28
Only made for manual labor	R29
Won't make it past 25	R29
Gang-banger; Thug; Hood	R29; R31; R36; R45; R50
Blacks are greedy	R29
Nigger	R34; R42
Unwanted	R35
Mixed=Better than the Average person	R37; R44
Lazy	R39; R42
Mean	R39
Poor	R41
Poor dating choice	R43
Pothead/drug-users	R50

In addition to the stigmatizing messages that the young men reported in this study, many of my respondents detailed experiences from their lives that illustrate the types of ways that various social spaces can have lasting effects on the perceived stigmas held by individuals. Take for example this experience with family during the Thanksgiving holiday from Landon:

> **Landon: Every time I come around to a family event, "Oh, there go that faggot.", or, "He's gay", or side talk, mumbling to somebody else...Close. Well, last year, I had an incident on Thanksgiving and it was both. I don't know. Like a whole bunch of people came to my granny house and, I don't know, somebody just started talking about I was gay and everybody just started attacking me like, "Oh my gosh, you faggot." and yada yada yada. It was like 10 people just, right there, just ridiculing.**

It is clear from Landon's description of this family gathering that this was a traumatic experience. He details that this type of verbal bashing is not unique to this one experience for as he says, it happens "every time." These experiences can be directly targeted to the stigmatized individual or mumbled with just enough volume for the subject to hear. From the description above, the stigmatizing experience can feel like an attack on one's personhood and in the case of this respondent, it created a lasting memory. Other respondents have also expressed the ways that stigmatizing experiences have left lingering impressions on their self-understanding and identity formations. For example, Trey details a harrowing experience with his peers that highlight the types of emotions that can come from stigmatizing experiences:

> **Trey: "There was one particular incident I'll never forget. I was in the eighth grade. There were 4 guys sitting along the rail…I knew because I have classes with them and normally when I was younger I used to walk with my head down because I had low self-esteem but I knew that this was the only way that I could go to get to where I needed to be. So, I kept saying let me get past them let me get past them because one of them I knew would always bother me so I kind of knew that something was going to happen so I'm walking by and I hear them say "Here comes this faggot." And one of them spit on me and I remember just going to the bathroom and crying because I felt like I had nobody to go to. Even though looking back now I know I have my mom at the time I felt I had nobody to go to. I went to the bathroom and cried and cried I was in there for like an hour ahead miss one of my classes. It was just difficult, and I dealt with a lot on my own growing up because I didn't tell anyone what was going on with me. I opened up to my mom last year also about**

suicide at the age of 14 I contemplated suicide I didn't quite know what to do or how to do it but I thought about it really strongly like I don't want to live anymore and at age 16 I attempted suicide.

In this episode that is shared by Trey, school emerges as another social space where respondents were subjected to stigmatizing experiences concerning their sexualities. This incident is just as violent as the previous one above where the subject of the interview was attacked for his gay identity. Yet, in a much more aggressive way, Trey was physically attacked when he was spit upon. This incident also had an impact on his scholastic achievement as he missed class due to the negative experience. Furthermore, the effects of this encounter were clearly long-lasting as he detailed his thoughts and attempts concerning suicide. This interview went on to reveal that Trey avoided going to college for fear of being treated in the same way. From his perspective, college would just be a place where he would be subjected to even more negative treatment at the hands of his peers. With this information, it is undeniable that stigmatizing experiences concerning sexual orientation can have long-lasting damaging effects on the self-esteem, self-worth, and educational trajectories of some Black gay men.

Yet, these young men were not just experiencing stigma associated with their sexualities, but also they reported strong memories of being treated negatively due to their racial identities. While the experiences surrounding sexualities tended to be very explicit and typically verbal, much of the racial experiences that respondents reported, tended to be implicit or occurred from a sense of discrimination or maltreatment. For example, Nicholas mentioned that he has been called by a racial epithet before but also shares in detail an implicit bias he felt by his presence at an event:

Nicholas: I mean, I've been called a nigger before, by a white person. I've been... There's this joke, I don't know if you heard it, but it's not really a joke. But it's like, this black guy was applying for a job and he gave his address and the guy was like, "What's your apartment number?" And he's like, "What, what do you mean? Why do I have to have an apartment? 'Cause I'm black." So, that's happened to me before in real life, not as a joke. I've had... I used to do forensics, where I would I go give a speech in the Bay tournaments and I've had the experience of being the only black person at a competition. And it being like, "Oh, he's, they let him... He's not really

> **good, he's just here to represent the black schools, so that there's a sense of diversity and inclusion." Although, I knew I was fierce! But I've had that energy; I've overheard those conversations before, so.**

The preceding passage identifies key language that is used to disparage Black Americans. A few respondents commented on having been called nigger or being treated explicitly different due to their race much like the messages they had heard about their sexualities. Notably, the experiences of Nicholas around his race seemed to be more of a sense of overhearing or a simple sense of differential treatment rather than an explicit directing of negative action towards his person. Similarly, Corey details his attitude to those who approach his Blackness with reservation or fear:

> **Corey: People lock their doors when I walk by, they move out the way when I'm walking down the street. I don't care, "Fuck out the way." You dig? That kind of racism I don't mind. Fuck out of my way. You can be scared, be intimidated. You dig, don't touch me, we're fine. Don't say nothing rude, don't look at me crazy.**

Corey argues that certain types of racism are to his benefit in life. He expresses his comfort with people moving out of his way intentionally or to avoid him as a benefit to his life. Here, Corey has capitalized on this fear of his race and believes that it ensures others won't bother him. Rather than be bothered by their fear, he encourages it and seems to be okay with a fear of Blackness that doesn't cause him physical harm or discomfort.

Across these detailed stigmatizing experiences tied to sexuality or race, multiple social institutions arise to create an enveloping effect on the social actor in question. Family, peers, co-workers, and even strangers on the street are all viable spaces where stigmatizing sentiments about one's race or sexuality can be heard, felt, and seen. The intersectional nature of identity and place, thus, create unique conditions under which Black gay, pansexual, and bisexual men must reconcile their relationships with themselves and relationships with others. The experiences and messages detailed here undoubtedly have lasting effects on the ways that these young men seek to engage the social world and the places that they frequent.

The copious amount of stigmatizing messaging and stigmatizing experiences that Black gay, pansexual, and bisexual men reported in this study has set the stage for the role that the organizational space plays in their everyday lives. By their participation in the organization, the men in this study demonstrate *how* they negotiate these stigmas and the intersectional nature of these stigmas. The organizational space represents a social location where these young men learn and develop a public identity, teach one another how to unspoil their identities, and create community among one another. Across the following three chapters, I explore how these young men negotiate these stigmas. First, drawing on interview data I turn to how these young men individually negotiate their racial and sexual identities and prioritize these identifications. Then, using participant observation I detail how organizational participants unspoil their identities through teaching one another this new stigma response technique as they reject traditional forms of covering and passing. Finally, the third section examines how the organizational space provides a sanctuary to reinterpret and redefine religious teachings, especially as they pertain to religiously-based sexual stigma.

Chapter 3: Negotiating the Incompatible: Race & Sexuality at UpLiftLA

How are young Black, gay men experiencing intersectional stigma? Furthermore, how are these men negotiating the stigmas associated with their identities? In this section, I turn to interviews conducted with a subset of the young men who attend the meetings at *UpLiftLA* to build on prior research that offered a framework to understand the negotiation of multiple stigmatized identities. Prior work has examined the ways that Black gay men come to prioritize and express an identity politic rooted in their coalesced sense of self. In this vein, studies that have examined the identity expressions and formations of Black gay men have argued that the articulations of these identities have meaningful impacts on how these men come to engage with the social institutions, spaces, and actors within their everyday milieu.

Using a typology developed by sociologist Marcus Hunter, we can better understand how the young men in this study work over time to create meaningful expressions of identity. In his interview-based study, Hunter posits three model-types to understand the intersection of racial and sexual identity—Interlocking, Up–Down, Public–Private. He writes, "In the interlocking conceptualization, race and sexuality were signified as united identities for the individual, often expressed as 'Blackgay.' In the up–down model, respondents privileged one identity over the other, often expressed as 'Black-then-gay' or 'gay-then-Black.' Finally, in the public–private model racial and sexual identification were specified through a specific understanding of space, wherein race is perceived as a public identity and sexuality is considered a private identity, often expressed as 'Black and gay' (Hunter 2010). These "ideal types" are useful in trying to categorize the many ways that race and sexuality coalesce among these young men. While Hunter's work reveals how Black gay men understand the simultaneity of their sexual and racial identities and how they may use these identity formations to respond to stigma, I build on this analysis in key ways. First, I offer further insight into the experiences that inform these different classifications and highlight the types of

experiences and conditions under which these particular identity formations take root in this population. Second, I offer a fourth categorization that rejects an explicit prioritization of either racial or sexual identity. Third, I offer a deeper investigation into the ways that these identities may change over time. Specifically, in the course of this work, most respondents were interviewed at more than one point in time. As such, I highlight the changing nature of these identities, both racial and sexual, and illustrate the importance of recognizing the perpetually shifting locations that respondents find themselves along racial and sexual spectrums.

Among individual interviews, respondents highlighted the experiences over the life-course that have shaped their individual racial and sexual identities. Each passage highlights a variety of occurrences and draws to the forefront the difficulties that these young men have had in other spaces with trying to coalesce their identities. In this section, we can see individual glimpses into the lives of each participant and highlight the diversity of racial and sexual identity expression.

Interlocking Identities

Exploring Black gay young men and the messages that they have received from family, friends, and societal influences elucidates the varying trajectories of the coalescing of their identities. If we take Hunter's suggestion that identity is fluid, what then are the mechanisms that facilitate movement to and among these different identity categorizations? Respondents highlight the many realms of their experiences and across all spaces show that many existing institutions do not provide supportive environments for their growth into adulthood. Thus, these passages describe moments within a continuous life process rather than a permanent state of being. Take Rahsaan for example:

> **TW: What are some of the messages that you've received about being bisexual?**
> **Rahsaan: Well Black and bisexual…. the first message that I received was that I'm going to hell…um, and it was a sin, and it was a choice I made on my own…Um, my parents really didn't approve, well they definitely didn't approve of any homosexuality at all. The message I got after that would be that um…any gay man had HIV and that they were sick or disgusting…and that was pretty much the first two messages that I got…about that.**

In the preceding interview quote, Rahsaan describes messages that he feels are specific to the experiences of Black, bisexual young men. Rahsaan's automatic inclusion of his race when prompted about his sexuality reinforces the notion of *interlocking* racial and sexual identities; and as such, he suggests that he cannot separate these two aspects of his identity. Additionally, the impact that his family had on his own understandings of his sexual and racial identities is evident in this description. He knows his sexuality is not "approved" and that his family viewed it as a choice that he made—a wrong choice. Rahsaan emphasizes that being Black and bisexual is seen as a sin and condemnation to hell, which highlights the crucial role that religion and the Black church plays in the experiences of many of these young men. Here it is evident that religious communities and sometimes home-life can be difficult spaces for these young men to navigate in the effort to reconcile their identities. While very prominent among the young men of this study, interlocking identities are not the only ways that Black and gay identities coalesce.

When reporting what messages they had received about their sexuality, many respondents could not speak of sexual identity without mentioning a racial identity. While the majority of young mens' identities in this study correspond with the interlocking categorization, almost all respondents reported negative messages from friends, family, and other societal mediums. One might assume that given the huge amounts of negativity towards their sexuality that more young men would hide this particular aspect of themselves—perhaps with a public-private negotiation of their identities; however, among interview respondents, this was not the prevailing case. The continual and constant barrage of negativity that these young men face surrounding their sexuality inside and outside of the home seems to be the impetus for seeking out a space that helps to reinforce a particular cohesive self-conceptualization. Building on Hunter's three types, we can see that the emergence of these identities come at varying times and are solidified as young men share their memories individually within interviews and as a collective group in weekly leadership meetings. Additionally, looking at the

language they use to categorize these self-conceptions frequently suggests the importance of other aspects of their identities such as religion or family structure. Much like the findings of Moore's work concerning Black lesbian identities, the racial and sexual identities of these young men are complex and perpetually changing as different aspects of identity (racial, sexual, religious, etc.) hold varying degrees of importance for sexual and racial minority individuals across their differing life experiences (2011).

In the following excerpt, Lonnie expresses his understanding of equally important racial and sexual identities:

> **T: What's more important to you? Your racial identity or your sexual identity?**
> **Lonnie: I feel like they're both equally balanced because nowadays being gay isn't really a big thing because everyone is coming out.**

Lonnie argues that being gay isn't truly a big thing anymore since "everyone is coming out." His perception that being gay is becoming more acceptable and visible suggests that Lonnie has increased comfort in the company of others who are openly expressing their sexual identities. His comments also suggest that his racial identity isn't "really a big thing" like his sexuality might have been in the past. He makes this by elevating his sexuality to the acceptability space of his racial identity and they both have an equal salience in his everyday life.

Interlocking identities were the most represented identity positions in the sample. 27/50 interviewed respondents fell into this category. While some explicitly mentioned they see the equality in both identities, others, like Rahsaan, implied this interlocking nature to their identities by correcting me and answering questions from an interlocking perspective.

Up-Down Identities

Another way that young men came to coalesce these identities is seen in the up-down identity model. Here the most salient example comes from a young man who found difficulties with being "embraced by the Black community" as his sexuality become more evident. Take Malachi's

schoolhouse memories as an example:

> **Me- So you identify as Black. Can you tell me—**
> **Malachi-Gay first. Black second.**
> **Me-Gay first but Black second?**
> **Malachi-Mhm.**
> **Me-Ok. You said gay first, Black second, what made you say that?**
> **Malachi- So in my gay development, I wasn't embraced by the Black community. Girls would bully me; I was bullied a lot in school.**
> **Me- By girls?**
> **Malachi-Girls and guys.**
> **Me-Ok.**
> **Malachi-And I hated Black people in elementary school. I did. I hated them. Because I was tired of getting rocks thrown at me; I fought every day at school. Not really starting the fights but just people would...like, why? And I remember asking the teacher, "Why? Why are they bothering me? Leave me alone." And I remember snapping one day...HA! And my mom took me out of the school and she put me in a predominately white school.**

As expressed by Malachi, he remembers coming into his own gay identity and felt rejected by the Black students at his elementary school. This in turn, seems to have solidified his conclusion to prioritize his sexual orientation over his racial identity. Again, experiences of violence and bullying play a key role in affecting the processes that undergird his self-conception of gay first, and Black second. By experiencing multiple physical threats, including having rocks thrown at him from people who he believed identified the same as he did racially, Malachi decides to identify more solidly with a gay identity.

Notably, Malachi's mother removes him from his school and places him in a "predominately white school" environment, which he found *more accepting* further solidifying a disassociation with his racial identity as primary to self-conception. This move to physically shift the space around the child is a very powerful one. It suggests that in many cases, schools and larger ethnoracial communities can lead to particular attitudinal differences among young men. Again, this begs the question, if schools, home, and larger neighborhood communities are proving challenging for these young men, where are they going in order to cope with these experiences?

In another example of up-down identities, Earl draws a distinction between what he

considers his unchanging culture, or "being black" and his choice to embrace gayness:

> **TW: when you think about your identity, and you said you identify as being Black and gay, how would you rank those to you personally? Is one more important than the other or are they equal?**
> **Earl: I feel like being Black is a little more important to me than the gayness because it should be an important factor. The color of my skin is my culture and that's what I'm about, my ancestry. You can't change being black but you can change your preference. I'm not saying it's going to happen for me or it will or won't happen but it's not a stone type of thing so I try to embrace that.**
> **TW: You say you try to embrace the blackness in a different way than you embrace the gayness**
> **Earl: Not necessarily but if I had to pick, I would definitely take black over gayness.**

Through the comparison of race to sexuality, Earl clearly still finds some value in working to embrace the possibility of change in his sexual identity. For him, his gayness is a preferential choice that could one day change even if at this time he doesn't deem this a plausible reality. Conversely, Earl discusses his racial identity as his unalterable culture tied to him via ancestry. Not only does he argue that his racial identity is unchangeable, but also he pushes this further by saying that one's racial identity *should* be an important factor. While he weighs an importance on each identifier, he undeniably would prioritize his Blackness since he views it as immutable. By evoking ancestry, Earl seems to suggest that there is an awareness of history in his view of identity and his sense of the importance of Blackness is passed down to him, unlike his gayness which he has elected to embrace.

Public-Private Identities

One of the less-common responses for identity negotiation was that of a public-private identity. While most respondents suggested they felt their sexualities to be public knowledge, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the respondents in this section felt that sexuality is something that should be disclosed selectively. Take Lamont's discussion of how he uses his sexuality and the sexualities of others to manage his public social life:

> **Lamont: You know so it's like with one side you know I'm more so comfortable being myself, but at the same time I'm the same person wherever I go, my personality doesn't change or anything like that, you know. And also with that being said, um, I'm really self-conscious about who it is I kick it with a lot of times. You**

know like just being out in public, it's also one of those things where it's like there's a time and a place for everything, in a way...you know like there's certain friends I won't kick it with you know in certain environments or whatever because like maybe they're just like a big queen or you know, which I don't have a problem with you…do you…but I'll see you tonight at Cantina or whatever, you know what I mean? And everything like that, but yeah.

Lamont's response details how crucial it is for his own comfort to control the people that he is seen with in public spaces that may not be explicitly gay-friendly. While he argues that his personality stays the same, he believes that someone might be "a big queen" or as other respondents have suggested in the space, "extra'd out." Lamont works to manage his response to me as embodying both an openness to those who may be flamboyant in their sexualities while simultaneously arguing that there is a place and time for their public gay expressions. He mentions Cantina, or Fiesta Cantina, a popular bar in the "gayborhood" of Los Angeles, West Hollywood. Lamont mentioning that he is self-conscious shows how much the opinions of others, mainly the non-stigmatized, impact his own comfort. In many ways, Lamont relies on traditional stigma management tactics of covering by working to maintain a consistent personality while also managing with whom he is seen to diminish the relevance or awareness of his sexuality.

Other respondents also repeated this refrain of having certain social spaces being appropriate for acknowledging one's sexuality. For example, Donovan argued that his place of employment may be a space that can see his race, but not his sexuality:

Donovan- So, I mean... I guess, now that it's 2012, it's a lot of benefits of being gay and stuff like that. You can do stuff and you're supposed... I guess, you're supposed to be "Black." I don't really see that as being a negative or positive for me anymore. Just people's views on it, like it's different. So, I... 'Cause I'm not not that type of person that's like, "Oh, it's a positive thing for me being gay." Hey, y'all, I'm gay", and they treat me like this, or something like that. So, everyday I'm just me. I can't really, really be anybody else but me. I can't... I don't really be like, "Okay, well, you gotta do this because I'm gay". At the end of the day, everybody don't know at work, but the ones that do... I wanna be respected as me, not as a gay Black male. So, I never wanna be that... I have to be Black because they see that, but I don't have to be like I'm gay.

Donovan expresses that he feels being gay can and is sometimes a positive asset in the world at the

time of this interview or 2012. He expresses that he considers his sexuality as almost neutral by suggesting that his own views of being gay are neither positive nor negative, but rather that the impressions of others are what may vary. Donovan expresses a view that brings together his personal experience with an impression that the world itself has changed for the better. He argues that at work some of his co-workers do not know about his sexuality; yet, he cannot hide his Blackness. His final sentiment, *"I have to be Black because they see that, but I don't have to be like I'm gay,"* is the perfect example of the dilemma facing the 2 young men who openly identified with being public about race and private about sexuality.

Deemphasized Identities

Appearing in this data is the emergence of another conceptualization of racial and sexual identity that either 1) deemphasizes both racial and sexual identities as important or 2) prioritizes one identity and deems the other irrelevant, rather than secondary. I offer a fourth conceptualization of identity, "Deemphasized" where respondents see race and sexuality as simply minor parts of their larger identity and refuse to assign any importance to these aspects of their identity. Consider Courtney's perspective on these minimized aspects of self:

> **TW: What does it mean to be gay to you?**
> **Courtney: It doesn't, it's not. To me personally, I don't. It's not. It doesn't mean much and let me explain why I say that. I'm so much more than that. I don't surround my life around my sexuality and I don't make it a pillar in my life. It's just a small part of who I am. You know what I mean. Yeah, I can be a Black man, I can be 6'5, I happen to do music. You know there are so many aspects of me in my life so it doesn't. It's not something that stands out to me.**

This fourth category is unique because it represents a position of identity formation that tries to respond to the often derogatory and conflicting messages about one's race and sexuality by downplaying their significance in overall importance. Courtney suggests that he cannot be defined solely by his race and sexuality and refuses to impart any importance on them in his everyday life. By focusing on equalizing all aspects of one's identity it is a conscious resistance of attaching too

much value to any one aspect of self. Similarly, Norman confided that over time he has found his identities to be equal; however, unlike those in the interlocking category Norman presents these identities as equally *unimportant*:

> **TW So you feel like your race and sexual orientation are equal?**
> **Norman: Equal in the sense where I don't have to deal with one of them more than the other. If my skin were lighter, more people would recognize the fact that I'm Asian without having to realize it by looking at my face. Therefore, the things I would have to deal with if people did recognize my genes immediately would be so different than the things I deal without recognizing that fact. I don't think your sexual orientation and your race can be equal at all. Both are varied so widely. I hope I'm making some sense?!**
> **TW: So would you say to you, personally, they're not important?**
> **Norman: Today…absolutely not important at all. About ten years ago, not!**
> **TW: So 10 years ago they mattered? What changed?**
> **Norman: The times…10 years ago I was younger and thought my race and sexual orientation was the only thing people saw when they looked at me.**

Here the deemphasized identities are articulated as equally unimportant due to a change in "the times." Norman reveals his earlier perception that his race and sexuality were the only things that others noticed about him. Also, Norman discusses his idea that his Asian heritage is masked by his darker complexion. While both Norman and Courtney work to deemphasize their racial and sexual identities as equally unimportant, other respondents valued one identity aspect and diminished the other. Take Tyson's response, for example:

> **TW: So, my last few questions for you... So, if you had to say which one was more important to you, would you say that being African American...**
> **Tyson: African American.**
> **TW: Being African American is more important to you?**
> **Tyson: It's very important to me.**
> **TW: Okay. Okay. So, you would say African American first, bisexual second?**
> **Tyson: Well, I wouldn't even... I don't consider being bisexual important. I just don't. I don't think of being bisexual any more than I think of what I'm eating for breakfast. It's a decision that I made and it's really all it is to me.**

While Tyson emphasized the importance of his identity as African-American, he adamantly denied any importance whatsoever to his sexual identity as bisexual. Furthermore, he articulated that his sexuality was a choice that he pursued rather than the common response of organizational

participants that felt they always knew they were innately different (i.e. gay, bisexual, etc.). He goes further to equate sexuality as something as trivial as his breakfast choice. By drawing a parallel between his chosen sexual identity and his everyday basic eating decisions, Tyson illustrates another form of the deemphasized identity model.

Drawing on information about individual identities and life experiences that have come to bear on these identifications provides important information for understanding the types of interactions that occur within *UpLiftLA*. This section has illuminated the narratives young men tell to reconcile their current racial and sexual identifications and highlights how few spaces there are where these young men can feel validated in these identities. Additionally, the section explores the negotiation of these identifications through *interlocking*, *up-down*, *public-private,* and *deemphasized* models that suggest a more diverse response to negative experiences surrounding sexuality. Importantly, while *public-private* identities were not as present in interview data, those identities become a clear point of contention within the organizational space. It is clear that for these young men the negotiation of incompatible racial and sexual identities is a crucial developmental juncture in the face of anti-gay stigma. The next segment looks at how messages concerning this negotiation are transferred explicitly from one person in the group to another. The organizational space is the place where these young men come together to discuss and coach one another on how to be comfortable in their own identities even within homophobic environments or contexts. In doing so, they create their own community that exists outside of mainstream white, gay culture and co-construct appropriate understandings of racial and sexual identities. Additionally, the conversations within the space can be both supportive of particular identity models while discouraging of others.

Shifting Spaces: Moving Along Racial and Sexual Spectrums

While I believe these identity types provide accurate archetypes to understand the potential ways that Black gay men may come to respond to intersectional stigma, these young men are

continually working to exist comfortably within stigmatizing spaces. As such, I offer the next few cases to illustrate how some of the young men in this study identified publicly as one way and then changed to another public identification in the course of the research. Additionally, through these examples I show not only do personal identifications change throughout continual life experiences, but also do the saliences of those identities change with the times, echoing Norman's sentiments in the previous section.

One of my respondents has continually been an informant in my work at UpLiftLA. I met Donald in February 2013 and interviewed him almost immediately after he permanently relocated to Los Angeles. In our original meeting, Donald described his sexual identity as gay. And offered the following about this orientation:

> **Donald: I don't really know how to put that into words because that's just who I am. I mean I wake up every day and this is me. So as far as what are the positives of being gay? Just living my life. I don't do anything in particular that says this defines you as your sexuality. So I just feel like being me. I'm a number of things. I look this way and I dress this way and I go these places and I think my sexuality is just something that is a part of who I am. It's not the whole picture. But I mean, I'm attracted to guys. I don't know how else to explain that. It's just real…With the gay community, I feel that, it's so funny because we always say don't judge us. We say straight people they think this about us. We're like this and they think we're that. But we label ourselves. We sit here and say your feminine, you're masculine, you're a top, and you're a bottom. So you're already being judged by a community that's already being judged and they have this negative stereotype for us; and we're putting ourselves in a box and saying this is what you are and I need to define who you are to make me feel better about myself.**

In this description of his sexuality and his coming out, Donald reveals that his personal feeling is sexuality doesn't fully describe him. From this conversation, Donald might be considered to be in the Deemphasized categorization in how he suggests that sexuality is not the entire picture.

Yet, when I followed up with Donald in 2016 about his feelings regarding the importance of his racial and sexual identities, he made it very clear that he no longer identified as "gay":

> **TW: I asked you how you identified your race and sexual orientation and you said African-American, Filipino, and Irish, & gay. Do you feel one of those is more important to you or would you say you think they're equally important?**

Donald: Well, first off, I'm not gay. I'm MSM. To me, I value them the same. My ethnicity is on the outside and my sexual identity on the inside.
TW: So inside v outside… then do you consider the sexual identity private?
Donald: I'm a private person in general. So yes and no, I'm not rocking a rainbow 24/7 or constantly throwing it out there but if someone asks I'm not hiding it.
TW: Why the shift to identify as MSM?
Donald: I mean it's a term that simply states that I'm a man who has sex with men regardless of anything else. Correct? I just don't like "gay". I'm sure more people would use it if they were aware of the meaning. A lot of people only know straight, gay, or bi...Well, I like same-gender loving MSM I think it's general enough to not have too many biases or restrictions. Like I said gay, bi, and straight are all general terms used in the media to allow others to understand. I never really enjoyed the word "gay" because it's used quite commonly as a negative term.

This conversation and Donald's strong resistance to the term "gay" is a prime example of the ways that sexuality identification is continually changing across the life course. Donald corrects the previously provided information from our 2013 interview and asserts his new identification as MSM. He also articulates what I would consider a version of the interlocking identity. While he suggests that his sexuality is inside and his ethnicity is outside, he rejects the idea that this sexuality is "private". Rather, he confides that he finds equal value in his racial and sexual identities, but that his sexual identity isn't necessarily something he likes to flaunt around. I believe Donald's rejection of the term gay is a prime example of the ways that stigmatizing information about one's identity can *spoil* that identity on an individual level. Donald has come to understand and, in this case, to almost take ownership of the stigma associated with identifying as gay. Evoking a sense of double consciousness, borrowing the language of DuBois, it is clear that Donald is actively working to disassociate himself from the "negative…biases [and] restrictions" that come with being associated with "gay." In many ways, the decision to identify as MSM rather than to identify as gay is a strategic way to avoid the stigma associated with being gay by choosing another term to mitigate the response that he may get from other people.

Another respondent that I initially interviewed in 2013 presented a different sense of his sexuality at that time. Having only recently come out to his family, Julian almost described his sexuality at that point as something that he selectively confirmed for others:

> **Julian: The ones that I decided to tell like the ones that I could trust you basically said it is what it is and it's just me so they didn't really care. certain people kind of new and in high school I just started to show myself so to say I just didn't really care how certain people saw me so I just acted the way that I wanted to act. but the people that I confirmed it to would be the people but I knew who would be able to accept it and basically those were some responses were like it's your life it's not mine and you are the way you are and I like that you are gay. like if you were straight you probably would not be the same person so it was pretty much accepting. and with people like my mom it was the complete opposite. she basically said that it was not me I was falling with the people that I was hanging around with and it's a phase and I don't know what I'm doing all that stuff. every one of my cousins that came to me and told me that he actually knew and that ended up being a good reaction because he told me he knew and he loves me no matter what. and that we both knew how the family worked and so we should keep it between me and you and he was so serious because he said if you tell anyone else don't tell them that I know because then they are going to be mad at him. he basically wanted to make sure that it wasn't a phase and that it was the real me and just do what you have to do and that no one needs to know**

Julian's preliminary answers about his experiences with coming out to others about his sexuality is quite similar to the discussions of strategic outness discussed above with Donald. Here, Julian shows that he chose selectively to disclose his identity to others that he perceived would be accepting of his identity. Julian highlights another aspect of this process that emerged where his friends were more accepting of his identity than his family and, specifically, his mother questioned the veracity of his sexuality. Given these experiences with family and how his experiences were with coming out to them, Julian might consider to keep his sexuality private as his cousin urges him at the end of this transcript selection. As I did with Donald, I followed up with Julian in 2016 about his attitude towards coalescing his racial and sexual identities. The following was his response:

> **Julian: I think being Black is more important. Being gay is something that everybody deals with, well not *every* family, but every race deals with. I think that's something familiar. But, Black is something different. You go through something more being Black and being gay, especially being in LA in South Central, it's something different. So I think I have more pride in being Black; that's what I care more**

about—me being Black and my heritage.

From Julian's response, we can see that his prioritization is his racial identity. In particular, he notes the importance of his location in South Central Los Angeles as a specific reason that he finds his Blackness or heritage most important. Additionally, he argues that there is something unique about the Black experience rather than the issue of sexuality within families. In doing so, he shows that sexuality itself, or discussions around being gay, can occur across race groups.

Yet, he suggests that the addition of a Black experience coupled with his sexuality creates a reality that is uniquely different from that experienced by others. While this description would immediately seem to fit the up-down model since Julian emphasized his racial heritage, this was not his final response. Several hours after our discussion, Julian called me to let me know that he had reflected further and felt that he had not accurately portrayed his feelings about his identities. He came back and spoke:

Julian: I want to change my answer--I think I care about them both equally

The revision of his original response indicates the transitory nature of the importance of these identities. Often researchers have suggested the salience of identities change in different contexts, but are unable to formally show how respondents may change under these conditions. Julian's change may be reflective of the timing of this conversation. While his first response reflected the importance of his growing up in South Central, his decision to revise the prioritization of his racial and sexual identities while at the Black LGBT organization space indicates that physical location may play such a role in helping individuals to define the significance of their identities.

CONCLUSION

As revealed in interview data, young men expressed a lack of space and ability to explore their gay identities at home, church, and in schools. The anti-gay experiences that these young men reference in their life narratives illuminates the importance of understanding experiences across the life course

that can shape identity development. Respondents claimed various sexual identity statuses and preferred certain identifiers above others given their own comfort with terms and desires towards others. I add to Hunter's three categories (interlocking, public-private, and up-down) a fourth categorization, 'deemphasized' where young men deemphasize the relevance of racial identity and sexual identity in everyday life. These young men all acknowledged a 'gay community' while still identifying with such terms as gay, homosexual, bisexual, and/or pansexual.

These data also illuminate the many ways that Black, 'gay' young men negotiate seemingly incompatible sexual and racial categories by deemphasizing both identities, prioritizing one over the other, keeping their sexuality hidden and private, or finding race and sexuality inextricable. The experiences underlying the choices made by these young men to identify with particular terms and how to negotiate these identities shed light on the importance of life course continuity and highlight a desire among many of these young men to assert their stigmatized identities in the face of anti-gay stigma. Additionally, these identity model-types are explored in the interactional space that is *UpLiftLA,* where the young men have an opportunity to express their own identities, instruct others on how they should express their identities, and to challenge one another's choice of expression. Perhaps, most importantly, we see that these negotiations among the young men are situated within strong narratives that justify how they have come to express their own identity. The ability of these young men to express a story or narrative that underlies a current identity choice reinforces 1) that identities are changing and shifting according to continued life experience and 2) that some narrative justifications can be deemed as appropriate while others are challenged and rejected (Polletta et al 2011).

Chapter 4: You Have Internalized Self-Hate: *Unspoiling* as a Stigma Response Strategy

In this chapter, I draw primarily from three-years of ethnographic fieldnotes at a Los Angeles young men's development organization, *UpLiftLA*. Over these three-years of observation, ethnographic fieldnotes were collected at weekly meetings, offsite events (i.e. educational presentations, conferences, and balls), and informal social gatherings (i.e. clubs, birthday parties, brunch gatherings and dinners).

Fieldnotes and interview data collected were organized and analyzed through a process of abductive analysis, an iterative methodological approach involving close analysis of primary data in light of relevant theoretical literatures (Timmermans & Tavory 2012). In the analysis that follows, I lay out the conditions under which unspoiling is advanced as a viable stigma response strategy and how unspoiling work in the organizational space leads to the hope for destigmatization of identities.

Living with the Multiplicative Consciousness: *Stigma Management Options*

Under the guise of health education, the organizational space of *UpliftLA,* represents a community space that is bounded and based on ties among young men in Los Angeles who seek to develop cohesive sexual and racial identities. It becomes a site where they can discuss views of the larger gay community, the Black community, and deal with personal and social issues (e.g. homelessness, anti-gay stigma, joblessness, etc.) that are frequently experienced by young Black gay men. Through these conversations, interactions and participation in the organizational space the young men explore the transitional natures of their racial and sexual identities.

In the ensuing findings sections, I first detail the ways that covering and passing are used by young men in the space in their discussions of navigating racialized spaces. I also explicate how the tensions around the unacceptability of covering and passing work to create the conditions under which unspoiling emerges. I then show how these young men work to unspoil their identities and how the process of unspoiling sets the stage for a social movement towards larger collective identity

destigmatization.

Living Up to Black Hypermasculinity and Gay Expectations

Messages about how young men should portray a public sexuality are imbued with understandings that are routed in racial stereotypes and perceived expectations. The young men believe that there is a noticeable difference between the way that they are understood as gay men and the ways that other White, Latino, or Asian men are gay, especially as it relates to presentation and sexual roles. Sexual roles and social presentation of those sexual roles play an important part in defining the boundaries between these different age and racial groups. While they are linked by their sexual orientation, these "communities" and "sub-communities" as described by the young men are varied and distinct. Their discussion of various races and sexual role expectations show precisely how these young men transmit and co-construct negotiations of their racial and sexual identities within the organizational space. Take the following fieldnote excerpt from a discussion of the expectations and desires of Black gay men:

> **Malachi argues that Black men must be "strong and macho" and they cannot be sensitive. He adds that they all want someone straight acting, or no one 'clockable'. He continues by saying he believes this is true because these types of men "give a sense of security." He adds that he believes many Black gays feel this way because that way "they won't suspect us if something goes down". The boys continue to discuss the problem with trying to perceive someone's sexual role from their outward expressions of masculinity. Chadrick comments that many times "people scream 'I'm a top! I'm a top!', but when the lights go out..." Malachi dramatically pauses to finish his sentence "then legs go up!" Many in the room laugh and Malachi asks "Do you think it's internalized homophobia? What can we do to combat that?"**

The conversation between the young men about outward expressions of masculinity and whether these expressions imply a specific sexual role conveys the importance of gender appropriate behavior for these Black men. Malachi details the expectation that Black men are expected to lack emotions and be "macho." These perceptions that Black men are seen to be hypermasculine are consistent with previous research that has hypothesized hypermasculinity as a coping mechanism among young Black men (Seaton 2007). Pope and colleagues also suggest that gay men sometimes

display these hypermasculine traits to contend with the negation of their masculinities (2000). Another major concern for some of these young men is being "clockable," meaning that their sexuality can be discovered or detected from behavior and appearance alone. Often by using traditional stigma response techniques to mask their true sexual orientations (i.e., passing, covering), these young men protect themselves from threats of violence or being ostracized. These presentations are extremely tied to perceptions of sexual roles and Chadrick adds that "covering" with a masculine gender presentation can also be accompanied with presentation as a top, even though that may not be the case. In this sense, "covering" may work not only to mask sexual orientation from the threat of racial group castigation, but also to conceal true sexual positions to maintain a true Black masculinity.

It is evident that these young men experience the expectations of being strong, macho, and being heterosexual as especially important for Black men. There is a particular type of Black masculinity that makes it difficult for these young men to exist in predominately Black community environments. For example, consider this fieldnote capturing Dwayne and Tory's discussion of the differences between Black, White and Latino men:

> **Dwayne begins to discuss men of different races and how it can be difficult to recognize their sexual orientations. He says that people of different races are "more feminine than how we Black people are." He continues by saying that one might think "oh he gay" but that might not actually be the case. He says as an example that "Hispanic dudes arch their eyebrows and sometimes their girlfriends will even do it for them."**
> **Tory agrees with Dwayne saying that White guys are feminine in general: "They are very, very feminine, but they turn the corner and are kissing their girlfriend."**

From these different descriptions of White and Latino men, Dwayne and Tory both agree that men of other races are simply more effeminate than Black men, thereby making it harder to distinguish between heterosexuals and homosexuals based on appearance or behavior. Dwayne commenting that even female partners of Latino men accept arching of eyebrows, an action that is typically understood as a feminine beauty process, makes Black men more masculine than others. The young

men in the space have come to essentialize their perceptions of Latinos as "feminized" as a group and juxtapose their own masculinities against this stereotype of Latino men. This posturing of Black masculinity to be understood as more masculine than Whites or Latinos mirror the findings of Pascoe (2007) who found in contrast that young white men in high school found Black and Latino behaviors more feminine." Given this conversation and the preceding one, it is clear that traditional stigma responses, such as "covering," within the Black community are of critical importance under the guise of hyper-masculinity for many of these young men.

These examples highlight the ways that expressions of sexuality and racial expectations impact the impressions of the young men in the organizational space and how stigma management techniques are still useful in many situations. However, in order to manage a stigma, these young men must accept their own identities as stigmatized. Often, the young men in this study resisted to simply manage the stigma in order to comfortably fit in. In the next section, I how some of these young men respond to these constraints while actively rejecting traditional stigma response (i.e., covering). In so doing, some of the young men work to *unspoil* their identities and to prioritize their own identity comfort over the comfort of others or in Goffmanian terms: the "normals".

Being Extra'd Out: Passing & Covering in the Hood

Weekly, a group of anywhere from 5-20 young Black gay men come together to discuss the various issues they face in their lives. Coming together, the young men sit in a semi-circle and engage in conversations that are facilitated by an organizational authority figure. These meetings function as "deep education" (Obrien 2011) for the young men who are socializing one another into the appropriate ways to respond to stigmatizing experiences they have outside of the space. For example, during one meeting the young men gathered together and began to discuss their opinions about how the behavior of others reflected on their public image. In the following dialogue, two

participants, Kyle and David, discuss the issues they have with the behaviors of those who may be "extra'd out":

> **Kyle: "Gays should not be extravagant or flamboyant when out in public."**
> **David: "There's a time and place for [flamboyance]."**
> **Kyle: "Living in South Central Los Angeles, I'm bothered when I see flamboyant gays on the corner, vogueing, playing house music, doing too much, or being 'extra'd out' and drawing attention to themselves."**

In this selection, Kyle notes his discomfort with others who may draw too much attention to themselves by being "extra'd out." His distaste for flamboyance is situated alongside his noting of neighborhood. Kyle offers this sentiment not just due to his own sexuality, but also because of his living geographically within a well-known Black ethnic environment where he feels too much attention being drawn to gay behaviors might cause him problems. This experience highlights how the burden of a multiplicative consciousness requires Kyle to negotiate his existence within the racial meanings of a Black environment while simultaneously negotiating the meanings of his gay sexuality. In many ways, this signifies the burden of intersectional stigma that requires Kyle to consider the ramifications of the behavior of others and how it challenges notions of Black masculinity. Kyle's sentiments invite further discussion and conversation from the group.

The facilitator of the group meetings, Henry, plays a key role in encouraging the continued probing of these ideas of public appearance and displays of sexuality within Black neighborhood contexts. Henry follows Kyle's remarks by asking of the group, *"What is 'too much'? Do we work to accommodate people and to appease others with our outward appearance?"* This question from Henry evokes Goffman's "normals" or the stigmatizer. It directly prompts the young men to consider how the behavior of the absent (yet, ever present) "normal" views the behavior and expression of these men. One young man, Tory, replies to Henry's question immediately and qualifies his response:

> **Tory: "You need to present yourself anyway you want to be comfortable with yourself. I want to be 'undetectable' and not giving a glimpse of my sexuality when I'm in public."**

In Tory's response, he notes that his own decision for self-presentation and the decisions of others should be based on individual comfort around one's sexuality. He suggests through this that his hiding or being an "undetectable" gay is rooted in his own issues with his sexuality and not the effect of so-called "normals". It is apparent from Tory's reply that while he is not acknowledging the role that the gaze of "normals" plays in his self-expression, there is an undeniable influence from this gaze in the desire to conceal one's sexuality. Tory, then, can be understood to advocate for "passing" as a strategy to conceal his sexuality in public.

Passing is held up by other young men in this group for a variety of reasons, from personal to political. One repeated source of appreciation for the stigma response approach of passing is the threat of violence. As the conversation about self-presentation continues, David chimes-in to express why he elects to pass in certain areas of his life:

> **David: "You don't need to be all extra'd out...I've been jumped before...so when I go to certain hoods I throw on my 'nigga outfit,' but I'd go out with a weave and makeup if I'm comfortable around people like the Revlons or Escadas."[5]**

Here, David's narrative against being extra'd out is rooted in his fear of encountering violence. His coded language of wearing his "nigga outfit" when going to "certain hoods" suggest he is notably orienting himself to Black spaces in Los Angeles by changing his clothing in order to avoid physical harm. In this retelling of his being "jumped" or in other words assaulted, David attributes this encountered violence to his outward expression of his sexuality and gender that violate the compulsory heterosexuality of Blackness. Furthermore, the agreement of some of the young men in the space was clear as they nodded or uttered "yep" to endorse these ideas of changing one's appearance as a way of protection. These comments highlight how these young men often find themselves in what sociologist Jason Orne calls the "line of fire" for their sexualities (2011). Thus, the multiplicative consciousness can create "lines of fire" for the expression of one's sexuality that are racialized by the burden of second sight.

While passing is clearly a viable option for some of the young men in the space, others find this to be a problematic way of dealing with stigma. These young men elect to create a distinction between hiding one's self and lessening the impact of their stigmatized identity on others by "covering". Kyle returns to the conversation to explain that he was not advocating for passing, per se, but rather for a form of covering. He is joined by Rodney and Dwayne who echo his sentiments about outward displays of sexuality:

> **Kyle: "There's a difference between hiding who you are and toning it down."**
> **Rodney: "I don't need everyone to know I'm gay based on who I hang around."**
> **Dwayne: "I can tell a gay person from a mile away…We have to respect that people don't want to have their children around 'this' and then get upset when they say something."**

Kyle's attempt to distinguish between hiding one's sexuality and toning down the public nature of that sexuality signals the importance of outwardly displaying one's sexuality but not "too much"—what I consider policing the boundaries of outness. He highlights a desire to create a clear distinction between passing and covering by heralding covering as the more socially appropriate choice. Furthermore, Rodney's comments highlight the tension that many of the men in the space noted with the sexualities of others reflecting too strongly on their own coupled with his desire for discretion. In his statement, Rodney signals a concern for what psychologist William Cross called "spotlight anxiety," or the fear that the behaviors of others would draw attention to one's own sexuality (1992). Dwayne's comments expose concerns around child sexuality and the comfort of others. By evoking the protection of the children from being around "this," which we might consider to mean his public display of sexuality, he sanctions the behavior of heterosexuals who express issues with the outness of the young men, thereby policing the emotional boundaries of those who may be bothered to be chastised for their outward expressions of sexuality.

The tension and discomfort among many of the young men in the space with acknowledging that they may be working to hide their identities created a space where hiding was

shamed, but adapting or toning one's sexuality down was approved by select group members. During another meeting, one man, Anton, expressed how he was living on the down-low or "DL,"[6] a lifestyle that was not celebrated by members of the group. One of the more respected and older men in the space offered his advice to Anton about his sexuality and why the DL was not the answer:

> **Ricky begins to offer his opinion of Anton's story and starts, "As for you being DL..." and continues to say that he can understand why he may try to present himself as the trade and may want to hide, but that it's not the best idea for him to be ultimately comfortable with himself. Ricky then begins to share a story about his own experiences and remarks that he has never been bothered like others for his sexuality, because he knows how to adapt to different environments and situations. He adds that he's "not hiding myself but being a chameleon." Others nod in agreement to this statement.**

Ricky uses his own experiences as a teaching point in order to suggest how Anton should approach his own sexual identity when among other people. By utilizing his personal story, Ricky shows that being able to blend-in among predominately Black spaces has made him like a "chameleon" which has shielded him from the antagonism from outsiders. Ricky offers this tip to Anton as a more experienced "out" gay male within the group setting and reinforces the idea of prioritizing one's own identity and comfort-levels. Ricky emphasizes that he is not hiding himself and that he is unbothered by the assumptions and reactions of others. This explicit desire to put his own identity comfortability first over the comfort of others and to remain unbothered by the perceptions of others elucidates how there exists a tension around the ideas of "covering" or "passing" among the men in the space. From this tension, some of the young men in the space come to reject these strategies altogether and *unspoiling* is born.

Rejecting Existing Strategies: Unspoiling in Spite of Stigma

While the previous section highlighted how passing and covering operated in the organizational space, there were instances were young men would reject these strategies as adequate for dealing with stigmatizing experiences. The weekly group conversations socialize group members

to re-consider taking approaches to stigma such as passing or covering as unacceptable ways to negotiate experiences with stigmatizers and instead to consider a response that rejects the stigma put on them by "normals" and to encourage discomforting "normals". On one such occasion, the young men were discussing their daily jobs and began to debate one group member's ability to wear long decorated fingernails that were a marker of his weekend work as a drag performer throughout the week as he taught at an elementary school:

> **Caden, an elementary school teacher, tells the group that he's credentialed and continues by saying, "When you get older and mature then you'll see you can do what you want when you're known and valued for what you offer...my classroom is the best."**
> **Caden continues, "you're Black first not gay."**

Caden's final statement drives home the importance of time in the processes that underlie self-understanding. It is clear from his comments that a Black identity represents the whole individual and that being "gay" comes secondary as simply another layer. In this sense, Caden exhibits what sociologist Marcus Hunter terms an "up-down" identity negotiation, where one identity is prioritized over the other; in this case, where Black identity is elevated over gay identity (2010a). By publicly prioritizing his racial identity as a result of being "older and mature," he is effectively teaching the group members how he believes they *should* understand their identities. In his remarks, Caden emphasizes the prioritization of his successful classroom to his identity and how his competence gives him the liberty to be known and valued for his work rather than judged for his identity. It is clear from this example that one reason to reject an existing stigma management response in favor of *unspoiling* is based in one's professional credentials that lend social legitimacy.

Malachi, another older member of the group, echoes Caden's advice to the younger men within the group. He suggests another reason that one may reject covering or passing as a stigma response, as seen in the following:

> **Malachi was very "pissed off" about what he had heard and wanted to thank Caden for what he shared with the group. Malachi then said to the group "you have**

> **internalized self-hate." He continued, "who the fuck cares how you look, who the fuck cares how you talk...I'm so tired of hearing that its only okay to be gay after the sun goes down or at a ball." He added, "Some people can hide their being gay, but I cannot. I've been jumped and stabbed for being gay, but I haven't changed."**

Malachi's passionate response to corroborate Caden's advice shows that he believes most of the people in the group who have expressed notions of "hiding" or covering have "internalized self-hate" and are in a sense doing a disservice to themselves. He conveys this message very forcefully to the other young men in the group as seen by his repetitive cursing and his evident exasperation with feeling punished for being gay. Malachi believes that he simply cannot hide his gay identity and therefore finds it a futile exercise to consider trying. Malachi is advocating for the other participants to be comfortable in being recognized as gay. This is very different from the perspectives of some of the other young men who work daily to depict themselves in particularly "less gay" ways for varying reasons (e.g. perceived safety, in consideration of children, not wanting their business know, etc.). Unlike David's story from the preceding section, Malachi stands forcefully in the line of fire, both figuratively as he advocates for self-acceptance and literally as he endures the violence of being beaten or stabbed for his sexuality. Both Malachi & Caden display that their perspectives have come after maturing and becoming comfortable with themselves in other spaces. Their emphasis on teaching the young men in the group to be more confident and to reject self-hate, or what we might read as the acceptance of an identity label and the rejection of stigma, is another key form of how *unspoiling* occurs in the interactional space. In other words, in addition to explaining one's own acceptance of a stigmatized identity, the young men also teach others to reject the stigma associated with said identity.

Unspoiling Black and Gay Identities Toward Social Destigmatization

Moving from the individual level work of unspoiling to a larger destigmatization of Black gay identities is often a topic of discussion among the men of UpLiftLA. In order to understand the social environments where unspoiling may lead to destigmatization, it is crucial to understand the

cultural milieu of the population at hand. The young men that frequent *UpLiftLA,* tend to live in predominately Black neighborhoods of Los Angeles. This fact is extremely important in the context of Los Angeles where over 70 percent of same-gender loving people of color live in predominately Black and Latino areas even when there are well-known gay enclaves, such as West Hollywood, close-by (Moore 2010b). These Black gay young men are acutely aware of their semi-belonging in West Hollywood and feel that while it is a geographically bounded gay community—it is not for them. These young men articulated frequently that certain aspects of the gay community were racially divided and they based their participation in certain events around that fact. Take for example this excerpt from my fieldnotes concerning Los Angeles Pride in West Hollywood:

> **Henry, the group facilitator, announces that LA gay pride will be happening soon and that there will be a float for AIDS Walk that people can be involved with.**
> **Gary asks if any Black gay people go to LA Pride**
> **Henry replies emphatically, "To be honest, No!"**
> **Donovan adds, "But, they be at The Abbey at night…"**

As seen in the preceding passage, one of the major pride events in Los Angeles has a reputation for *not* attracting the Black gay population. While sharing knowledge about the event, Donovan offers that Black men may not attend the pride events, but rather will convene informally at a popular gay nightclub in West Hollywood, The Abbey. Given that the young men do not feel that West Hollywood or larger gay community events, like pride, are intended for them, these young men go to *UpLiftLA* in order to create community among one another while discussing what is needed in their personal communities to rectify issues that are particular to the Black gay young man experience in Los Angeles.

In another instance, Tyrone describes the resources that are available to address the things important to those in the Black gay community:

> **Tyrone starts by saying he wants an organization to turn to like the NAACP for gay issues. He acknowledged that GLAAD is around, but that they don't understand the issues that Black gays face in particular. The majority of the room agrees. Lloyd adds that in addition to that, "We need a Black gay parade in every city; not just the**

major ones." He argued that it was important to show up in all places and to "force people" to see that Black gays were in their midst.

Tyrone's statement highlights the importance of the ties between sexuality and race for these young men and their desire to have their needs met by an organization that takes a stand for issues faced by the community. Lloyd reinforces these comments and adds the importance of having Pride events that are directly targeted to the Black gay community in areas that Black gay young men frequent. By "forcing people to see Black gays," Lloyd not only shows how imbedded these young men are within Black communities, but also demonstrates how important it is for these young men to create change in order to remain in these spaces. These comments both highlight the need for organizations and events within the community and they underscore the importance of the weekly meetings between these young men that occur at *UpLiftLA*. Furthermore, this passage elucidates the ways that the young men are astutely attuned to the negotiation of multiple oppressive forms through the multiplicative consciousness; through this consciousness, the young men advocate for ways to not only overcome a colorline, but also a sexual line within color-lined communities.

The need to "force" others to see Black gay people is important to note, because it highlights feelings of invisibility among two separate communities—the Black community and the predominately white, gay community. By attending these weekly meetings and participating in different events in Los Angeles, the young men practice unspoiling their identities towards greater destigmatization within these two communities. In this example, Lloyd argues that the most important thing that they can do is to show up and be seen. Rather than using traditional stigma management techniques of covering or passing, Lloyd advocates for an outward expression of his racial and sexual identity to the discomfort of others. Unlike *passing* and *covering* which prioritize the experience of Goffman's "normals," *unspoiling* converts the prioritization to the comfort of the stigmatized. In emphasizing the effort to make their presence known, the young men put themselves first within the community and desire to bring awareness and acceptance of their unique social

positions.

Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter, I have illustrated that the burden of negotiating multiple stigmas creates a multiplicative consciousness for the multiply marginalized. Furthermore, I illustrate how the multiplicative consciousness is leveraged to elect strategies for responding to stigmatizing experiences and interactions. Specifically, I argue that existing strategies, which prioritize "normals" (i.e. covering, passing, flaunting), are insufficient for individuals who are seeking to reject stigmatization and to refashion a positive self-image. I find that from the tensions with the applicability of these strategies, the new strategy of unspoiling is developed.

By exploring the messages that are sent and received during interactions within the organizational space, I highlight unspoiling as a crucial intermediary step towards a process of destigmatization. Additionally, I add to the literature about the diversity of identity expressions among Black gay young men and increases our awareness of the roles that these organizational spaces may play in the development of unspoiled identities. Building on O'Brien's (2011) notion of stigma management rehearsals, this work highlights the role of peer mediated stigma response as opposed to organization leader-promoted normative response. Rather than focusing on the influence of organizational leaders, this work looks at the interactional accomplishment of peers as they negotiate appropriate rejection of stigma. In so doing, I argue that focusing on understanding the ways that individuals managing multiple stigmatized identities are burdened with a multiplicative consciousness reveals how they reposition their concerns inward to self-comfortability. The process of unspoiling as a midway between simply accepting a stigma attached to one's identity and working towards socially destigmatizing an identity adds to the understanding of how individuals reject the social stains associated with their identities and re-conceptualize their identities as both acceptable and normal.

Unspoiling then represents a particular presentation of self. For the young men at UpLiftLA, it is the process of accepting a normalized sense of their racial and sexual identities continually teaching and sharing this normalized identity with one another. In learning to unspoil a stigmatized identity, the individual becomes focused on a public display of self and a self-reconciliation with stigma rather than the opinions, attitudes, or approval of others. As outlined in the findings above, unspoiling can be a part of one's coming out process or entirely unrelated to coming out to family and friends. Additionally, as the young men demonstrate, unspoiling is not inherently an activist or social movement position at its onset. Rather, I offer that the process of unspoiling and the social accomplishment of an unspoiled identity can set the stage for moving within a shared collective identity towards larger destigmatization through the support of a social organization and advocacy.

Previous research has cited the need for further research into spaces that socially isolated Blacks use to leverage social support and development (Hunter 2010b; Silva 2012). My ethnographic data unveils the unique interactions that occur within the organizational space of *UpLiftLA* to guide young men as they navigate expressly negative reactions to the simultaneity of their racial and sexual identities. These findings call to bear a lifting of the veil (Du Bois 1903) behind an intersectional existence as simultaneously Black and gay to both Whites and heterosexual Blacks. Group members emphasize the need to express a unified racial and sexual identity—to reject a stigmatized identity and to live openly. In doing so, these young men approve or disprove of stigma response choices made by their peers. By illustrating the messages that are conveyed in micro-level organizational interactions, we can further understand the role of organizational spaces in the shaping of gay identity, furthering research by Armstrong (2002) and Warren (1977).

Spaces such as *UpLiftLA* become safe-havens for young men to negotiate the difficulties they face with assuming a public identity that embraces a stigmatized race and sexuality. These findings suggest the importance of these spaces to offset unfavorable reactions to their identities

within other community spaces (e.g. gayborhoods, ethnic neighborhoods, churches, etc.) that have shaped their life course by letting these young men try out expressions and arguments they will use to justify their identities to the outside world. Black gay young men are the focus of numerous policy and health interventions, it is crucial that we seek to understand their larger social-cultural positions and how these young men work collaboratively to craft cohesive identity narratives.

Future research should examine the role of other social institutions that shape the developmental processes of other racial and sexual minority young men. What other spaces are frequented by young men who are combating negative reactions to their sexualities and actively working to *unspoil* notions of their sexual and racial identities? What messages are transferred in these other locations? In exploring these relationships further, scholars will deepen knowledge about the role of social institutions and policies that affect the life trajectories of sexual and racial minority young men. Additionally, in a time when individuals are heralded for coming out and living openly with stigmatized identities, more research should focus on the large-scale processes of social destigmatization. Moreover, while the stigmatized individual may successfully reposition their own comfort with that identity, how then will others within society come to accept this as the new normal?

Chapter 5: Shouting it Out: Religion and the Development of Black Gay Identities

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

Many Black gay men will be exposed to religious messages about sexuality. The opening quotes highlight the critical tensions between on the one hand sexual and racial self-identification and on the other hand religious teachings experienced by young Black gay men. Lawrence[3] illuminates the deeply felt dilemma to negotiate negative messages from church communities about sexuality while still practicing his faith. Henry, in contrast, appropriates a religious lesson from a sermon he has heard in church to counter anti-gay ideas and messages. These two quotes highlight the role of religion, including both the rampant, negative religious-based messages and the more positive aspects of belonging to a religious community, in the socialization of young Black gay men. Drawing upon observations of religiosity in a secular organization catering to Black gay men, this chapter addresses how these young men mitigate negative experiences with religious institutions and teachings to make sense of their presumed incompatible religious and sexual identities.

Youth-serving organizations have played constructive roles in assisting LGBT youth and young adults to explore their identities (Boxer 1993). However, we know less about how young Black gay men in an organizational setting negotiate religious messages of racial and sexual identity. Drawing on previous work that has identified the delegitimization of anti-gay religious teachers (Pitt 2010) and the importance of personal religious spirituality for youth (Kubicek, et al 2009), I analyze the role of participation in youth development organizations in helping youth to 1) receive authoritative messages on religious teachings and 2) work collectively to reclaim and repurpose religious messaging.

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

Furthermore, by combining both individual religious experiences with collective faith expressions, this analysis contributes to the knowledge of lived religion in everyday life.

Specifically, this chapter will show how young Black gay men in one community-based organization 1) appropriate religious teachings to explain hardships and homophobia, 2) negotiate a religious and sexual identity following negative religious messages throughout childhood related to homosexuality, and 3) use the organizational space to recharge and recreate a sense of religious community. Using participant observation, the study illuminates strategies that youth employ within the non-religious organizational space to internalize gay-friendly religious messages deliverers of those messages. Additionally, I analyze the ways that organizations can intentionally and unintentionally be structured to imitate religious worship services—in particular, Black church related practices, such as, shouting[4] and call and response[5]. Taken together, the analysis suggests that while religious dogma can transmit damaging homophobic lessons that youth struggle with throughout young adulthood, aspects of religious teachings and communities can be used within LGBT organizations, both structurally and substantively, to aid youth as they face adversity and transition to adulthood.

Reconciling Contradictory Religious and Sexual Identities

Churches and religious institutions have been major political, social, and moral pillars of Black communities (see Morris 1984), but they have also been associated with homophobia. While some

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

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

studies have documented the health benefits of religiosity (Koenig, George, and Peterson 1998; Oxman, Freeman, and Manheimer 1995; Pardini et al. 2000; Foster et al. 2011), others still have documented the many ways that anti-gay theology has negatively affected the church's response to HIV/AIDS, homosexual behaviors, and the development of LGBT identities (Fullilove and Fullilove 1999; Adler et al. 2007; Smith, Simmons, and Mayer 2005; Ward 2005). Consequently, scholars have found mixed evidence of the role of religion among young Black gay men: generally, belonging to a religious community may be beneficial, but blatant homophobia can prove quite harmful (Kubicek et al 2009).

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

At the same time, studies that have focused on Black gay men, have highlighted the many ways that a sense of religious community and involvement with church activities, social gatherings, and services can be beneficial to the psychosocial development of LGBT peoples (Pitt 2010; Walker & Longmire-Avital 2012). Much of the research that has examined the ways that LGBT people who are also religious has, understandably, identified how they might negotiate these identities within religiously centered organizations and churches (Thumma 1991; Rodriguez & Oullette 2000; O'brien 2004; Pitt 2010; Fuist, Stoll, & Kniss 2011).

Considering the central role that the church plays in the Black community, we may expect that religious culture and teachings will play a role in the socialization of young Black gay men even in non-religious contexts. For instance, participation in religious communities may play a role in assisting Black gay men deal with life's everyday challenges as related to HIV, while still transmitting negative views of homosexual behavior (Foster et al. 2011). In particular, these impacts can be quite important in Los Angeles County where African American MSM are the group least likely to be linked to care within 3 months and the group least likely to reach viral suppression following a positive diagnosis for HIV (Frye 2014). Research has suggested that LGBT affirming churches in Los Angeles, specifically, have often provided a safe space for those coping with the effects of HIV infection (Leong 2006).

In the sociology of religion the concept of "lived religion" has been advanced to study and understand individual expressions, practices, and beliefs that are incorporated into everyday activities (McGuire 2008; Talvacchia, Pettinger, & Larrimore 2014). As articulated by McGuire, "The focus on individual religion, necessitates examining not only people's beliefs, religious ideas, and moral values (i.e., cognitive aspects of individual religion) but also, and more important, their everyday spiritual practices, involving their bodily and emotional, as well as religious, experiences, and expressions" (2008, 16-17). While this focus on the individual religious experience indicates a shift away from formal

worship, McGuire also asserts the role of collectively derived and constructed religious experiences, realities, and worlds (2008). The focus on lived religion illuminates a way that religious practices can be used to justify and make sense of everyday challenges and setbacks among the lives of the young adults in this study.

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

Theoretical Frameworks

Intersectionality provides a practical framework for analyzing the marginalization and self-identification development of young Black gay men. Advanced by legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw, intersectionality was employed to assess the politics and interconnectivity of racism and sexism among women of color (1989). Other research rooted in Black Feminist theory has advocated for the use of intersectionality as a framework that addresses the multiplicative impacts of race, gender and sexuality (among others) on the individual (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 2000; Moore 2010, 2012; Hancock 2007). Its analysis centers on the systemic institutions of oppression that come to bear on life trajectories by exploring experiences of marginalization and subjugation of multiple minority identities.

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

In order to further understand the intersection of multiple identities in this study, it is useful to look at identity development theories. Contemporary research on identity development and conceptualization of self considers the individual as "a storyteller who draws upon the images, plots, characters, and themes in the socio-cultural world to author a life" (Olson & McAdams 2010, 10).

Understanding the developing person as a continual author who is working to narrate a connected life story is important to youth who are working to create innate conceptualizations of self that rationalize current experiences, especially for stigmatized gay youth. Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels write, "development of self-identification as homosexual or gay is a psychologically and social complex state, something which, in this society is achieved only over time, often with considerable personal struggle and self-doubt, not to mention social discomfort" (1994, 291). In grasping these different social aspects of identity construction and narrative building, religion and religious beliefs may play a major role (Yip 2003).

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

Employing an intersectionality framework allows the focus of this project to uncover the processes that influence the specific social location of these sexual and racial minority young men. By understanding the strategies that young Black gay men employ in response to particularly homophobic experiences, this project elucidates the ways that youth are trained to respond to these homophobic attitudes by their peers. The current study builds on previous research by examining

the role of *non-religious youth development organizations* in the negotiation of contradictory religious and sexual identities among Black gay young men as lived religion.

Gay Identities and Church Communities

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

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

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

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

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

These early experiences tended to be particularly derogatory for these young men who recalled that others and they, themselves, were often condemned to hell. One interview respondent, Rahsaan, had very strong memories of the negative messages that he had received growing up. A 21-year-old bisexual man, Rahsaan invited me into his home and rehashed some of the disparaging messaging. At the end of a small cul-de-sac where he lived alone in a modest sized apartment he told me:

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

Rahsaan, much like Gary, emphasizes that his sexuality was viewed not only as a sin or condemnation to hell, but also as "disgusting" and a pathway to disease. From his response, it is evident that the messages Rahsaan received regarding homosexuality were not only disapproving, but also associated homosexuals with being diseased and morally compromised. The connection between homosexuality and disease has been longstanding. Rahsaan's family is drawing heavily on popular discourse about homosexuality as a disease, which is often rooted in biblical teachings, biological histories, and psychological assessments of human sexuality. While homosexuality was officially removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association in the early 1970s, the emergence of HIV in the subsequent decade effectively re-categorized homosexuality as not just a

disease but as a "death sentence" (Colvin 2011). As HIV/AIDS was first known as Gay Related Immune Deficiency, or GRID, equating homosexuality and disease has become inescapable in recent history (Altman 1982). The association of gay identities with HIV and disease further stigmatize gay identities and complicates religious identities.

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

The Recharge: Structural Parallels in the Development Space

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

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

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

> Avery —Yes, I go to church and I tithe, but I can still have a drink and have a sip and see. I need to pour more into myself. Coming to the groups, we're learning to pour into ourselves, and starting to add to ourselves first. Coming to the group is like

coming to the recharge. Each time you come in here there's no bias malice or bullshit; it's about being with family and being yourself and growing.
Torian: Like church!

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

The significance of the weekly meetings is clear for these young men and they encourage one another, again much like the ways Black churches work, to spread the word about the services and opportunities offered at *UpLiftLA*. They are encouraged to become *organizational evangelists*. One particular week, the young men are discussing their coming-out stories and the experiences they had with family and close friends. After the two-hour conversation with all of the guys, the group facilitator, Henry wrapped up the meeting and encouraged the young men to bring others to next week's meeting:

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

Justin finished the group facilitator's sentence with "healing" and collaboratively added to what he believes the meetings can impart upon attendees. The healing referred to is not medical but spiritual healing. Henry also encouraged the participants to bring people back to the group, paralleling the church service by creating a common goal to convince others of the powerful religious undercurrent

of the space. The young men were urged to share the experiences they have had with others, who may be in need—other young Black gay men who are looking for space. Next, I further highlight the behavioral aspects that are rolled over from African-American religious traditions and incorporated into the lived religious practices of the organizational community: *call & response* and *shouting.*

Call & Response

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

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

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

African-American religious traditions and preaching, connecting Black religious practices to those of African origins (Pattillo-McCoy 1998).

As the clock nears two-hours, Henry finished the meeting by wrapping up with a message he wants to leave to the group. He says, "People are your characters; you decide what they can do in your story. You have to take the power and take the pen. Keep writing." Henry's "sermon" not only focused on the role that each person plays in his or her own life, but also he urged his "flock" to remember that God still has a hand in the making of each life trajectory. As facilitator, Henry used his position to teach a message of God's acceptance and involvement in the young men's lives that may counter the messages and lessons that they expressed in their individual interviews. From this exchange, it is evident that in many ways the organizational space mimics that of a religious worship space. Similar to a church's pastor, Henry's position as group leader gave him authority to deliver religious teachings to the young Black gay men of the organization. The weekly meetings provided Henry with an opportunity to pastor within the space and to impart his own individual religious interpretations, knowledge, and lessons into the lives of the young men. Much as a pastor is seen as a religious and spiritual guide, Henry fulfilled this function for the young men who attend UpLiftLA.

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

leave behind in the New Year. Kyle shares with the group that he wanted to get rid of this attitude and meanness.

Henry, the group facilitator, exclaimed, "Yes God! *Yes God*!!" Kyle, who is sitting right next to me, is visibly annoyed by this exclamation, but continued to speak: "I'm getting rid of my femininity, I'm gonna give trade[6] [in the new year]."

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

Religious exclamations can also occur when the meeting content is expressly about religion. An example of this happened during one meeting where I observed the participants talking about their experiences growing up in church. Two participants Ian and Avery discussed perceptions about dating differences across sexualities and racial groups. Specifically, Ian, a young Latino man who infrequently attended meetings, agreed with Avery's perception of the similarities between the gay and straight communities when it came to dating and expressed his agreement via religious exclamations. Henry, in similar fashion called out the names of those who are raising their hands to speak, assigning numbers

[6] A masculine man perceived to be straight by onlookers, but who has sexual relations with other men (see Chauncey 1994; Hawkeswood 1996)

to Avery and Ian in succession. Avery began, "You go to church and you act like you are a 'kid[7].' People will ignore it and act like they don't see it like: 'He's got a girlfriend he's getting married.' Ian's turn came next and he was visibly excited to share his perspective to the group. He started by emphasizing how different it is in the Latino church. He said, "It's completely different. Once the Pastor knows, you're out!" The group seemed rather shocked by his comments and all agreed that their own experiences have not been the same.

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

Another idea expressed in this exchange between the young men is the significance of religion and religious spaces to romantic relationships both gay and straight alike. Flowing organically into this topic of relationships, Avery and Rahsaan discussed the church as a "hookup spot." Avery shared that among his friends the "kids" attend church for status within

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

the community and to be seen by others within the space. When Rahsaan expressed shock that the church is a place where gay men might meet one another, Avery replied, "Ohhh yeah! My friend calls them "Chays", the church gays; they go to the club but never get a man from the club, but rather always get their man from church." Ian exclaimed, "Amen" in response. Avery shared that churches can serve as a place to meet a potential partner, in particular through using geospatial locating applications that are highly used within LGBT communities, particularly among men who have sex with men (Holloway et al. 2014). This information and the belief that church was an ideal place to find a romantic partner is seconded by Ian who gave an "Amen" in typical call and response patterns found in church religious settings.

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

Shouting

Expressions of agreement can also be religious but non-verbal in the space. In one such instance, Avery used another form of religious expression commonly seen within African-American religious spaces, "shouting," to support a message about friendship to Torian who had sought out the advice of the group after a recent conflict with a close friend. Henry gave the floor to speak to Torian, who he began to tell a story about his college friend. He shared that when his mother passed away a female friend's father wanted to give him money for his loss. However, the friend never gave him the

money but kept it to herself. Many of the young men exclaimed, "Oh hell no!" Avery directly addressed Torian, asking, "How do you call her a friend?! I don't wanna be ratchet, but you need to reevaluate this so-called friendship cause that's not even a friendship!" Others expressed agreement through exclaiming "Amen!" and "Yes!" Avery gets up and *shouts*—giving a "praise dance" with his feet moving quickly around near his seat and raising his hands highly toward the sky.

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

These observations have illustrated how religious language and expressions can be used in everyday conversations that occur during the weekly meetings at UpLiftLA. They emphasize the similarities between the church space and organizational space in their roles for young Black gay men. Many structural parallels can be found between these two social institutions: 1. Meetings occur weekly at the same time and on the same day, 2. Agreement is frequently expressed through call and response or praise dancing, and 3. A leader (pastor or lead facilitator) acts as guide through spiritual and personal

revelations. Furthermore, these weekly occurrences give the young men an opportunity to engage one another not just about topics of religion, but also to use their religious expressions to discuss everyday events and relationships and to challenge negative religious messages.

Reclamation and Reinterpretation

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

An example occurred in one meeting where Henry guided the participants through an interactive exercise to develop strategies to combat challenges. Henry created a large brick-pattern with index cards on the main wall in the discussion space. Each index card displayed a different word on its front. I could make out words such as "judgment," "negativity," and "failed relationships." As the conversation began, Henry invited people to talk about the different challenges that can create "walls" or "barriers" in life. When one of the young men spoke, he asked him to pick a word from the wall that resonated with his own barrier built inside. One of the participants, Reginald talked about having overcome his personal self-doubts and insecurities. Henry honed in on Reginald's use of the word 'insecurities" and handed him that card from the wall. Behind "brick" was another card with a

more positive word written. The card behind Reginald's read "blessings." Reginald began to speak about how just tonight on the train a woman told him that he should and could be an actor. He talked about how she commented on his energy and gave him a card to a casting director contact that would sign him on the spot. Malachi piped up with shouts of agreement and the other young men encouraged Reginald to add detail to the story. Reginald continued, "You know I'm bad at telling stories…" Building from Reginald's own admission of his storytelling, Malachi added that the woman gave Reginald the card and told him to pretend like he *personally* knew the director himself. Reginald picked up his card "insecurities" saying that he had gotten rid of them and now different blessings like this experience on the train were coming into his life.

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

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

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

An understanding of the broad spectrum of other participant's relationships with religion was also evident within the group. These young men worked to ensure they were inclusive of another's beliefs no matter what they may be in order to acknowledge the varying paths that one may take to respond to the anti-gay messages that they have heard throughout life. Jalen emphasized this by saying

not simply "God," but also "whomever you believe in." While statements such as these were somewhat inclusive, there was no question that there still existed an implicit expectation that *everyone believed in something*. As such, it reinforced the norm of religion and spirituality within the organizational space.

Besides reclamation of blessings, group participants also reinterpreted the similarities between their own lives and that of religious figures. Young men in the space reconciled the negative lessons that they have accumulated over time through religious teachings to the many challenges Jesus faced. Some of the young men felt that while they may be different from others, they cannot be wrong because God himself was ridiculed. During one night, the participants recalled their coming-out narratives. Elijah told to the group:

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

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

In sum, young Black gay men exploring their gay sexualities within a church-going family face a dilemma. It is very likely that they have heard denunciations of their sexualities at home and in church; yet, they still find themselves clinging to certain aspects of organized religious worship. The young men in this study maintained at least some minimal connection or belief in a divine being, even if they did not practice at a church or religious congregation. Moreover, in order to reconcile incongruence in their racial, sexual, and religious identities these young men appropriated religious

practice and teachings and imported them into a secular space. By creating a place for the discussion of religious teachings within a gay-affirming environment, these young men are able to retain supportive elements of the religious church experience: community and collective participation.

Conclusion

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

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

While this study is limited to one organizational space, the findings of this study highlight the important ways that Black gay young men are creating religious spaces among LGBT organizations

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

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

Chapter 6: "They're Like My Backbone": A Family by Design

"When someone has rejection from their mother and father then when they get out in the world, they search. They search for someone to fill that void"
-Pepper LaBeija, Paris is Burning

Families are critical social institutions in the socialization of a child. As the primary social unit for humans, we learn much of our earliest senses of life from parents, siblings, and others in our immediate families. These early years are shaped by not only things that we learn through observation, but also through explicit role messaging from parents to their children. As gender scholars have argued, parent to child messaging can have profound lasting effects on the identity formation and development of their children (Carter 2014). Additionally, scholars of race have discussed families as primary units where racial knowledge is shared with children from parental figures. In his study of transracially adopted children, Richard M. Lee and colleagues (2003; 2006) offer the term *cultural socialization* to encapsulate the ways that racial differences are addressed and reconciled. Moreover, he defines this type of socialization as "the ways parents communicate or transmit cultural values, beliefs, customs, and behaviors to the child and the extent to which the child internalizes these messages adopts the cultural norms and expectations, and acquires the skills to become a competent and functional member of a racially diverse society" (Lee et. al 2006, pg. 572). This definition clearly connects the powerful role of parents in the socialization of their children and preparing them for existing in the outside world.

Borrowing from these definitions and understandings of socialization, it is not question that to truly investigate the stigma management strategies and responses among young Black gay men, we must interrogate the role that families play in said socialization. Yet, if we are to expand Lee's definition to not only think about the importance of existing in a racially diverse society, but also a sexually diverse society, the family unit must contend with how they prepare LGBT children for acceptance of their identity or lack thereof. As I have shown in the previous section, the role of

families is often quite negative in the sexual socialization of the young men of this study. Therefore, in this chapter I turn to the ways that these young Black gay men come together to create intentional kinship networks to mitigate the lack of cultural socialization that they have received about their non-heterosexual identities.

Racial and Sexual Identity Socialization

As a socializing agent, the family serves to orient children to their own understandings of race and sexuality. Scholar Dian Lewis argued that the Black family has its largest cultural influence in the earliest stages of development, before children are exposed to the racialized and gendered opportunity structures of the outside world (1975). Frabutt and colleagues discuss the family unit as the first socializing factor that teaches children about race relations in the world through *racial socialization* (2002). They write, "Broadly defined, *racial socialization* refers to messages and practices that provide information concerning the nature of race status as it relates to (a) personal and group identity, (b) intergroup and interindividual relationships, and (c) position in the social hierarchy (Thornton et al., 1990)" (Frabutt et al. 2002). With this understanding of racial socialization as a primary function of minority and ethnic families, we can then speculate about the role of families in sexual socialization.

Given that most LGBT children are reared in heterosexual families, the process of their *sexual socialization* can be significantly delayed or even stifled. That is, LGBT youth and young adults tend to learn about their sexual identities in similar ways as a racial identity by observing behaviors and sentiments expressed by their parents and larger social networks. Many scholars have tried to explain sexual socialization of LGBT youth in a set of stages or a progression of steps that ultimately result in a LGBT outward identity (see Cass 1984; Coleman 1982; Lee 1977; Martin 1991; Minton and McDonald 1984; Ponse 1978; Troiden 1979; Weinberg 1978); still others have critiqued these sequential models of identity development in favor of more holistic or "fluid" sexual identity

development markers (see Shapiro et al. 2010). Yet, with all of these approaches to identity development, it is without question that parents and families play a role in the early notions that LGBT people have of their identities and place in society. Thus, sexuality born from heterosexual families that may hold stigmatizing views of LGBT persons often leave young people with a need for a replacement support system to augment the knowledge they've garnered about their own world position.

Fictive Kinship in African American and Sexual Minority Communities

Much has been said about the Black family in the United States. One of the most polarizing pieces about the Black family was the policy report from American sociologist and Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan's *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action* (1965). This piece also known as the Moynihan report played a critical role in the understandings of the Black family as deviant and pathologically inferior. In his work, he argues that the emasculation of the Black father under the overly-dominant family matriarch created a wayward culture of Black family life. This stigmatization of the Black family has increasingly been cited as continuing to beget the negativity that families struggle to deal with today.

Sociological research that has come out since the Moynihan report has emphasized the role of structure in shaping the Black family. Understanding the historical ties to enslavement and the contemporary role of mass incarceration are pivotal to any work about Black families (Bailey 2013). A major component of many African-American communities is the informal kinship networks that serve as added social support (Chatters et al. 1994). These fictive kinship ties are seen as powerful socialization agents in the lives of Black Americans in working to teaching younger generations the cultural practices of their ethnic and racial communities (Gutman 1976). Fictive kin's role in socializing the youth of a community has been fundamental to African American communities.

The role of these family networks cannot be overstated as they have been argued integral to the survival of African-Americans during the period of enslavement in the US (see Gutman 1976).

Understanding the significance of families and fictive kinship within African American communities is critical to an analysis of Black LGBT fictive kin networks. Thus, in this chapter, I illustrate how these Black gay families are an extension of the kinship networks formed in both LGBT and Black communities. As a mechanism that insulates and protects against some of the harshest experiences of anti-gay and anti-gay stigma, fictive kinship families play a crucial role in acclimating and shaping the life narratives of young Black gay men.

In the sections of this chapter that follow I explore 1) how young Black gay men come to join these gay families, 2) why young Black gay men join gay families and what they gain from participating in these relationships, and 3) what types of support they offer one another as siblings and parents. In order to investigate these concepts, I follow two families one headed by a gay father named Ricky and the second lead by a gay mother named Zaire. These two families offer contrasting and complementary glimpses into the ways that Black gay families can work as agents of unspoiling as young Black gay men seek to navigate the gay landscapes of Los Angeles. Ultimately, I show how through created support networks of fictive kinship, Black gay men are socialized into the local meanings of their identities and underscore the impact of gay parental role models in the lives of young Black gay men whose trajectories they shape.

Becoming A Part of the Family

After gaining entrée to two gay families, I worked to spend time with each of these groups to better understand how they shaped and were formed. Both of the leaders of the two families I studied, Ricky and Zaire, agreed to have one of their family members collect notes as a peer ethnographer and also to invite me to their times when they were together doing family time. I learned rather quickly that these two families while structured similarly, operated quite differently as

far as who came to participate in this type of social network. One family appeared to be focused on spending time together as many times as possible during the week as a whole family unit while the other family was more likely to convene in smaller cliques among themselves. As such, the process by which new members came to join the families became important to understand as much as what the families did as a unit.

Across these two families, the young Black gay men (and sometimes transwomen) came to join these families as a way to supplement their participation in the house/ballroom scene. Often, these young men are searching for more social support as they navigate what it means to be Black and gay, an understanding that they often note is difficult for their biological family to guide them with. The differences between the two families that I studied were quite stark as to how someone could become a member of the family. For Ricky's family, he emphasized his role as leader of the family—the father. As such, he decided who joined his family which sometimes left rifts among his children. For example, a peer ethnographer fieldnote detailed what happened when two new children were added to the family abruptly:

> **Ricky added two people into the house and Khalib felt some way about it. In the group text Ricky told us that he added two new people into the house and told us their names and mentioned that he was going to start a new group txt to include them and for us to welcome them into the family. Khalib sent 2 sad faces and because I knew what they were for, I asked him what was wrong and he said he'd call me. When we spoke he said, "He doesn't know about the 2 new people because he felt like we were losing our exclusivity and the family that we've grown to trust and love is no longer going to [be] special." I told him to express himself and let them know how he feels. He mentioned if he says something that he needed me to back him up cuz he doesn't want to be the only one voicing his opinion. I told him that I was waiting on Ricky to get off of work and would talk to him when I see him plus I can't text while I was on the phone with him. After voicing his opinion in the group about the family not seeming special anymore because random people are being added, Ricky's response was that he's father and what he says goes. Ricky mentioned that no one was voted into the house and that the same way that he is adding these two new people is how everyone else joined[8].**

[8] I attempt to keep all fieldnotes as close to the original writing of the peer ethnographer to stay true to their articulation of their experiences.

This scene is emblematic of the types of unilateral decisions that were the basis for the interactions of this family. This note also shows the blurring of the lines between what Ricky called his "house kids" and "personal kids." As the father of a popular house within the house ballroom community, Ricky was seen as a father figure by all members of this house; yet, he noted that he had a select group of mostly young Black gay men who were his "personal kids." This distinction became a big conversation topic during my time with the family as the personal kids struggled to see a true difference between their treatment and the house kids. This, however, emerged as a strength of the father Ricky, who was praised for his ability to make the personal kids feel special while simultaneously treating the all of the kids equally well. His ability to create an environment of special treatment for personal kids all while making his house kids a prioritized show how he has created a very positive space for his children.

The second family tended to be more democratic in the way that they expanded their familial network. The "mother" of this family Zaire discussed how he always consulted his current children before adding someone new to their family. At the time when I first spoke with Zaire about his family, he was considering adding a new family member and outlined a bit about how he saw adding someone to the ranks who had formerly left the family:

> **Zaire: It would be kind of hard to make him my child again. I told him this time, it's not my decision. You have to go through my kids this time. And I'm not going to overrule like I did the last time. Because I did make an executive decision like 'Oh, this is your brother; this is your sister'. But this time, you have 5 people to go through…If one says no, then No!**

The difference in this example shows how while Zaire does hold the power in his family to make "executive decisions" that he also seeks the counsel of his children to see how they might receive a new sibling being added to their ranks. Unlike Ricky, Zaire gives voice to his children in a way that creates a sense of checks and balances for the expansion of the family. The flexibility in the less than formal rituals by which young men become family members exposes the ways that for some young

black gay men gay families can prove to be quite welcoming, yet for others, it may be a process full of challenges to their acceptance. Knowing the process of entering these families, how then do young Black gay men elect to join one? I explore this question in the section that follows.

Why Join a Gay Family?

Through spending time with these families, I came to inquire what lead them to desire having a gay parent. What do they get out of being in this sort of social relationship? To understand this question, I was able to interview members of Ricky's family and to have them tell me exactly how they came to be members of this family and how they viewed their individual processes. First, I was able to understand how Travis came to join the family via his best friend Julian (peer ethnographer):

> **Travis***:* **Well, it was from being Ricky's boyfriend's best friend. I've been knowing him since middle school and then after like seeing him go through all the ballroom things I kind of got interested in it but then I was looking for someone who had been in it and who had known a lot about it. And the only person I could think of was Ricky and then I seen how he did care for his other kids and how he was so caring—it wasn't just all about ballroom for him, it was just being a mentor or just being someone that I look up to. And I personally just asked him, "Will you be my father?" It took him like awhile to answer…it took him like a week or two, but he was like "Yeah sure…you just have to listen to me and understand that what I say is going to be in your interest."**

Travis's interest in the ballroom scene led him to consider Ricky as a role model, but more importantly, he notes that he looked up to Ricky for not only being a role model in the ballroom scene, but also as a life mentor. He emphasizes Ricky's caring attitude and how through viewing his relationship with other kids, he wanted to have that be his father, as well. This is significant as many of the respondents discussed the lack of a male role model in their lives. For these young men, having a gay father represented the only father figure whom they could depend on. Additionally, from his comments about Ricky's reply, we can see that he exudes a confidence in his advice and ensures that Travis knows he must "listen." This comment shows how important the hierarchical relationship of true family these relationships tend to be. Another personal kid of Ricky's, Cliff,

confided to me, at one of their frequent and quite popular game nights, that Ricky had told him to come to meet him downtown at UpLift LA very suddenly saying, "Ricky said 'Bring yo' ass downtown to UpLift LA."; and although sudden, Cliff came. In own his words, he confessed, "Well, he's my dad so when he says come, I come; unless I *really* can't. Otherwise, I come." Cliff's insistence on his readiness and availability to appear when he's told to do so, shows the level to which these young men come to appreciate and respect the roles within their families.

Khalib, Ricky's son who I mention above, also divulged his reasons and process of joining the family. For Khalib, he found that this father figure guided him through the gay world:

> **Khalib: Ricky's like my 'in' to the gay world. He's exposed me to so much stuff, and I love it. Cause it's the stuff I always wanted to get into and it was just like wanting to see. And one day I was actually in the Bay area when I became Ricky's kid…he was texting me a lot and making sure I was alright…and one day he just asked me like "I want you to be my son" and I was like "Okay!" because I just felt comfortable with him.**

Khalib's story is a little different than Travis in his coming to join the family. That is, unlike Travis Khalib was asked to join by Ricky. Describing him as the 'in' to the gay world shows how these relationships help to guide the young men through what they consider to be a separate world space than what others might see. Yet, similarly to Travis, Khalib is exposed not just to the mentoring in life generally as a personal kid, but also as a member of the house he gains ballroom knowledge through this relationship.

However, not all personal kids are also house kids within the family. Take for instance Ramone, who is one of the male children that came to be called Ricky's daughter:

> **Ramone: When I was first told I was his daughter or son or whatever I decide to be, I was like "Okay!" I just ran with it…this had never happened before…So I was just hanging around and stuff like that…I forgot it was one night that I went to his house and I pulled him to the side, and I was like I hear you call me your daughter why don't you call me your son…He told me: You're not in the house, you're like my personal child because you have different qualities that I hope you can bring to the kids in the house versus you just being in the house and doing the activities…Cause I never really thought of myself being in a house just because my gay lifestyle is different…**

As Ramone details, he wondered why he was singled out as a daughter rather than as a son. While his comments don't truly detail the reasons why Ricky calls him his daughter, I learned from Ricky that he decided that Ramone was a daughter based on his gender expression and his feminine ways. Yet, we can see that he also gave Ramone the choice to be seen either as his son or daughter which highlights the liberal understandings of gender within these family contexts. Similarly, Zaire discussed one of his former children, Landon, that he also called a daughter. When I probed him on what made Landon a "daughter" rather than a son, he shared some personality qualities and outward gender expressions that made him decide that this was the case:

> **Zaire: Well, you know Landon is very timid, very feminine. She's adorable to me; she gets the lashes done. She gets nice little manicures and she carries a little purse, pocketbook, and the shoes with the little studs…so that's daughter. As opposed to [the sons] for them it's Nikes, Jordans…boy stuff.**

As detailed above, the way that Landon publically presented himself was contrasted with Zaire's other children which resulted in his labeling Landon as a daughter. Yet, much as Ricky stated about his children, Zaire went on to say that he is open to what his children want to be called. They'll correct him when they feel he's called them the wrong name as daughter rather than son. Often, he says that they'll offer, "I may have my feminine ways, but I'm still a boy." These comments expose the blurring of the lines of gender expression that create varying distinctions within the family.

Biological Family v. Gay Family

Gay families can serve as support networks for young Black gay men who feel that their support from their biological families may be selective or complicated. Often, these families serve as a way to enlist guides for all the challenges and decisions that come with being both Black and gay. These families function as a way to replace or supplement relationships with biological family. In Zaire's family, he details that as the mother of the family, he sees it as his role to protect and "guide" his children through gay life:

> **Zaire: We're a family based on the bond we have with each other. Most of my kids I've known since before they became my kids. It took me a long time to be mature enough to actually be able to guide…I feel like you can't guide if you haven't been through anything. You can't. It's impossible. Like one of my children was like oh I'm homeless Mother, I don't know what to do…I'd be able to tell them well this is what I did…Now I don't know if it's going to fit you or your situation, but this is what I did. Or I place myself in situations so that if something like that did happen, I would be able to help them. I'd be able to give them a week or two somewhere or you know be able to help them out with money or feed them. You know what I'm saying—which I'm always about to do. That's why I'm broke now, because of Daniel now…why one of *my* bills isn't paid. It's like when you're a gay parent, you're stepping into a place of a real parent also. Because, sometimes they can't talk to their real parents about "Oh…I just got fucked by this person" "Oh mother I feel like…" Cause your mom don't wanna hear that and your daddy doesn't want to hear that…**

These remarks emphasize the importance of the role of mother in Zaire's eyes when he discusses his family. He shares that being a gay mother is often "stepping into a place of a real parent" because he frequently supports his children not only emotionally, but also fiscally. Sheltering his children when they are homeless or paying an unpaid phone bill for his children becomes expected territory of the gay family dynamic. Zaire also highlights his role as taking care of things that pertain to gay lives that may not be freely discussed within biological families such as relationships, sex, and attraction. Additionally, Ricky's role was quite similar in his own family. For example, during one of their frequent family game nights, the entire family met at a local trampoline house where Ricky covered the costs for admission for almost 15 attendees. On several occasions, these parents would discuss going out of their way to do whatever they could for their children even if it would put a strain on their own finances.

The importance of this stepping into the place of true parents was echoed by many members of Ricky's family. Take for example Cliff who discusses the support he receives as a part of the gay family:

> **Cliff: They were a huge support. I didn't actually come out to my family until I joined the whole house or ballroom scene. They actually helped that process come out more smoothly and made it easier…They were there to support and kind of helped me be who I was hiding…who I wanted to portray but was kind of hiding. They would just say: "That's you! Just be you" and always say "This is you! Stop trying to hide it"**

and then it helped me to come out and have that conversation with my mom and stuff like that.

Ricky's son Cliff mentions that the family served as a major support for him as he proceeded to come out to his biological family. In many ways, he discusses how they taught him to understand who he truly was and discouraged him from hiding his authentic self from his biological family. In this example, it is evident that the family structure can work to help young Black gay men unspoil their identities by being supportive and teaching one another to reject covering or passing their identities in the face of fear of stigma. Other members of the family also mentioned the support of the gay family in navigating their biological family relationships. In the following, Khalib discusses how the gay family taught him about what it means to be gay and offered the support he needed to face challenges as a gay man:

Khalib: My real family doesn't really know how to handle me being gay…I mean they know how to handle it as far as like they can deal with it, no one talks shit…but they don't like know how to help me go through gay things like having sex, going to the club, how you present yourself, hygiene—you know we go through a lot of different things like that. So, they (Ricky family) are like my backbone when it comes to stuff like this, because at the end of the day a lot of my choices have to do with me being who I am. So, I feel like it's kind of like a therapy, it's kind of like having those people who like care about you and *really* understand you not just care, but understand you.

As seen in Khalib's comments about the role of the gay family in his life, this support network is there to assist as he deals with the daily things that come along with being gay. He calls the family his backbone since he feels that his biological family doesn't really offer him the support he needs. He is certain to mention that while he doesn't feel bashed by his family members, they just cannot offer the support that the gay family can offer with the everyday aspects of his life. He emphasizes that Ricky's family "really" understands him and likens this relationship to a form of therapeutic care. In so doing, he suggests that those who may not share his sexuality do not fully comprehend the set of issues that he faces every day. The role of family as an integral socializing unit highlights that the role of a gay family can supersede information from the biological family as they may not have critical

knowledge about the inner-workings of gay sexualities. He shows how his sexuality is central to his identity and the decisions he must make in life.

These families very clearly go beyond simply helping as young men navigate what it means to be Black and gay in Los Angeles and often act as support in times of crises. For example, when one of the young men in Ricky's family lost a biological family member, the family used their group text chat to express their support for his loss and to offer encouragement or an ear as support. Additionally, in another case when one of the family members fell ill, they were the group that escorted him to receive medical care. This scene is described in the following fieldnote from peer ethnographer Julian:

> **10/27/16—Last night we brought Felix to the emergency room because he hasn't been feeling well. They admitted him because it was worse than we thought. As we were leaving, Ricky sighed and said "Everyday it's something else…we can't ever have a good day to just enjoy and have fun." Cedric then said "Welcome to my life. It's what happens when you have kids." Ricky responded, "I know! That's why I don't want any more". Cedric then reminded him that he just adopted another one the other day!**

Ricky's exasperation once they learn that Felix must stay is echoed by Ricky's own gay father, Cedric. They both seem to take these types of incidents and being present for support as part of their work as gay parents which highlights the very way that these gay parents become intertwined deeply in the lives of their charges. This incident underscores the role of the gay family as a support network that wraps around these young Black gay men to offer encouragement and reinforcement for things pertaining to being gay and also to everyday issues that they face. Additionally, the consistent expansion of these networks shows just how pivotal these relationships can be for those who may not have biological family to rely on when they need assistance with bills, a place to stay, or even in this case emergency medical care.

Siblings, Adoptions, and Complex Relations

As a peer ethnographer, Julian represented an interesting case in the study of his family. As the romantic partner of Ricky, best-friend of Travis, and age-cohort mate of many of Ricky's children, Julian was viewed a myriad of ways by the family members. At times the other men considered him as a sibling and still others saw him as a step-parent in his role as Ricky's fiancée. Julian captured an interesting exchange between his partner Ricky and their gay father Cedric who both prodded him to accept a child of his own:

> **7/6/16—While at the Abbey with Cedric, Ricky, Lee, and Isaac, while we were ordering Cedric texted me then pointed to his phone so that I can know to check it. The message said, "are you feeding your child?" referring to Isaac (before we left Ricky had asked Isaac if he had money, but we knew he didn't have money because Ricky had to pay his way into the Legends' Ball on Sunday). Then I showed Ricky the message and said this must be for you. He responded "No! that's your child, your message." I said except I don't have one of those. Ricky responded the fact that you deny it makes it bad. I asked "deny what" and he said "that you guys have so much in common." Cedric laughed and said you can't choose what days of the week or what hours of the night you want to be a parent I said yeah I understand that but luckily I'm not a parent and don't have to worry about it. Ricky said to Cedric "I'm not surprised; he just started claiming you." Referring to when we were in the car headed to get our nails done and I told someone that "I was in the car with Ricky and our father." I said I was still confused about that whole situation Cedric says what situation? Ricky intervened and said he doesn't think you can be my dad and his dad at the same time. As the father (Cedric) looked at me questioningly I said am I like a stepped son or an in law? He paused like he always does before he says something meaningful and said have you ever met someone and in that first 10 minutes know that they were meant to be in your life. he said I had that with him, looking at Ricky and I had that with you.**

In this passage, we can see the complexity of the relationships between these gay families. The young men discuss the case of Isaac who had just begun to hang around the group and often seemed to seek out Julian's counsel. Yet, when Ricky and Cedric hint that Isaac appears to be Julian's child even as he profusely denied the responsibility of a gay child. Cedric highlights this sense of responsibility by underscoring that one cannot decide in what moments one might act as a parent and then simply deny the child. Ricky believes Julian's denial is emblematic of how he failed to fully accept Cedric as his own gay father until recently. Julian came to question the relationship between himself and Cedric since he had met Cedric as Ricky's gay father; in so doing he highlights

the ways that these relationships bend the boundaries of biological familial relationships, as effectively with the same father (Cedric) Ricky and Julian might be considered siblings. Yet, Cedric's explanation underlines the sense of support and connection between the gay family and argues that his relationships with each of the young men is unique to the individual.

The complications of these relationships were also captured in another event between Julian and one of Ricky's children, Khalib. In what follows, Julian recounts an experience of his rejecting the title of step-mom:

> **10/21/16—After performing at the Rage, I told Khalib to give me my overalls. After hearing that, Ricky said: "Dang you're so mean to your child". Then I said, "That's not my son, that's my step-son" Everyone who heard said: "Oop!" and Khalib acted like he was crying and asked if I would really disown him as a parent and said I was the worst mother. Then I said "yeah…cause I'm not anyone's mother…"**

Julian's rejection of parenting responsibilities was a running theme as the complications of being romantically tied to someone who had gay children continually arose. His desire to dissociate himself with the role of mother shows not only a rejection of the parenting responsibilities, but also as I will show below, a rejection of the title "mother" as a feminine role that he did not want to embody as he associated himself strongly with the identity of "man." The running conundrum of what Julian's role was within the family was unclear to many of the family members and often they hinted that he would play differing roles in varying circumstances. That is, when he might leverage his relationship with Ricky, he'd be seen as a parent, but in other cases he might be seen as a sibling given his age-proximity to Ricky's other children.

This tension within the family also underscores the enduring influence of heteronormativity within gay relationships by the refusal of the family to envision two fathers being the head of their family. The fact that they refer to Julian as the "mother" and not as their other father shows the way that heterosexual relationships still play a role in shaping gay families even after the legalization of same-sex marriage. This lack of imagination on the part of the young gay men in this study

reinforces the way that role models of parenting and relationships are often mapped onto these families even as they work to resist the types of restrictive confines of those same relationships structures. In other words, the gay family is defined directly in contrast and in consultation with understandings of "traditional" family.

Gender Expressions of Sexual Positioning

As discussed above, these families can offer support not just with dealing with issues with biological families, but also in their relationships. In the following case, I highlight how the family works together and how the participants learn from one another about how to navigate the challenges in their relationships. The next selections reflect a discussion between members of Ricky's family when one of his sons, Randall, experienced issues with his boyfriend due to their sexual positions. In this case, Julian uses his own relationship with Ricky to support Randall in his own relationship dilemma:

> **7/1/16--While on the way to UpLift LA we were talking about sex and expectations**
> **Randall said he gets disappointed because when he's about to have sex, people expect something different from him from what he prefers**
> **Cliff's response was "because you're the girl"**
> **Randall said "Oop! Well"**
> **We all kind chuckled**
> **Randall kept quiet the rest of the conversation**
> **Then Cliff said that I was the girl too between Ricky and I**
> **My response was "What makes anyone the girl? Because I know that I'm a man, and when I get married they will say I now pronounce you man and man. And I know that I'm with a man, and I know that I am gay because I want a man"**
> **Randall agreed with my questioning and said what makes someone the girl because if anything I would think that's Ricky who has more female-like tendencies than I do**

The exchange detailed here illustrates the ways that the young men of the family rely on one another to navigate relationship challenges and teach one another about what it means to be gay men. Randall's challenges arise from the mismatch of expectations by him and his potential sexual partners. Cliff highlights that this may be because those partners find Randall to "be the girl" alluding to his perceived sexual position. Julian confided about this particular note, "*I guess because*

Leo gets in drag, vogues, and does make up people automatically assume he is a submissive bottom." As a more feminine presenting man who worked in makeup, many of his sexual partners expected him to be a bottom, or receptive party during anal sex. This misconception bothered Randall and he felt challenged by this in his interactions. His silence after being called a girl is notable simply because it mimics his sense of invisibility even among his "family" as someone who may be feminine by prefers to play the "masculine" role of top in the bedroom. Cliff continues his example by directing the idea that Julian is the girl in his relationship, as well. Yet, Julian explained that he was not a girl and rejected the idea that anyone was the girl in his relationship because he was a man who desired men, as is his definition of gay. Julian gets Randall to agree that being a girl isn't important, nor is the embodiment of "female tendencies." These interactions detail the types of discussions that occur among family members as it pertains to their intimate relationships and the intricacies of sexuality in everyday life. Gender expression in some cases transmits understandings of sexual positioning as young Black gay men work to build romantic and friend relationships. Yet, as shown here in the case of Ricky and Julian, these are not hard fast rules for understanding sexual positioning.

The issues that Randall experienced with the perceptions of his own sexual positioning continued and spilled over into his relationship. Julian captured a conversation between Ricky and Randall following his recent break-up with his boyfriend:

> **7/15/16--Randall told Ricky that he and his boyfriend broke up because Randall's boyfriend is a bottom but doesn't want to get fucked by Randall. On the phone, Randall mentioned something about hating himself and Ricky's response was that he shouldn't hate himself for who he is and someone will love him for him eventually. He told Randall that when he meets people he lets the know that he is a feminine top: he cunt, wears hills, and vogues. And if they're not okay with that then there's no reason to waste time with them. Randall's response was grateful. He said, "Thanks. That was exactly what I needed to hear" and he also mentioned it will allow him to focus on himself**

Randall's dilemma with his boyfriend stemmed from the fact that he presented too feminine and that his boyfriend didn't want him to "top" him as a feminine man. This break-up and the reason

behind it resulted in Randall feeling badly about who he was, and in this conversation Ricky as the father figure imparts his advice to Randall. Ricky gave Randall the inspirational advice he needed to stop feeling bad about himself and encouraged him to seek a partner who would be comfortable as he already is. This display of advice giving shows how these relationships can be support networks for young Black gay men. Much as Zaire discusses in his own family, Randall's story shows how gay parents can serve as surrogate biological parents in their ability to discuss the intricacies of gay relationships that may be off-limits to a biological parent. In this teaching moment, Ricky again acts as an agent of unspoiling to instruct Randall with how he might better understand not only his sexuality, but also his gender expression. In his reaffirming of Randall's outward presentation, Ricky plants the initial seeds of identity unspoiling for Randall so that he might not cling to self-hatred, but rather openly embody his sexuality and gender presentation.

Conclusion: Gay Families as Agents of Unspoiling

In this chapter, I have illustrated the role of gay families in the process of socialization and identity unspoiling. As seen in the numerous examples throughout this dissertation of messaging that many of the young men received about their sexualities, biological family can often create the conditions under which young Black gay men come to seek gay parents and to need a re-socialization into their identities. The relationships that are formed by being within a gay family offer insight into the intimate ways that the process of unspoiling unfolds within the everyday lives of these young Black gay men.

The benefits of having this sort of family support system are immeasurable for young men who are navigating finding jobs, looking for stable housing, and facing insurmountable bills. By joining a gay family, young Black gay men are able to insulate themselves against facing the stigmas associated with their identities alone. As the young men in my work reveal, these families literally serve as the backbone to each one of its members. And in the teaching from parents to child and

sibling to sibling, these young men weave a net of support that is able to not only guide them through their everyday troubles, but also prioritizes sharing information that is specialized to members of the population at hand.

This chapter as illuminated the pathways to joining an intentional kinship network as a mechanism to help mediate the effects of stigma experienced in the lives of young Black gay men. Additionally, as prior work has noted, young LGBT people often miss out on traditional adolescent rituals due to lack of information about their identities and the shame that often comes with openly embodying a non-heterosexual identity (Glazer 2014). These family structures then provide a way for young people to reclaim information about their identities and to re-fashion their lives with support systems that accept the entirety of their identities.

Conclusion: Unspoiling Towards Destigmatization: Living a Shameless Black Gay Life

The examination of the lives of young Black gay men explored in this dissertation covers three major socialization pathways to their understanding of live in the U.S. Taken together, these three domains represent a few, but not all, ways that young Black gay men come to understand and negotiate the negative messaging that they receive about their identities in everyday life. In this work, I contend that young Black gay men are socialized via media, family, and local community organization into developing new ways to refute anti-gay and anti-Black stigmas.

As we enter into the 5th decade of the fight against HIV, research on the lives and sexual experiences of Black gay men has seen a major uptick. Nearly every federal and local funding body that targets this population is seeking to find ways to empower organizations to decrease the effects of stigma. Yet, no research as of yet has fully tackled the theorization of destigmatizing marginalized identities. This work offers insight into an intermediary step of destigmatization by outlining how this doubly marginalized population works to unspoil their identities. Examining the case of Black gay men who are among the most stigmatized identities in the contemporary US, we gain insight into not only how people can resist stigma but also how this unspoiling process is proliferated across social sites and social networks.

As I show in the first section, the impact of media representations on the lives of BGM can be long-lasting. Yet, the dearth of variety in these representations leads to a lack of role models for these young men to look to for inspiration and guidance with negotiating the trials that they experience in their daily lives. While shows such as Noah's Arc and FreeFall can, and have, affected non--BGM audiences, the impact on BGM is of critical importance as BGM often work to emulate or disassociate themselves with the schemas left with outside observers. That is, while these shows may help to expose stigmatizers to new understandings of marginalized people, they also serve to

present representations of unaffected Black gay men and offer young Black gay men tools with how to engage with others in their everyday interactions.

In looking at the experiences of these young men in community organization, I have unveiled the backstage work (O'Brien 2011) that is a part of this marginalized group's process to negotiate stigmas attached to their identities. In an effort to simultaneously expose and reinforce the power of marginalized populations to challenge and reaffirm their own identities, I aim to lift the "veil" (Du Bois 1903) and to give insight into the micro-interactions that can spurn new ways for communities to reject stigmatization. In so doing, I offer a 4th conceptualization to Hunter's (2010) models of identity negotiation and show how social location and temporality affect the expressed identities of young Black gay men as their senses of stigmatization change. Furthermore, I outline the three tenets of unspoiling as an ancillary step towards a larger goal of social destigmatization.

In the final chapter, I argue that family, as a critical socializing agent in all lives, can have an even greater importance in the lives of young Black gay men who may be searching for affirmation. The formation of gay families and the inquiry of what is learned there within highlights the ever-present eye of heterosexual relationships and the values that are co-taught between family members. Additionally, these families can help fill the void for young men who are missing out on key male and masculinity socialization in the absence of a biological male figure.

Implications of the Study

This robust mixed methods study adds major theoretical contributions through the examination of the process of identity de-stigmatization or *unspoiling*. Additionally, through employing innovative methodological approaches like peer ethnography and content analysis on the emerging field of user-created scripted content, this project improves sociological inquiry into these fields by providing detailed accounts and hopefully examples to follow for other scholars interested in similar populations. Furthermore, this study adds to sociological inquiry of group processes,

stigma, individual identity development, and social inequalities by contributing to an expanding literature specifically focused on Black gay identities; yet, simultaneously providing an empirical example for the use of intersectional frameworks in the study of coming of age among young populations.

This project offers great insight into the many roles that organizations (both formal and informal) play in the lives of everyday citizens especially those most marginalized and disadvantaged. Given the focus of health institutions (i.e. CDC) on the lives of young Black gay men, this work reveals intended and unintended effects of programs servicing this population as they seek to lessen the impact of HIV burden and infection. Data about the role of media will highlight the importance of media content both traditional and web-based and will sheds new light on the importance of shows with depictions of diverse characters and the impact of these narratives on viewers. Additionally, information about gay families exposes the intricate ways that young Black gay men seek out and place socializing agents into their intimate lives.

Ultimately, this work revels the embeddedness of stigmatizing messaging within the communities of young Black gay men and the lengths that many of them must go to combat negative self-image. The project begets larger questions about the role of various social institutions in the yet to be outlined process of destigmatization. Here, I ask is destigmatization a true social possibility or an asymptotic goal of the marginalized who will never truly escape the mark of a stigmatized identity, but who will nevertheless continue on to refashion identities.

Appendix A. Methodologies

Working to investigate the socialization patterns and stigma response behaviors of young Black gay men in a major metropolitan are comes with its challenges, but also with opportunities to expand how information is collected. This project allowed me to employ multiple methodological approaches to the study of this population. Originally, I set out to do a project that examined the role of out of school time programs in the development of Black identities, yet gaining access to such programs proved a challenge. Upon discussing my interests with an advisor, she suggested I think about how racial identities are expressed, enacted and shaped, but also to consider gender and sexuality. I began to consider my own identity in this process, asking "How did I learn about what it meant to Black and gay?" and being from another city, I came to consider "How are these identities formed in the sprawling metropolis of Los Angeles?" These questions led me to spend time with young men who frequented a local organization that was funded to work with Black gay men to curb the HIV infection rates among the population in Los Angeles County. Unlike my own upbringing, I found that some young men are able to create communities through these organizations and to receive guidance or support services as they are socialized into Black gay identities.

Ethnographic Fieldnotes

At the very beginning of this work, I began conducting fieldwork at a local non-profit organization at the suggestion of my thesis advisor. I was introduced to the organization by another graduate student in my department which eased my ability to gain access to the space. I started by simply attending the weekly men's leadership group meetings which occurred midweek from 7-9 PM. The weekly group facilitator, Henry, acted as a major gatekeeper and vouched for my work from the very beginning. I introduced myself and my project for the first few meetings and was able to covertly take notes on my phone. Using the notes app on my iPhone I appeared to be texting at

various points throughout the weekly meetings which allowed me to record jottings to be expanded once I left the meetings. All in all, I spent over 4 years at the organization and actively collected ethnographic notes during 2.5 of those years. These notes were subsequently coded by hand using a word processor and new memos were created for emergent themes of the data. Using the process of abductive analysis (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), relevant theories were linked to these memos and new theories were developed in concordance with empirical findings. Through the analysis of these notes, the socializing agents that are the focal point of this work were repeated sources of influence among the young men: media representations, non-profit organizations, and "gay families." In addition to my ethnographic notes, I wanted to chronicle just how many young men attended the weekly meetings. In order to track this information, I collected copies of the weekly sign-in sheets from the meetings. While this proved a great way to collect counts of attendance, I noticed two major issues with this as the only way to count attendance: 1) sometimes young men elected not to sign the paper for fear of their information being given out and 2) often the young men used different names to sign-in from week to week. When I noticed these issues, I did my best to keep personal records of who attended and the various names for one individual.

I also employed ethnographic observations to complement my work with peer ethnographers for the gay families that I followed. I spent time with the two families at birthday parties, game nights, social outings (e.g. balls, skating, etc.), and to local nightclubs. For one family, the game nights proved to be quite productive centers of observations and after participating in sharing new games, I became a welcome addition to the, often intimate, family game nights. Notes were taken on the phone and later developed. As these events often lasted until 3 or 4 AM, I sometimes attempted to audio record my thoughts on my drive back home. Overall, I conducted over 50 hours of participant observation with these families.

In-depth Interviews

As a feature of my work I noted that some of the young men were attending more regularly than others; what I might call "regulars." These regulars make up the bulk of my interview sample. On a weekly basis for about 12 months, I would announce my interview project and approach members after the weekly meeting about meeting for an interview. In total, 50 YBGM agreed to be interviewed for the project. These young men were given the option to be interviewed in a location of their choosing, whether public (e.g. cafe, park, restaurant, etc.) or private (i.e. their home or a friend's home). One of the most effective ways to conduct interviews proved to be interviewing respondents before the weekly meeting in an empty office. These interviews covered four major themes: racial identity negotiation, sexual identity negotiation, gender identity development, and local non-profit organization participation. These four areas elicited information about the young men's stigmatizing experiences with family, friends, and strangers and demonstrated a wide array of social institutions (e.g. school, work, home, media, etc.) where they learned the social weight of their combined racial and sexual identities. These interviews lasted anywhere between 40 minutes to 3 hours; the majority lasted about 90 minutes. Interviews provided great information from the individuals and helped to better contextualize their behaviors and interactions with others in the organizational space. While I was not able to pay my interview respondents for their time, I found other ways to "pay back" their offerings. This involved advising young men on filling out the FAFSA, accompanying them to school visits at local community colleges, reviewing resumes and application letters, and showing up as an audience member for support at events. Additionally, I informally interviewed members of the organizational staff who held the history of the organization and its original intentions with the creation of the leadership group.

Even with organizational support and the support of a major gatekeeper it took well over a year to obtain my first 25 interviews. Only after having spent time in the space with the young men and gaining their trust did I truly have people hoping to be interviewed. For example, after the

completion of my first publication (see Chapter 5), I was able to obtain 25 more interviews within just 3 months. I believe this illustrates how critical relationships are to the population—a sentiment that was often noted with the repeated fear that I would eventually abandon the group. Many of these subsequent interviews came after organizational "regulars" vouched for my project and told friends that I was "cool" and could be trusted.

In-depth interviews were also conducted as part of the section on media representation. I reached out to the two creators of the shows Noah's Arc and FreeFall. Immediately, I received a reply from the creator of FreeFall who agreed to be interviewed. Stationed in Atlanta, we agreed to conduct the interview by phone. I used the app Call Recorder over cellphone to record the conversation for later transcription. This interview covered the creator's intentions with the show, the intended audience, difficulties with the show, and his experience interacting with consumers of the show. For Noah's Arc, I had difficulties reaching the show's creator, but happened upon the chance to interview its lead actor, Darryl Stephens. After meeting serendipitously at a local arts exhibition, he agreed to meet with me for a brief interview about his experience working on the show. I provided him with a brief sketch of my questions via email since we had limited time. We met locally in Hollywood, CA on June 15, 2017. I recorded our conversation and transcribed the recording. This interview data admittedly does not directly get to the creative intentions behind Noah's Arc, yet I believe it is just as illuminating in the desired intentions for the show's audience. To supplement this actor interview, I also draw upon various interviews done with the original creator dated during the show's original airing.

This interview covered similar topics as the interview with the creator of FreeFall, but also included a conversation about the actor's hopes for the show and his understanding of the creator's intent with its creation. These interviews provided great insight into the production and creation of these shows. Additionally, it allowed me to compare the hoped intention for the show with the

conversations that took place among my focus group respondents about the significance and meanings of the shows.

I also conducted interviews with selected members of the gay families that I followed. Beginning with the parents, I met with a few of the young men within these families at a location of their choosing to learn more about their time in the family. These interviews covered topics such as intention and process of joining the family, advice or lessons learned from parents and "siblings," types of support garnered by membership, and the individuals perceived role in the family structure. These interviews proved quite illuminating as great insight into the reasons the observed relationships had come to be. Having met many of the young men from one family in other settings, it eased the interactions for our interviews and made them much more likely to agree to be interviewed. The second family proved much harder to arrange times with as they were frequently moving or out of work.

Peer Ethnography

I was introduced to the method of peer ethnography by my research collaborators at AIDS Project Los Angeles (APLA), sociologist Matt Mutchler and psychotherapist Bryce McDavitt. I employed this technique to better capture the "on the ground" daily interactions between members of the two gay families that I followed for this work. Having established relationships with the two heads of the families, one "gay father" and one "gay mother," I interviewed these parents to get their approval to follow their families and solicited their recommendations for a peer ethnographer (PE). With both suggestions, I approached these candidates who agreed to be trained and compensated for their participation in the project. In order to train these young men in the ethnographic method, I adapted trainings by my colleagues that used a PowerPoint to cover the following aspects of the study: 1) PEs were introduced to the goal of the project in uncovering the social importance of these gay families and the messages/lessons about race, sex, and identity that they received; 2) PEs were

shown example jottings and subsequent fieldnotes to illustrate the level of detail required; 3) PEs were instructed in the reporting structure of weekly meetings with the PI and protocols for deleting notes after submission; 4) PEs agreed to be paid up to $250 for completed notes and weekly meetings. Additionally, PEs were alerted to the various topics of interest to the study which included the following: information about sex, sexual health information (e.g. HIV testing, medical care, etc.), dating and relationships, and messages about race or sexuality (i.e. Being Black and gay). After the first set of notes, I met with PEs individually to refine their note taking process and to fill in their perspectives of recording the information.

While this method provided rich data about the inner-workings of the families, the execution of the data collection has its challenges. In particular, one of the peer ethnographers proved to be more responsive and attentive than the other which resulted in quite different levels of data quality. Additionally, as these young men were inherently embedded within the family it became a challenge for them to sometimes remember to consistently provide information. Each with his own difficulties to complete the task, the peer ethnographers varied widely in the types of data they provided. Early on, the writing of complete fieldnotes became tedious for one PE and he elected to submit his jottings and screenshots of a family text group and would discuss the full context with the PI to fill in the notes. As for the second ethnographer, a pattern of illicit drug use emerged in the data collection period; this development made contact and submission unreliable, but also better characterized the relationships of the family. One family appeared to rally behind its members in achieving "redeemable" social qualities whereas the other prioritized space for individuality. With these challenges, it became apparent that my observations would be unbalanced, yet I believe this accurately depicts the relationships there within.

Focus Group

In order to supplement my interviews with show creators, content analysis, and online comment data about media representations, I held a focus group with young Black gay men in Los Angeles about the shows Noah's Arc & FreeFall. During a weekend retreat to Big Bear Mountain for an arts and health campaign grant, the group facilitator created time for me to screen the pilot episodes from both shows and to begin a conversation among the young men about what they saw in the shows. All in all, 14 young men participated in the focus group and the subsequent demographic survey that followed. For their participation, the staff facilitator offered them each $15 Target gift cards from the leadership group incentives. Generally, the young men were quite excited to watch the episodes and provide feedback. Beyond simple mentioning of the shows in casual conversation, screening these shows as a focus group allowed for targeted conversations about their content and the impact of the shows on their collective lives. I elected to show the pilot episode of Noah's Arc first followed by a brief discussion and then aired the pilot episode of FreeFall with a follow-up discussion. I chose to follow this order due to the first show's prominence and also given that it was the older of the two, having aired originally in 2005 compared to FreeFall's 2013 debut. Airing in this order undoubtedly impacted the discussion as Noah's Arc naturally became the standard or baseline from where conversation followed.

Content Analysis

As part of my work on media representation, I conducted a systematic quantitative and qualitative analysis of the shows Noah's Arc & FreeFall. I watched the episodes of seasons 1 & 2 for both series and coded each episode separately. In my analysis of these shows I focused on thematic elements that the young men in the focus groups drew upon as important to them. Also, I coded these shows for explicit signifiers of race (e.g. mentioning Black identity, the subtle references to Black areas of Los Angeles, mention of other Black media/actors, etc.); discussions of homophobia or racism; mentions of sexual positioning or advice about sexual behavior; interactions with

biological family; and explicit descriptions of their intersecting racial and sexual identities (i.e. being Black and gay). Additionally, I collected online comment information about these shows from two different online venues. During the 10-year anniversary re-airing special of Noah's Arc, I used Tweet Archivist to capture all tweets that appeared within a 72-hour window of the marathon airing that used the hashtags: #NoahsArc or #Noah10. For online comments about FreeFall, I individually downloaded the comments from every episode of the first two seasons from the gay online community site Black Gay Chat (BGC). While I cannot be sure of the races for many of these online commenters, when possible, I checked photographs of Twitter users and profile information for BGC users. I believe this technique provided a much wider range of audience interaction and feedback to supplement focus group data.

While I did not interact with the users who commented on these shows myself, I did attempt to monitor the ways that they communicated with one another. The audiences online were not simply commenting independently of other users, but rather many of the users engaged in discussions and debates about the relevance of topics on the shows and bonded over their shared sentiments towards these shows.

Insider-Outsider Positionality

With the backing of the group facilitator, I was accepted into the young men's group tentatively. I quickly learned that for the young men to continue sharing of their life experiences and histories, I would need to share a bit about myself as well. The facilitator, Henry, would often cold-call participants to share and often would call on me to be included in conversation. My own willingness to share about my upbringing, racial and sexual identities, and aspirations allowed for the group to become more inclined to trusting my presence. While some of the men took to me quickly, for a multitude of reasons, I realized that I represented different things to the young men in the space. For some, I became a mentor in schooling or educational aspirations; for others, I

represented a potential friend; and to some I was viewed as a potential relationship partner. Working to negotiate my desire to build genuine connections with my respondents but to maintain appropriate boundaries was an on-going task. While most of the young men believed my work, I often was greeted with surprise when I revealed a tape recorder during interviews since some appeared to believe my inquiry for an interview was a pickup line.

Many of my initial encounters where the young men began to trust my presence was over music and nightlife in Los Angeles. For example, I offered to drive a few of the young men to the closest train station and briefly offered rides to some of the men who lived further away after one of them had been accosted on his way to the organization. During these rides, the young men would talk about their lives outside of the walls of *UpLift LA*; they would talk about relationships and give insights into the many things going on in the space that were invisible to the naked eye (e.g. text conversations during group, budding relationship interests, secret romantic connections, etc.). On the first ride when I took about 4 guys to the train station, they all piled into my car and I turned on the radio. My phone began playing my most recent playlist of top "ratchet" songs and the young men expressed shock. One saying: "You listen to this music?!" I was genuinely confused and laughingly asked, "Well what did you think that I listened to…?" He replied, "Smooth jazz?" This moment seemed to solidify for the men in the car that I was indeed one of them and they began to recognize aspects of me that were not altogether different from themselves.

Limitations of the Data

Conducting this study in Los Angeles has come with some very particular challenges that limited my access to certain things. One major consideration of the findings of this work is the geographic context of Los Angeles County. The young men in this study lived all across the nearly 4100 square miles that make up the entire county. As such, much of my time involved driving long periods of time to hopefully get an interview. This also means that many of the young men that

came to this particular origin site (UpLift LA) were traveling from various points within the city and larger county. Therefore, generalizing the socialization patterns of this group to other places in the US and beyond may be difficult. Even within Los Angeles, the unique neighborhoods and lack of fully adequate public transportation options for the entire county mean that there can exist entirely untapped communities within this work. That said, I find that this work does adequately represent a decent swath of Black gay lives in Los Angeles.

Additionally, while I observed well over 200 young Black gay men, I found that the majority of the young men in my study struggled with similar issues such as homelessness, lack of access to HIV medical care, joblessness or underemployment, and lack of higher education. I attribute this to a site-specific selection effect. There are at least two other organizations that cater exclusively to Black gay men in Los Angeles City which tend to draw different populations than the one seen at UpLift LA. One such organization targets Black gay professionals and thus tends to have a much higher number of elite educated and older successful businessmen. Therefore, I find that this project specifically speaks to the needs of those young men who often find themselves at the margins not only socially, but also economically.

Lastly, many researchers have noted that among LGBT populations, internet and cyber communication has been a critical way that relationships and bonds are formed. Integrating myself into the life of my participants took much time and with the added knowledge of their cyber lives I admittedly missed many conversations, connections, and relationships of which I was unaware. Over time, however, I was added to Facebook pages, Snapchats, followed on Twitter, and Instagram. Yet, ultimately, I did not systematically include data from social media sites of my respondents. Undoubtedly, this leaves out some information about how relationships formed and were conducted online; still, I included data from group text messages and family Facebook groups in the section on intentional kinship networks.

Appendix B: In-depth Interview Guides

Demographic Information/Interview Structure

Given the semi-structured nature of these interviews, the following are example questions. This list is not exhaustive, but rather will be the starting point to other questions that may be asked of respondents during individual interviews.

Demographic Information Questions

Examples:
*Age:
*Race/Ethnicity:
*Highest Level of Education Attained:
*Current Occupational Status:
*Preferred Gender Pronoun:
*Sexual Orientation:
*Place of Origin:
*Neighborhood in Los Angeles:
*Parents' Marital Status

UpLift LA Involvement Questions

Examples:
*How did you first hear of UpLift LA?
*Can you tell me about your earliest memory of UpLift LA?
*In what ways have you been involved in UpLift LA?
*Why are you involved with UpLift LA?

Involvement in other organizations Questions

Examples:
*Are there other organizations that you are also involved with [that are similar to UpLift LA?
*What roles do you play in these other organizations?
*How did you become involved with them?

Sexual Orientation

Examples:
*How would you characterize your sexual orientation?
*Can you tell me when you first realized that you were _____?
*What messages have you received about being_____?
*Tell me some of the positive things about being _____?
*Tell me some of the negative things about being _____?
*You have just told me about what it means to be _____. How do you fit into this? What is that like for you?
*How are you different than the things you told me about being _____?
*Do you feel that there is a _____ community? Describe this community to me.
*How do you fit into this?
*In what ways are you connected with a _____ community?
*How did you develop that connection?

Race

*How would you describe your racial identity?
*Can you tell me when you first realized that you were black/_____?
*What messages have you received about being_____?
*Tell me some of the positive things about being _____?
*Tell me some of the negative things about being _____?
*You have just told me about what it means to be _____. How do you fit into this? What is that like for you?
*How are you different than the things you told me about being _____?
*Do you feel that there is a _____ community? Describe this community to me.
*How do you fit into this?
*In what ways are you connected with a _____ community?
*How did you develop that connection?

Gender

*How would you describe your gender identity?
*Can you tell me when you first realized that you were _____?
*What messages have you received about being_____?
*Tell me some of the positive things about being _____?
*Tell me some of the negative things about being _____?

Media Creator/Actor Guiding Questions

What do you think the significance of Noah's Arc was for media? for Black gay men? Others?
What as the most difficult scene/episode to film? The most realistic?
What were the challenging pieces of playing Noah?
What's your most memorable fan moment? Have you ever had someone tell you they've emulated you in real life?
What were your hopes for the show and how people viewed it? Did you hope to impact lives? Why did you choose to play the role?
What role would you say the show has played in your life personally? Professionally?
If there was one thing you hoped people would learn from watching the show, what would it be?
How realistic do you find the depictions in the show?
Were any of the episodes controversial to you? Were there topics that you wished the show could have addressed but didn't?
Who was the intended audience? Who did you hope was watching the show?

Interviews with "Gay Family"

Given the semi-structured nature of these interviews, the following are guiding questions. This list is not exhaustive, but rather will be the starting point to other that may be asked of respondents during individual interviews.

Demographic Information

Age
Race
Gender
Sexual Orientation
Employment Status
*Bio-Mom Employment Status
*Bio-Dad Employment Status
Education
*Currently Student
Annual Income [Estimate]
*Personal
*Household/Family
Relationship Status
* Length of Relationship
Housing Status

Biological Family

Tell me about your biological family...
Where did you grow up? What family members grew up/lived with you in your home?
Tell me about the relationship between you and your biological mother or the person who raised you...
Tell me about the relationship between you and your biological father or the person who raised you...

Symbolic Family

How did you become involved with this family? Tell me how the conversation went when you first joined the family.
What role do you see this family playing in your everyday life? What role do you see yourself playing in this family?
How often would you say you are in communication with the various members of the family? How often would you say that you see them in a week's time?
When you all are together, what are the types of activities you do? What types of events do you do together? Tell me about a time you all were together that you enjoyed the most.
What does it mean to be a part of the personal family and not just the "house" family?
Do you ever get advice about other aspects of your life (job, school, etc) from your family members? Can you give an example?
Can you talk about a time you felt supported by the family? Have you ever felt unsupported by the family? If so, how and why?
If you had to describe your family tree to me, who makes up the central family unit to you?
What lessons have you learned from being a member of the family?
To whom would you say you're closest to in the family and why?

Appendix C.

Organization Interview Sample Demographics (N=50)

Age Range: 18-31 Mean: 24 **Racial Self-Identification** African American: 12 Black: 26 Mixed/Multi-ethnic: 11 **Education Attained** Less Than High School:1 High School Diploma: 16 Some College: 18 Associate Degree: 4 Bachelor's Degree: 8* Master's Degree: 1 **Employment Status**** Fulltime Employed: 29 Part-time Employed:5 Unemployed: 8 Student: 9 **Gender Pronoun Preference** Masculine (Him, Man, etc): 49 No preference: 1	**Sexual Orientation** Homosexual: 5 Gay: 38 Same-gender loving: 1 Bisexual: 5 Pansexual: 1 **Place of Origin‡** Los Angeles Area: 29 Other West Coast Cities:4 East Coast Cities: 5 South: 3 Midwest: 7 International Cities:4 **Parents' Marital Status** Married: 5 Married, b/ Separated: 2 Divorced/Separated: 14 Single/Never Married: 29

*****At the time of interview two respondents were working on completing Masters Degrees and have since completed.

******Employment totals exceed N=50 as some students were also part-time employed.

‡Some respondents reported originated from multiple cities; often claiming Los Angeles and an international city.

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