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SNAP with a Twist and BRUH with a Dap!: The Articulation of Black Gay Masculinities within the Context of Heteronormativity

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SNAP WITH A TWIST AND BRUH WITH A DAP!:
THE ARTICULATION OF BLACK GAY MASCULINITIES WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF
HETERONORMATIVITY

by

Antonio Spikes

B.S., Georgia Southern University, 2011

A Research Report

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Arts Degree

Department of Communication Studies

in the Graduate School

Southern Illinois University Carbondale

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RESEARCH REPORT APPROVAL

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In recent years, communication scholars have produced works that examine the layered dimensions of Black masculinity in contexts ranging from hegemonic interpretations of manhood (Alexander, 2006; Jackson & Hopson, 2011; McCune, 2012) to media representation (Jackson, 2006; Johnson, 2003) to sexism and homophobia in hip hop (Jackson, 2006; Jackson & Moshin, 2013) and to education (Cummins & Griffin, 2012; Griffin & Cummins, 2012). Such works commonly examine how Black men articulate their experiences at the intersections of race and gender, situate Black masculinity as a discursive site of identity performance, and highlight elements of marginalization and privilege in the lives of Black men. For instance, Alexander (2006) positions the Black male body as polemical which indicates that the Black male body can be understood as “a site of public and private contestation” that reflects “competing investments in Black masculinity that are historical and localized affecting notions of intellect and character, as well as virility and fertility” (p. 74).

Building upon the foundation of Black masculinity research in communication, my research interest is in how Black gay men construct and negotiate their masculinities within the context of a heteronormative society. To date, homosexuality, homophobia, and heterosexism are often examined in current research (Jackson & Hopson, 2011; Jackson & Moshin, 2013; Johnson & Henderson, 2005), but are not necessarily centered to reveal how Black gay men navigate their identities at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Addressing this absence are works by Johnson (2008) and Alexander (2006); both authors use an intersectional lens to explore how Black gay men navigate cultural and social spaces. More specifically, Johnson (2008) focuses on how, at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, Black gay men manage their lives within communities and geographic regions that marginalize their race and sexuality. Focused on competing notions of Black masculinity, Alexander (2006) documents how White and Black

communities can differ in their interpretations of “good” versus “bad” embodiments of Black masculinity. For Alexander (2006), qualities of the “Good Man” (p. 75) in accordance with Whiteness include being articulate, polite, and intelligent; however, such qualities may be considered gay (i.e., “Bad”) in Black communities. Therefore, someone who embodies those characteristics that are “good” can be simultaneously understood as “Bad Man” (Alexander, 2006, p. 75) in accordance with homophobia and heterosexism. In an era in which Black men are predominantly thought of in essentialist ways (Alexander, 2006; Chandler, 2011; Hughey & Parks, 2011; Johnson, 2001), communication research that centers Black gay men offers refreshing insight into the diversity among Black men.

Generally speaking, this project addresses the dearth of communication research that deals with how Black gay men articulate their understandings of and experiences with masculinity. As a Black, gay, formally educated, working class, cisgender male, I am interested in how other Black gay males narrate and negotiate their masculinities. As such, I am often disappointed by the relative invisibility of Black gay men as central subjects in Black masculinities research. Equally disappointing is the invisibility of Black gay men in queer studies of sexuality. Take for example Johnson and Henderson (2005) who say, “lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color who are committed to the demise of oppression in its various forms, cannot afford to theorize their lives based on ‘single-variable’ politics” (p. 5). In essence, because oppression is usually experienced on multiple fronts, raising one identity above others as the primary focus of analysis potentially reinforces hegemonic power structures instead of dismantling them. Although research in Black, queer, and communication studies is improving at incorporating Black gay men beyond a tacit mention, there is still little research with a specific focus on how Black gay men understand and experience their masculinities.

For clarity, I use “masculinities” throughout this project to acknowledge how Black gay men construct and negotiate masculinity. The term “masculinities” (Neale, 2013, p. 4) signifies the existence of multiple masculinities as opposed to a singular masculinity. For example, the title represents the widest range of masculinities adopted by Black gay men. The finger snap represents the feminine style of masculinity and the “dap” (also called fist bump) represents a more masculine gender expression. Therefore, this project encourages readers to imagine Black gay men as a diverse group of people who embody multiple masculinities within the confining nature of heteronormativity. Exemplifying the need to do so, Mutua (2006) addresses the tension between the progressive masculinities project and Afrocentrism, which has a history of constructing a singular Black masculinity that is dependent on sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. In reference to Black gay men, a singular understanding of Black masculinity is typically exclusionary. By acknowledging the existence of multiple masculinities, the lives of Black gay men are not only acknowledged, but legitimized as well (Mutua, 2006; Neale, 2013). This idea is directly tied to my project’s overarching aim, which is to identify the multiple ways Black gay men construct their masculinities within the context of heteronormative society.

Using queer theory (Butler, 1999; Goltz & Zingshiem, 2010; Ferguson, 2004; Holland, 2012) as my theoretical framework, I argue that Black gay masculinities are self- and co-created in multiple ways. Masculinities, in general, are not only mediated by race, but also by gender, religious affiliation, class, and oppressive forces such as heterosexism, racism, biphobia, and transphobia. I partner queer theory with interviewing as method to disrupt the essentializing nature of research on Black men with narratives of lived experience. To do so, I first provide a rationale for this project. Second, I review the literature on Black masculinity that focuses on the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. Next, I situate queer theory as my theoretical

framework coupled with interviewing as my method. Then, I present the overarching themes that I found in my interviews with Black gay men including heteronormative masculine performances, homeless identity, disidentification, and resistance. Finally, I conclude with a summary of my project and a discussion of its contributions to communication research.

Rationale

Considering the recent challenges of the modern Civil Rights Movement such as the repeal of a stop and frisk ruling (Long, 2013) and Trayvon Martin's unpunished death (McVeigh, 2012), focusing on how Black men in general, and Black gay men in particular, construct their masculinities is timely and meaningful. Due to the narrow definition of Black masculinity often limited to hypermasculine, hypersexual, and/or unintelligent stereotypes (Campbell & Giannino, 2011; Chandler, 2011; Hughey & Parks, 2011), Black men commonly fall victim to a range of violence that includes shootings and police harassment as a result of being perceived as violent. However, by studying how Black gay men articulate and navigate their masculinities, communication scholars can expand the meaning of what being a Black man in U.S. American society signifies. From my perspective, this is key to de-essentializing Black masculinity.

In popular discourse, I believe many U.S. Americans typically look at identity as a set of trading cards that you can trade, keep, or just cast away. In the case of Black gay men, we are often placed in the middle of tug-of-war identity politics between the Black community and the gay community. Take for instance Alexander (2006) who, articulating identity as "contestatory" (p. 2), illuminates the identity struggles of Black gay men. What he means by "contestatory" is that identities are not fragmentary, as in evenly divided and separate aspects of a person's overall identity. Rather, identity is composed of meanings that compete with each other for recognition and legitimacy (Alexander, 2006). For example, the identity of a Black gay male is contestatory

in the sense that “Black” is largely constructed in heterosexist terms (Ferguson, 2004; Johnson, 2003) and “gay” is usually constructed in racist terms (Johnson & Henderson, 2005). In this context, “Black” and “gay” are competing for representation.

Due to contestation, a Black gay man, in accordance with heteronormativity, may not be considered a “real” Black man or a “real” gay man since he is not heterosexual or White. Indeed, the public face of the Black community is often pictured as a heterosexual Black male while the public face of the gay community is often imagined as a White middle class male (Johnson & Henderson, 2005). Due to how these communities have been rhetorically constructed, Black gay men often have to choose between these communities, reject both of them, or traverse the highly political landscape with a burdening sense of homelessness when they occupy both cultural spaces (Johnson, 2008). To me, this reality undermines the existence of Black gay men such as James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, and Essex Hemphill, who made exceptional contributions to society but rarely had their identities at the intersections fully recognized.

Overall, academic discourses within and beyond the field of communication, at best, marginalize and, at worst, ignore the experiences that Black gay men have (Johnson, 2001). Johnson and Henderson (2005) mention in their anthology *Black Queer Studies* that Black studies and queer studies often fail to address issues that are specific to Black gay men because Blackness is heterosexualized and gayness is Whitenized. For instance, although there has been work detailing the effects of heteronormativity in the lives of gay men (Clarkson, 2006, 2008), these men have often been White and upper to middle class. While these studies are valuable, they problematically position themselves as studies that can be universally applied to gay men of color without considering how race can inform experiences with heteronormativity and heterosexism (Ferguson, 2004; Jackson, 1997). When Black gay men are mentioned, it is usually

within the context of HIV/AIDS (Cohen, 1997; Johnson, 2001, 2008), or in a long list of excluded groups who are tacitly mentioned (Holland, 2012). Due to such exclusionary practices, I believe a study on how Black gay men construct and negotiate our raced, gendered, and sexualized identities is warranted. This study is designed to disrupt essentialization among gay men, Black men, and Black gay men. The research questions framing this study are:

1. How do Black gay men narrate masculinity?
2. How do heterosexism and/or homophobia impact Black gay men's understandings of masculinity?
3. How do Black gay men navigate heterosexism and homophobia?

Overview of Literature

In the review of literature that follows, I draw from queer, Black, and communication studies to engage the bodies of work that inform my project. I first examine the literature that is present in queer studies about gay masculinities. Second, I attend to the literature present in Black studies pertaining to Black masculinities. Then, I address limitations within each to expose how queer studies and Black studies fall short in their inclusion of race (i.e., queer studies) and sexuality (i.e., Black studies). Next, I engage with the existing literature on Black gay masculinities paying close attention to works authored by communication scholars. Afterwards, I explain how my proposed project expands what we currently know about how Black gay masculinities are constructed and negotiated within a heteronormative society.

Gay Masculinities within Queer Studies

Queer studies covers a wide range of topics dealing with sexuality (Somerville, 2000; Stockton, 2006); in this section I will center gay masculinity in particular. A meaningful trajectory of current scholarship details the differences between feminine gay men and masculine

gay men. This trajectory represents a contested space of queer scholarship (Clarkson, 2008). Thus, on one hand, the presence of masculine gay men can be thought of as progressive since they have the potential to renounce damaging stereotypes of gay men as weak, effeminate, bitchy, and self-centered (Bergling, 2001; Clarkson, 2006; Connell, 1992). However, the celebration of these men at the expense of effeminate gay men can amount to sissyphobia, which refers to the hatred of feminine behavior in men (Bergling, 2001; Clarkson, 2006). According to Bergling (2001), sissyphobia is present in the gay male community mainly due to heterosexist pressure to conform to heteronormativity (Johnson, 1995). Because of this immense pressure, some gay men conform to dominant gender norms, such as “straight-acting” gay men, and adopt heteronormative hatred of effeminate behavior in men (Clarkson, 2006, p. 191).

Bergling (2001) also points out that sissyphobia, or femiphobia as it is sometimes called, stems from the overall contempt that society has toward women. In other words, the reason why effeminate behavior in men is derided is because femininity is thought to be appropriate for women and women are rendered inferior in patriarchal societies such as U.S. American culture. According to Clarkson (2006), sissyphobia is a risk of celebrating heteronormative and hypermasculine displays of gay male identity. Such celebrations may give society at large, and those in the gay male community, a license to hate those who are read as effeminate and traditionally called “queeny” (Johnson, 1995; Johnson, 2008). Connell (1992) documents this same phenomenon earlier than Bergling (2001), noting that upholding heteronormative masculine norms reinforces the heterosexism and sexism that gay men, transgender and cisgender women resist daily. Therefore, celebrating heteronormative masculinity as progressive among gay men undermines queer efforts to resist dominant ideologies. Having briefly addressed

gay masculinities within queer studies, I will examine the literature on Black masculinities in Black studies in the section that follows.

Black Masculinities within Black Studies

Black studies covers numerous topics dealing with Black masculinities such as sports, media, fatherhood, and hypermasculinity (Jackson, 2006; hooks, 2004; Lavelle, 2010). In this section, I focus on two themes that I identify in this body of work: (1) the resistant efforts to center Black masculinity in academic research, and (2) the construction of normative Black masculine categories.

Black studies research on Black masculinities emerged from the absence of Black men in research on masculinities. Part of the reason why Black men were largely absent has to do with the myth of universality (Jackson, 1997). This myth encouraged White male masculinity scholars not to document distinctions between men of different races, which resulted in an understanding of masculinity that failed to address diversity among men. Jackson (1997) states, “the European American perspective of Black masculinity has generally been equated with White masculinity, presuming that American culture is universally lived and understood the same by all American inhabitants” (p. 738). By centering Black male identities, experiences, and interests, Black masculinities researchers (e.g., B. Alexander, 2012; Jackson, 1997) identified one of the glaring blind spots of European American masculinity research: Whiteness.

According to Warren (2009), “whiteness is both an identity and a structure” (p. 80); it is both who a White person is and the system of power that benefits White people and disadvantages people of color (Warren, 2009). Furthermore, B. Alexander (2012) defines Whiteness as a “self-reifying practice, a practice that sustains the ability to name, and conversely not to be named, and the power to speak without being chastised while in the process of

chastising others” (p. 23). In essence, Whiteness influences our perceptions of what a “real” man is to the point that when we think of “real” men, we usually think of characteristics and images typically associated with White men. Because of this association, examinations of how race and gender intersect in the lives of men of color remain under theorized. However, Black male communication scholars such as B. Alexander (2006, 2012), Jackson and Hopson (2011), Johnson (2008), and McCune (2008, 2012) have published a significant body of work to contest the absence of Black masculinity research in our field.

Moving away from the dominant, “universal” conceptualization of masculinity, the aforementioned Black male researchers center Black masculinity. Issues pertaining to Black men, such as media representation and stereotyping, have steadily gained traction (Alexander, 2006; Jackson & Hopson, 2011; Lemelle, 2010). For instance, Jackson and Hopson (2011) trouble how “Black males are routinely scripted as dangerous, anti-intellectual, reckless, incompetent, uneducated criminal delinquents, deadbeat dads, incarcerated felons, and/or entertainers and athletes” (p. 2). These stereotypical scripts create the expectation for Black males to be impervious to pain, especially pain resulting from racism (Jackson, 2006). Such representations also result in what McCune (2012) terms “bipolar Black masculinity” (p. 123) which refers to polarizing Black male identity. In this context, Black men have to be “good” by being exceptional (McCune, 2012). As McCune (2012) states, “the inability to see Black men as ‘good,’ and to disaggregate blackness from deviance, situates men who move outside the norm of demonized blackness into an ‘exceptional’ category” (p. 123). Overall, the failure to see good in Blackness creates a dangerous binary in which Black men can either be “bad” or “exceptional.”

In relation to this dangerous binary, a significant portion of interdisciplinary research about Black masculinity represents Black male identities in crisis mode (Jackson, & Hopson, 2011; Neale, 2006). The crisis itself is broadly described as hypermasculine socialization that results in violent behavior (hooks, 2004; Lemelle, 2010); neoliberal commodification which entails objectifying Black bodies (Leonard & King, 2011); hip-hop masculinities which necessitate homophobic and sexist behavior (Jackson, 2006; Neale, 2013); drug consumption (M. Alexander, 2012); and violence, abuse, and father absenteeism (hooks, 2004). Hypermasculine behavior among Black men, which involves an excessive focus on power, control, and dominance (hooks, 2004), has been one of the quintessential topics addressed in Black masculinities research. For example, Neale (2006) talks about how the hypermasculine socialization process is initiated and maintained by hip hop's reproduction of sexism and homophobia offering Snoop Dogg as an example. Since this hypermasculine image is perpetuated continuously via songs and music videos, it has been normalized as emblematic of Black masculinity (Jackson & Moshin, 2013; Neale, 2006).

hooks (2004) deconstructs Black masculinity in alignment with Neale's (2006) focus on hypermasculinity, but she spends more time articulating the historical, structural, and institutional forces that create the foundation of hypermasculinity. She links the hypermasculinization of Black males to the masculine socialization that America imposes on its boys, particularly Black boys. Because of this masculinization process, White supremacist capitalist patriarchal society both fears Black men and is enamored by them (hooks, 2004). "White supremacist capitalist patriarchy" highlights how interlocking oppressions such as racism, classism, and sexism are simultaneously working at any given moment (hooks, 2004, p. xiv). In this context, Black men are given more attention when we are violently acting out in

accordance with dominant ideologies (hooks, 2004) than when we are not. The sports industry is an example of this in that U.S. American society appreciates Black men when we are exhibiting hypermasculine behavior in the realm of aggressive sports (Leonard & King, 2011). However, embodying hypermasculinity outside the realm of sports and/or entertainment usually gets a Black man chastised, arrested, and/or incarcerated (M. Alexander, 2012; Jackson, 2006).

hooks (2004) also focuses on how patriarchy takes center stage in Black communities and privileges male interests. For instance, critics identified patriarchal ideologies as a driving force behind the Million Man March (Hutchinson, 1999; Reed, 1999; Squires, 2007). According to Hutchinson (1999) and Reed (1999), this patriarchal mindset placed Black males at the top of the gender hierarchy in the Black community. In other words, Black heterosexual men as the ideal in the Black community were elevated to victim status despite this same group being privileged by gender and sexuality. In this instance, it is an advantage to be considered “the Black victim” iconized in the Black community because strategies and solutions will be crafted in alignment with “the Black victim” who, in reality, reflects the interests of Black heterosexual men. Due to such practices, issues that were specific to Black gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, queers, and heterosexual women such as domestic violence and homophobic and transphobic assaults, were not a part of the public Black agenda emphasized at the march (Hutchinson, 1999; Reed, 1999) and remain relatively hidden. As Squires (2007) asserts, the Black community agenda is depicted as a “male-dominated arena and” this depiction distorts “the complexity of African American political opinion critical to establishing twenty-first-century agendas” (p. 74). Next, to address how Black gay men are excluded in the realm of research on Black masculinities and queer masculinities, I discuss the limitations of queer and Black studies. In

highlighting the limitations, I will draw from established scholars who have addressed these problems within queer and Black studies.

The Limitations of Queer Studies and Black Studies

Exclusion in Queer Studies. Although queer studies effectively examines the role of sexuality in the lives of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people, and other sexual and gender minorities, the research repeatedly centers White people as subjects of inquiry to the exclusion of queers of color (Cohen, 1997; Holland, 2012). Those who identify as LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) are oftentimes hesitant to adopt the label “queer,” and to some extent even “gay,” due to their association with Whiteness (Cohen, 1997; Johnson, 2001). Furthermore, Cohen (1997) states, “In many instances, instead of destabilizing the assumed categories and binaries of sexuality, queer politics has served to reinforce simple dichotomies between heterosexual and everything ‘queer’” (p. 438). In essence, queer was stabilized as White instead of including the differing racial experiences amongst queer people. Johnson (2001) points out that the mistake many queers made in the gay rights movement was hierarchizing oppressions, with sexual oppression occupying the top position. Analyses of several White queer scholars’ works (e.g., Butler, 1999; Foucault, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990/2008), indicates that they did not commonly take into account that people of color would experience sexual oppression differently than White people (Johnson, 2001; Holland, 2012).

By exploring identity through a singular focus, we miss the opportunity to examine how intersections of various identities speak to and shape the lives of people who are on the margins of society. For instance, from my perspective, Butler (1999) treats race as if it is separate from how gender and sexuality are formed in U.S. American society. Using motherhood as an example of how so, she does an excellent job disrupting the gendered discourse that positions the

regulatory rules of motherhood as “pre-paternal and pre-cultural” (Butler, 1999, p. 118). However, she assumes that those rules are implemented the same way for every woman in U.S. American society. This viewpoint glosses over how motherhood was often denied to Black women during slavery and afterwards via domestic service jobs. Because of this history, White and Black women produce similar but also different viewpoints on motherhood, with the former often viewing motherhood as oppressive and the latter often viewing motherhood as liberating (Holland, 2012). Overall, intersectional work is needed because homogenizing those on the margins creates a hierarchy within marginal spaces (Holland, 2012). This is not to say that Butler (1999) intentionally renders racial identity invisible in her deconstruction of the sex/gender binary. Rather, it is to highlight that race was not explicitly considered in how the sex/gender binary is produced and enforced. Also, while I acknowledge that one author cannot attend to all of the intersections of all identities at once, when multiple authors and fields of study consistently exclude race, this troubling pattern results in the systematic exclusion of racial minorities within queer communities.

Holland (2012) makes a similar observation in White gay and lesbian scholars’ use of Foucault’s (1990) *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*. Many use it to establish how sexual orientation was historically and socially constructed. In a brilliant explication of the hidden meanings in Foucault’s (1990) theorization of homosexuality, she points out that his historical account was steeped in Whiteness. “While Foucault’s historical trajectory for the invention of the homosexual in the mid-nineteenth century is pathbreaking, it glides over signal events in the Americas such as transatlantic slavery or Indian removal as if these events bear no mark upon our sexual proclivities” (Holland, 2012, p. 11). What makes this critique of queer studies so interesting is that this discipline emerged from gay liberation movements that focused on sexual, as well as

racial and gender diversity. Many of the early gay liberation activists such as Martha Shelley and Lois Hart viewed resistance against racism, sexism, and capitalism as instrumental in the struggle against heterosexism and heteronormativity (Sullivan, 2003). However, since the queer movement took a turn toward the “ethnic model” for political mobilization (Jargose, 1996, p. 62), highlighting community building and action, the movement focused on positioning sexuality at the top of the movement’s concerns and assimilating to institutions (e.g., marriage and the military) that are immersed in Whiteness and White privilege. As Holland (2012) states in her reflection on queer theory’s shortcomings, “even though integration is our gold standard, we seem wholly unable to practice it *critically*” (p. 11).

Exclusion in Black Studies. Unfortunately, despite meaningful criticism lodged by those who study Black masculinities (B. Alexander, 2006, 2012; Jackson & Hopson, 2011; Jackson & Moshin, 2013; Neale, 2006, 2013), Black studies has typically excluded Black gay men. More specifically, most of the issues that Black masculinities research covers are rooted in the realities of Black heterosexual, cisgender men (Johnson & Henderson, 2005). As Johnson and Henderson (2005) state, “it is not surprising that sexuality, and especially homosexuality, became not only a repressed site of study within black masculinity studies, but also one with which the discourse was paradoxically preoccupied, if only to deny and disavow its place in the discursive sphere of black studies” (p. 4). As previously stated, this was largely due to the heterosexual construction of Black identity. For example, when I read hooks (2004) I get the feeling that “Black” and “gay” are two different species. Even though hooks (2004) addresses how the Black hypermasculine cool pose is constructed in part by homophobia, there is little room in her construction of Black masculinity to imagine a Black man who is attracted to men or both men and women. Another exclusionary example emanates from how some Black studies scholars use

notable figures such as James Baldwin. Baldwin is usually understood in the context of his racial and gender identities; however, his sexual orientation as a Black gay man is often ignored to reproduce a heteronormative articulation of authentic Blackness (McBride, 2005).

From my perspective, the invisibility of Black gay masculinities research in Black studies reflects the cultural invisibility of Black gay men. For instance, Black gay men are provided few visible spaces within the Black church. Scholars express that Black gay men are usually appreciated in the choir, but not valued as much in other spaces within Black churches (Johnson, 2008; Neale, 2006, 2013; Ward, 2005). In relation to homophobia and heterosexism within the Black church, Black gay men have been victims of Black respectability and Black authenticity rhetoric (Neale, 2006). Black respectability focuses on a “respectable” appearance that was largely aligned with White familial formations including a husband, wife, and children within a neighborhood that is populated by those with upper to middle class incomes (Ferguson, 2004). However, some Black gay men such as myself do not want to be married to a woman or to have children for that matter. Because of our refusal to assimilate within heteronormative family formations, we are often marginalized in rhetoric that aligns itself with the interests of some White and Black conservative groups (Johnson, 2008). Likewise, Black authenticity denigrates Black gay men because in order to be a “true” Black man, or a real “nigga” who reflects hypermasculine socialization, one must be, above all else, heterosexual and willing to objectify women (Jackson, 2006; Neale, 2006, 2013). Because Black gay men do not fit neatly within the rhetoric of respectability and authenticity rooted in heteronormativity, we are often excluded from the realm of Black masculinity.

In reference to the historical emergence of respectability rhetoric in Black communities, Ferguson’s (2004) *Aberrations in Black* illuminates how gender and sexuality were regulated by

White supremacy. For instance, early twentieth century “Black and tan parties” were understood as an obstacle in Black people’s pursuit of equality (Ferguson, 2004, p. 78). Black and tan parties were spaces where queers, transgender people, and interracial couples were openly welcomed. Within Black communities, Black and tan parties were often characterized as pathological and deviant because the parties accepted interracial sex, homosexuality, and transgender people (Ferguson, 2004). Such characterizations fed into dominant beliefs that Black people were inherently animalistic and immoral (Ferguson, 2004). As a result, Black communities largely did not want to be associated with homosexuality due to its presumed connection with sexual immorality. Therefore, dissociating from homosexuality and normalizing heterosexuality was often considered necessary to prevent further racial discrimination (Ferguson, 2004; Johnson, 2008).

Many have suggested that the virulent homophobia and unyielding heterosexism in the Black community is due to dominant society’s scrutinizing gaze on Black sexuality (Ferguson, 2004; Kornegay, 2004; Ward, 2005). Because sexuality in the Black community was situated as deviant, Black people policed sexuality within their communities in accordance with what was deemed respectable from heteronormative perspectives (Ferguson, 2004). As such, Black people whose lives did not conform to heteronormativity were excluded from the category of Blackness (Valera & Taylor, 2011) and “contestatory” (Alexander, 2006, p. 74) divisions were created within and among Black people.

In service of disrupting the aforementioned exclusionary practices and the essentializing nature of Black and queer studies in reference to Black gay masculinity, this project does not approach Black gay men as a homogeneous group. Rather, I center the diversity among Black gay men and confront the competing notions of “Black” and “gay” to foster a peaceful

coexistence at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. In the next section, I address the degree to which Black gay masculinity has been addressed in relation to communication, narrative, and/or voice.

Black Gay Masculinities

Research that is attentive to Black gay men at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in/related to the field of communication generally follows two patterns: (1) focusing on everyday life in Black gay male communities and (2) documenting how Black gay men negotiate the complexity of intersectional identities (e.g., Alexander, 2006 ;Johnson, 2008). One example of scholarship that deals, at least tangentially, with the topic of Black gay masculinity is the anthology *In the Life* (Beam, 2008). The phrase “in the life” has traditionally been understood in Black communities as Black men and women who are living a homosexual lifestyle (Dais, 2008; Dixon, 2008; Shepherd, 2008; Tinney, 2008). Each chapter articulates experiences within the Black community regarding same-sex attraction and the meanings thereof. For instance, Shepherd (2008) openly struggles in his essay with what it means to be both gay and Black. His struggle highlights three issues: (1) the rigid stereotypical box that Black people are stuffed into, (2) the automatic assumptions equating Blackness with heterosexuality and homosexuality with Whiteness, and (3) his attraction to White men (Shepherd, 2008). Mirroring Shepherd’s (2008) first two struggles, my project is concerned with how Black gay men define themselves and struggle for legitimacy (Alexander, 2006; Johnson, 2003).

Another key concern addressed in works that center Black gay men is intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1995). At the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, McCune (2008) examines how Black gay masculinity is constructed and negotiated in a gay hip hop club. McCune (2008) centers heteronormativity and desire while disrupting the categories of gay and straight. This

disruption takes place by engaging queer desire through heteronormative contact. For example, in the club he was observing, McCune (2008) experiences an in-between space in which the club's hip hop scene both affirmed and negated homosexuality as a legitimate sexual expression. His focus was on how men engaged queer and homosexual desire through heteronormativity as resistant and anti-normative, which is reminiscent of Muñoz's (1999) articulation of disidentification.

Disidentification involves carving out a space within dominant contexts to survive and/or thrive (Muñoz, 1999). An example of this process is how men who have sex with men (hereafter referred to as MSM) engage the terms "gay" and "queer." McCune (2008) posits that the club is more hospitable to MSM, rather than Black men who outwardly identify as gay or bisexual, due in part to its liminal space. The club's liminal space allows Black MSM to reject the label gay (e.g., via homophobic song lyrics), and affirm their own behavior (e.g., flirting and having sex with other Black men). McCune's (2008) article is one of the few publications authored by a Black male communication scholar that deals directly with what I am concerned with in this project, which is the construction and negotiation of Black gay masculinities. While McCune (2008) deals specifically with MSM, I spotlight Black men who consciously identify as gay and/or bisexual.

Johnson's *Sweet Tea* (2008) is a comprehensive work that highlights the lives of Black gay men, from the perspectives of Black gay men including the author himself. *Sweet Tea* addresses how the intersections of being Black, male, and gay affect the lives of his interviewees in the South. What he contributes to, and what I build upon, is an effort to de-essentialize Black gay male identity. An important feature of Johnson's (2008) work is that he allows his research participants to tell their own stories rather than using his academic voice to narrate their lives. I

perceive this as a powerful move for two reasons. First, centering their voices allows the participants to resistantly speak back to research that often excludes them and second, doing so allows these men to emphasize how they are different (e.g., gender expression, religious beliefs, and class status).

What McCune (2008) and Johnson (2008) have in common in their respective works is the idea of “queer world making” (McCune, 2008, p. 300) which I interpret as closely related to Muñoz’s (1999) disidentification. Since Black gay men have not fully matriculated in Black (heterosexual) spaces or (White) gay/lesbian spaces, we often create space within each of these realms to suit our needs. In this space of disidentification, Black gay men can fully blossom into who we want to be. Thus, focusing on disidentification can reveal the nuances of how gay Black men construct their masculinities and negotiate heteronormative social constraints. In the next section, I discuss key assertions and concepts of queer theory as the theoretical framework for this study.

Theoretical Framework

For this project, I use queer theory as my theoretical framework. Identifying the essential elements of queer theory proves difficult due to its interdisciplinary nature. Queer theory is a framework that is used in fields such as sociology, philosophy, anthropology, literary studies, and communication (Butler, 1999; Chávez, 2013; Goltz & Zingshiem, 2010; Holland, 2012; Johnson, 2001; LeMaster, 2011; Somerville, 2000; Stockton, 2006; Warner, 1993). Generally speaking, scholars use queer theory as a revelatory framework in service of liberating people from normative sexuality and gender scripts in U.S. American society (Goltz & Zingshiem, 2010; LeMaster, 2011). Despite the broad applicability of queer theory, there are key assertions and concepts that appear consistently including but not limited to: anti-essentialism, identity as

performative and fluid, heteronormativity, disidentification, and intersectionality. Before expounding upon queer theory's key assertions and concepts, I briefly attend to its roots.

Queer theory primarily emerged from activist efforts, ignited by the Stonewall riots in 1969, that established the gay liberation movement (Sullivan, 2003). The gay liberation movement was itself a response to the homophile movement that preceded it. The homophile movement, which began in the late 1800s, positioned gays and lesbians as people who were sick and in need of sympathy, rather than scorn, from society (Jargose, 1996). In opposition to the homophile movement, the gay liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s included radical themes such as taking pride in one's sexuality, while calling for sexual freedom and confronting systemic domination. Soon after the Stonewall riots, the gay liberation movement transitioned to the "ethnic model" (Sullivan, 2003, p. 52), or what is known as the modern gay rights movement, which focuses more on gaining individual rights on the micro level than creating systemic change on the macro level. The transition toward the ethnic model occurred during the 1980s when the AIDS epidemic gripped the nation's consciousness (Sullivan, 2003). Due to increased visibility of and discrimination toward homosexuality, the AIDS crisis "united" gay people, thus resulting in the gay community's political emergence (Jargose, 1996; Sullivan, 2003). However, the ethnic model was critiqued for its exclusionary politics in that those who were acknowledged as gay were usually White, middle-class, cisgender, able-bodied men. Therefore, lesbians, people of color, people with disabilities, and transgender people were excluded from the overarching conceptualization of gay identity (Chávez, 2013; Cohen, 1997). Due partly to the marginalization of various members of the LGBTQ community, queer theorists offer key assertions and concepts that highlight LGBTQ oppression and destabilize the notion of who constitutes the community at large.

Key Assertions and Key Concepts

There are common key assertions and concepts within queer theory. The first assertion is that queer theory positions itself in opposition to essentialism, which refers to the imposition of homogeneity onto social groups (Chávez, 2013). As such, queer theory exposes how dominant social structures and belief systems, in relation to gender and sexuality especially, impact how we construct social groups and live our lives (Halberstam, 2005; Stockton, 2006). Despite queer theory's anti-essentialist leanings, queer theorists have typically constructed the queer subject as White, male, able-bodied, cisgender, and middle-class (Johnson, 2001). Illuminating such practices as disturbing, Anzaldúa states that "queer is used as a falsifying umbrella which all 'queers' of all races, ethnicities, and classes are shored under" (as cited in Johnson, 1991, p. 250). In this case, "queer" obscures the differences that exist within the gay community and as a result, experiences that diverge from the "norm" within queer communities go unnoticed. Therefore, how race, for example, informs the construction of various queer sexualities has been glossed over in favor of a universalizing view (Sedgwick, 1990/2008). To work against the exclusion of queer people of color, my study continues the work of Cohen (1997), Johnson (2001), Ferguson (2004), Holland (2012) and others by exploring how Black gay men negotiate and construct their queer masculinities within heteronormative society.

Another key assertion of queer theory is that "sexual identities are multiple, unstable, and fluid social constructions intersecting with race, class, and gender, among others, as opposed to singular, stable, and essentialized social positionings" (Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2003, p. 4). Mirroring this stance, Butler (1999) exposes how gender and sexual identities are rhetorically understood as fixed when she posits that dominant conceptualizations of the sex/gender binary as male/female do not include persons who identify as transgender. Her work is an example of how

queer theory takes a seemingly stable notion of gender and reveals the stability to be nothing more than an illusion set forth by dominant groups (Butler, 1999; Sedgwick, 1990/2008).

Similarly, my work speaks to the fluidity of Black gay men's embodiment of their intersectional identities.

In addition to fore-fronting queer theory's assertions, the key concepts that I draw upon include heteronormativity, disidentification, and intersectionality. Heteronormativity refers to organizing a society in a way that privileges heterosexuality (Warner, 1993). Heteronormativity stems from heterosexism, which refers to the systemic ideology that everyone is or should be heterosexual (Warner, 1999). For instance, a heteronormative society positions heterosexuality as natural and normal while placing differing sexualities, such as homosexuality and bisexuality, as strange, unnatural, and wrong. Also, the laws that guide heteronormative society assume that all people are and should be heterosexual (Halley, 1993). With regard to gay men, heteronormativity limits how we navigate our social and cultural spaces by denying our freedom to live our lives in self-definitive ways (Warner, 1993, 1999). For example, marriage laws in many states limit, or prevent, LGBTQ people's participation in the social institution of marriage. Yep (2003) argues that heteronormativity is not only oppressive, but violent as well. Referring specifically to heteronormative violence within communication studies, Yep (2003) says, "although the premier journal [in communication studies] was founded in 1915, there was almost complete scholarly silence on issues of sexuality for the first 61 years of official disciplinary existence" (p. 17). Though sexuality research emerged in the field in the 1990s, it largely appeared in performance and critical media studies (Yep, 2003). Likewise, Chevrette (2013) argues that normative ideas about gender and sexuality have limited interpersonal and family communication's engagement with queer lives. Yep (2003) considers the exclusion of gay

people violent because such practices erase the existence of queer identified people and implies that our lives are not worth researching.

The second key concept useful for this study is disidentification (Muñoz, 1999). Contrary to the insinuation of the term, disidentification does not involve the wholesale rejection of a particular identity (Muñoz, 1999). Rather, as previously discussed, disidentification involves someone reformulating existing normative space for their own particular uses. In other words, disidentification is “meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 4). For Black gay men, disidentification can be understood as a means to carve out a humanized reality within a White heteronormative society that systematically punishes us for not acclimating to the dictates of dominant norms at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality (Ferguson, 2004; McCune, 2008). As McCune (2008) articulates, there are ways that Black gay men disidentify with the Black community due to homophobia and heterosexism and also from the gay community due to racism.

Finally, intersectionality is also central to the articulation and application of queer theory. Conceptualized by Crenshaw (1995), intersectionality proposes that humans are not just composed of one identity. Rather, we have multiple identities that interact to construct specific realities and produce responses to those socially constructed realities (Crenshaw, 1995). One of the faults of previous applications of queer theory is that sexuality was centered as the major identity while identities such as race and gender were undertheorized in relation to sexuality. Scholars such as Johnson (2001, 2008), Chávez (2013), and Holland (2012) highlight this fault and propose a more comprehensive approach to queer theorizing by paying attention to how

sexuality, alongside race, gender, class, and ability, informs how people navigate the multiple terrains of their sexual lives. Specifically for this project, intersectionality is key because sexuality is not the only identity that informs how Black gay men experience the world. Rather, sexuality is gendered, gender is racialized, and race is sexualized (Ferguson, 2004; Holland, 2012). In the next section, I explain interviewing as the method that anchors this project.

Methodology

This project relies heavily on the experiential life narratives of Black gay men gathered via interviews. By focusing on individual articulations of Black gay men's masculinities, this project positions Black gay men as similar to and also different from each other. Allowing these men to speak about their lives instead of having someone else speak for them surfaces "larger questions regarding identity formation, community building, and power relations" (Johnson, 2008, p. 3). Ideally, the complex narratives that I highlight in the interviews disrupt the universalizing impulse of queer theory and provide a fuller account of Black masculinity and Black gay men's lives. To access Black gay men's narratives, I use empathetic interviewing (Fontana & Frey, 2008) as my method.

In their elucidation of empathetic interviewing, Fontana and Frey (2008) refer to the interview process as a "contextually bound and mutually created story" (p. 116). This definition departs from the traditional understanding of interviewing as "the neutral exchange of questions and getting answers" (Fontana & Frey, 2008, p. 116). Empathetic interviewing calls for scholars to view our interviewees as humans instead of a means to an end. Also, empathetic interviewing allows interviewees to speak from their subjective standpoints about themselves and for themselves. This method is less about obtaining the right information and more about seeing the

world from the interviewee's perspective (Fontana & Frey, 2008). In the next section, I describe my positionality in relation to the research process.

Researcher Positionality

I position myself as a Black gay male researcher within the context of this project. As a Black gay male, I identify with some of the experiences that other Black gay males have had in terms of constructing their masculinities in the context of heteronormative society. To reference the title as an example, I regularly alternate between snapping my fingers and “giving dap” which is dependent on the person and the context. Situated in the critical paradigm, this project requires that I draw from the interviewees' experiences to meaningfully make sense of how Black gay men construct our masculinities and negotiate heteronormativity. My identities will also be drawn upon to transparently mark my own construction of masculinity in relation to my participants' experiences.

Site

The six interviewees were recruited in two places: (1) Southern Illinois University (SIU) and (2) Vidalia, GA, which is my hometown. Depending on the interviewee, the interviews took place in sites ranging from an empty classroom to a coffee shop to a room reserved in the campus library. For instance, I interviewed a Black gay male in Vidalia, Georgia who has no connections to Southern Illinois University and he felt comfortable conducting the interview in a local McDonald's. I also interviewed Black gay men who are students at SIU and felt comfortable being interviewed in a reserved room in the campus library. There were also participants who were more comfortable with phone interviews instead of face-to-face interviews. As a result, I accommodated their needs by conducting phone interviews (if they did

not want a face-to-face interview) and going to their preferred locations. Overall, four people were interviewed face-to-face while two were interviewed over the phone.

Interviewees

I recruited the interviewees using a criterion-sampling method that involves selecting a group of people that meet a specific set of characteristics (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). To accomplish this, I used the existing network of relationships I have within SIU and in my home town to recruit interviewees. To participate, the interviewees had to meet the following criteria: (1) identify as a gay/bisexual/queer Black male and (2) be between 18 and 50 years old. I created age restrictions to avoid completely replicating Johnson's (2008) study about Black gay men in the South in which he primarily used men over the age of 40. Overall, I conducted six interviews with self-identified Black gay and bisexual men. I had a mix of Black gay men who were out to their respective families and communities and those who were not out. I purposefully did not exclude Black men who are in the closet because I felt that doing so was unnecessary and harmful. I offered confidentiality to all of the participants through the use of an informed consent form that was approved by the Office of Sponsored Projects Administration at SIU. To recruit participants at SIU, I networked via the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) Resource Center and the Black Male Initiative program. I also networked via personal relationships at SIU. As for my participants in Georgia, I connected with them through Facebook via private messaging. This was possible considering my Georgia participants and I were Facebook friends prior to this project.

Method

I asked the interviewees to participate in a face-to-face or phone interview that would last approximately 45 to 60 minutes (see Appendix A for interview questions). The structure of these

interviews was structured and open-ended (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). They were structured in the sense that they fell within the 45 to 60 minute time frame, but they were also open ended to allow the interviewees the comfort to express their ideas, feelings, and experiences without being constricted by a fixed set of questions. The point of this structured and open-ended format was to create a space in which interviewees could feel comfortable narrating their lives. Affirming this approach, Lindlof and Taylor (2011) define one of the purposes of qualitative research as to “understand the social actor’s experience and perspective through stories, accounts, and explanations” (p. 173).

Coding Process

Once the interviews were transcribed utilizing a transcription service¹, I identified categories and subcategories from the data via an open-coding process (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). An open coding process involves identifying categories I found in the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The purpose of this process is to first identify as many categories as possible (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). For this project, my open-coding process was guided by the key concepts of queer theory including heteronormativity, intersectionality, and disidentification. Initially, I identified over 30 categories in the transcripts. Then, I initiated a process of comparison and elimination to refine the set of categories. This occurred by merging some categories together and eliminating others when it was determined that they were not connected to other existing categories. For instance, I merged the category “Christian Homophobia” into “Black Christian Experience” when I realized that these two categories were quite similar. This process of merging and elimination yielded a reduced number of 15 categories total including: heteronormativity, intra-group policing, intersectionality, resistance, struggle, exceptionalism, disidentification,

¹ The name of the service is called MVC Transcription.

redefinition, erasure, racial community alignment, Black Christian experience, controlling/controlled masculinity, heterosexism, self-policing, and systemic oppression.

After the open-coding process, I constructed a color-coding system for the codebook (see Appendix B) to organize the 15 categories that I identified after the open-coding process. Color-coding the categories was helpful in terms of organizing categories together and to facilitate the next stage in my coding process. As an example of my color-coding process, I randomly assigned heteronormativity the color yellow. Other categories that were closely connected to heteronormativity, such as heterosexism, hypermasculinity, and homophobia were coded as yellow too. The next stage of the coding process was axial coding. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), the purpose of axial coding is to create “a new set of codes whose purpose is to make connections between categories” (p. 252). This involved merging similar categories together. If one of the categories was large enough to be an axial code, I organized other codes under the axial code. Returning to my previous example of heteronormativity, since it was large enough to function as an axial code, I organized heterosexism, hypermasculinity, and homophobia under it.

The final step of my methodological process was dimensionalization. Dimensionalization requires examining “each construct...and try[ing] to tease out the key variations” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 252). In other words, once the axial codes were created, I identified the properties of the specific constructs. For example, under the heteronormativity axial code were controlling/controlled masculinity, heterosexism, hypermasculinity, gender policing, and homophobia. In order to dimensionalize a theme from the axial code, I referenced the major categories and subcategories subsumed under the axial code to get a stronger picture of the overarching themes within this group. Via this process, I deciphered four major themes from the

collective transcripts of all six interviews. The four themes are: masculinity as controlling and controlled, homeless identity, disidentification, and resistance.

Analysis

Interviewing Abel, Nick, QJ, Fire, Kam, and JM² alluded to interrelated experiences at the intersections of race, gender and sexuality. Taken together, these men are from similar but also different backgrounds. Some grew up in single parent homes and others in two parent homes, some were bullied and others were not, and five are out while one remain in the closet. As demonstrated in the following sections, these men have constructed and negotiated their masculinities in various ways. To theorize their experiences using queer theory, this section is organized by the following themes that I pinpointed from multiple interviews: controlling vs. controlled masculinity, homeless identity, disidentification, and resistance.

Controlling and Being Controlled by Masculinity

The first major category I identified from the interviews involved masculinities being both controlling and controlled. Via queer theory, I situate this category in relation to heteronormativity, hypermasculinity, and gender policing. In relation to gender, heteronormativity functions to control the performances of Black gay masculinities. Hypermasculinity is utilized in this section to refer to how Black gay men are encouraged to limit their expressions of masculinity to physical and emotional dominance, aggression, and violence. Gender policing refers to the ways Black gay masculinities are being controlled via social norms and attitudes about masculinity and homosexuality. The interviewees narrated this theme in a variety of ways that illustrate gender policing and externalized and internalized homophobia.

² Each interviewee chose their own pseudonym.

Gender policing functions as an arm of heteronormativity that guides us into “appropriate” ways of performing our gender (Butler, 1999). Fire, who is the oldest interviewee in the group (mid to late-40s) and from Chicago, IL, narrated a gender policing incident that occurred when he was a child. As an eight year old boy, he was playing with two little girls at a Black owned salon in Chicago, IL. All three children were perusing through magazines on an end table near one of the salon chairs. The girls were attempting to embarrass Fire by identifying the female models as his girlfriends. Flustered, eight-year-old Fire tried to find men he could use to embarrass the girls with. However, there were only women in the magazine. So he selected a random woman and said, “Hey, this is your girlfriend!” Explaining what happened, he says:

And the next thing I knew, that woman, the [Black] woman who was doing hair, their mother...came so close to me I thought she was going to strike me! But she snatched that magazine out of my hand and... found some male models and she said, “Now you can play the little game with them. We’re not going to have that girlfriend stuff in here!”

From my perspective, the woman’s reaction communicated the heterosexual ideal to Fire. In other words, her reaction conveyed that it is wrong for people to romantically love those who are of the same sex. Although this example of gender policing could be considered extreme, it is very common as an expression of homophobia which emerged in several participants’ interviews.

Further narrating how heteronormativity manifests and informs perceptions of masculinity, Abel, a recent SIU graduate in his late-20s and an Illinois native, recalls experiencing homophobia in the Black church. As he tells it, “going to church for years...you’re told that you’re a sinner, you’re going to hell, this [homosexuality] is wrong, and so I just kept my mouth closed [in the church].” For both Fire and Abel, masculinity was articulated and

normalized in a heteronormative context. Although masculinity was not explicitly fore-fronted in Fire and Abel's examples, their experiences served to frame the way Fire and Abel began to understand their own masculinities in terms of who men should be attracted to in order to be "good" men. The only sexual orientation that was allowed was heterosexuality which reflects heteronormativity. Not only was the adult woman in Fire's example culpable in the reinforcement of heteronormativity, but the young girls were implicated as well. In the aforementioned example, they reinforced heteronormativity, as children socialized in a heteronormative society, by assuming that he would be interested in women and have a girlfriend in the future. The articulation of this heteronormative expectation, whether intentional or unintentional, fuels homophobia.

Framed by queer theory, homophobia also emerged as both an externalized and internalized factor in the lives of the interviewees. Externalized homophobia refers to the negative attitudes and beliefs that are expressed by individuals, and society overall, toward the LGBTQ community (Yep, 2003). Internalized homophobia, however, refers to homophobic beliefs that we as LGBTQ people accept about ourselves (Bergling, 2001). Many of the participants experienced externalized homophobia in the context of family. Families were described as paradoxical spaces where they feel comfort, enrichment, protection, oppression, and pain simultaneously.

Abel speaks to this paradox in his reflections on his family. Although he appreciates the level of confidence his family members instilled in him, he still remembers the homophobia that his mother and father often expressed in front of him. For example, he recalled instances when his mother questioned his masculinity. He says, "though I love my mother she would frequently say don't you want to be a man?" His father also outwardly expressed homophobia by calling

him a “punk,” “faggot,” or “sissy” when he deviated from the hypermasculine norm.

Additionally, when he was subjected to homophobic bullying by his brothers, his parents did nothing to help. Narrating their responses to his pleas for help, he says,

Whenever I went to my mother and when I went to my father and told them about my brothers bullying me they said, “you know what, you’re fatter than both of us, you deal with it.” They’re like, “you’re bigger than both of us, you deal with it.” That was their response. So here, you have this gay teen who is being belittled, abused, and called names, and when he reaches out for help he is told “you deal with it.”

Consistent with hooks (2004), I interpret Abel’s narrative as an illustration of how he was being actively policed by hypermasculinity which requires a “real” man to solve his own problems, largely through violence. The enforcement mechanism, in this case, was blatant homophobia (and fat phobia) in that his parents allowed the homophobia to continue uninterrupted and contributed to it themselves. I experienced similar childhood incidents in which I would be called a “punk” and a “faggot.” If I reached out to adult family members for help, I was often told that my peers must be right because I was not fighting back. As a result, my family substituted meaningful help, such as notifying school officials, with shaming. Allowing the homophobia to continue, similarly to the families of my interviewees, my family hoped that I would embody their version of “real” masculinity which required toughness and physical aggression.

Another example of externalized homophobia emerges from Kam’s life, a fellow Vidalia, GA native in his early to mid-20s. In talking about his experience with homophobia, he locates it within the context of his family. After he came out to his family, he says “it was hurtful...and I didn’t speak to my immediate family for two months.” After the two months, some of his family

members began to reconcile with him. However, not all of his family members were willing to do so. At a recent family reunion event, he encountered more obstacles; he says, “when I came to their house to chat with them and associate with them, they tell me all of a sudden I’m not welcomed.” Also, in talking about the repercussions of his coming out through social media, he says “some of my family deleted me off of Facebook.” Being exposed to this level of externalized homophobia often leads to Black gay men internalizing this hatred (Bergling, 2001).

The forms of internalized homophobia some interviewees narrated include femiphobia and self-policing. According to Bergling (2001), femiphobia is the hatred of perceived or actual feminine characteristics such as sensitivity, vainness, and moodiness. Some participants embody hypermasculinity in reaction to internalized homophobia. One of the men who embodied hypermasculinity was QJ, an Illinois native in his late-20s. During his early childhood, he was taught to be physically dominant, heterosexual, and aggressive. As a result of this teaching, he played sports, had girlfriends, and fought in school. QJ felt compelled in his adolescence to conform to hypermasculinity because femininity in men was, and continues to be, vilified as immoral and ungodly. However, from his perspective, hypermasculinity was not a reflection of his true self. It was simply a performance to help him gain acceptance from friends, family, and society at large. Due to his performance of hypermasculinity, he began to hate himself which could be interpreted as internalized homophobia. For instance, QJ says “you almost start to hate yourself. You almost start to just say that’s just not who I am. Most of that is just not who I want to be.”

QJ’s experiences connect with self-policing that can be understood as the way we control our bodies to follow specific norms (Butler, 1999). As he became more aware of his family’s homophobic stance toward homosexuality, he became more aggressive and confrontational.

Recounting his experience with self-policing, QJ says “I had to perform masculinity to their expectations of what the public eye sees as masculine, which is how you wear your clothes, how you talk, how you approach people, and how you walk.” My interpretation is that QJ had to perform masculinity in a way that evaded suspicion of his homosexuality. Another interviewee who experienced self-policing was Fire. Fire became highly aware of how homosexuality was viewed in his family after his incident in the Black-owned beauty salon. Years later, he entered the United States military. During this time, “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” (DADT) was still being enforced as a policy that discharges people for being open members of the LGBTQ community. To stay in the military, Fire adopted self-policing mechanisms such as not staring too long at another male and keeping pictures of his male partner hidden to avoid accusations of homosexuality.

In addition to policing his own behaviors, another way Fire policed his sexuality was by making hypermasculine, heterosexual men as comfortable as possible. For instance, when he entered a men’s therapy group session to help him grieve his mother’s death, he “let it be known [that] I don’t feel comfortable making these emotional connections that you [the group therapy facilitator] suggest us doing.” By presenting himself as a traditional man who avoids his emotions, he policed his body according to an image he felt the men in his group would be more comfortable with. It was only when he saw the straight men in the group reassuring him that revealing emotions is okay that he realize that his struggle with homophobia, at that moment, was internal. In the next section, I specifically focus on how the participants’ masculinities are impacted at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality.

Homelessness at the Intersections of Race, Gender, and Sexuality

This section speaks to Black gay men's sense of homelessness at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. The idea of a "homeless" identity emerged when several of the participants described their experiences as members of the Black and gay communities. These men experienced some degree of erasure and systemic oppression within Black communities and gay communities given their experiences with homophobia in the Black community and racism in the gay community. As such, QJ, Kam, JM, and Abel shared never feeling completely at home within either community. Their experiences speak to research that addresses how Black gay men are erased and oppressed when Black and gay communities are positioned as separate entities (Holland, 2012; Johnson, 2008; Neale, 2006). In the following paragraphs, issues of erasure and systemic oppression are discussed in relation to heterosexism and racism.

Erasure appeared as a salient characteristic when we talked about Black gay life within gay communities. For instance, QJ expresses his frustration with how gay culture is framed in the interests of White, cisgender, middle class gay males. He says "for people like me, people of color and brown bodies that are gay, it's hard to be gay because we're like 'hey, we're gay too!'" Drawing from his lived experiences, QJ is addressing how Black gay men are erased from the public image of the gay community. Abel also brings this up when he mentions Illinois recently legalizing same-sex marriage. For him, the new state laws are met with a mixture of gratitude and frustration. He is grateful for the male same-sex couple who had the resources to push this issue in Illinois. Abel says, "I actually know them [the couple]... they are both White, they are both male, the only disadvantage that they have is that they are openly gay." However, he feels frustrated with how the couple became the "leaders" of this issue. Abel says,

It's like really when they would go to pride parade in Chicago with the ACLU, they're everywhere, they were the face of the fight for marriage equality in the state of Illinois. Never mind the fact of how many black, interracial, Latino, queer couples were being affected by these laws, you had these two white men at the fore-front.

To me, Abel's commentary signifies that, as people of color, we were essentially put on the backburner of the movement to make room for more desirable bodies. These bodies in the past and presently are typically constructed as White, male, cisgender, and middle class in queer politics (Cohen, 1997; Johnson, 2001). This speaks to essentialism, which involves homogenizing a group of people (Chávez, 2013). Articulating his frustration with being marginalized in the gay community as a gay man of color, Abel says "the faces that you see at the front lines of everything is typically the shape of well off White men." Oftentimes this public erasure via essentialism leads to silencing the voices of people of color within the gay community (Holland, 2012; Johnson, 2001).

Erasure was also alluded to in the context of Christianity. Christianity has performed a critical function within Black communities as a site for liberation and resistance (hooks, 2004; Johnson, 2008). Considering the Black church's significant role in the Black community, one would presume that this institution is inclusive toward all Black people. However, as the participants demonstrate in their interviews, the Black church has not often felt welcoming to us as Black gay men. Although the Black church has been critical in resisting racist oppression in U.S. American society, when looked at from the intersections of race and sexuality, homophobia in the Black church is a salient component of the institution.

Exemplifying erasure, Kam and JM, another native from Vidalia, GA in his early to mid-20s, articulate complex feelings towards their churches. Raised in southeastern Georgia, these

two found that Christianity functioned as a seamless and unquestioned norm in their lives. Both men describe the church in mostly positive ways. For instance, Kam talks about how the church has given him, at times, the confidence he needed to live his daily life. Church also formed the epicenter of Kam's family's life in that much of their social lives revolve around the church. Specifically reflecting on the significance of his church's teachings to his life as a Black gay man, he says "I take that vision [of masculinity] right there [in the Bible]." However, Kam also describes feeling oppressed by the church's insistence on heteronormativity and gender conformity:

But like I say, it was also my teaching that what my mom told me that, you know, how a man is supposed to be and also in the bible and everything...so my self-esteem was real low at points of time because [of] not defining myself correctly if I'm masculine or I had feminine ways.

In the comments above, Kam is describing his struggle between his Christian beliefs and his identity as a Black gay man who embodies feminine characteristics such as emotional sensitivity and nurturance. Because of Kam's beliefs and pressures from his family, he responded to his church's discourse by trying to emulate a more traditional masculinity without forsaking his sexual orientation.

Like Kam, JM also has ambivalent feelings toward the church. Although he indicates that he believes in the heteronormative teachings of Christianity by saying, "I know I am living wrong," he continues to form sexual and romantic relationships with men. JM underscores his ambivalence when he narrates a story about how he and his friends were entering a church and all eyes fell upon them. In that moment, he detected contempt and judgment from their stares. As he tells it,

As soon as I walked in, they turned around and looked at me like all eyes is on me. And I felt weird and uncomfortable because certain people...had looked at me when I first walked in, they was like staring during the whole entire service.

Therefore, although JM feels generally at home in the Black church, he does experience instances of normative judgment.

Utilizing queer theory, I interpret the above examples as erasure because these men are reacting to the erasure of their lives under Christianity. Kam's experience as a Black gay man was erased under the definition of Black Christian masculinity and JM's presence in the church was treated, from his perspective, as an anomaly. I have faced these challenges within the Black church as well. When we cannot appear as ourselves in our houses of worship, our lives and bodies are rendered invisible by heteronormativity as a result. Because of constantly being rendered invisible, I made a decision that Kam and JM found to be extreme: I left the church.

In addition to narrating erasure, many participants acknowledged their oppression as systemic, cutting across multiple identities such as class, race, and sexuality. For instance, Abel talks about experiencing systemic oppression at his retail job via the dress code and rules of the retail chain. He views the homogeneity of the clothing that is permissible to wear in the store to be a component of class oppression. Abel says "whenever I do go to work, and I work for a retail giant... a big part of who I am is stripped away." Since working class people are not able to express their individual identities on the job, they are essentially viewed as the same. Abel has also noticed that he is often asked to pick up heavier objects. He says, "when you're a self-identified Black male and you're in the working class and you have a retail job or a factory job they expect you to do certain things." He stipulates that because he outwardly identifies as a

Black working class male, many people assume that he is more capable of picking up heavier objects due to the hypermasculinization of the Black male body.

Abel was also a victim of heterosexism at his job when a customer subjected him to a homophobic verbal assault. Reflecting on his reaction to the homophobic slur, he says, “I took my nose ring out, I pulled it down. I was on the clock, and I was on the sales floor...and I said ‘we just need to go outside and handle this.’” Due to his sexual orientation and gender performance, male customers uttered a homophobic comment in Abel’s presence with the assumption that he would not react in a hypermasculine way. Although he used hypermasculinity to defend himself, his experience highlights the dominant masculine norms that all gay men, especially feminine gay men, are judged and measured against (Clarkson, 2008). Reflecting on this violent action and others in the past, Abel says,

So that really worried me when I had those violent reactions because it’s like I turn into what is expected of me, being this angry violent Black male. And to me that is an issue because that’s not the person I want to be, it’s really not the person that I am.

QJ also linked an instance of racism to the systemic oppression of Black gay men that manifests despite their male privilege. He was chatting online with a White gay male when this man identified a litany of reasons why he normally does not date Black men. While QJ shares this particular experience, expressions of disgust and exasperation flash across his face accompanied by an animated sigh:

He said, “You know, I think Black gay men are great. I think they’re hot. But they’re stupid and they don’t have a car or they don’t – they’re just not” – he just had this whole – he had this complete generalization of what Black gay men were just because of his interpretation.

QJ then connected this instance of racism as a component of collective gay culture. As mentioned previously, the public face of the LGBTQ community tends to be a White male. Due to this, White gay men are able to evade how their White privilege, despite their oppression as gay, allows them to create a toxic environment for Black men within gay communities. In accordance with QJ's perception, it is hard to be a Black gay man when you are not even acknowledged in public discussions about gay life. He says, "it's hard for gay men of color ... to navigate that space because everywhere you go in the world, it's hard. It's almost like you're not a desirable body. You're not a wanted body."

Relating to QJ's experience, I have often questioned myself the extent to which the gay community is depicted as only White, particularly when I consume media. Whenever another breakthrough in television happens for the gay community, the person centered is most often White. I even become frustrated when I think about my prospects for love. I wonder, will my skin color be seen first before my personality is seen? Or, even worse, will I be sought out for my skin color as part of fulfilling someone's fetish? Unless queer people of color are explicitly asked, rarely does society see how gay communities create racially oppressive structures for people of color (Chávez, 2013; Johnson, 2001). Oppressive racial structures commonly foster opportunities for Black gay men to engage in acts of disidentification, which will be discussed in the next section.

Disidentification and Reflections on Community

Disidentification emerged during the interviews in ways that allowed participants to narrate their experiences between and among the gay community and the Black community. Instead of rejecting either or both communities outright, interviewees expressed carving out a space to thrive without casting away their racial and/or sexual identities. Muñoz (1999)

articulates disidentification as the survival strategies that one uses to “navigate phobic majoritarian” spaces that punish people for not “conforming to normative citizenship” (p. 4). The phobic majoritarian spaces in question are the exclusion of people of color in the gay community and the exclusion of LGBTQ people in the Black community. Forms of disidentification included emphasizing particular sexual orientations, performing gender fluidity, and foregrounding race.

All of the participants did not share the same sexual orientation. Because of our penchant, myself included, to essentialize within the gay community (Chávez, 2013), some interviewees specified their sexual orientations. For instance, Nick, a St. Louis native and a graduate of SIU in his early-20s (he’s currently a grad student at another university), emphasizes that due to his bisexual and racial identities, he finds himself at odds with both the gay community and the Black community. In other words, he feels he cannot completely immerse himself within either community because each ignores and misunderstands an aspect of who he is. His struggle for recognition became real to me when he mistakenly identified himself as gay instead of bisexual. Reflecting on why homophobia and biphobia are hard to deal with in U.S. American society, Nick says “it’s way more complex than we’re thinking and researching it...every individual is different, every gay man, we can have similar things but it’s still different for every gay man, and also [every] bisexual man.” In this quote, Nick realizes that he identified himself with gay men and quickly corrected himself to reflect his bisexual identity.

Living in a culture that does not tolerate bisexuality, Nick is often pressured by gay and straight people alike to choose a side (gay or straight). From my perspective, Nick outwardly disidentifies with the gay community (as well as the straight community) by emphasizing his bisexual orientation. He also defends his bisexual orientation to people whenever someone

questions it. For example, he remembers how one Black woman casted doubts on his sexual orientation by stating that “bisexuality in Black men does not exist.” This same sentiment was expressed by a White male earlier in his life. Nick responded to both situations by emphasizing that he is indeed attracted to both women and men. Next, I address gender fluidity as another form of disidentification.

Gender fluidity refers to the multiple, unstable ways that gender, as well as sexuality, are socially constructed as dynamic and shifting (Butler, 1999; Yep, Lovass & Elia, 2003). Some of the interviewees embody gender fluidity by adopting both traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine characteristics. JM and QJ are the two interviewees who reference gender fluidity most often. JM, for example, consistently comments on how his fluid gender performance affects his Black Christian surroundings. Below, he narrates how his aunt confronted him on this particular issue.

I still have my ways where ... I wear female pants or whatnot around my family. But she [JM's aunt] did not – she's like “that's not what to wear over there” [in college]. But she ought to know...I'm going to do what I want to do.

Identifying with JM's experiences, when I attempted to adopt a gender fluid performance as a child, I was heavily chastised for it. To this day, that chastisement influences how I present myself as a man. However, regardless of being chastised repeatedly for his choices in self-representation, JM still wears traditionally feminine clothing including small tank tops and tight capris. To me, it is clear that he believes his fluid gender presentation represents a core component of who he is as a Black gay man. Situating his decision as a form of disidentification, I interpret his decision to define himself as a means to remain in the Black community without acquiescing to normative gender and sexuality expectations.

QJ shares similar struggles regarding how he dresses as a Black gay man. Like JM, he adopted a traditionally masculine appearance during his childhood simply because it was expected. However, during high school, QJ entered another phase in his masculinity which entailed presenting himself as more effeminate than masculine. What is remarkable in QJ's case from a queer perspective is his refusal to abide by the masculine/feminine binary. Reflecting on his decision, QJ says,

So when we're [him and his partner] having sex, he's like wow, you're pretty aggressive and dominating. And I say "yeah, you know, just because you've seen my outward [feminine] appearance doesn't mean that I don't have any type of masculine traits."

QJ's reflections relate to queer theory's insistence on challenging unnecessary binaries.

Articulating his argument that normalization is a site of violence, Yep (2003) says "this regime of sexuality based on the homo/heterosexual binary becomes injurious and violent to individuals and communities through the workings of heteronormativity" (p. 37-38). Connecting QJ's embodiment of gender and sexuality to Yep (2003), QJ challenges the masculine/feminine binary with his fluid understanding of gender. Within a hypermasculine gay and Black culture that mandates the embodiment of traditionally masculine characteristics such as physical and verbal aggression, rationality, and stoicism (Clarkson, 2008), QJ embraces gender fluidity instead of acquiescing to heteronormativity and hypermasculinity in Black and gay spaces. By adopting a gender fluid performance despite normalized expectations, he is able to stay within the Black and gay community without rejecting either one.

In terms of navigating the intersections of race and sexuality, Black gay men typically understand ourselves as being members of two groups of people (the Black and the gay community) whereas White gay men oftentimes understand themselves as residing with one

group of people (the gay community) (Holland, 2012). In other words, Black gay men's racial identities are often visible to us while the racial identities of White gay men are largely invisible to them. As QJ notices, "it's out there. I mean I look at the magazines. I look at LOGO [a gay television network]. I look at just in general and I tell people this all the time." QJ's comments signal that Whiteness functions as an invisible norm (Jackson, 1997; Warren, 2009) within gay communities. Because Whiteness is invisible, many White gay men do not understand how their racial privilege oppresses gay men of color.

Because Black gay men understand ourselves as part of a racial group, our narratives concerning how we construct and navigate our masculinities ultimately narrate our lives as not only gay men, but as Black gay men. For instance, many have talked about the ways in which Black gay men contend with Black authenticity as a heteronormative structure within our lives (Jackson, 2006; Johnson, 2008; Neale, 2006). Black authenticity functions to question the "Blackness" of Black gay men (Neale, 2006). Black gay men often deal with how Black authenticity inspires contradictions within our understandings of who we are (Johnson & Henderson, 2005; McCune, 2008). For instance, QJ performed hypermasculinity largely to fit in. He says "I can do everything that needs to be done because I did everything I – I performed it. I was in sports and I mimicked. And so I knew what it meant to be masculine to the public eye." However, when QJ was at home with his father, he could perform as himself rather than the stereotypical, hypermasculine Black boy. In this way, he places himself within the dominant norm of Black "authentic" masculinity while still retaining a core component of himself at home before he came to rejecting the performance of hypermasculinity altogether. In the next section, I address how Black gay men resist dominant ideologies pertaining to gender, sexuality, and race as the last theme.

Resisting Dominant Ideologies

These men resisted racism and heteronormativity in various ways that include redefining who they are, changing their perceptions of themselves, and focusing on improving their lives via education, business endeavors, and self-esteem. What unites these men are the ways they excelled at resisting heteronormative constructions of masculinity. In this section, I describe three overarching characteristics of their resistant strategies: exceptionalism, self-acceptance, and redefinition.

Exceptionalism, in this study, refers to the ways the interviewees excelled at achieving their personal and business goals. This category is reflected mainly in the educational lives of the interviewees. The participants who explicitly articulated exceptionalism were Abel, Nick, and Kam. For Abel, education is a significant way he resists his family's idea of masculinity. For instance, he talks about how his brothers dropped out of school and how he continued his education: "Out of the three, I'm also the only one who graduated from high school, I'm the only one who put himself through college." His desire for education has been encouraged by various female family members. For instance, he shares a story where his aunt was so dedicated to obtaining her Master's degree that she was able to defend it without revisions. This story fueled Abel's desire to complete his undergraduate education and pursue graduate education. In alignment with his educational goals, Abel also wants to fore-front the voices of Black gay men in his research.

Overall, Abel's commitment to education helps steer him away from the hypermasculine behaviors that continue to affect a majority of his male family members. For example, his father, currently in his fifth marriage, was known for beating up his girlfriends and wives. Witnessing his own mother suffering at the hands of his violent father affected how Abel looked at

masculinity for the rest of his life. Abel says, “He used to beat my mother. Those moments just sort of made me think and feel if this is what it means to be a man... then I want to be something else.” From childhood on, Abel wanted to use education to rise above the legacy of violent hypermasculinity his father left for him and his brothers.

Nick narrates a similar story about the prevalence of male violence and drugs in his neighborhood on the west side of Chicago, his former residence. Education, for him, was a way to transform his masculinity and to resist traditional Black male stereotypes such as being overly aggressive and unintelligent. Because of this experience, he labels hypermasculinity as something that can be resisted and transformed with enough will and effort. For example, Nick says,

I got in a lot of fights too. I thought that’s what being a man was until I got to college. I had class discussions about what being a man is. So I think now I understand what it is, my definition has definitely changed [to]... taking care of my family, taking care of my friends...and having integrity.

Also, due to attending college, he was dubbed “the smart one.” In this sense, we both shared the experience of being labeled “the smart one” and having that experience influence how we understand our masculinities. For example, I was considered smart from the moment I was six-years-old and as the only one capable of reading a whole book by myself in my kindergarten class. From childhood to late adolescence, the “smart kid” label allowed me to envision a masculinity that involved intelligence and compassion instead of violence and hatred. For Nick and myself, educational excellence is a core component of how we understand ourselves as Black gay and bisexual men apart from hypermasculine heteronormativity.

In comparison to the narratives shared thus far, Kam experienced exceptionalism of a different kind. According to him, his grades were not stellar enough to be called “the smart kid.” However, he proved himself in other ways after high school. Instead of going to college, he went straight into the workforce and became a manager at a major fast food restaurant chain in southern Georgia. In addition, he is planning on managing two restaurants that are a part of that same chain and he has opened up a business in wedding flowers and decorations. In this way, Kam resists stereotypical constructions of Black masculinity as unintelligent and lazy by accomplishing his goals and excelling at business. Exceptionalism as a resistant strategy against hypermasculinity and heteronormativity helps several of the interviewees, and myself, deal with self-acceptance, another major issue in our lives.

Self-acceptance was identified as another form of resistance utilized by the participants. Each interviewee arrived to self-acceptance differently. Some men found it easier than others to accept themselves due to strong family bonds. Others took a longer time to accept themselves due to familial bonds not being as strong or the perception thereof. The latter is the case for Fire. He left his family and his hometown for a significant amount of time because he felt he was not safe there as a Black gay man. After accepting himself years later, he went back to his family to find out that they already knew he was gay and still loved him. Reflecting on his experiences, he says,

And I’m like “so wait a minute. I left out of here almost fearing for my safety that I had a big red X on my back. I go to the military, don’t ask, don’t tell... and you all [his family] tell me that I’m not approachable or dateable because I don’t easily read the stereotypes that I used to be afraid of having directed at me.” That’s some crap.

Fire finds it ironic that his family is now giving him relationship advice. Because he was afraid of being read as gay, Fire embodied stereotypical characteristics of masculinity. However, his family now tells him that his is not dateable because he is not readable as gay.

For others, the process of self-acceptance wasn't as easy, especially for Abel and Kam. Early on in Abel's self-acceptance process various family members, including his father, refused to talk to him. He remembers being prevented from attending his father's wedding to his fourth wife due to his sexual orientation. As he tells it, "Because I was openly gay and rather feminine and a nerd, everything that wasn't masculine, he [his father] asked me not to attend. So I didn't." Kam experienced similar exclusion from his family, which involved being defriended from Facebook accounts, verbal assaults, and outright rejections. Recounting his experiences, Kam says

When I'm coming to their house and coming to chat with them and associate with them, and they tell me all of a sudden I'm not welcome. And then some of my family deleted me off of Facebook...have said mean and hurtful things to me.

However, some of the family members who initially rejected Kam eventually came to accept him. His family's acceptance in turn aided him in his self-acceptance process.

I situate self-acceptance in relation to resistance because of the nature of each man's journey in accepting himself. Abel expresses self-acceptance as resistance in the following quote, "So whenever I started to embrace the bear community...I started carrying myself a certain way, I had already divorced myself from this idea of what do others [his family and the gay community] think." He continues saying,

So who cares what they think? If I really gave a shit, I'd trim my beard, I'd take out my nose ring, I'd probably find a matching set of pants for this vest but I don't care. Because

this is the way that I carry myself. This is what I look like, and this is how I see myself. And if there are other people who don't know what to think then that is more on them than it is on me. Because my existence isn't to please others by my appearance. It's to help others by my actions.

This is by far the strongest statement among the interviewees that articulates self-acceptance as resistance. The context for this statement resided in our conversation about standards of beauty within the gay male community. According to Abel, the bear community refers to a group of gay men who present an image of rugged masculinity via big and hairy bodies. As Abel says, "all of us bears are just big, hairy, gay, overweight, big and muscular, hairy chested, and the whole kit-and-caboodle." Abel also says, "So I realized I don't fit that paradigm [dominant version of gay male beauty as thin] and then I find out there's a sub-culture of what they call embracing the masculine community and they call us bears." Relating to Abel's body politics, much of his understanding and embodiment of masculinity stems from resisting dominant ideologies that would have him erased at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and size. Oftentimes, interviewees also narrated self-acceptance as leading to the process of redefinition.

To me, redefinition is the linchpin in how the men resisted heteronormative and hypermasculine constructions of their own masculinities. There were various ways the men redefined their own masculinities and identities. For example, Fire redefined his masculinity after he experienced internalized homophobia for a long time. He did so by redefining what it means to be a Black gay man. Earlier in his life, he confronted his masculinity as if it was an actual disease. Afterwards, he accepted that he is entitled to the same personal freedoms that heterosexual men often take for granted. He says, "So now, I don't even feel like I need to

apologize with the ‘it’s a choice and I can’t help it’ rhetoric. I can choose whatever the hell I please.”

The subject of redefinition was also taken up pointedly by Kam. For him, redefinition came in the form of adopting a more traditional masculinity. Kam, after years of presenting a fluid gender identity, decided to present himself as one who is traditionally masculine by becoming more outwardly independent, assertive, and significantly more dominant in his romantic relationships. He redefined himself in order to defy stereotypes of the weak and pathetic gay man. Although scholars usually conceptualize hegemonic masculinity as only oppressive (Clarkson, 2006, 2008), Kam highlights how performing hegemonic masculinity could be used as a space for resistance to liberate oneself from harmful stereotypes. He says,

My self-esteem now, I have over the period of time, I had to redefine myself, and now I’m taking more of an initiative. And now I care more about the masculinity that I was raised up with. I’m taking more of the initiative in my relationship now. I’m being more of the provider and everything. I had to redefine myself.

However, this space is complex precisely due to how Kam embodies hegemonic masculinity. For example, he uses hegemonic masculinity for the purpose of liberation. Yet, familial and religious pressures factored into his decision to adopt a hegemonic masculine appearance. In this context, the resistance that Kam embodies is constrained within a heteronormative environment that normalizes how he currently embodies masculinity. From my perspective, Kam’s experience underscores that redefinition has its limits, as do the masculinities that each of these men, myself included, embody.

As the analysis shows, the Black gay men I interviewed construct and negotiate a complicated masculinity that is rife with pain, joy, contradiction, self-acceptance, and struggle in

relation to their lives as Black gay men. In essence, racial identities frame how they understand themselves as gay men and their sexuality influences their idea of what Black masculinity should, and can, entail. The intersections of their identities also inform the resistant strategies they use on a daily basis. For example, Kam understands the power of Christianity in the Black community. In order to rebuff damaging stereotypes of Black gay men as “bitchy,” having HIV/AIDS, and lacking morality, Kam embodies a masculinity that outwardly falls in alignment with dominant patriarchal Christian values which simultaneously challenges and affirms oppressive forces. Kam’s construction and negotiation of his Black gay male identity signals the utter complexity of these men’s identities as individuals and members of the Black gay male community.

Conclusion

Since Black gay masculinities remain undertheorized in communication studies (Johnson & Henderson, 2005), this project provides insight into how Black gay men construct and negotiate their masculinities. This study is important because most communication research, with works from Alexander (2006), Johnson (2008), and McCune (2008) exemplifying the exception, either approach Black gay men as a homogeneous group or do not center us at all. However, in this study the narrative experiences of Black gay men, myself included, are positioned front and center. Generally speaking, communication can become a more inclusive discipline by recognizing the multiplicative nature of Black gay men’s experiences in U.S. American society.

The first research question that guided this project reads: how do Black gay men narrate masculinity? In response, the interviewees narrated their masculinities in ways that were positive, contradictory, and painful. The hope, pain, inspiration, and frustration that accompany masculinity for Black gay men are based not solely on gender, but on sexual and racial dynamics

as well. Specifically, the confluence of these identities produces particular realities for us that differ from our Black heterosexual and White gay male counterparts. The participants also narrated their masculinities as malleable rather than fixed. This contradicts the dominant frame of hegemonic masculinity as being sturdy. Collectively, these men also demonstrate that their masculinities are subject to change.

The second question asks: how do heterosexism and/or homophobia impact Black gay men's understandings of masculinity? Some interviewees rarely experienced homophobia while others experienced homophobia as an everyday phenomenon. Many were able to identify heterosexist structures while others struggled to do so. What this points out to me is not only that all gay men do not experience homophobia and heterosexism the same way, but also that Black gay men have differences that mediate their experiences with heterosexism and homophobia. These differences include gender expression (whether one identifies as masculine, feminine, or both), families (whether they accept us or not), and age. All of these factors influence how heterosexism and homophobia impact Black gay men's understanding of being a man.

The third research question asks: how do Black gay men navigate heterosexism and homophobia? Many interviewees navigated these tumultuous areas either by performing hegemonic masculinity or by resisting binaries and opting for a more fluid embodiment of masculinity. These decisions were determined by a multitude of factors such as family acceptance, class, age, and religious beliefs. In other words, some chose to accommodate and abide by gender norms and others chose to resist. Even those who resisted did so in different ways ranging from self-acceptance to redefinition. Collectively, all of the participants chose a mixture of accommodation and resistant strategies to navigate heterosexism and homophobia in

their lives. The culmination of pain, joy, struggle, conviction, and resistance serves to represent how they have constructed and negotiated their own masculinities.

Overall, the purpose of this project was to center the voices of Black gay men to learn how they define and negotiate their masculinities in a heteronormative society. At a time when Black men are largely understood in homogenized ways, it is important to recognize the differences present among us. This project, via empathetic interviewing and positioning my experiences as part of the dialogue, created a space where Black gay men could speak back to essentializing discourses in the White gay community and essentializing discourses in the Black heterosexual community. To fully account for this population, work that theorizes the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality is imperative. I am not stating that works focused solely on race, gender, or sexuality are unimportant. Rather, research focused on single identities has yielded valuable insight into how U.S. Americans navigate their cultural, social, and political landscapes. However, much more can be done if we look at how race and gender *and* sexuality operate simultaneously within people's lives. Although there are commonalities among my interviewees, differences that are mediated by class, religious affiliation, age, and region are also significant. Therefore, this project moves toward expanding what we know about Black gay masculinities by de-essentializing Black gay men (as the title attempts to accomplish) and expanding Black masculinity research to include Black gay masculinities. It is important to know these narratives are relevant to other communities. Considering the culture of machismo, for example, Latino gay men may experience similar, or even identical, constructions of masculinity the interviewees experienced in their own lives (Subero, 2006). As such, this research can be used as a springboard to analyze similar constructions and negotiations of masculinities.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

1. How do you define masculinity? Follow up: Where did you learn to define masculinity in that way?
2. How has your definition of masculinity affected or not affected your self-esteem?
3. What key events or moments in your life influenced how you currently define masculinity?
4. How do you “wear” your masculinity? Why do you wear it in this particular way? What specific events in your life led you to make this decision?
5. How has your performance of masculinity influenced your relationships with families, friends, and partners?
6. Homophobia refers to hatred toward those who are or are perceived to be gay. Have you experienced homophobia in your life? If so, can you describe an experience that stands out to you?
7. How has homophobia influenced your understanding of yourself as a man?
8. Has being Black influenced your experiences as a gay man? If so, can you describe an experience that stands out to you?

Appendix B

Name	Abbreviation	Description	Example
Heteronormativity	HTY	Organization of society around heterosexuality	“So she explained to me that it is if you have a man who likes other men the way you like girls and she was assuming that I liked girls when she gave me that definition”
Intra-Group Policing	IGP	Policing within one’s own community	“So whenever you’re gay and you’re trying to sort of exist within this community it seems to be [inaudible] between the masculine’s and the fem’s and you’ve got your straight acting and your feminine acting, or what other men in the community will call faggots, no faggots no fem’s, like that.”
Resistance	RE	Opposing dominant and hegemonic constructions of reality	“So they’re looking for somebody who’s masculine and to me it’s like who are you to determine what masculine is, that is for the individual to determine.”
Intersectionality	INT	How various identities intersect to create unique realities for people	“It really – when you think about it especially in certain jobs when they just kind of turn you into a worker bee, you’re a drone, it’s really dehumanizing on many, many levels but then at the same

			time when you are poor and there are no jobs, you have to survive.”
Struggle	ST	Struggling against dominant forces	“And that was another thing was like why did I have that reaction of violence being a means to an end and it was that hyper masculine side that comes from my father.”
Exceptionalism	EX	Behaviors denoting success	“All three of them have police records, all three of them have a history of violence, all three of them have been arrested for either domestic violence or battery or assault and I’m the only one that hasn’t. Out of the three I’m also the only one who graduated from high school, I’m the only one who put themselves through college.”
Disidentification	DIS	Creating space within a dominant ideology	“And I had several solos in high school singing with the jazz chorus, the band, and I was a drummer for two years in the band, lead drummer for concert – for the spring concert choir, and lead percussionist and the fact that I did all these things and I participated on the

			forensics team, the speech team for two years in high school and graduated with two scholarships to a junior college.”
Redefinition	RD	The ability to change yourself	“Being who you are, being true to who you are, kind of [inaudible] you’re the most macho and manliest man can be [inaudible] to me. What could be masculine?”
Erasure	ER	Suffering ignorance of one’s life	“Dudes can’t be bi, they’re just gay”
Racial Community Alignment	RCA	Aligning major concerns with racial community	“But I said you don’t know what it is to be a black – how to be an African American first and what we struggle through, what we still are struggling through, how to be people of color. ”
Black Christian Experience	BCE	Experiences of Christianity within African-American communities	“I think Christian faith, it’s almost as though that if you grow up with that, you do almost experience homophobia.”
Controlling/Controlled Masculinity	CCM	Masculinity as being able to control and being controlled	“But when I hear the word masculine, I don’t just think of it as descriptive. I think of it as a yardstick. ”
Heterosexism	HET	Privileging heterosexuality over other sexual orientations	“You would never demonize heterosexuality as a phase. We treat it as normal. And everything that isn’t

			gets othered.”
Self-Policing	SP	Being strict on oneself to perform to dominant expectations of gender	“Can't fish and hunt, but what offsets that and now I come back here and you all tell me that I'm not approachable or dateable because I don't easily read the stereotypes that I used to be afraid of having directed at me.”
Systemic Oppression	SO	Oppression happening on a broad level.	“And I feel like one of the things that this is the way the systemic oppression has played out in my life on the macro level. I feel like I have a lot to offer my community now. But I have avoided being around them because I fear persecution and ridicule and isolation. I have avoided mentoring children.”

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SNAP with a Twist and BRUH with a Dap!: The Articulation of Black Gay Masculinities within
the Context of Heteronormativity

Major Professor: Rachel A. Griffin