RESEARCH ARTICLE

Straight Gods, White Devils: Exploring Paths to Non-Religion in the Lives of Black LGBTQ People

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To examine paths to non-religion in the lives of black LGBTQ people, I analyze 10 interviews of black LGBTQ people who were raised Christian. Utilizing an intersectional lens, I conclude that lessons of the Christian home, reinforced in religious school and at church, drew a connection between Christianity, one's racial and ethnic identity, and heterosexuality in such a way that being LGBTQ was marked un-Christian and foreign, and sometimes associated with whiteness. This further shaped how my participants navigated the urban public sphere, one of the only spheres where they could 'be LGBTQ' – some neighborhoods were constructed as Christian, connected to one's childhood and hostile to LGBTQ people, while others were LGBTQ-friendly, albeit largely white and gentrified. The overall impact of Christianity across multiple spheres influenced which non-religious paths my participants took. One remained with a Christian denomination of her childhood and one remained with a Christian denomination of her mother but not her father. The other eight left Christianity behind, with one choosing a different religion and seven becoming non-religious, holding identities from Unitarian Universalist to atheist. Overall, black LGBTQ people struggle to find acceptance of their LGBTQ identities by people closest to them and acceptance of their racial, ethnic and non-religious identities in largely white and often non-religious LGBTQ spaces. In response, they use different strategies to find community and live coherent lives, whenever possible.

Introduction

At the 2015 Faith & Family LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) Power Summit, faith leaders from 33 states made explicit that resisting Christian hegemony and committing to racial justice is key to solving religious homophobia and making it easier to be religious and LGBTQ (Cruz 2015). Until then, 4-in-10 LGBT[1] people leave their childhood religion behind (Jones, Cox, Navarro-Rivera 2003) and are twice as likely as their non-LGBT peers to be unaffiliated with any religion (Pew Research Center 2015). The tension between religion and LGBTQ identities presents a unique paradox for black people, who are more likely to be LGBT (Gates and Newport 2012) and Christian (Krause and Chatters 2005, Pew Research Center 2015). In this article, I explore non-religious paths in the lives of black LGBTQ people who were raised Christian, building on previous scholarship of ways non-religious people construct non-religious identities (Sumerau and Cragun 2016) beyond white atheist narratives of men and secular organizations (LeDrew 2013, Smith 2013, Cragun, Hammer and Smith 2013).

Utilizing an intersectional lens, I analyze 10 in-depth interviews of black LGBTQ people who were raised Christian as they navigate their gender, sexual and racial identities across multiple spheres. My focus on genderqueer, non-binary individuals and cisgender women (for definitions, see **Table 1**) is intentional, because they face an additional burden of sexism, having been sexed female at birth and reared as Christian girls.[2] Further, not only do black transgender people face inequalities at the intersection of transphobia, racism and poverty (Page and Richardson 2010, Phillips and Stewart 2010), but research on genderqueer and non-binary people shows they face more discrimination and violence than their transgender counterparts[3] (Harrison, Grant and Herman 2011). By looking at experiences of black genderqueer and non-binary people in addition to cisgender people, I also deepen the analysis of race, gender, sexuality and religion and push back on the cisgendering of reality (Sumerau, Cragun and Mathers 2015).

In response to the tension between their Christian upbringing and LGBTQ identities, my participants take a number of paths to non-religion that reflect integration or distinction, concepts that I introduce. Part of these processes has to do with the influence of a Christian upbringing at home, school and places of worship on one's LGBTQ identity. In addition, and what is generally unexplored, is the extent to which the urban public sphere plays an important role in how LGBTQ people may come to non-religion. To explore the relationship between LGBTQ identities, religion and space, I ask: How are neighborhoods constructed as homophobic and connected to a Christian childhood while others are deemed LGBTQ-friendly, but

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Term	Definition (limited)[4]	Example
Cisgender (Cis)	Describes a gender that is not different from gender of rearing.	Mary was raised as a girl and identifies as a woman.
Transgender	Describes a gender that is different from gender of rearing.	Charlie was raised as a boy but identifies as a woman.
Genderqueer	Describes a gender that disrupts the gender binary. May combine two or more genders.	Jackie was raised as a girl and sometimes identifies as a woman.
Gender-Nonconforming	Describes a gender different from the gender expected. May combine genders or have no gender.	Lee was raised as a girl and identifies as a trans man.
Non-Binary	Describes a gender outside the gender binary. May combine genders or have no gender.	Amy was raised as a boy but is neither a man nor a woman.
Agender	When a person does not have a gender.	Elena was raised as a girl but is now genderless.
Heterosexism	A system and a belief that heterosexuality is the only valid sexuality.	Thinking that women are only supposed to marry men.

Table 1: Terminology.

fraught with racial and class tensions? What, if any, are public and private spaces for black LGBTQ people who leave religion behind? Is it possible to find a community where they can belong?

An Intersectional Lens: Race, Gender and Sexuality

Intersectionality, rooted in black women's lives and black feminism (for an overview, see Brewer 1999), is a concept that race, gender and class are co-constitutive and shape one's relationship to power and oppression (Crenshaw 1991, Brodkin 1998, Collins 1990). It has been extended to analyze sexuality, religion, ability and other social axes (Ferree, Lorber and Hess 2000, Battle and Ashley, 2008, Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013), which sometimes omits race and rewrites the history of intersectionality (Luft and Ward 2009, Bilge 2013, Tomlinson 2013). In this article, I re-center the lives of black people and extend Kimberlé Crenshaw's focus on women (Crenshaw 1991) to genderqueer, non-binary people and one cisgender black man, all identifying as LGBTQ. To understand paths to non-religion in the lives of black LGBTQ people, it is important to understand the intersection of race, gender, sexuality and religion in society.

Black LGBTQ people's lives are informed by historical and present-day constructions of black womanhood, manhood and gender non-conformity used to uphold white manhood and womanhood (Greene 2000). Slavery and its legacy are part of the reason whiteness, especially hegemonic white masculinity, is held universal and desirable and blackness is marked as foreign and dangerous (Brown Douglas 1999, Collins 2005). Hegemonic white masculinity, with a monopoly on resources, gives white, middleclass, heterosexual and cisgender (Sumerau and Cragun 2015) men a significant amount of power (Shabazz 2009), used to create a hierarchy of womanhood, which I here limit to white and black women. White women are seen as inferior but fragile and sexually passive, whereas black women are seen as inferior but sexually aggressive and perverted (Brown Douglas 1999, Collins 2005, Lugones 2008). Black men, under constant surveillance by the carceral state, are seen as sexually violent and physically threatening (Shabazz 2009), unless they embody a 'respectable', middle-class masculinity. 'Respectable' black masculinity and femininity are collapsed with heterosexuality as black people are made to follow white norms of gender and sexuality, reinforced by a common history between racism and heterosexism (Somerville 1994, Collins 1990, Collins 2005). Through the myth of black people's hypersexuality or extra-heterosexuality, homosexuality was inadvertently marked as white (Collins 2005). Therefore, following white norms of gender and sexuality means treating black LGBTQ people as 'less authentically black' and LGBTQ identities as a 'white disease' (Collins 2005, see also Giddings 1996, Cohen 1996, Griffin 2001).

In reality, black LGBTQ people are a part of their communities, secular and religious. For example, in the first half of the 20th century, Harlem was known as a gay enclave (Dudley 2013) and there was space for 'deviant' gender and sexual expressions of singers like Gladys Bentley or Bessie Smith (Phillips and Stewart 2010, Page and Richardson 2010). During the civil rights era, heterosexual black people did not want their LGBTQ peers to be 'too out', fearing it might compromise their struggle, but welcomed their participation (Collins 2005). That ambivalence was reinforced by the Black Church[5], which rejected homosexuality using 'love the sinner, hate the sin' narratives (Collins 2005) that have endured, along with homophobia (Dyson 1996, Ward 2005). Indeed, in 2002, out of more than 2,500 black LGBT people surveyed, 66% agreed that homophobia is a problem in the black community; those reporting negative experiences with black churches or religious institutions were more likely to agree (Battle et al. 2002). In another survey of over 700 LGBT people of color, respondents said churches were least likely to accept LGBT people, with the pain of a religious childhood being especially intense for African-Americans (Gonzales Ruddell-Tabisola 2009).

Non-religion, Communities and Space

Non-religion scholarship looks at the way people construct non-religious selves, organizations and communities (Kosmin et al. 2009, Zuckerman 2011, Smith 2013) as they become greater in number in the U.S. (Cragun, Hammer and Smith 2013, Baker and Smith 2015), where religion is considered important and central (Edgell, Gerteis and

Hartmann 2006, Hammer et al. 2012, Heath 2012). Because religion is a dominant force, non-religious people have to make sense of religion in their lives (LeDrew 2013, Guenther, Mulligan and Papp 2013, Sumerau and Cragun 2016), which presents an additional burden if people hold other marginalized identities like being LGBTQ (Warner 1999).

Faced with a conflict between LGBTQ identities and Christianity, people take a number of non-religious paths that I group under *distinction* or *integration*. I use distinction to describe strategies that aim to maintain LGBTQ identities and Christianity as distinct. When thus considered, people can reject their LGBTQ identities or Christianity, or compartmentalize the two (Mahaffy 1996, Rodriquez and Oullettee 2000, Schuck and Liddle 2001). I use integration to describe strategies that aim to reconcile LGBTQ identities and Christianity, which range from coping within hostile churches (Pitt 2010) to attending LGBT-friendly churches (Valentine and Waite 2012) or privatizing one's beliefs (Rodriguez and Oullettee 2000, Wilcox 2002). Finally, some LGBT spaces are religiophobic (Stuart 1997, O'Brien 2004, Valentine and Waite 2012) and some religious LGBT spaces are suspect of non-religious LGBT people (Sumerau 2014, Sumerau forthcoming 1), which further complicates any non-religious path.

For black LGBTQ people, race matters when choosing distinction or integration, but especially on the way to non-religion. The unique position of black churches as more than a source of worship (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, Jones and Hill 2002, Barnes 2005) makes it particularly difficult to leave – even when people leave, they are still influenced by the Black Church (Dyson 2003, Hill 2013). Another way race matters is that black LGBTQ people live in black communities instead of 'gay neighborhoods', which are usually white (Moore 2010, Moore 2011a, Dudley 2013), and leaving means breaking ties that alleviate racism (Johnson 2001, Bowleg et al. 2008, Bridges, Selvidge and Matthews 2003). When non-religious paths lead to LGBTQ spaces, these spaces tend to be largely white (Han 2007, Han 2008, Dudley 2013) and black LGBTQ people encounter racism and discrimination (Loiacano 1993, Jones and Hill 1996, Battle et al. 2002, Gonzales Ruddell-Tabisola 2009). In response to the conflict between race and LGBTQ identity, people minimize their sexual or racial identity or find LGBTQ communities of color, which may contain tensions like biphobia, racial and ethnic prejudice, classism (Lehavot, Balsam and Ibrahim-Wells 2009) and an exclusionary climate for transgender and gender non-conforming people (McQueeney 2009).

Fragmentations of this kind expose the need to disaggregate the LGBTQ acronym in order to address how specific groups have different types of access to spaces and communities (Valentine 2000, Frost and Meyer 2012). For example, a 'gay neighborhood' can be safe for a moneyed group of white gay men (Castells 1983, Knopp 1990, Nero 2005) but unsafe for poor LGBTQ people of color displaced through policing (Eng 2010, Mogul, Ritchie and Whitlock 2011) and gentrification (Rothenberg 1995, Knopp 1995, Hanhardt 2008, Gieseking 2013). This makes it difficult for black LGBTQ people to belong in LGBTQ spaces and communities, which are crucial for the survival of LGBTQ people as a whole (Davis 1995). An intersectional approach to space considers it a site of 'intersectional oppression' (Grzanka 2014) and unequal power relations (Valentine 2007), but relating space to non-religion would build on scholarship of religion, place and power (Holloway and Valins 2002, Williams 2005, McAlister 2005).

Data and Methods

For part of my dissertation, which explores the way public interactions bear on gender and sexuality at the intersection of race, class and space, I conducted over 70 in-depth interviews with 66 participants who faced catcalling and LGBTQ-directed harassment on the streets of New York City. Participants were recruited via flyers, online calls and snowball sampling, with a specific focus on people of color and/or LGBTQ people. Of my 66 participants, 10 (15%) are black, LGBTQ and raised Christian. In this subsample, one participant is a cisgender man, six are cisgender women, two are genderqueer and one is non-binary. Eight identify as lesbian or queer, one as bisexual and one as gay. Seven participants are black and three are biracial. All are college-educated, in the middle class and are 21–31 years of age.

Interviews were held face-to-face at a location picked by the participant. Names, school and work locations have been changed. Participants were asked to provide their age, gender label and gender pronouns, sexuality label, self-perceived class position and educational background, as well as their racial and/or ethnic identification. As a result, my sample includes a greater number of identities (see Nowakowski, Sumerau and Mathers 2016). Each interview was audio-recorded and lasted one to three hours. I focused on the development of the participants' gender and sexual identities from childhood to the present, with an emphasis on catcalling and LGBTQ-directed harassment in the urban public sphere. Environments and influences like religion, school and the workplace, as well as race, class and space were addressed. To better explore the relationship between gender, sexuality, a Christian childhood and current non-religious status alongside one's feelings of racial/ethnic identification and community when it comes to LGBTQ spaces, subsample participants were given an additional set of questions (see **Table 2**). Each interview was transcribed and coded for major and minor themes without software assistance.

Results
Christianity & Identity
From a young age, Christianity was deeply embedded in the lives of my participants, confirming the ubiquity of theism and religion (Roof 1999, Zuckerman 2003, Smith 2011). Intertwined with culture, it was a considerable presence in one's home, religious school and church. Regardless of denomination or level of devoutness in the family, participants were socialized into a rigid gender binary, default heterosexuality and ideas of family life that reflect a kind of religious familism (Edgell and Docka 2007) seen below.

1. Specify whether you grew up in a Christian household, the denomination and any additional types of Christian upbringing (church, school, etc). What did you learn about gender and sexuality (homosexuality and LGBTQ identities) because of Christianity?

2. Specify whether you are now Christian and whether your denomination is the same as the denomination of your childhood. Why or why not? If you rejected your Christian upbringing, did it have to do with your gender and sexuality?

3. If you have remained Christian, how did you reconcile being Christian with the gender and sexual identities that you hold? If you do identify as LGBTQ and have had to navigate largely white LGBTQ spaces (organizations, marches, etc), do you think they are less accepting of religion and/or of people of color?

Table 2: Additional Questions for Subsample.

Ever since I was a young girl, I learned that women are supposed to be feminine, grow up serving the Lord and become attractive for the male gaze. This would ensure I fulfill my duty in life, which was to get married and have children.

Remy, 30, black lesbian cis woman

While such messages are common in Christian households, my participants made explicit mention of respectability politics and narratives around gender and sexuality that are specific to black people in a racist society (Collins 2005).

In terms of gender identity, at least insofar as my being on the "femme" end of the spectrum, [it] stems from a combination of being Southern and black respectability politics, [as a] means of countering popular social views about black women not being feminine.

Whitney, 30, black bisexual cis woman

I had to go to church when I was with my dad and I was never allowed to wear pants. He told me, and I quote, "Christian girls don't wear pants." My father was also a fan of "Black Respectability," which is completely contingent on gender roles being adhered to […] a Black church is very big on appearance.

Herschel, 22, black lesbian cis woman

In line with previous scholarship that looks at the way religion frames racial and ethnic identity (Cadge and Howard Ecklund 2007, for an overview, see Edgell 2012), the link between Christianity and black respectability was just one example – rejection of homosexuality was another. When heterosexuality is marked default and compulsory (Rich 1980, Butler 1990), rejection of homosexuality is part of heterosexism, a form of oppression that privileges heterosexuality and allows its bearers, such as Christian adults and leaders, a significant amount of power (Collins 1990). For some of my participants, an additional link was made between rejection of homosexuality and ethnic identity and/or immigrant status.

I was raised to be a Christian in an African Caribbean household where religion is deeply intertwined in the culture. Being part Jamaican, I was raised to believe

the bati-boys and sodomites were going to hell and deserved all the abuse for being gay... When immigrants raise children, they raise them with expectations that you're going to get married to a boyfriend or girlfriend, that you're going to have kids – this is our expectations of you, we came over here from the Islands or Africa, we don't have no sodomite in our family, no bati-man in our family. Some people say, "well, homosexuality doesn't exist in Africa and in the Caribbean, you're bringing this white shit to us."

Levone, 33, black lesbian cis woman

It seemed an unavoidable fact, that black West Indian/Caribbean people are so homophobic, and yet so very Christian, and so God fearing, yet harbor this true and deep hate for the homosexual. With names like "Bati Boy" or "Chi Chi Mon" any man that fell into any part of the LGBTQ spectrum was the worst.

Pierre, 30, black gay cis man

First, these statements speak to an important connection between religion and black Caribbean identity (Bashi 2007, Chatters et al. 2009), where religion plays a central role to the racial, ethnic and/or immigrant experience. Next, they speak to the intersection of black Caribbean identity and LGBTQ identity (Moore 2011b), often considered mutually exclusive, supplanted by the view that LGBTQ identity is an outside, white reality, something foreign as opposed to something that is part of black Caribbean experience. Black Caribbean communities struggle with homophobia (Gutzmore 2004, Crichlow 2004) that represents a conservatism, which some connect to higher religiosity in Caribbean cultures (Vickerman 1999).

In addition to homosexuality being marked racially and ethnically foreign for many of my participants, it was also seen as malleable, something that can be changed with enough effort and prayer (see also Reed and Valenti 2012). When my participants were not 'cured' of their LGBTQ identity through such means and got engaged or married to partners that society would deem 'same-sex', it was seen as further proof of their sin.

My mom is a loose cannon, she's gonna tell you how it is: No, I'm not fucking coming to your wedding... how dare you be engaged and have a wedding? Do you think that God will validate that? I never wanna see a

kid that's produced by you two. I never want a grand-kid that's made artificially, that's not a creature of God.
Violet, 28, Afro-Latina lesbian cis woman

She thinks that I'm not only destroying my soul and my chances of going to heaven but my wife's and the children's as well. I'm assuming she feels that we will raise the child believing it's ok to be gay, which is something she feels is an abomination to God.
Remy, 30, black lesbian cis woman

In her study of black lesbian women, Miller (2011) links such invalidation of one's family to the fact that having a family makes it difficult to hide one's homosexuality, even though hiding is encouraged by family members who say they would feel embarrassed if other people found out.

I should also note that most of the conversations in the lives of my participants, reflecting a similar tendency in the scholarship reviewed, are about homosexuality and not any other sexuality or gender non-conformity. Beyond linking gender non-conforming behavior to one's perceived homosexuality, families in the lives of my participants made no mention of rejecting gender non-conforming identities. One reason is that genderqueer and non-binary participants in my study were sexed as female, reared as girls and never 'came out' as genderqueer and non-binary, knowing that if their sexual identities were not accepted, that lack of acceptance would extend to their gender non-conforming identities. Interestingly, while they knew about their LGBTQ identities early on in their lives, coming into their genderqueer and non-binary identities did not take full shape until their early 20s, possibly because of a collapse made between gender non-conformity and homosexuality that interrupts identity formation.

Christianity & Urban Public Sphere

For my participants, knowing that family members would be further embarrassed and angry if others found out about their LGBTQ identity also made it difficult to navigate the urban public sphere, one of the only spheres where they could 'be LGBTQ'. Being LGBTQ in public means a broad range of phenomena, from particular ways of expressing one's gender and sexual identity to being seen as romantically and sexually linked to another person or people, which would, based on appearance, mark them as 'deviant'. When LGBTQ people move through the urban public sphere, they move through a heterosexist space (Valentine 1993) that (re)forms and (re)congeals men, women and 'deviant others' without consent. This contributes to the general erasure of sexualities besides heterosexual and gay/lesbian (e.g., bisexual, asexual) and gender non-conforming identities (e.g., genderqueer, non-binary). Yet, the public urban sphere is also a queer space[6], marked by social-environmental alliances and sites of abjection, transgression, pleasure and community (Ingram 1997). When asked to identify which neighborhoods were 'red zones' (places where they could not be LGBTQ) and 'green zones' (places where they could be LGBTQ in public), many of my participants gave strikingly similar answers (see **Table 3**).

Repeatedly, using the word 'home' specifically, my participants marked neighborhoods as red zones if they were linked to their childhood home, religious school and church. Other red zones are reminiscent of the home neighborhoods in some way. Many of the narratives mentioned catcalling and LGBTQ-directed harassment and referenced people who reminded them of home like 'older black religious women', tying in their own racial and ethnic identities.

In both of our neighborhoods, there was a fear of running into her brother. There would always be her aunties on the porch or in other people's yards and there were older women who weren't related to her but we had to look out for.
Amara, 25, Afro-Latin@[7] queer genderqueer person

If it's an older, middle aged, super religious Black woman, she will say, "You lesbian, you dyke" and I have respect for women and you could have been my mother and I can see my mother say that to somebody on the street. Sometimes I'll say, "You ignorant." They'll look away or something like that.
SK, 25, black lesbian genderqueer person

Several other participants reiterated the link between their LGBTQ and ethnic identities and specific neighborhood by saying they do not feel comfortable in areas that are predominantly Caribbean or West Indian. Instead, they would have to 'be gay' somewhere where they could

Name	Neighborhoods	Neighborhoods
Treble	The Village, W. 4th Street (NYU)	Queens: Hispanic/White; Brooklyn: Caribbean
Amara	The Pier, LES, NYU; Brooklyn: East NY	Home: Bronx; Brooklyn: Bensonhurst, Brighton
SK	The Pier, LES, West Village; Williamsburg	Home: Brooklyn: Flatbush/Caribbean/West Indian
Levone	The Pier, East Village, West Village, Midtown	Brooklyn: East NY, Flatbush/Caribbean
Bri	Anywhere away from home	Home: Brooklyn: Crown Heights
Whitney	The Village, NYU, Williamsburg	Any based on time of day and presence of men
Herschel	Spanish Harlem; Brooklyn: Flatbush	Home: Bronx; Harlem; Chelsea/Eastern European
Violet	The Pier, W. 4th street (NYU)	Home: UWS; Brooklyn: Jay Street, Fort Greene
Remy	The Pier, Bronx: HS area, Harlem: Dad's Home	Home: Bronx: Mom's Home; Harlem/Church
Pierre	The Pier, The Village, Brooklyn: Prospect Park	Home: Father's home in Florida

Table 3: Green v Red Zones for LGBTQ People.

not be recognized by family members or people who could expose them to family members. Violet, a 28-year old Afro-Latina lesbian cis woman says, "When we were younger, we could only be gay in the spaces that didn't belong to us, in the spaces where nobody would recognize us, because we weren't allowed to be gay". For others, a further connection was drawn between LGBTQ and ethnic identities, neighborhoods and religion. For example, Remy's childhood church is also around the corner from the Atlah church, regularly showcasing marquees that link Christianity, Harlem and rejection of homosexuality in the urban public sphere (see **Figure 1**). When asked to reflect on the Biblical verse referenced, part of which says, "And he breaked down the houses of the Sodomites that were by the house of the Lord", Remy, a 30-year old black lesbian cis woman who is Pentecostal, said,

> It's a mess because it coincides with why Harlem isn't so much of a safe space for me. How could they expect you to go into these churches when they don't make you feel welcome? They consider gay people sodomites and when Christians say sodomites, they mean gay people. According to this verse, where it's saying he broke down the houses of the sodomites, it means God was displeased. They don't feel that being gay is acceptable and they wouldn't accept me or my life or my family so why would I wanna go there? I think it's typical of that area. Harlem's a predominantly black neighborhood and Christianity is the cornerstone of the black community and you'll see a lot of churches like this.

Remy reiterated that this kind of display of homophobia, linked to her neighborhood and religion of upbringing, made it difficult to return and that she, like many of my participants, relied on certain strategies. One was not to avoid these areas entirely, so as to normalize LGBTQ presence and public displays of affection. Another was to minimize such displays or alter one's appearance. The tension between wanting to be their authentic selves and having to make changes resulted in conflict between my participants and some of their partners. Whereas some of

Figure 1: Courtesy of Christina Nadler.

my participants wanted to resist and fight against harassment, some of their partners wanted to avoid it altogether, which points to a variety of responses LGBTQ people experience when facing oppression across different contexts (see also Bowleg et al. 2003, Ghabrial 2016).

If neighborhoods marked as red zones can be anywhere that my participants grew up or places that remind them of their childhood, culture or ethnic background, neighborhoods marked as green zones cluster in Manhattan and are traditionally 'gay spaces' like the Village, Lower East Side or the Pier. Confirming research that LGBTQ spaces are largely white, racist (Loiacano 1993, Jones and Hill 1996, Battle et al. 2002, Gonzales Ruddell-Tabisola 2009) and gentrified (Rothenberg 1995, Knopp 1995, Hanhardt 2008, Gieseking 2013), my participants felt that while they can go into green zones, they do not exactly belong, in terms of race or class.

> It's like in the Pier Life, the documentary… he was saying why he went to the Pier is all these homeless minority kids and the people were calling the police on them and they are queer and white… I can't be accepted if I go down there unless I'm super educated and I have a lot of money and I can afford to live down there.
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> SK, 25, black lesbian genderqueer person

> To the Pier, we always went in big groups. We were leaving our safe neighborhoods to go into this neighborhood that didn't feel like it was ours… There were a lot of white males at the Pier and that's who we felt the space belonged to, at the time… We knew who could afford to live in the Village. We didn't have things like that where we were from so we assumed them to be of a different socioeconomic class. We were participating as outsiders.
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> Violet, 28, Afro-Latina lesbian cis woman

In a way, green zones represent partial respite and speak to the way the white spatial imaginary and majority white spaces shape the experiences of black people in the U.S. (Lipsitz 2011).

What is also striking about green and red zones is that they are both spaces of safety and exclusion, which means that black LGBTQ people experience a simultaneity of oppression that can shift its form based on context (see also Narvaez et al. 2009).

Non-Religion Paths & Community
Of my participants, only one remained with a Christian denomination of her childhood, one remained with a Christian denomination of her mother but not her father, and the other eight left Christianity behind, with one choosing a different religion and seven becoming non-religious, holding identities from Unitarian Universalist to atheist (see **Table 4**).

The religious path of Remy, a 30-year-old black lesbian cis woman, who stayed Pentecostal, is the only example

Name	Age	Gender	Sexuality	Race	Childhood Religion	Current Status
Treble	21	Non-binary (they)	Queer	Afro-Latin@	Catholic	Spiritual/Yoruba
Amara	25	Genderqueer (she)	Queer	Afro-Latin@	Catholic	Atheist
SK	25	Genderqueer (they)	Lesbian	Black	Jehova's Witnesses	Non-Religious
Levone	33	Cis Woman (she)	Lesbian	Black	1. Anglican 2. Pentecostal	Unitarian Universalist
Bri	22	Cis Woman (she)	Queer	Black	Catholic	Non-Religious
Whitney	30	Cis Woman (she)	Bisexual	Black	Baptist	Agnostic
Herschel	22	Cis Woman (she)	Lesbian	Black	1. Brown-Catholic 2. Baptist	Brown-Catholic
Violet	28	Cis Woman (she)	Lesbian	Afro-Latina	Catholic	Non-religious
Remy	30	Cis Woman (she)	Lesbian	Black	Pentecostal	Pentecostal
Pierre	30	Cis Man (he)	Gay	Black	Catholic	Non-Religious

Table 4: Subsample Details and Non-Religious Paths.

of integration, a term I use to describe strategies that aim to reconcile LGBTQ identities and Christianity. Remy privatized her beliefs (Rodriguez and Oullettee 2000, Wilcox 2002) apart from the church of her childhood or any other church, prioritizing 'what is' over 'what ought to be' (McFadyen 2000, cited in Valentine and Waite 2012). The rest of the participants took non-religious paths that are examples of distinction, a term I use to describe strategies that aim to maintain LGBTQ identities and Christianity as distinct. Two are still religious. Treble, a 21-year-old Afro-Latin@ queer non-binary person, now identities with the Yoruba religion because of their racial and non-binary gender identities.

> I currently identify as Spiritual/Yoruba… I reject the notion that I should believe in this white God, this white savior when my ancestors never did. Slave masters gave us this religion as a means of subjugating the people and making us docile.
> Treble, 21, Afro-Latin@ queer non-binary person

Similarly, for Herschel, a 22-year-old black lesbian cis woman, rejecting her father's Baptist denomination and identifying as 'Brown-Catholic' like her mother speaks to a religious path that is distinct from her sexuality, "My mother just wanted me to learn the 'white saints' so she could better explain the brown ones…I almost completely identify with my mother's religion".

In contrast, the conflict between one's Christian upbringing and one's sexual identity marks the path to non-religion for the remaining seven participants – one is now an atheist, one is agnostic, one is Unitarian Universalist and four use 'non-religious' as a label. No matter the label, most non-religious paths in the lives of my participants were marked by the realization that they did not want to be part of a religion that does not accept people like them.

> I returned to the idea of a "loving" God, and wondered how such a God could damn me to hell for eternity for the sin of loving. This split from the Church prompted me to become irreligious or non-denominational, then deist, then agnostic, then just atheist.
> Amara, 25, Afro-Latin@ queer genderqueer person

> People that are religious are living by a book but they aren't following it. You shouldn't be hating anybody because they wanna sleep with somebody else or they wanna change their gender and they wanna look a certain way and they're like, 'no we're gonna have these crazy protests and say super homophobic things.' I am not a Christian anymore.
> SK, 25, black lesbian genderqueer person

Second, all participants faced the 'hard trap' of not always reconciling their identities (Dunn and Creek 2015), which made finding community difficult, especially when leaving black churches is a big loss (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, Jones and Hill 2002, Barnes 2005).

> You aren't just leaving a religion; you're leaving a community. You're leaving your immediate relatives, friends, people that you care most about and they care most about you. Dropping the religion means leaving everyone else behind. And it is so tied to our history in this country, it's how we managed to save ourselves or get through slavery so yeah it is a huge loss. It really is a struggle to give that up. When you find yourself leaving it, to try to build new relationships where you may not see yourself represented in it too… then you have to take on this new identity that feels like it was never really yours. How am I supposed to get through this if I don't accommodate and assimilate to this new situation? And then you're living between two worlds. I mean, how does your family understand you now? But then these people understand you but they don't understand you because they also don't know the cultural ties that you have with these other folks.
> Pierre, 30, black gay cis man

Like others who lack acceptance in their religious communities because of their LGBTQ identities (for an overview, see Wilcox 2006; Battle and Ashley 2008, Barton 2010), my participants sought to find LGBTQ-affirming spaces somewhere else. What they discovered is that such spaces may be far less welcoming of religious beliefs or people who could not easily reject religion (Stuart 1997, O'Brien 2004, Valentine and Waite 2012). They were also white spaces where my participants felt suspicious

of their newfound allies, due to previous experiences of racism and lack of cultural understanding in majority-white spaces. For example, one of my participants noted that all the gay bars she checked out were not only for gay men, reflecting a dearth of lesbian spaces, but that some had Irish or Italian flags on the outside, which made her unlikely to go inside. Instances like that are an example of how white LGBTQ spaces alienate people of color (Kudler 2007, Ward 2008) in addition to microaggressions (Sue et al. 2007, Nadal 2011) and discrimination (for an overview, see Balsam et al. 2011, Ghabrial 2016).

Facing multiple exclusions, my participants struggled with finding spaces and communities that would safely incorporate all of their identities. Being that finding community is very important to the wellbeing of LGBTQ people (Kertzner et al. 2009), this result is particularly troubling. While most of my participants did not feel welcome in largely white LGBTQ spaces, some put a significant amount of energy into locating spaces that were specifically for LGBTQ-people of color (POC).

> I can't just Google search 'LGBTQ party.' I have to do more digging… There's way more homework to do because I cannot sacrifice either of those pieces (race and sexuality) and those two things have come together. People have put the energy into creating those spaces that are both queer and poc… I'm constantly surrounding myself with that and that takes way more effort because everything that's gay is white, for the most part… I have to dig so much to see the black gay.
>
> Violet, 28, Afro-Latina lesbian cis woman

It is clear that finding LGBTQ-POC spaces and communities is already very difficult. Finding spaces that are LGBTQ-POC and supportive of one's non-religious path is nearly impossible.

Conclusion

To examine the paths to non-religion in the lives of black LGBTQ people, I analyzed 10 in-depth interviews of black LGBTQ people who were raised Christian. Utilizing an intersectional lens, I conclude that lessons of the Christian home, reinforced in religious school and church, drew a connection between Christianity, one's racial and ethnic identity, and heterosexuality in such a way that being LGBTQ was marked un-Christian and foreign, and sometimes associated with whiteness. This further shaped how my participants navigated the urban public sphere, one of the only spheres where they could 'be LGBTQ' – some neighborhoods (red zones) were constructed as Christian, connected to one's childhood and hostile to LGBTQ people, while others (green zones) were LGBTQ-friendly, albeit largely white and gentrified. The overall impact of Christianity across multiple spheres influenced the non-religious paths taken by my participants. Exemplifying integration, one participant remained with a Christian denomination of their childhood. The rest of the participants took paths of distinction. One remained with a Christian denomination of her mother but not her father and the other eight

left Christianity behind. Of these, one chose a different religion and seven became non-religious, holding identities from Unitarian Universalist to atheist. My participants struggled to find acceptance of their LGBTQ identities by people closest to them and acceptance of their racial, ethnic and non-religious identities in largely white and often non-religious LGBTQ spaces. In response, they use different strategies in order to find community and live coherent lives, whenever possible.

One of the implications of this study is that non-religious paths of black LGBTQ people are different from the white atheist narratives of men and secular organizations (LeDrew 2013, Smith 2013, Cragun, Hammer and Smith 2013) because of the way race, gender and sexuality intersect with a religious upbringing to create non-religious selves. It is, however, important to disaggregate the LGBTQ community when taking a look at such intersections. My analysis also calls for a more detailed consideration of transgender identities, in order to figure out how gender-variant and non-binary people create non-religious selves. That would build our broader understanding of how people with such identities interact with religion, a subject that is currently under-studied (Rodriguez and Follins 2012, Sumerau, Cragun and Mathers 2015, Sumerau and Cragun 2015, Sumerau forthcoming 2). Another way that non-religious paths for black LGBTQ people vary from typical narratives is in terms of age. If there is a chronological path to non-religion where people often question religion once they hit college (Smith 2011), for LGBTQ people, a conflict with religion emerges at a much earlier age, when they are coming into their sexual and gender identities (see also Dahl and Galliher 2009).

A second implication of this study is that if religion is an important source of social support (Edgell, Tranby and Mather 2013) and is associated with many benefits (Koenig et al. 2001), leaving religion behind is rife with significant loss for people who grow up with a deep link between religion, race, ethnicity and/or immigrant status (Waters 1999). As it turns out, for black LGBTQ people, doing so also results in few opportunities for supportive spaces and communities, because of the way space is racialized and segregated (Lipsitz 2011). I reiterate the importance of community formation for non-religious people of color that hold LGBTQ and other marginalized identities. My analysis of red and green zones also shows that paths to non-religion incorporate a spatial component, which means there is a connection between neighborhoods, LGBTQ spaces and non-religious paths. Finally, utilizing an intersectional lens is paramount to disaggregating the experiences of religious and non-religious people (Dunn and Creek 2015) in order to address ways in which people's identities shape and are shaped by their non-religious paths and to center people who are generally erased out of research.

While the current study gives insight into non-religious paths that are rarely explored, there are some limitations. The sample size (n = 10) is small and is not representative. Instead, it is meant to illustrate black LGBTQ people's experiences with a Christian upbringing and paths to non-religion, to be addressed through further study. One direction is to focus on people who are intersex, gender non-conforming and

non-binary people, as they locate non-religious paths that are more welcoming of their sex and gender identities. Another is to focus on bisexual, asexual, and non-heterosexual identities that are not part of the LGBTQ acronym. Secondly, given my study's focus on black LGBTQ people, the results cannot be extended to other racial, ethnic, or immigrant LGBTQ groups, which deserve their own engagement. Another important recommendation is for future scholarship to address how class contributes to the relationship between race, gender, sexuality and non-religious paths. For example, black LGBTQ women are more likely to be mothers, which reflects a different relationship to class inequality (Johnson 2001) – future research should take family structure into consideration and examine the ways in which becoming a parent affects one's ability to reconcile race, gender, sexuality and non-religion (see also Oswald 2001). Finally, future research should also address regions beyond New York City, decentering metropolitan areas privileged in scholarship of LGBTQ populations (Inness 2004) in order to explore the relationship between non-religion, space and place at the intersection of race, gender and sexuality.

Notes

1 LGBTQ and LGBT will be used to reflect the terminology used in the referenced text.
2 Specific to my subsample. Genderqueer and non-binary individuals can also be sexed male and reared as boys or sexed as intersex and raised in a variety of ways, when it comes to gender.
3 While 'transgender' is used as an umbrella term for gender non-conforming identities, some gender non-conforming people do not use 'transgender' to denote their gender identity.
4 All definitions are mine, not exhaustive and in constant state of redefinition. Subsample participants provided their own definitions for each of their identities.
5 I use 'Black Church' to reflect the terminology in the referenced literature. Because there is heterogeneity to black churches that reflects a variety of beliefs (McRoberts 2003), I use 'black churches' whenever possible.
6 Queer is used here as synonymous with LGBTQ and other marginal gender and sexual designators.
7 The @ symbol at the end of this word is used in lieu of Latino/Latina to include individuals who are neither men nor women and, by their very existence, contest the gender binary.

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Competing Interests

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