A Cultural Encounter That Challenges Queer Youths' Self-Understandings, Communal and Individual Ways of Seeing Queer Youth

by

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Womanist Pastoral Psychology establishes precedent for the importance of psychology within religious study, emphasizing race, class, gender, and cultural ways of being. This discipline helps us make sense of religious experiences in relation to societal expectations, psychological processes, and the development of self-perceptions, which have lifelong impacts. As McCarthy asserts in *Multifaith Activism, in Interfaith Encounters in America*, America's history has made abundantly clear, religion remains an indelible part of society and its functions. This means religion acts as an undercurrent to institutions, culture, and general society, giving us insight into early lived experiences. While religion's cultural impact is at times more obvious, it can nonetheless always be presumed to be involved. This is explicitly acknowledged in some of the literature; however, it is something that can reasonably be assumed of all, given the historical context.

My experiences as a queer person growing up in a densely populated cultural community are integral to the ways I approach the research. Central to my concerns argumentally is that what is constructed as the eso, something suggesting risk or deviation from norms, is only so for those who hold a vested interest in preserving societal values that affirm their own identities and cultural hierarchies. With this knowledge, it can also be considered that the risk of the queerness being communicated to others is only a liability for those who frame it as such. As is considered later on, children's queerness does not pose these risks or connotative understandings for them inherently apart from this belief being conditioned in them by adults and society. The accounts of adult queer men emphasize how this conditioning affects them as children and into adulthood, as they attempt to adapt beliefs that help their well-being as opposed to harmful ones they were taught. That in their adulthood, they feel similarly about the conditioning as they did in their youth means queer children's insights should be given more significance culturally.

Situating Queer Youth Experiences Through Queer Theory and Womanist Theory

In this chapter I address the unique insights of queer youth experiences that Decena and King's theories together enable. Whereas Decena's theory speaks to the cultural phenomenon that is at play in queer youths' experiences, King's KAP addresses how peoples perspectives are affected by their own biases which can include cultural understandings. This allows further investigation into the internal experiences of queer youth as byproducts of cultural understandings in their environments.

Utilizing Decena's theory around mirrors and self-perception, as a contextual starting point, in addition to womanist pastoral psychological methods, gay youths' experiences with school, teachers, peers, and their families will be analyzed regarding the effect on self-perceptions. This creates an understanding that gay youth are always engaged in some way with reconciling how they are perceived by others and that they are subject to increased attention in expressing their identities. Additionally, the treatment they endure from different people in communities they are a part of is argued as connected to societal reinforcement of religious values that condemn their identities.

Decena highlights through his participants' childhood accounts that queer people's experiences in the world from their vantage point hold their own possibilities, as he mentions that many of them were proud of their effeminacy in childhood; however, it was people's responses that tainted their identities and made them something else, something limited, leading to repression of it in adulthood. King's Kaleidoscope Analysis Perspective highlights how another person's own sensibilities toward someone can be projected and unethically applied to them. This creates a challenge for them to overcome as their identities in the world are

constrained by other people's meanings or biases. Bryant additionally underlines this when mentioning scholars' findings that gay men become more aware of the differences between pathological and healthy belief systems, and choose belief systems which empower them in their lives rather than those which tear them down(p.172, Bryant, 2008; Pitt, 2010). He adds throughout the chapter that these harmful beliefs are rooted in childhood family and religious teachings regarding homosexuality.

Decena, in his aspiration to use words (and memory) to describe and map out what the body says, and what his participants' bodies said in *Tacit Subjects*, speaks of how, similarly to a piano teacher being limited in how he can describe to a student satisfying musical performance techniques, these men learned to be men. He adds that this form of communication allows the student and teacher to access and exchange knowledge without having the specific words to name it. He notes that the "others" who evaluated, criticized, and encouraged them to style their bodies in specific ways did not always name and describe what was desirable or not; instead, the process of becoming men relied on transfers of knowledge about body codes through demonstration, explanation by analogy, imitation, and critique.

Eugenio, a twenty-nine-year-old Decena, interviewed regarding his childhood, offers insight into how gay youth begin to learn about perception: "When I didn't see anyone, I was a completely different person. I was very effeminate. I walked very much like a little queen . . . that's why I was afraid of participating in many of the things they did in my house"(Decena, p.111). He added that he did not like to appear in videotapes because there was always someone who said, "Look, look at that," referring to his effeminacy. He confirms that he was a very effeminate person, and says that because he had a girlfriend, he did not have a lot of problems at school, though he still faced a lot of comments from people, as his demeanor was again

something others could see. Eugenio consistently alludes to himself in a way that is dictated by the values and perceptions of others. It is also notable that he distinguishes between his behavior when he is alone versus when he is around people.

Decena continually asserts that the codes of masculinity are represented by others and subject to scrutiny by others, at any given moment. As he mentions that even among heterosexual men, the gender work of constructing masculinity relies on men's ongoing evaluation of one another as men, irrespective of sexual identification and erotic object choice (p.123). He argues that the effeminacy Eugenio began noticing in himself as he grew up was connected to various sites of gendering in daily life through which his own understanding of himself as a feminine boy became possible. For this reason, Decena notes that while reflecting on himself, he conveyed what distinguished him from other boys based on descriptions of differences visible to him; namely, characteristics of other boys and men who surrounded him, specifically his brothers (p.117). This underlines that his perception of himself is grounded in what he is not related to others.

Roberto Panes, another participant, also highlights how codes of masculinity are defined for and by others: "Panés offered narrative access to these scenes of exchange and feedback with his mother about the coordination of bodily deportment and the judgment of what "looks good" (that is, masculine) in the eyes of others"(p.121-122). Panes's mom's feedback comes from what she knows about others, though also the possibility of what his eso can communicate to them. Decena references the Lacanian mirror stage, how a young infant first identifies themselves before identifying in the dialectic with others and how this is different for his participants, "In contrast, the relationship between child and mirror Heredia recounted implicated others. There was no stage of self-recognition prior to sociality"(p.119).

Considering Decena's theories about how gay youths' image of self is inextricably tied to others' negative perceptions, King's notion of the effect of distorted mirrors on children is essential to framing this. This is as King maintains that the Kaleidoscope, as a symbol for black girlhood, identifies distorted mirrors in its body as analogous to misrepresentations of black girlhood. She further says that looking into these mirrors has the potential to dangerously distort a black girl's self-image, a belief also held by Audre Lorde in her poem "Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap". In the poem, Lorde writes about mirrors symbolically as a means of self-recognition and self-definition. These insights are paramount as Decena speaks to how gay youth associate social perceptions of them with their own image. King's KAP illuminates how these mirrors are constructed by people's biases toward black girls. Thus, in a similar vein, gay youths' socially reflected images are built by people's biases.

Decena explains how Heredia's description of the selves in front and behind the mirror suggests an understanding of his own fragmentation as a possible condition for his own survival and not definitive abjection. Clarifying that when on his own, behind the mirror, he expressed himself differently, similarly to other informants in settings where they felt comfortable enough to "be themselves". "The realization of the incommensurability of the authentic (private/behind-the-mirror) self with the one that needed to be produced to get through the world (public/infront-of-the-mirror self) was foundational for Heredia as it was for other informants"(p.120). Decena notes that self-fashioning involves learning to arrange oneself to have some control over the ways one is perceived.

Decena references Panes, who, like other informants, illustrates this: "Panés pointed toward "la forma de caminar" (walking style) to underline the potentially scandalous (and discrediting) swish he had to control. But he also talked about his mannerisms in general. "Me

partía mucho,"(p.122). Partirse, he explained, was a common way of speaking about situations where males let out a signal of effeminacy and possible homosexuality. He again emphasises a self-image based on others, in adding that for it to register as a disruption of the presumably seamless trajectory of heterosexual masculinity in the visual field, others have to be present to voice that judgment. It should be noted that Heredia is eventually less feminine once older as a result of this socialization.

Decena continually emphasizes others and local topographies in articulating how queer youth become adjusted to expectations surrounding their identities. These are both essential aspects to queer youths' self-perceptions as they are deeply influenced by encounters in their specific communities with a variety of others. Furthermore, in his close attention to their memories and words as bodied inquiry, he establishes that what they were taught regarding their bodies affected what they felt about them and within them. He repeatedly speaks to the scandal provoked by the eso and what it can potentially suggest about queer youth. It is important to understand the cultural risks it elicits for families and other men.

Decena explains the connotations behind what is implied by the eso: "Much of the existing scholarship on the relationship between gender and sexual role performance (particularly among Latinos in the United States and Latin American populations) takes as a given that being read as a "sissy" means social vulnerability and sexual "passivity"(p.114). He addresses how it is only recently that conflating male gender dissent with anal receptivity has begun to be interrogated. It is important to note his assertion that to be seen as an effeminate man in Latin America or in Latino communities in the United States implies that the body in question is stigmatized because of its homosexuality, registered as anal receptivity in sexual intercourse with other men. Connecting the eso to anal receptivity elucidates why it is risky in what it evokes

in a patriarchal heterosexist culture, which prioritizes normative masculine deportment. Decena's speaking to having to be read as a "sissy" to designate these negative associations again speaks to how it is an identity ascribed based on one's behavior according to local cultural values.

Decena explains the impact this has on queer youth as they understand that because their identity is at all times subject to scrutiny, they must remain vigilant, leveraging their bodily knowledge of masculine stylizations in order to protect themselves. He explains la loca as their breaking with expectations, "Indeed, to the degree that this specter exerted an important force in their lives, despite their being directly or indirectly implicated with it, la loca will name figures, stylizations, and movements of the body and speech patterns as performative utterances that express dissent from the languages of normative masculinity in daily life"(p.115). He notes that the informants' work of self-fashioning focused on what could be seen, and the possibility of the eruption of la loca in the visual field was ever-present for them. This highlights that as this system pervaded their lives, they had to be aware of how they navigated spaces in which the deportment being seen could provoke increased risk. This additionally highlights that in queer youths being socialized into varying relationships with their eso, it is taught that it signals disagreement with normative values.

This dissent he distinguishes is not expressed in desire to be a woman, as he says many students of Latin American Homosexualities and as many of the informants perceived men they considered effeminate, though in a male body that stages femininity through the deployment of stereotypes associated with women. Referencing Sifuentes-Jauregui's corporal language, he says la loca is a gynographic performative, an imagined form of femininity staged as excess on a male body. Decena speaks to how this perception of their behavior as dissent caused a complicated relationship with la loca for queer youth, "Like the community that expels this particular member

to secure its normative identity, the informants did not look to distance or expel from their self-making "the radically different but . . . the proximate other." Still, la loca on the surface of my interlocutors' bodies was not an other that was proximate in the way that figure might be for the people who surround Trinidad's son"(p.116). He adds that it constituted their authentic self in ways some of the men learned to negotiate by mobilizing codes of normative masculinity. It is also important to consider the attention to la loca, understood as excess only on a male body.

Decena compares queer youths responses to Fanon's response to Lacan's mirror stage in which a white child says "Look, a Negro!" causing a certain fragmentation within a circuit, "Furthermore, the disappearance of the child who points, and the disappearance of the relative or neighbor who points to the "eso" that registered, visually reveal the parallel constitutions of whiteness and normative masculinity (and femininity, as many of the coaches and evaluators of male children's socialization were mothers) as disappearance"(p.120). He continues that the excess of the black and effeminate inaugurates the unmarked status of normative whiteness, maleness, and femaleness. This underlines how internally queer youth go away from themselves when their eso is pointed out in another example of their reflection being implicated publicly by those who possess normative identities, and who in this encounter become arbitrary beyond triggering this response. This is because when subjecting queer youth, they provoke an internalized process. That Decena acknowledges that mothers, relatives, and neighbors all participate is important.

Decena speaks to how their knowledge was based on the specifics of their communities, "As if styling one's body in ways considered "properly masculine" were not enough, the children the informants remembered also had to be mindful of the way they moved through local topographies shaped by "what people said" about children as well as specific grown

men”(p.112). This identifies that the particular community and its beliefs around children as well as specific adult men's views, influenced how queer youth learned to deploy these strategies. Decena offers another example, “Roberto Panes’s recollection of being raised and taught to be a man from his mother emphasized an issue central to most men I interviewed: the question is not who he is (quien es) but rather the way he presents himself where he is (donde está)”(p.121). This highlights how the communal and individual values previously mentioned are of utmost concern to mothers in policing their sons' demeanors due to the impacts they could have in particular settings.

As the other, in the form of family, relatives, neighbors, and other grown men, is frequently spoken to by Decena in perpetuating attitudes about queer youth, he is calling attention to how they each hold a stake in normative cultural values. As he addresses many times within Dominican society, the values allow for a legitimacy to be retained for men, though this has implications for families as well. Given that Decena speaks to how virility and brute labor, which complied with a rugged masculinity, are part of the normative codes of masculinity, it can be understood why queerness is conceptualized as problematic. It is additionally highlighted in more obvious confirmations of normative masculinity, such as relationships with women, though he addresses the heart of the conflict overarchingly when speaking to how simply having proximity to boys labeled effeminate by those in the neighborhood was also undermining for boys/young men. Furthermore, how this proximity was gauged as association or similarity in identity to them.

Taking from these understandings, which Decena has established, raises how cultural values are perpetuated in order to maintain expectations and hierarchy. This also warrants reflection on what those within a cultural context stand to lose by an identity existing that

destabilizes efforts at cohesive heterosexual and gendered identity. As men and others are heavily involved in constantly evaluating and policing queer youth identity, they are identified as primary players in reinforcing cultural beliefs about male identity, though also as beneficiaries when this system is upheld. This is because preventing nonconformity strengthens the beliefs surrounding their cultural values. On another level, this explains why in male interactions societally, seeing men who present effeminately can be threatening to them. This is especially of interest within Dominican culture as the added element of being within a more intimate structure where values are deeply held, and beyond their different demeanor, effeminate men may resemble other Dominican men in terms of features and shared lineage. This may be unsettling as resembling them without conforming may cause more fixation surrounding their nonconformity to culturally reinforced values for men.

In terms of mothers and families, it is also obvious why the eso may constitute a threat to them. As these values that emphasize virility and brute labor are important, deviating from them undermines a man's legitimacy. In a cultural setting where other men or neighbors have power and are constantly evaluating gender, their identity has considerable consequences. Thus, mothers and families often try to offset their loss of power to these men in their communities, which affects their family, and also partake in a policing role as a form of prevention. This is because a loss of male power in a patriarchal society can be devastating. This is also as in a patriarchal society, men have the most power, and straightness is a constituent part of this; those who are straight are invested in certain ways in preserving it. Nonetheless, as a community, multiple people at the different levels that Decena names are all invested in maintaining the values that undergird these communities.

King addresses people's engagements with black girls based on societally reinforced messages about them. In doing this through KAP, she is addressing a cultural and societal perception of them that constrains who they are and thus cannot perceive the full nuance and complexity of their ways of being. The resources and insights she offers for ethical engagement require a continual disposing of uninformed societal ways of seeing them. She speaks to this in saying, “first being that Black girls have the capacity to claim space, especially when that space is freely offered, and second, the space they create has the potential to be more vivid, boundless, and beyond my adult imagination”(p.5). She adds, I realized that my approach needed to be flexible, intentional, co-created with Black girls, and deeply attentive to the fullness of their experiences, thought processes, and ways of being. This establishes an understanding that black girls are multidimensional in contrast with narrow stereotypes that are projected onto them. Further, this knowledge requires consideration to perceive their experiences, thought processes, and ways of being with depth.

In outlining essential components of her kaleidoscope approach, she says, “Additionally, the kaleidoscopic approach recognizes memory as a subjective tool of analysis. In other words, a kaleidoscopic analysis maintains that memory is vital to the researcher’s sense of identity as memory maintains our positionality to the world around us and configures how we perceive our environment”(p.7-8). These insights importantly speak to how one's memory governs their understanding, as it is part of their identity and specific relationship to the world. In speaking to the eyepiece, she again directs attention to the researcher as the origin point for their perceptions.

She also calls attention to how the eyepiece relegates their perceptions to their sensibilities “In my view, the eyepiece of the kaleidoscope correlates with the gaze of the researcher determined by their self-perceptions, changing perspectives, and memories . . . Once

the viewer looks into the eyepiece, their vision is contained and restricted to the barrel of the kaleidoscope”(p.7). This highlights that one's own self-perceptions, changing perspectives, and memories comprise a confined space through which their perceptions of black girls can only be products of the former.

Given King's illumination through Kaleidoscopic imagery, it becomes evident that the risk and peril of queer youth undermining masculine cultural values is a contingency that exists only for men, families, and communities who are personally invested in self-constructed expectations. An understanding of this would reorient their engagement with queer youth and allow them to contextualize their existence in a way that is informed by queer youth as opposed to themselves. This is because queer youth do not feel limited within their identities until these ideas are impressed on them over time by vehement scrutiny and policing. King’s KAP analogy and continual addressing of engagement, which is unsuitable, creates a dire precedent for privileging black girls' own perspectives in any substantial inquiry, “She asserts that Black Feminist thought is useful for situating Black girls as being the sole proprietors and interpreters of their experiences, whereas Womanism maintains that everyday experiences of intergenerational socialization matter”(p.8). This similarly highlights that queer youth experiences and queer-affirming theory must be consulted to support ethical engagement with them.

These individual engagements with black girls as a result of socially reinforced ideas cause mirroring conditions in which black girls perceive themselves negatively. Similarly, queer youth who experience negative perceptions interpersonally and publicly internalize these images of themselves. She asserts, “A Womanist theological anthropological lens is particularly helpful for intentionally acknowledging Black girls as complexly human and integral to theological

reflections on the human experience"(p.9). Not utilizing Womanist, feminist, and other research paradigms, which are grounded in black women and black girls' experiences and contextual cultural understandings, hinders the ability to see black girls as complexly human. "In some cases, mirroring occurs in person-to-person interactions, while in other cases, mirroring occurs through cultural immersion and contextual experiences . . . Sheppard asks: 'What happens to this development of self when culture—a source for mirroring—offers a distorted and exploited reflection of the self?"(p.11). This frames the stakes of harmful social mirroring in individuals as culture reflects negative traits to them as they develop, which they identify with, causing harmful behaviors towards the self, such as self-hate and negative self-talk.

Womanist Pastoral Psychology, Womanist Theology's Connection to Lived Experiences

In order to utilize Womanist Psychological and Religious methods to examine queer youths experiences, the ways that Womanist Theology is informed by psychological insights must be established. In highlighting how Womanist Theology has Psychological facilities and engagements, how this is appropriate to the thesis is highlighted.

Carroll Watkins Ali, in *Survival and Liberation: Pastoral Theology in African American Context*, frequently alludes to black cultural experience and history's importance to create care that is contextually appropriate and sufficient for black people and black women's needs. In deviating from Hiltner's shepherding perspective, which erroneously privileges the pastor's perspective and encounters to establish care, womanist pastoral theology instead advises reflection on the experience of the cultural context and making the pastor's experiences secondary. An understanding of black people's various struggles for survival and liberation would help create care that helps their unique needs, as Ali identifies that the dominant pastoral

care model of shepherding does not meet their critical concerns in its functions, such as nurturing, empowering, and being ultimately liberating in praxis.

This pastoral care relationship is heavily dependent on psychology as Ali continually speaks to black people and black women's everyday cultural and societal realities as important guides to care needs. The catastrophic failures of normative pastoral care models for black people and black women highlight that pastoral care requires a psychological facility, both in its capacity of administering effective relational care, but also in anticipating the needs of people with experiences of both racism and sexism. Thus, Womanist Pastoral Psychology can be defined as a primary concern with relational needs, utilizing knowledge of how a context of various oppressions creates particular spiritual and psychological needs for black women. Ali reasons that, as much as black women and their children are positioned lowest socially, politically, and economically in this country, it is through their eyes that pastoral caregivers need to gain a view of the critical needs for black America. She additionally offers that with the advance of the postmodern era, there must be an understanding that knowledge is relative to cultural awareness.

Ali identifies that the description of the experience as felt internally is relative to the nature of the external experience and its impact on internal awareness, something that is not readily available in the literature of black psychology, likely due to the field of psychology's Eurocentrism. Thus, she advises that the best form of knowledge to build theory is the experience of the context, necessitating a description of the psychical experience of African Americans and the accompanying behavior that she says is incidental to the experience of slavery and racial oppression built into current structures of American society. She argues that this gave Baldwin and Morrison a unique kind of awareness, enabling them to write with clarity and believability, which those outside the context do not have the benefit of. Beyond solely

drawing attention to problems, though, she reasons that literature is a reliable secondary resource that helps to understand the interior psychological experiences of black people and black women that are crucial to pastoral care.

Womanist Theories from Black Girls' Lived Experiences

Exploring Duncan, King, and Walker-Barnes theories highlights the psychological engagements of Womanism which are rooted in black girls' lived experiences. Given that these theories speak to socialization and childhood experiences for black girls, they help to situate queer youths cultural experiences in their environments. This is enabled by the last chapters establishing that Womanist Pastoral Psychology necessitates psychological engagement.

Carol B. Duncan, in *From "Force-Ripe" to "Womanish/ist" Black Girlhood and African Diasporan Feminist Consciousness*, outlines how Alice Walker's Womanish, found her as it represented language and experiences she felt deeply and particularly. She highlights what Ali mentioned regarding womanist pastoral psychology's foundation in black people's internal psychological experiences, when she says that there was a terrifying cognitive dissonance when the U.S., amid what she thought was progress, quashed the Grenadian Socialist Revolution in 1983. She also asserts that as a sociologist, she was particularly concerned with Immigrant Caribbean women's everyday religious life experiences in Canada, in the Toronto Spiritual Baptist community.

Thus, Womanism is identified as an ethical and theological framework that at times lends itself to a religious affiliation within certain contexts. It is established as such by Duncan and others in acknowledging that it provides them with a framework to consider relevant social relations of power and individual black women's life experience within religious space. Contrary to what has been noted in the shepherding pastoral theological model, womanism is steeped in

the experiences of black people who are within the cultural context spanning from history to the present. In contextualizing her introduction and embrace of womanism, Duncan identifies herself as a trans-atlantic diasporan black woman born in the mid 1960's in London, England, and as a daughter of parents from the Caribbean, specifically Antigua for her mother and Guyana for her father.

Being a first-year sociology student at a Toronto University in 1983, she recalls the possibilities surrounding the quality of life created by a post-civil rights era due to victories of her parents' generation regarding anti-racist, anti-colonial, and civil rights political, economic, and cultural efforts, which secured a life previously unimaginable for generations of black people. She notes that the year was distinct in the trajectory of black cultural and political life in North America and Western Europe. Helped also by Hip Hop culture's fourth year in the mainstream, in addition to the popularization of a specific jerri curl hairstyle, which was a byproduct of a 1980s black aesthetic. Kobena Mercer, a black British sociologist, said the hairstyles' popularity communicated a practice of new world black stylization spurred by African-European cultural contact and mutual appropriation and popularized by popular musical entertainment stars such as Michael Jackson and Prince. This was primarily an economic endeavor, as this cultural turning point, which valued black aesthetics, challenged the interests of earlier radical black movements.

In recounting the circumstances during which she found Womanism within her context and multiple aspects of her identity, Duncan highlights the importance of cultural history and experience to Womanism. Without recognizing her lineage and acknowledging the struggles of black people leading up to her young adulthood, connected to a longer legacy of struggle historically, Duncan's context or care could not be engaged. She mentions that this is why, during

a period of social flux and change, Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, impacted her, as it represented Walker's own personal recollection and sharing of wisdom developed through her activism in anti-racist and radical social justice movements in the United States.

Duncan additionally explains how Womanism was invaluable to her intellectual formation as an undergraduate in the 1980's and graduate student in the 1990s in the sociology of religion, she says that while some of its central texts were not formally included in her course work, she found these books through references from other black women graduate students, writers, and scholars in women's bookstores. This again highlights how Duncan, being a student of sociology specifically in the 1980's/90's, is connected to these experiences within womanism, being important to her spirituality, given that they include the interior experience and the cultural context of black women. This is ultimately why womanism found her and resonated.

Her studies being important context to her adopting womanism is also shown in her referencing Anne Game and Dorothy Smith, as Smith radically argued that sociological analysis of power should not be confined to notions of a wider structure that imposed its logic on women's lives but instead that women have intimate knowledge of the matrixes of power that structure their lives through the relationships in their everyday world. Duncan says this is the very premise of Womanism, and womanish as one who dares to question and, in the process, is actively engaged in exposing the contours of her myriad social relationships. This is again why Womanism was appealing, as it considered power relations in everyday experiences, which were part of her experience of the world.

In her engagement with psychology more directly, Duncan addresses how black girls are treated and the experiences she recalls in her own childhood. In doing this, she is acknowledging both the external experience of what happens to black girls in their environments, but also the

internal experience of how this affects them. She additionally adds the contexts of multiple accomplished black women who similarly cite their high success to foundational experiences that occurred in their girlhoods. This underlines that the way black girls are treated, causing them to transgress norms around gendered behaviors, impacts them extensively beyond childhood. Duncan, saying Walker's radicalism was in her valuation of womanishness, since it was hardly ever acknowledged positively in her girlhood, says something about how this relationship with black girls in their communities affects them.

Duncan says that when reading Walker's definition of Womanist for the first time, she immediately connected with it as the term behind it, "womanish", was familiar to her from her own Caribbean girlhood in Antigua and Toronto, Canada. The word is also found in anglo-Caribbean Creoles and refers to a girl who acts grown (forward-thinking and mature) or who is fast (not necessarily with the implication of sexual precocity and/or promiscuity but who is self-motivated), in addition to "nuff" (a specifically Antiguan term usually used to imply someone, either male or female, who is unusually and perhaps even intrusively inquisitive). In addition to "womanish" Duncan lists other terms such as "fresh," "fast," "facety," and importantly "force-ripe" used to allude to behaviors and attitudes in youth and children that should, ideally, lie far beyond their life experiences.

She offers that the force-ripe metaphor is ostensibly taken from plant cultivation and conjures images of the practice of forcibly ripening fruit after it has been prematurely plucked from the tree or vine by placing it in artificially created situations, such as a brown paper bag at a warm room temperature. Adding that these circumstances subsequently "force" the fruit to ripen well before its time of maturation, clarifying that despite the beauty of the "forced" fruit, it is never as sweet as that which is vine ripened, "naturally" in a longer process of maturation. The

circumstances that force black girls to mature are addressed as experiences, sometimes by choice and sometimes due to the choices of others, especially adults in their lives, in addition to wider social and political circumstances beyond their control. Considering what Senior says about how girls are “raised” and “trained” while boys are allowed much more freedom in their choice of activities within and outside the household within Caribbean cultural contexts, the transgressiveness noted in black girls is a rational response. This is especially as she notes assessing gender and socialization across class backgrounds in Caribbean families, girls suffer most concerning their social lives and friendships due to parents' over-strictness.

Duncan identifies the transgressive instinct of black girls, “Yet, even with admonitions, as womanish girls, we still minded our own and other people’s business with alacrity and determination and I dare say the beginning of a burgeoning feminist consciousness grounded in care, concern, and the ability and willingness to step outside of established boundaries and norms of strategies of communication and inquiry”(p.31). This highlights that the way black girls respond to their circumstances goes beyond cultural expectations; however, they do so to meet their own needs within an undermining context. The environments that expose black girls to experiences that create this response and then condemn them should instead bear this burden, considering how their contexts challenge their autonomy.

Nonetheless, this is not how communities respond to black girls transgressing these boundaries, which is why Walker’s womanist reframing is crucial. Duncan highlights the communal responses to black girls being transgressive, “Yuh mus’ keep out-ta big people business.” (Literally, “Keep out of the business of big people”. . . with the aside, “She too love dip she mout’ in people business.” (Literally, “She likes to dip her mouth in other people’s business” meaning “She is always interfering in the affair of others.”) all these phrases

equivalent of mind your business nobody was talking to you”(p.31). These comments highlight a disdain towards black girls for deviating from norms. Duncan highlights that what causes discontent is that womanish represents a precocious orientation to social relationships and knowledge acquisition, in which the girl-child insists on speaking up and asking questions rather than being content with the knowledge gained from the position of the passive listener. As stated previously, this positionality is necessary for black girls' needs; however, in a context in which gendered behavior is policed, it is apparent why this might be perceived negatively.

Duncan speaks of how meaningful Walker’s definition of Womanish was because it affirmed transgressive acts rooted in black girlhood experiences as a source of feminist consciousness, creativity, and activism. She further highlights that womanish is the opposite of “girlish” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious."; meaning then that by definition as opposite is contemplative, responsible, and serious. This importantly reframes black girls and casts a positive light on their ways of being, vastly different from the adultifying, scornful, culturally prevalent one. Also, it affirms and appreciates black girls' deviations as means of coming into their identities and taking initiative against challenges. This is additionally critical to understanding the range of communal treatments of black girls, which dismisses black girls being transgressive and diminishes their character in the process. Frivolous, irresponsible, and not serious are judgments that can be implied in interactions with black girls that demean these acts.

Duncan mentions how black girls context affects the evaluation of their behavior, “Walker affirmed an important experience in black girlhood, namely, stepping outside of the boundaries of expected gender normative behavior in familial and community contexts, in which obedience (read silence) and compliance (read silence again) were highly valued and seen as

effective child-rearing practices that reflected positively on the child's mother"(p.31). In a setting where effective child-rearing is gauged by obedience and compliance, which are both denoted by silence, it is clear that not acting transgressively may harm them. This is as it is noted that being womanish is often required in the world to survive the insidious attacks of multiple oppressions, which black women and girls face.

Kishundra King, in *Being Womanish: A Womanist Perspective on Black Girlhood*, explains how noticing a void as related to the importance of black girls' experiences in Womanist Pastoral Theology, she courageously argued this at a Womanist conference. Through acknowledging this, she introduces other tools that are important to fostering a relationship with black girls that meets their spiritual and developmental needs. She highly emphasizes the fluidity and multiplicitous nature of black girls, which requires dexterity in those who aspire to learn from them. As she notes, black girls are capable of swiftly adapting in different circumstances, requiring an expansiveness in their care as the world they navigate also changes with time. Through exploring the symbolism of a kaleidoscope, she illuminates the tendency of people who do not center themselves in black feminist womanist research paradigms to treat black girls unethically at a most critical time in their development.

An essential insight of the Kaleidoscope analysis perspective King offers is the eyepiece, which she says represents the gaze of the researcher determined by their self-perceptions, changing perspectives, and memories. She furthermore delineates that what the viewer sees is a reflection of mirrored objects at the end of the barrel contingent on, "(1) the angle of the viewer's eye as they look into the barrel, (2) the condition of the viewer's eyesight, (3) the point in time the viewer looks through the eyepiece, and (4) the particular arrangement of glass bits at the end of the barrel"(p.7). She argues that these factors determine what the viewer sees in a similar vein

to how the subjectivity of the researcher shapes their analyses of events, experiences, and narratives.

With this understanding that people's own subjectivities can cause distortions of black girls, we can analyze people's engagements with them as directly responsible for increasing harm, both interpersonally and in perpetuating harmful perspectives of them in society. This honors the insight of black girls' experiences in the world and notably redirects scrutiny away from black girls and toward those who typically pathologize them due to normative developmental theories. By doing this, we can expose the problematic nature of the subjectivities of those who perceive black girls in an unethical way.

King similarly mentions the barrel as importantly enabling the viewer to focus on the objects of discovery. She specifies that in KAP, the ‘barrel’ functions as the guide for seeing and analyzing Black girls’ experiences. Though like the eyepiece, the barrel can also hold perilous consequences for misconstruing black girls, depending on the engager's biases. For this reason, King references Davis advising researchers to appropriate Black Feminist Thought and Womanism as a means for examining Black female psychosocial experiences. Adding that this is useful for situating black girls as being the sole proprietors and interpreters of their experiences, while Womanism maintains the importance of everyday experiences of intergenerational socialization. These theoretical frameworks are crucial to maintaining images of black girls that are not distorted, as they are culturally based and take seriously contextualized experiences and the interactive forces of history, race, class, and gender.

In exploring the barrel in more depth, King describes the inside of the barrel. Saying the barrel houses two or more mirrors or lenses that mutually enhance or strengthen the viewpoint. She, however, distinguishes again that unlike lenses in an actual kaleidoscope, the interpretive

lenses in KAP are not fixed and can change depending on the researcher's sensibilities, subjectivities, and theoretical orientation. With the final component being the collective of discovery at the end of the barrel, which she says is the stories we hear from black girls' narratives, ethnographic sketches of black girlhood, and what we see black girls doing in the world. King's ethical approach to the kaleidoscope, which is constructed with black feminist-womanist frameworks, offers clarity into how mischaracterizations of black girls can be amplified through an individual's gaze and personal feelings. This is also as she says that multiple sources and research methods move black girls from the margins to the heart of inquiry, maintaining that they are at the center.

King, alluding to Audre Lorde's poem, which also references mirrors symbolically speaks to how looking into distorted mirrors has the potential to dangerously distort a black girl's self-image. She underscores these effects through psychological insight, as Heinz Kohut, a self-psychologist, says an appropriate mirroring encounter involves the use of the affirming, empathic, and positive responses of others to identify positive traits within the self, leading to the development of inner-strength, security, and belonging. From this, it follows that when positive mirroring experiences are not available, healthy self-development is impeded, creating opportunities for negative self-talk, self-deprecation, and self-hate.

While mirroring is said to sometimes occur in person-to-person interactions, it also occurs in cultural immersion and contextual experiences, namely as thought cultivated through art, media, music, or the overall social ethos. In her book titled Self, Culture, and Others in Womanist Practical Theology, Sheppard speaks to this in questioning what happens to this development of self when culture – a source for mirroring – offers a distorted and exploited reflection of the self. She says that cultural context can be dangerous to the healthy development

of the self for black children. Referencing Winnicott's research, King adds that the faulty mirror functions as a failed environment, which can impede healthy self-development during maturation; as he describes the maturational process as a facilitating or holding environment. He, however, adds that if a breakdown occurs in this facilitating environment, noted by a failure to satisfactorily meet the individual's needs, the individual is at risk of disintegration that may manifest through anti-social behaviors such as stealing, destructiveness, delinquency, anxiety, depression, or other mental disturbances.

Considering that the current social climate as a facilitating environment fails black girls because it assumes they need less support, less nurture, and less care, having the right tools is crucial to support and not disrupt their selfhood. In Lorde's poem ‘Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap’, she addresses mirrors symbolically as a method of self-recognition and self-definition for black girls.

> It is a waste of time hating a mirror
> or its reflection
> instead of stopping the hand
> that makes glass with distortions
> slight enough to pass unnoticed

King highlights that it begins with the above plea before Lorde later recommends shattering the glass, “or if you can see the mirror is lying you shatter the glass.” King argues that Lorde utilizes the figurative and psychological connotations of mirroring to remind us of the insidious nature of false images and their potential damage to the psyche. Thus, considering how

mirrors are constructed by people and can wreak deep harm in black girls' self-images, being conscious of one's own capacity to harm is imperative. Beyond this understanding, King's utilization of multiple tools that center black girls and paradigms that uplift them is imperative. This is because all of these tools can enable self-awareness around different aspects of black girls' experiences that must be handled with tact for the contextual times.

King emphasizes that valuing black girlhood and the insight it offers for their needs requires Womanish psycho-theological anthropological lenses. This allows intentional acknowledgement of black girls as complexly human, which is neglected in the normative culture that diminishes their humanity. Without an understanding of how the fields of psychology, anthropology, and theology engender an informed understanding of black girls, one is not able to understand their subjectivities and needs.

In *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength,* Chanequa Walker-Barnes identifies emotional strength, caregiving, and independence as the traits black women simultaneously embody to an excessive degree to constitute an ill-fitting suit of armor. This armor descends from historical images and expectations of black women during slavery. Walker-Barnes emphasizes that these expectations at once mystify and make real black women by expecting the impossible from them while also perpetuating their strength as being beyond ordinary human strength. These beliefs stemming from America's dark past are noted to have infiltrated even the spaces of black women's own communities, where they should be safe from this dehumanization. Walker-Barnes also highlights that adopting these roles can be unconscious but can seem fulfilling in that society perceives them positively.

Walker-Barnes explains that from childhood, black women are taught that a good woman, especially a good black woman, is independent, a giver (and not a receiver of help), including

emotional, financial, or instrumental support; furthermore, that if she is a woman of Christian faith, any help she needs should come only from God. Walker-Barnes speaks to how this conditioning causes black women to compulsively care for others while neglecting their own needs. She establishes the history of this image in saying, "The legacy of the Mammy archetype is also an important factor in the caregiving tendencies of StrongBlackWomen. Originating during slavery and becoming the dominant image of black women during Reconstruction, Mammy was caricatured as eager to care for the needs of her owners/employers, even to the neglect of her needs and those of her family."(p.7)

Walker-Barnes adds that while the StrongBlackWoman image is often propagated because of its promise as a positive icon, it is only so superficially, as it is just as subjugating as the others. This is as she notes that the StrongBlackWoman icon is an infinitely more palatable alternative to the negative stereotypes surrounding African-American womanhood since their arrival on the shores of the United States; namely: the asexual and happily oppressed Mammy, the sexually promiscuous and manipulative Jezebel, and the sharp-tongued and emasculating Sapphire. She mentions that churchwomen and her students would ask why the seemingly positive icon was so bad. To this, she specifies many times that being strong, black, and a woman are not the same thing as strength in this connotation, as black men and women, and those of any race or gender can display strength.

Additionally, speaking to history she adds that during the American Slavocracy, "Black women were routinely depicted as being unusually strong, possessing physical hardiness that far exceeded that of women of other races and even rivaled that of men. In contrast to the "delicate" White woman, Black women were seen as capable of performing heavy physical labor in the plantation fields and household." (p.3) She adds that they could work through sickness and

needed little recovery after childbirth, and were able to endure separation from their children and families. This strength, seen as unfeminine, was perceived as evidence of their inferior humanity. Furthermore, she says it proved that they were incapable of full societal citizenship and were only suitable for the menial and reproductive labor that was characteristic of their enslaved status. This highlights how, during slavery, white society, in subjugating black women, misconstrued human survival instincts as distinguishing black women from them.

As Walker-Barnes acknowledges, this treatment is a byproduct of women being seen as second-class citizens, though this was consolidated with racial oppression so that black women's pain was uniquely horrific. These views of black women were likely rationalizations for the extensive level at which white people would mistreat them to facilitate their own needs. Though because sexism and racial oppressions continue today, this oppressive icon is still heavily relied upon. Walker-Barnes highlights that the myth of Black Women’s strength is dangerously seductive in that it imbues black women with a particular moral and emotional superiority, providing a psychic balm against the daily insults incurred from social injustice. Though this mythic strength evidently belies the extensive pain experienced. As Walker-Barnes puts into perspective that for black women, strength connotatively has dangerous consequences, in that it is intrinsically linked to suffering, as the capacity to withstand suffering without complaint. This mythic strength in a context that continually reinforces black women's pain contributes to black women not recognizing their pain and how they might be contributing through an ill-fitting armor.

This is also addressed in Walker-Barnes, discussing how frequently in today's context, black women's strength is recognized, however that the specifics of what this means remain nebulous. It is important to highlight this ambiguity of the strength, as it reveals how their

strength is an implicit expectation. With these expectations of extraordinary strength that are undefined, a precedent is created for endless expectations to be put on them. As black women internalize these long-standing subjugating images, they respond to stress unhealthily and suffer dire health consequences. Walker-Barnes notes that, regardless of the level of chaos occurring in her life, she appears cool, calm, and collected to uphold the restraining image. Through referencing an ethnographic study of middle-aged black women, she mentions how crying was never done in front of one of the women's husbands, as she saw it as losing control, which she could not afford to do.

The burden of strength requires vulnerability to be avoided, which causes black women to repress and suppress a range of important emotions; this, coupled with the endless demands of those who rely on them, takes a toll. Walker-Barnes adds, "anger is a favored emotion over sadness. In a classic "fight or flight" style, when the StrongBlackWoman cannot avoid, or flee, vulnerability, she assumes a fighter's stance, preferring the active emotions of anger, irritability, disgust, contempt, and annoyance."(p.4) She notes that while limited use of defense mechanisms such as denial, repression, and suppression can be effective means to cope with stressful situations temporarily, relying on them long-term guarantees emotional and physical overload. This is as not addressing and coping with negative emotions does not limit their impact but only causes it to be redirected, causing impacts on their physical health. This predisposes them to stress-related health problems such as hypertension, ulcers, migraines, and chronic pain, sleep and appetite disturbance, and obesity.

Despite their efforts to conceal their emotions, Walker-Barnes illuminates that they are no more impervious to the difficulties of life than anyone else, as they experience fear, grief, sadness, and worry to the same extent as others. She adds that the StrongBlackWoman has

developed an extraordinary capacity for “walking with broken feet” often unaware that she is in pain. To the extent that, even in becoming conscious of her distress, she is not likely to attribute it to role strain but to her own lack of ability to meet the demands that life has placed on her. This calls attention to how damaging the StrongBlackWoman icon and its ascribed features are for black women, both in what is expected from them by others and the ways they are taught to internally circumnavigate essential human feelings and responses to maintain it.

Applying Queer Theory and Womanist Methods to Queer of Color Lived Experiences

Utilizing these Womanist Psychological methods, Bartone’s narrative study of queer youths stories from the metro-Atlanta area will be analyzed. In examining their family, schooling, and overall social experiences, how Decena’s cultural insights play out will be considered in addition to King’s about people's perceptions being ascribed to others. Walker-Barnes and Duncan will also enable understanding of how queer youth are subjected to others beliefs and how they respond to this reality.

Utilizing the insights from Decena about gay men of color’s identity hypervigilance and others from Womanist Pastoral Psychology, Michael D. Bartone’s five research participants' stories, documented through narrative inquiry with an emphasis on life histories, will be examined to show how queer youth of color are affected by others' perceptions of them. It should be noted that their experiences with family, teachers, schools, and their peers are all connected in affecting their self-perceptions due to the ways they engage their queerness in communal spaces.

It should also be noted that although institutions such as schools, though at times even families have moved toward identifying more secularly, the impact of long-standing religious values is not gone from cultures or institutions. Many people may not claim a religious affiliation

or attend daily service, however still hold inherited religious beliefs culturally. Queer youth being treated negatively regarding their sexuality in America is likely a result of these religious beliefs.

Bartone's research was conducted in the summer of 2014 with five black males (nineteen to twenty-four years of age) who spent most of their lives in metro-Atlanta and used semi-structured questions (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009) in at least three interviews. Their first and second interviews, which were crucial to the schooling experiences focus of the study, asked about birth to middle school, and the second asked about high school to the present. They acknowledge that Atlanta was chosen because of its being viewed as a black gay mecca (Jarvie 2006), due to the visibility and engagement of many organizations and peoples in the black sexual minority community. This allowed them to ask questions about how growing up in a location in a city, or metro area, considered a Black gay mecca, affects the ways one comes to understand their intersecting racial and sexual identities.

Bartone says that the interviews capture the navigation and understanding of and appreciation of the participants' intersecting identities, which is a self-possession not often recognized in the literature (Bartone 2015). He identifies that their experiences in schools led them to learn (overtly and covertly) about and begin to accept and appreciate their racial and sexual identities.

Referencing King's and Decena's theories as related to Bartone's participants' experiences makes clear how communal responses to queer youth are fundamentally about something that can be seen and communicated to others, that they believe should not be. This belief is nonetheless one that is filtered through their cultural memories, self-perceptions, and experiences to be seen negatively. It is important to note that what this communicates to them

individually as adults is not what it communicates to queer youth. As King advises relating to ethical engagements with black girls, an appropriate engagement with queer youth is one grounded in queer people's experiences and queer-affirming theory. King's KAP explains how, in perpetuating ideals about eso others, superimpose their own perceptions onto queer youth, contributing to societal reflections which undermine the embrace of their queer identity.

The moment Zion recalls speaks to his eso being perceived by his dad and being projected onto him per King's KAP. "I would talk like this*ah*, say things like that*ah*, like with the extra "*ah*." And he [father] was like "Stop talking like that!" . . . I remember one day I was outside walking and he got super-duper mad at me. I was like, "why did he get so mad at me?" He yelled, "Come back here and walk differently!" I was like "what?" He made me go up and down my driveway and practice walking for like an hour, in the hot sun"(Bartone, p.66). Zion added that he would never answer him when asking what was wrong with it and simply said, "Just fix the way you walk." As Decena noted, the manner in which normative masculinity was taught and evaluated did not provide specific words and was rather mimicked and implied. In this way, knowledge of body codes was accessed through demonstration, explanation by analogy, imitation, and critique. His Dad's intense reaction is tied to what he understands the demeanor represents and the risk it poses when perceived by others.

"You've come from generations of strong Black men just to spit on their graves and not even populate . . . I want a family. You're my first born . . . . As a Black man in today's society you already have a disadvantage . . . . You being gay and Black is already making it even more disadvantaged"(p.66). Zion said these words were seared into his memory as his father taught that being gay is not what black men are to be, that they must procreate with a woman and keep the race alive. This highlights the reasoning behind why his eso in the earlier scene caused such

an intense reaction, as it represented a deviation from heterosexuality and an association with homosexuality. It also offers an opportunity to observe how these statements from his father can negatively affect the navigation of his gay identity. Zion recalls thinking after the first scenario, “why the fuck am I doing this?”, though complying as he lived in his house and felt he did not have a say so. He also speaks about how, after his dad made comments about his walk, he thought other people might perceive it similarly and subconsciously began altering it to be more conventionally masculine.

Zion attended a racially diverse elementary school. He was shy and tried to make friends with other kids, but many teased him, calling him gay and sissy, which confused Zion because he was doing “masculine, non-sissy” things at home, laborious things outside for his father. This underlines that school is another place in which queer youth’s identities are demeaned by others. Also, kids partake in processes of gendering that reinforce particular characteristics in males, which they learn from adults and those in their communities. Zion’s lack of awareness of his perceived identity beyond public encounters with peers in school settings is worth mentioning. This begins to create the association that Decena speaks to regarding an image of self that is based on public perception and sociality.

Bartone adds that middle and high school were trying times for Zion, as he first attended a majority-black school, the teasing by his black peers was nonstop, and he ended up befriending a group of black peers who were also into art. “This juxtaposition was something he grappled with since, partially based on his father’s reactions and his peers’ teasing, Black people were homonegative, so why would one embrace their blackness? He surely was not considered “truly Black” if he liked boys or was less masculine than others”(p.67). This highlights the extent to which evaluation and labeling by others created a distance from one's culture. In distancing

oneself, there is also an implicit disinvestment from the value system that views one's identity scornfully. This also signals a self-understanding that is separate from the ones applied to them by others.

Tae another participant speaks to the tensions of being both black and gay, “So, regardless what my skin is, if you know I’m gay, Oh, fuck you being black, n**** you gay.” And then you disowned right there. I don’t got time for that. You not gonna hurt my feelings or destroy who I worked so hard to become because I’m not straight”(p.60). Tae’s statements highlight how, within the black community, similarly to Decena’s subjects' culture, there are strong ideas of masculinity, which, if not complied with, are severe enough to dispossess one of cultural identity. This emphasizes that membership is contingent upon meeting gendered expectations in one's stylizations, which can be known or ascertained, as Tae addresses. Inherent in Decena’s observations of communal interactions regarding gender is an understanding that willfully embodying male queer identity warrants disenfranchisement from communities and a loss of power typically allotted to men.

Tae’s school experiences display how he, in another way, deals with others' perspectives. “Attending a majority-Black middle school, Tae was still shy and was not one who enjoyed sports. For many of his male peers, they conflated the shyness and the lack of athletic ability, meaning Tae was gay, for which he was constantly teased, often leading to fights or encounters off of the school grounds”(p.61). This highlights a viewpoint grounded in exhibiting masculine traits that are espoused by society. As Decena highlights, they relate to virility, playing sports, and other features visually displayed by males in a society. It is the perpetuation of these values that causes Tae’s shyness and lack of athletic ability to be interpreted negatively and as connected to being gay.

Tae's grandmother's response allows another perspective into eso, "when he was in sixth grade, Tae and his neighbor, a White boy, explored their bodies with one another. When Tae's grandmother came down in the basement and saw them exploring, she screamed hysterically–either for the same-sex exploration or the age of the two or a combination of both, banished Tae from ever seeing his friend again, and taught Tae in that moment what he was doing was wrong"(p.61). His grandmother's horrified response, likely on some level due to the queerness of the act, was because, whereas eso suggests the possibility of queerness, his acts more directly confirm it, increasing the urgency. Her speaking to morality and banishing him from seeing his friend again are due to a perspective of their actions as inherently reprehensible, in their being physical evidence of a queer identity. This is an increase in the caliber of offense as suggested queerness in youth corporal language is seen as amenable to remedy or intervention; however, queer actions are beyond the sphere of influence and more in line with an embodied integrated queer identity.

Tae experienced another moment with his female step team coach, where his queer identity elicited a response relating to his body deportment, "Hey, I heard that you were gay' and she told me to tone it down or not broadcast it so much because people could judge or it may not look good on you [me] especially at this age. She pretty much said don't be outwardly gay."(p.63). Her comments, which focus on age and visibility, highlight that these perspectives are more concerned with what is visible, as this alters what it suggests. This sheds light on how the identity, while problematic to them, is not as much of a concern as compared with ownership of that identity as expressed in corporal language. This is because the risk of the eso is that it vaguely suggests the potential existence of an identity but does not confirm it. Beyond the suggestion, a confirmation is an undermining of the normative standards of masculinity, which

must be reinforced to sustain the societal hierarchies. That she does not say anything regarding his being gay but only speaks to outward expression is noteworthy.

Charlie, another participant's school experiences also speak to this, “As a child Charlie was expressive, always making jokes and dancing at school and around his family; he was “theatrical” and fed off the attention. Many in his elementary classes perceived him to be gay for such mannerisms yet he had no idea the meaning of gay or that his theatrical manners held a certain, if any, connotation–he was having fun”(p.56). As previously stated there are figures, stylizations, movements of the body, and speech patterns that express dissent from the languages of normative masculinity. Charlie’s behavior was thus treated this way due to it being seen as an utterance of a breach of expectations. His being unaware of the meaning of gay and that his behavior is seen as gay raises how these conceptualizations of his identity are projected on him by others and are rooted in an ignorance of queer communities' self-understandings.

Utilizing the insights from King’s KAP and Mirror’s concepts, fixating on queer identity as something negative from one's own understanding inhibits one from any possibility of seeing queer people as anything else or in the fullness of their humanity. These ways of seeing queer people are so societally ingrained that they have become accepted as objective reality, though they are tenuous constructions that are continuously enforced based on individuals' personal values and memories. In calling attention to the unstable nature of these beliefs outside of these individuals' vantage points, there is an opportunity to engage other possible perspectives that are not self-interested and polarizing. This also allows a reflective opportunity that is rarely assigned to those who subscribe to privileged and normative ways of understanding the world. Creating space to consider how a perspective of something is rendered in real time due to one's own characterization of it, and not its inherent quality in the world, is sorely needed. These

characterizations often become second-nature in society and thus are not given much attention, though this does not mean they should be taken as infallible.

Charlie had told two close friends in his majority-black middle school that he was bisexual, and then he remembers all of a sudden, almost all of the seventh and eighth graders knew about his identity. “Next thing I know the whole grade knows and I was like “I don’t even talk to you all. How you all [know]? Well yeah I’m bi.” Every Black person was so disgusted with me and every time I would walk by “So are you really bisexual?Are you really bisexual?” I cried all the time, I was scared of being bullied, well I was . . . but nobody stepped to me”(p.56). This shows how this identity, which adults framed as repugnant, was seen similarly by Charlie's peers, who were likely not unfamiliar with gendered understandings and evaluations in their community. It also contextualizes why these incidents later escalate to physical confrontations despite Charlie’s earlier statement that nobody fought him due to his being a bigger boy.

Not being heterosexual/involved in heterosexuality was a threat to the reinforcement and stability of male values. In owning and professing queer identity beyond a body suggesting queerness and dissent, there was a direct calling into question of normative masculinity. Protecting the integrity of these beliefs was central to men's own legibility in a society in which they are perpetuated. This made queer identity a personal attack in that it destabilized an unmarked normative existence. “At one point, Charlie did have enough, and due to his size, knew he could fight almost anyone, particularly when one peer yelled “You a faggot.’ Then we just going [verbal attacks] and he got up and I said ‘What? Yeah, what’s good?’ I pushed him and he pushed me back”(p.57).

Charlie’s peer verbally acknowledging his identity and doing so antagonistically highlights that his male identity was threatened by Charlie’s queer identity. His behavior can also

be understood as probing in that it escalated things to a place where Charlie's ownership of his identity could be gauged. Based on Charlie's response to the use of a slur that expresses scorn towards his identity, this could be deciphered more directly. Charlie's response highlights that he owned his identity, though other actions, such as a lack of retaliatory confrontation, could signal repression or submission to systemic beliefs that see queerness as challenging heterosexualities' importance to male identity.

King and Decena's theories, notably KAP, explain how one's perceptions are configured based on their memories and positionality; this enables Force Ripe to be understood as an extension of KAP. Force Ripe is the vehicle through which views others have about queer youth are ascribed to them and begin to infiltrate their own views of self. While KAP focuses on ways of framing engagements with black girls, force ripe describes processes of cultural conditioning mostly by adults, which occur externally in their environments, affecting them internally during childhood. The beliefs held by adults on their own do not create harm towards queer youth; it is through the perpetual imposition of these values on queer youth interpersonally that extensive damage is done. Revisiting the participants' experiences from the previous chapter helps to understand how KAP and Force Ripe function together within their contexts.

Force ripe details the experience of being forced into a way of being. Black girls' circumstances force them to respond in a particular way, though adults also play a role in how they understand themselves and these responses. Having negative views of their responses causes them to be forced into an understanding of these ways of being as inferior, compromising traits. These forced ways of being teach them that their ways of navigating for survival warrant a continuum of damaging characteristics to them. Similarly, queer youths' identity expression, which supports their well-being, is cast in a negative light due to communal responses, causing

them to internalize stigma relating to their expression. Duncan's insights highlight how black girls are importantly impacted by their childhood experiences, helping their success, though this negative light being cast on their transgressive behaviors can challenge positive understandings of these core aspects that contributed to their identity.

Zion's interaction with his father articulates how, through force ripe one's beliefs are enforced on queer youth and internalized, "I would talk like this*ah*, say things like that*ah*, like with the extra "*ah*." And he [father] was like "Stop talking like that!" . . . I remember one day I was outside walking and he got super-duper mad at me. I was like, "why did he get so mad at me?" He yelled "Come back here and walk differently!" I was like "what?" He made me go up and down my driveway and practice walking for like an hour, in the hot sun"(Bartone, p.66). His father's admonition to stop talking "like that" and getting extremely angry at him is a way of establishing a moral perspective towards his actions. In responding to his demeanor in this way, he is solidifying that his behaviors will elicit scorn and punishment. As a variety of adults do this to queer youth in families, and they start to experience it in the world, there is a continual reminder of this and an inclination to suppress what provokes this. It should be observed that after this interaction, Zion says he thought about his walk and what other people must think of it since his father pointed it out. This means this is starting to infiltrate his own feelings about his behavior, which he may not even understand as queer yet.

These additional comments from Zion's father speaking to gay identity directly emphasize force ripe as a continual socialized interaction with youth by adults, "You've come from generations of strong Black men just to spit on their graves and not even populate . . . I want a family. You're my first born . . . . As a Black man in today's society you already have a disadvantage . . . . You being gay and Black is already making it even more

disadvantaged"(p.66). As Duncan highlights, repeated negative encounters in black girls' childhoods create negative understandings of themselves, as she says being womanish was hardly ever acknowledged positively in her girlhood. In Zion's father making disparaging comments about his identity, he is also socializing a range of negative responses to queer identity that will be reinforced in the world due to their societal prevalence. He is also challenging Zion, expressing a queer identity in a way that is not stigmatized.

Tae's interaction with the female coach on his step team also displays how adults force ways of being in queer youth, "Hey, I heard that you were gay' and she told me to tone it down or not broadcast it so much because people could judge or it may not look good on you [me] especially at this age. She pretty much said don't be outwardly gay."(p.63). Tae explained how on his step team, the males had a male coach, and the females had a female coach. The considerable effort for the female coach to approach him and make these comments to him when coaches were assigned to them based on gender is thus highlighted. She again, like those previously mentioned, imposes negative associations to visible queerness and specifies his age as a worsening component. This, in identifying his behavior and age at the time, encourages him not to be visibly queer, particularly due to his youth, highlighting Duncan and Decena's emphasis on childhood experiences.

Tae's grandma's response emphasizing immorality serves as another instance: "when he was in sixth grade, Tae and his neighbor, a White boy, explored their bodies with one another. When Tae's grandmother came down in the basement and saw them exploring, she screamed hysterically–either for the same-sex exploration or the age of the two or a combination of both, banished Tae from ever seeing his friend again, and taught Tae in that moment what he was doing was wrong"(p.61). Tae's grandmother not explicitly addressing why she reacted so

intensely in his youth is going to be interpreted as related on some level to queerness, especially considering that he was not aware of his identity, as in school and at home, there was no discussion of it. Her emphasis on the immorality of his actions and forbidding him to see the friend again, when he was engaged in queer actions, points to forcing a way of being that relates to queerness scornfully.

Although force ripe mostly occurs with adults, kids can also take part, as they also perpetuate societal perceptions of queer people. Attending a majority-Black middle school, Tae was still shy and was not one who enjoyed sports. For many of his male peers, they conflated the shyness and the lack of athletic ability, meaning Tae was gay, for which he was constantly teased, often leading to fights or encounters off of the school grounds"(p.61). That Tae was harassed based on his shyness and lack of athletic ability, and that this was related to being perceived as queer, is also an example of queerness being stigmatized. This underlines how behaviors which deviate from heterosexual norms are frequently connoted negatively, and in reacting this way, a pressure is being applied to not exist in ways that are unaligned with expectations.

Tae's experiences with his racial community due to his queerness also display a forced relationship to his queerness, "So, regarless what my skin is, if you know I'm gay, "Oh fuck you being Black, n**** you gay." And then you disowned right there. I don't got time for that. You not gonna hurt my feelings or destroy who I worked so hard to become because I'm not straight"(p.60). This was, in essence, Tae's community imparting on him that queerness excluded him from blackness. That his queerness was emphasized as a determinant of his cultural membership is evidently a method of forcing abandonment of this identity to retain another essential component, his race. Given that queerness is something that is visually understood, this

can cause queer youth to attempt to mitigate their identity perception by being less outwardly queer and lowering the risk of racial identity dispossession.

Charlie's experiences with being outed also display how communal responses condition queer youth regarding queerness, “Next thing I know the whole grade knows and I was like “I don’t even talk to you all. How you all [know]? Well yeah I’m bi.” Every Black person was so disgusted with me and every time I would walk by “So are you really bisexual?Are you really bisexual?” I cried all the time, I was scared of being bullied, well I was . . . but nobody stepped to me”(p.56). These repeated encounters with his peers convey an increasing scandalization upon their realization of his self-described queerness. In continually seeking renewed confirmation that he has identified with his queerness, it is understood as something offensive when expressed unabashedly. The repetition of these encounters creates a way of seeing his queerness that will be recalled when he thinks about it because of the consistency in which he was confronted about it.

Charlie’s experiences with peers at school highlight how kids adapting language and cultural understandings from adults partake in forcing ways of being. “At one point, Charlie did have enough, and due to his size, knew he could fight almost anyone, particularly when one peer yelled “You a faggot.’ Then we just going [verbal attacks] and he got up and I said ‘What? Yeah, what’s good?’ I pushed him and he pushed me back”(p.57). Charlie mentioned how he was getting mixed messages from peers, as many called him a faggot and looked down on him for his sexual identity, though in the same breath, some were encouraging him to “be masculine” to fight and beat someone up who was harassing him for being a “faggot.” Charlie's classmates' verbal attacks were an attempt to publicly assert a stigmatized understanding of his identity. His classmates using derogatory language while encouraging him to fight is about redeeming his masculinity, as his queerness, which has been acknowledged, undermines it.

Bartone adds for Charlie, society told him to be one or the other: a flamboyant black gay male or a thug and on the down low, a term not used for White gay males (Hill Collins 2005), “Putting both together and having to fight to prove that I am gay and Black but I don’t have to fit into your stereotype, because if I’m gay and Black I have to carry a purse, be flamboyant, get a whole bunch of weave all that stuff. I have to be a thug and be on the down low. I can’t be in the middle because I’m gay and I’m black?”(p.55-56). This dichotomy forces societal understandings on queer youth in that it encourages stereotypes that reinforce normative existence. If you were openly gay, this meant flamboyance, and if you were not, this had to mean being a thug/on the downlow, a way of being that more closely resembled straight men's ways of being. It forced a way of being in that it established that one cannot be openly gay without aligning with stereotypes. This prevents queer youth from having any room for nuanced identity, forcing an understanding of queerness as limiting.

Chanequa Walker-Barnes explains the StrongBlackWoman, as entailing core features of emotional strength, caregiving, and independence bound together to excessive degrees, ultimately stifling self-expression (Walker-Barnes, p.9). She says it is akin to a role black women play or a mask they wear, though more specifically is a suit of armor, a protective covering worn by them to mitigate damage from a hostile world that constantly assaults their character with degrading images and stereotypes. In donning this armor, she says black women have suited up for the battles waged against their psyches through racism, sexism, and classism. This enabled their survival for at least two centuries, allowing them to function by repressing grief, sadness, and anger, and by covering emotional distress with an outer facade of imperturbability, independence, and caregiving. Though this defensive strategy, which is enacted to protect from oppressions, compromises their well-being in its use.

The triumvirate of emotional strength, caregiving, and independence is seen, respectively, by Walker-Barnes as the helmet, breastplate, and shield of this suit of armor. She highlights that a second issue related to it is that it is not of their own making and is instead borrowed armor imposed upon black women through processes of socialization that begin early in childhood. These socialization practices train black girls to regulate negative affect, to extend themselves on behalf of others at the cost of ignoring their own needs, and to venerate independence over interdependence. While its use is not always bad, she says its maladaptivity is shown in how, in settings of assumed safety, they struggle with completely divesting themselves of it, causing them to remain in defensive mode, guard their emotions, refuse to rely or trust others, and keep people from getting too close to them. Thereby keeping them from the threat of devaluation but also keeping them from the type of authentic self-expression and intimacy that are necessary for optimal social and emotional health.

Walker-Barnes methodology highlights that while the suit of armor mechanism is not directly beneficial to black women, it does protect against the harms they experience in the world and as a result of its values. Similarly, gay men of color's socialization causes them to engage defenses to counter the oppression they face. These defenses may not help their overall needs to be met, though they will offset some of the harm of their oppression. Bartone states that many of his participants, through developing thick skin, coped with bullying and negative encounters due to their sexuality, though this does not undermine the harm of these experiences and the need for intervention by teachers and administrators.

He recognizes that from his participants' narratives emerged several themes, most notably: self determination (taking the initiative to seek information and relationships to learn about sexual identity), experiential evolution (understanding that experience translates into

growth and self-affirmation), thick skin (increasing ability to face and conquer challenges based on negotiation of past challenges, and defying/transcending stereotypes (refusing to conform to dominant narratives about black gay males). He notes that all of these themes developed due to the effect of the school environments they navigated, in addition to the effect of other institutions they encountered, clarifying nonetheless that his focus is on schools. These tactics are how they respond to the dangers represented by KAP and force ripe, which can be seen in this case as an extension of it.

Bartone says that although the participants had to endure much as they navigated through racist and heteronormative schools and society, many came out on the other side with self-love, though that they often had to do this alone or find others to help them through schooling and the process of knowing their intersecting identities; which is tricky as one never knows who to trust (p.70-71).

In light of Charlie's negative experiences, his use of these strategies is put into perspective. “In his experiences with his two lesbian teachers, Charlie felt at peace, and was able to have one-on-one conversations with them, something that allowed him to ask questions and seek guidance on ways to navigate the queer community and relationships”(p.57). Bartone says that Charlie was engaging in experiential evolution, learning that adults did not have to be the enemy and can be supportive. In addition, at home, he watched shows such as RuPaul's Drag Race and Noah’s Arc, helping him to see the varied identities within the queer and black gay community. These strategies are important as Decena and King’s theories highlight how Charlie needed to attach meaning to his identity that was not based on what it held for others but what it meant to him. Seeking information through media and his teachers was him being

self-determining and attempting to undermine the skewed conceptualizations of his identity held by others.

Bartone says, yet again taking control of understanding his identities, through self-determination, in his junior year of high school he went to Black Gay Pride in Atlanta and saw a beautiful varied black queer community. He says, “All of these experiences helped Charlie come to love himself and helped him build a thick skin where he is now able to deflect any criticism and be the black gay male he wants to be, not what society tells him where he should be categorized”(p.58). As an additional testament to his strength and love of self, Bartone says in college he began doing drag on the side and invited his family members to see one of his shows, something he never believed would happen when he was a child. These are crucial examples of Charlie disinvesting from contexts and messages he received about himself in places where his community was not centered and reinvesting in his and his community's own meanings about themselves.

Given Bartone's recognition that the participants endured much in the challenges they faced in their environments due to their identities, there is room to consider how this thick skin and self-determination may not meet other essential needs they have. Similarly, Walker-Barnes offers the armor shields black women from the threat of devaluation, but in the same vein keeps them from the type of authentic self-expression and intimacy that are necessary for optimal social and emotional health. Bartone states many times that the burden should not be on them, highlighting that they need support from others in their lives. He names administrators and teachers, though also parents, in repeatedly speaking to how they do not offer any education to their children on gay sexuality, and that what they do say about gay sexuality is scornful. These responses by gay youth help to overcome the challenges, but do not undermine the difficulties.

In Tae's exploring the internet to help him understand the physical feelings he was having for males, he was self-determining. As he says, being intrigued by the male physique, he went online to watch gay porn to see it in action. Tae also displayed these strategies in other ways: "Also being teased was not easy on Tae, and he began to build a thick skin, which would be tested in high school, and Tae also employed self-determination: standing up for himself from attacks and going outside of school to learn about his burgeoning sexual identity"(p.62). Additionally, once in high school, Tae despite casually dating females knew deep down he wanted to date a male, began going online to dating websites and talking with and meeting up with gay men. Bartone says, however, there were several gay males at his school, and he took a chance and contacted one, even though the fear of being outed was real.

Decena and King's insights, however, highlight that gay youth desire and need support from their families and communities. In the valuation systems that are utilized in Decena's participants' culture, gay youth are often tasked with carrying the burden of the risk and negative connotations of their identity for others. King highlights that these messages become internalized as they construct the mirrors through which youth look to understand themselves, and as they are projections of others' personal sensibilities that get imposed onto youth. Decena further highlights that being reprimanded for their ways of being causes shame and, ultimately, as adults, negative relationships to those aspects of their identities.

As Walker-Barnes identifies that donning the armor is black women's method of suiting up for battle, against attacks waged by sexism, classism, and racism on their psyches which has been to a particular extent the most effective means available for coping with the stressors of their existence; gay youth of color also rely on an armor to survive the threats they are faced with in their experiences. In a show of defying and transcending stereotypes Bartone says, "Even

though Tae's school had an LBGT club, and he was not hiding his sexual identity, nor was he fitting into either of the binaristic categories society has for black gay males, Tae chose to attend one or two meetings . . . Tae found the club to be mostly female and white; he never went back"(p.63).

"So, regardless what my skin is, if you know I'm gay, "Oh, fuck you being black, n**** you gay." And then you disowned right there. I don't got time for that. You not gonna hurt my feelings or destroy who I worked so hard to become because I'm not straight" (p.60). Bartone acknowledges that this is the tension for Tae while navigating school as a black male, though not being black enough because of his gayness. Nonetheless, his conviction that he will not let his blackness or character be undermined by people because of his gayness highlights his thick skin and a refusal to be subjected to societal binaries. This thick skin is particularly noteworthy as Tae faced continual teasing and bullying in middle school, leading to fights or encounters off of school grounds due to his identity, which he suffered alone as he did not believe administrators would do anything, and there were no schoolwide policies of support. This underlines his increasing ability to face and conquer challenges based on the negotiation of past challenges.

Bartone addresses Zion's experiences, "He called me gay and tried to make a scene in the lunchroom. He did it really dramatically: "Hey look at this fag blah blah blah." I was like "Oh, I'm a faggot? Ok, but [pointing to others standing around watching] I'm sleeping with your brother and I'm definitely sucking you up and I would suck you up too. So, like are there any takers?" (p.67) He said he did it in front of a very large crowd, and it was like no one could say anything as they thought "he knows what?" Saying the only thing they had on him was his gayness as he asked what was next. He said in that moment, all those past times with the bullying and annoying boys, it all clicked and was ok. He recalls the eleventh and twelfth grade being the

best years of high school, as no one messed with him anymore. This was Zion exhibiting thick skin in standing up for himself and challenging a negative connotation of gay.

Middle and high school had been trying times for him, as at first he had been at a majority-black school where the teasing from his peers was non-stop, leading him to befriend a group of black peers who were into art like him. “This juxtaposition was something he grappled with since, partially based on his father’s reactions and his peers’ teasing, black people were homonegative, so why would one embrace their blackness? He surely was not considered “truly Black” if he liked boys or was less masculine than others”(p.67). This highlights both thick skin and defying and transcending stereotypes, considering his previously mentioned experiences with his father and how he refused to adopt a blackness that could be undermined by his queerness. Though he adds now he had found black peers who accepted him and who he was able to slowly open up to regarding his sexuality, this was experiential evolution in that it was an understanding that experience translates into growth and self-affirmation.

Using Memoir to Examine Connections Between Childhood and Adult Queer Experiences

Whereas the participants' stories previously explored allowed an intimate understanding of how Decena and King’s theories occur mostly in childhood, they do not offer the context that self-narrated memoirs spanning from childhood to adulthood do. Given that the memoirs were written by both authors well into their adulthood there is an opportunity to unequivocally observe queer youths' relationships to their childhood experiences, as queer youths' experiences are not given this level of consideration.

In this section, I will document aspects of these two men's stories from their youths into early adulthood to allow the reader to consider and be part of the process of understanding where

the theory is relevant and how their self-perceptions are adversely affected by others in their youths; also, where they are utilizing the aforementioned strategies to navigate these challenges. In exploring their stories from their youths into early adulthood and being mindful that these accounts are narrated in their adult voices, I hope a thread emerges for the reader regarding their feelings about their youth. A possibility that is not often considered is that queer youth have an inherent pride and joy in who they are that can be challenged by others early on. In a world where homophobia is so prevalent, queer people's experiences are often trivialized, especially in childhood. That these men consistently identify these complex feelings towards their families and communities from childhood into adulthood means their early experiences should hold more weight culturally.

In turning to memoir, it is important to consider how they differ from the experiences documented by Bartone. While Bartone's participants were adults when recounting their stories, and he offers rudimentary elements of their adult lives before their accounts, these memoirs were written in Jones and Johnson's adulthoods. Bartones were brief and included if they currently had boyfriends, if they moved away from family, and what careers or schooling they were pursuing. Memoir is different in that it offers a close account of these gay men's stories going into early adulthood, in a way that allows their trajectories to be engaged. Additionally, there is a knowing and clarity that comes as queer men come into adulthood and fully embrace themselves, which allows them to reflect more acutely about their experiences retrospectively. Jones began writing his memoir around twenty-two, though he did not publish it until 2019, when he was thirty-three. Johnson was thirty-five when his book was published in 2020. Both books speak to their childhoods, though also their college experiences.

Saeed was raised by a single Mom in Lewisville, Texas, and usually spent the second half of a good amount of summers with his Grandma in Memphis. After going to church with her one night, he was swimming in the community pool across the parking lot from his grandmother's, when he heard her call his name. He thought it was for dinner until she said his full name, causing him to rush out. She was marching toward the pool from her apartment. “I stepped into the apartment and closed the door behind me. When I turned back, she was standing in the hallway with a wrinkled magazine clipping in her trembling fist . . . “This” she said, and it was a question I knew better than to answer. “No. No. No.” The words came from a deep part of herself. Each more of a bellow than a word. “No. No. No. No.”(p.28). Saeed remembered not being able to see it in any detail but knowing exactly what it was, as before leaving Lewisville, he had gone through his Mom’s pile of Vogue magazines and cut out every image of shirtless men he could find.

He says he watched her ball up the clippings and throw them into the trash, and then proceed to stomp into the living room, stopping at the coffee table and pulling him down to the carpet with her. “Worldly. Not in this house. We are praying now.” I knelt beside her, put my wet, wrinkled palms together, and slammed my eyes shut. My head was full of everything but apology”(p.29). This highlights the increasing conflict in Saeed and his Grandmother’s relationship as he begins to discover his identity. His lack of remorse after her chastisement communicates something brazen about his relationship to his identity at the time. That this happened when Saeed was thirteen should also be noted, as it highlights how queer youths' self-perceptions begin to be impacted early on. It also provides context for the strong feelings Saeed has towards his grandmother in his early adulthood.

In a related incident, he says a couple of summers earlier, he had had a run-in with her, which retrospectively seemed like a warning shot. He remembers them walking out of the Southland Mall when she turned to him and told him to stop holding his books "like a girl." He shot back, "Well, tell me how boys carry their books." He remembers having no words, not even a sputter, for what happened next: "without turning to look at me or pausing in her stride, my grandmother slapped me across the face with the back of her hand. I remember feeling the air whir between us. The automatic doors ahead of us opened . . . She walked through, then paused on the edge of the sidewalk waiting for me in the withering sunlight"(p.29). He was still standing in the mall entranceway, mouth agape and books still pressed against his chest. His associating this incident with the magazine incident calls attention to why they might be registering similarly in his mind, considering that both were moments when he was treated negatively for his identity by family.

Saeed's Mom responded similarly when finding his gay porn magazine, "It was the same silence that swirled around us whenever she found gay porn in my bedroom. She would rip it up and leave the shreds in a plastic grocery store bag on the kitchen counter for me to find. I would take the plastic bag out to the trash bin in the parking lot where I took Kingsley for a walk. We wouldn't talk about it"(p.62). While this occurred when Saeed was eighteen, it nonetheless highlights his Mom's feelings towards his identity that likely were part of his early childhood experiences. As he also crucially acknowledges, before the topic of his porn, they had the same exchange following his acceptance to NYU, as they were both devastated at the realization that he would not be able to attend due to a meager financial aid package and his Mom not being able to afford it. This dynamic is important to how they navigate his identity as mentioned and raises implicitly expressed negative conceptualizations of his identity by his Mother, whose

perspectives greatly impact his self-image.

Saeed describes an incident that happened in high school, where his Mom had found gay chat rooms he had been visiting for months, where he talked to older men. She had drafted a message to the man who was in his mid-thirties, telling him he was sick for communicating with her son, who was a minor, and that if he ever contacted him again, she would report him to the police. She told him to hit send as he tried to reason that it was not like that. “You’re growing up and you have . . . feelings. Everyone has them; everyone has questions. But, Saeed, this” –she pointed her cigarette at the screen–”this is dangerous. There are men out there who would . . .” She trailed off”(p.48). She scolded him about the dangers and then grabbed her ashtray and started walking to her bedroom, Saeed said “as if to announce that she had persevered as far into this conversation with me as she could”(p.48). This again highlights the characteristic silence in their relationship around difficult subjects and how this alienates Saeed in his understanding of his identity.

Saeed, reflecting on the situation, mentions the increasing need for guidance due to her vague response to the incident, “Only after I was back in my bedroom, behind my own closed door, did I realize how much I wished we had kept straining through that conversation together. Did she mean that when she was growing up she had feelings and questions about other girls and that this was normal? Did she mean all men who were attracted to men were dangerous?”(p.48-49). He clarified that he wondered if it was only the kind in that chat room, and if he was one of those dangerous men, or on the way to becoming one, as he was also in the chat room. This highlights that Saeed critically needed clarity about whether she was supportive of his identity and how he should understand himself as a gay man. Her ambiguous response and

allusion to the men as dangerous, while possibly due to their age, could still be perceived as a generalized response to queerness, as she did not clarify.

Saeed explained that the ferocious way he seized upon his newfound freedom in college occasionally baffled his friends and classmates and sometimes even seemed to grate on them and push them away. “Now and then, I got the sense that it was one thing on campus to be an out gay man and another to be an out gay man who liked to have sex . . . At times I was proud of my sluttiness. I liked to think it was radical, as if the act of fucking another man and then bragging to my friends about it was a form of protest against the shame I’d grown up with, and against the shame I felt silently radiating from the new people in my life”(p.93-94). Saeed reflected on this as he had been playing never have I ever with friends, and one of his friends responded, “Jesus, Saeed. What the fuck *haven’t* you done?” He modified, though, that just as often the wide eyes around him pushed him to wonder if there was something wrong with him. Saeed’s susceptibility to the shame of his friends can plausibly be connected to the shame he was subject to by his Mother and Grandmother growing up, as he mentions both in relation to an experience of feeling negatively about himself.

He mentions how not too long after moving into his dorm in college, he began to pretend to be someone else, “It shouldn’t have been that easy to un-become myself. The lies and omissions started to roll off my tongue and I got more confident; I stopped mumbling and stuttering. I began meeting people's eyes, shaking their hands confidently, and introducing a person who I wasn’t exactly . . . I could be this person . . . Lewisville had raised me well”(p.84-85). He adds that this person was the kind of man who always feels the need to make it clear he doesn't swing that way; that he knew exactly how to be him. The guys he had become friends with were the typical straight types who liked sports and went to parties to eye girls

despite leaving girlfriends back home. He said without anyone shoving him back there, he had closeted himself again. This highlights how the negative relationship others around him had with his identity early on caused him to be at odds with himself in a new environment, and feel the need to pretend to be someone else, someone not queer, to fit in.

Saeed contemplated whether having sex was a distraction he wanted from how he felt when his body wasn't pinned against another man's body. He noted it didn't really feel like lust, really, and had a tinge of meanness to it, or even spite. During college, he had been a star student who was involved on campus and spent copious hours tucked away reading poetry in the library, even adding that when the University President passed him on campus, he would greet him by name. He had made himself busy and kept up appearances, though he said none of it had any bearing on how he felt when he was alone, as he stood in the mirror and felt like he and his reflection were rival animals, about to tear each other limb from limb.

He recalled how on days when even hiding in the stacks didn't work, he'd go back to the Botanist, "I'd told him to delete my number, but I hadn't deleted his. Given his lack of surprise the first time I texted him about hooking up again, I guess he'd expected this from the moment I stormed out of his house. Maybe, a decade older than I was, he knew what I would eventually learn: it's possible for two men to become addicted to the damage they do to eachother"(p.116). Saeed's seeking these negative relationships indicates how his self-image has been affected, causing him to seek out harmful situations. Furthermore, that he seeks out distractions is equally notable in that he is dealing with unresolved feelings, as his Mother has not supported his queerness.

In their first initial hookup encounter with the Botanist, who was a white man, he made fetishizing comments about Saeed's genitals, which caused him to tell him to delete his number.

Though he was now saying he fucked him brutally to provoke the racist slurs, which sent him into a vicious loop as his worst fears about himself were being echoed back to him in a white man's voice. He said it was not enough to hate himself and that he wanted to hear it; and on all fours with this white man was how he severed the divide between the appearances he kept up and how wrecked he felt internally. This underlines how Saeed's upbringing created internal conflict for him and created a precedent for relationships with himself that are undermining. For him to have such an aversive relationship with himself in early adulthood draws attention to his experiences leading up to that moment.

Saeed eventually, while in college, does not go home to spend New Year's with his mom and instead goes to a party; though later regrets it. He also makes an excuse to return to campus earlier after one summer break, as he says living in a one-bedroom apartment with his Mother and dog and everything that was left unsaid was exhausting. On another occasion, when Saeed's Mother was hospitalized, he did not want to call his Grandmother even though he initially dialed her before changing his mind at the last minute and calling his Uncle instead. He had thought about how he couldn't explain why, at such a crucial moment, her voice was not one he wanted to hear. His mother had forced him to take a trip with her to Memphis to see his Grandma, and he thought about how he had avoided it for so long that it took effort to remember why he stayed away. He thought about how he still had not forgiven his Grandmother. For most of the afternoon he said they barely spoke beyond initial hellos and hugs. At this time, Saeed was about twenty-five and was living alone, working as a twelfth-grade teacher. This highlights that he was deeply impacted by the negative experiences he had with both of them regarding his queerness as a child and still feels strong emotions toward the events as an adult.

Matthew's story is different from Saeed's in that, on the surface, his family appeared supportive, and at many times he notes everyone's love and being well-intentioned, though he nonetheless acknowledges the struggles he ultimately faced with his identity. Despite his family not being hostile toward his identity, they did not have much education, as he additionally mentions is a problem more largely within the black community, and thus did not address it, leaving him to deal with it alone in his youth. He acknowledges frequently in his youth that he felt alone and unlike his male cousins and even younger brother, did not have his people that he identified with. It is in his early adulthood, though, as he is leaving for college, that he fully recognizes how intensely he had wanted to escape his hometown and just how alone he had felt while growing up there.

Matthew grew up in a small city in New Jersey called Plainfield, which was about thirty miles from Manhattan. Matthew remembered being in the second grade, a happy, moderately talkative kid, when his family had told him to stop switching, "I was skinny and for sure didn't have any hips. But back then, before other kids got cruel, I would try my best to throw my little body from side to side when I walked–even more than my natural walk was already doing. My family always said, "Stop switching, Matt!" But I would just laugh, even when someone told me to stop doing it and go back to walking like a boy"(All Boys Aren't Blue, George M. Johnson p.54). He remarked on how he was very sassy as a little kid and would be called a sissy by kids before they got older and escalated to faggot. He recalled watching women walk with a switch–the movement of the hips side to side as they walked forward, and how he had a natural one, though knowing he wasn't supposed to walk like that, he tried his best not to. This identifies challenges Matthew faced throughout his schooling from peers due to his identity and also when it started being introduced to him by family.

In speaking to his family's acceptance of him, he addresses his parents, “I had a father who never once said anything about how effeminate I was. My mother, who always knew, put a system of family support in place for me from the age of two. She understood I would need people later in life who could relate to my experience–aunts and uncles who loved me, loved me, and loved me even more”(p.139). Speaking more specifically to him and his father’s dynamic, he says, “As manly as my dad was, he honestly just let me be. Every now and then, if I gravitated toward something that was too girly, he might let the word “sissy” fly. But he never hurled the term at me so much as he hurled it at the thing I was doing”(p.153). It is important to recognize the distinction Matthew makes between the things he was doing and himself, similar to his dad. In critiquing what Matthew was doing or his behavior, this creates a particular standard about himself that can have an impact later.

He, however, noted that he had an older brother who was also gay, who did not have a good relationship with his Dad, and how he believed that his being gay played a role. He felt that his Dad had a second chance with him, a decade later, to get it right and have the relationship he wanted with his eldest son. He recalls one day when he was eleven or twelve, playing football with him and him being shocked that despite Matthew being more into school and disinterested in sports he played well, “I think a lot of the times he saw G.G. in me, and rather than fight against what he was seeing, he decided to not engage with me at all”(p.154). He recalls their relationship changing forever after this, and that they both learned that they did not simply have to exist as two people living in the same house. He might not like or understand everything Matthew had going on, but did not need to treat him differently as a result. Matthew said he learned that he could have his father and a relationship with him, too. This underlines that he did

feel on some level distance with his father due to his identity, and that his dad did have an issue with it initially, as displayed with his older brother.

Matthew remembers first saying the word “Honeychild,” which he made up, with a group of girls he was gossiping with at school, stunning them before they used it themselves; the word left his small group and was used by the entire class, eventually getting all the way to kids’ homes. After a parent complained about their child using the word and where it originated, his teacher called his Mom to ask if she could talk with him about no longer using the word. “Mrs. P said that you created a word called ‘Honeychild’ what’s it mean?” So, I told her I used it to refer to boys and girls instead of saying their names. “Well, they are saying that other kids are using the word that it’s become a distraction, so you have to stop saying it.”(p.60) Matthew had made and used the word because he had felt more drawn to girls and women and felt they reflected something closer to his identity. This language was his way of connecting to that part of himself, though his teacher and mom were teaching him that how he expressed himself wasn’t proper for a boy.

He acknowledged that adults in his life dictated what masculinity would look like for him. That they also felt a responsibility to ensure the person he was, a “sissy” didn’t influence other children. His word had been a threat to the identity of their kids, the one they hoped they would have. “When you are a child that is different, there always seems to be a “something.” You can’t switch, you can’t say *that*, you can’t act this way. There is always *something* that must be erased–and with it, a piece of you. The fear of being that vulnerable again outweighs the happiness that comes with being who you are, so you agree to erase that something”(p.60-61). This highlights feelings Matthew was navigating alone as a result of his teacher and his mother's

actions, as well as the trauma of having your identity policed, which has the capacity to affect an individual significantly beyond the event.

In speaking to the traumatic nature, he says, “I remember not feeling upset about “Honeychild,” but also not really understanding it either. I just said “Okay, Mommy,” and she smiled. I went back to my room and finished getting ready for bed. I never used the word again–but now I know the trauma that had been triggered because I have never forgotten the word”(p.62). He thought about how it seemed like the only time when he was told he couldn't do something or was chastised for it was when he was being too feminine. He commented on how children remember the good and the bad and how they are also burdened by the stresses their parents face in attempting to guide them to meet societal standards. His parents had shared this fear with valid reason, as they balanced wanting to fight for him to live “as he was”, and also knowing the dangers his sassiness could place him in.

He mentions how his Nanny was a major support for him as she took him along to flea markets every weekend, she’d helped him start a candy selling business in school, explaining stock, profit, loans, and took him along with her, always making sure he had something to do. She even started a soup kitchen in their church, which they were lifelong members of, to help him fulfill 250 hours of community service his Catholic high school required to graduate. “I was becoming isolated around the age of ten, and she saw it. As hard as I tried to suppress my queer identity and fit in, I just didn’t. I had friends, but not how my cousins and brothers had friends . . . Like the natural born caregiver she was, my grandmother frequently placed me before herself. Even if that meant she was carrying a young child everywhere with her, she wasn't going to let me be alone”(p.136-137).

Matthew additionally speaks to how his Nanny accepted who he was on a deep level because she had experience with other queer kids in their family. “Furthermore, she had been in it before with children like me in our family. Growing up, I had a transgender cousin named Hope, as well as other lesbian and gays within the family. My grandmother watched Hope grow up and transition, and I think that helped her to understand what she was seeing in me”(p.138). Though, as Matthew identifies, he had no language or information regarding his identity, and this caused him to feel alone as he navigated his identity in other spaces outside of home. He recalls seeing Hope and her friends at a family outing, “I couldn’t stop staring at all of you. I mean, it was shocking, because I was a kid and I didn't know what I was looking at. However, I did know that whatever it was you all were, I felt it and knew that something about me would one day be like you, too”(p.163). This underlines the importance of families providing education and exposure to queer communities as queer youth navigate their identities.

He recalls how a lot of people wanted him to stay in New Jersey for college though this was never his plan, “I, on the other hand, had had enough of New Jersey for one lifetime. I had decided some months ago that I was going to leave home and finally be myself, or at least what I thought “myself” would look like. Though he speaks to how he has a rude awakening upon arriving at his college campus in Virginia, “There was no magical awakening. There was no boost of courage that I thought would come with the fresh Virginia air. There *was* this boy who had always feared the consequences of coming out”(p.238). This highlights how Matthew attributed his struggles with his identity to being at home, though also how these experiences at home re-emerged when he was in a new environment, which he believed held opportunity and freedom regarding his identity.

He recalled meeting his first friend, who lived next door to him at his off-campus apartment, and after becoming a crew with her and some others. On a drive to the mall one day, Tiara asked him about his sexuality. “We were listening to music on the way when she asked me out of the blue, “Are you gay?” My heart immediately sank to the floor. That same fucking question and assumption I had dealt with in K-6, middle school, high school, and now in college. I looked at her and said, “No, why would you think that?” This highlights that how people treated Matthew’s identity in his upbringing had long-term consequences, similar to Saeed. Also, like Saeed, because of his upbringing, he initially felt the need to pretend to be straight and someone he was not in college.

He speaks to how much these challenges affected his experience, “I was depressed at the start of the second semester. I had made friends, gotten a 3.1 my first semester, and was having fun, but deep down inside, I hated myself. I got up every day and still wasn’t the person I wanted to be. I wanted to have the friendships and the good grades and the parties, but as a gay person”(p.245). He added he didn't want to be the guy petrified of having sex due to fear someone would find out. He eventually gave up on going to class and coming out, and by the end of the semester had failed two classes, passed one, and got an incomplete in another, and lost his scholarship. In the summer, he called his Mom to tell her he was thinking about coming home for good.

He said the summer had given him time to refocus and remember that he had always been smart and gotten good grades. “I was so concerned that first year with finding myself while outside the constraints of home that I lost the parts of myself that I liked . . . I liked being considered the smart person in the room. These weren’t the things I should’ve been straying away from”(p.246-247). This once again underlines that his struggles in this new environment

are rooted in the ones he had in his formative years at home. Given these experiences, it is not surprising that he did not know how to navigate a space where there was potentially more acceptance. He addresses a venture he pursued for acceptance, “I would see him out and about with the brothers on campus or doing community service, and I quickly became more interested in what a fraternity could do for me. Masculinity–better yet, my lack of it–was always at the forefront of my mind. Joining a fraternity seemed like a win-win situation”(p.252). His friend Lawrence was in a fraternity, and they had become close on a campus quiz team. He added that masculinity felt necessary and gaining it almost felt like a form of self-love, and he wanted to be in love with himself.

Matthews' reflections on experiencing his sexuality in college also reveal the extent of his challenges: “That moment didn’t come until my junior year of college. I remained a virgin until I was almost twenty-one years old, something unheard of in my family. It had been a daunting task to lie about having sex (and with a girl) to all of my heterosexual cousins”(p.266). Not being able to experience his sexuality until later, in addition to feeling as if he had to pretend to be someone else, both underscore a larger issue. He also highlights difficulties in lacking education about queer sex and how this impacted his first sexual experiences, “I often imagine what my first sexual experiences would have been like had I been given the ability to learn about what queer sex was when all my straight friends and classmates got to learn about what it looked like for them. My queer sexuality was one big, risky crash course, much like the other aspects of my queer existence”(p.275). It is noteworthy that he also mentions how this lack of education was similar to the other challenges in his queer existence.

Decena’s theory surrounding effeminacy in gay youth speaks to a cultural way of understanding queer identity. Through utilizing Womanist psychological methods, these

experiences can be explored to ascertain how these cultural perceptions, which are engaged contextually, are internally experienced. Consulting Decena and King's theories in tandem enables inquiry into how queer youths' experiences in the world impact their self-image. Utilizing memoir as an additional method of inquiry allows a more interconnected analysis of the ramifications identified through the theories, as communal and individual experiences from childhood to adulthood are narrated in their own voices. The threads that emerge in engaging these multiple sites of inquiry, and specifically the memoirs, offer invaluable insights about how queer youths' realities affect them.

My Experiences and How They Brought Me Here

Queer people's feelings and experiences are often disregarded in their youth, this is because people in their communities, instead of listening to them, reinforce their own biases which conceptualize them scornfully, rendering their insight unvaluable. This nonetheless should not happen, as the fact that into adulthood these feelings are consistently held means they should have been addressed with importance originally. I grew up in New York City, but still navigated the Catholic religion and how it meticulously and more seamlessly impresses ideas about queer people into youth. I have realized that people assume that it is always aggressively hurled obscenities and derogatory language, and while that does happen and is part of this poor conditioning, it's mostly more moderate and over a longer period of time. I grew up in a culture and family where some people identify as Catholic but do not attend service or practice it, some don't identify religiously at all, though most have ideas about queer identity and other subjects that have been etched into the culture by religion's colonial impact.

This more intricate, quiet approach, even in a place like New York City, heightens the risk of queer youth as they develop into adulthood, finding themselves in harmful situations that resemble the damaging experiences in their formative years. I navigated a lot in my community due to machismo, which can also be arguably tied to heteronormative/heterosexist Catholic religious values. My insight and grievances about my queerness were often dismissed by my family as a child and are something I am learning to articulate and for myself validate the impacts of to this day.

As a man who presented in ways many people around me understood as feminine and deviating from expectations, my sexuality was negatively connoted and often forced on me before I understood it for myself. I had to very early on develop some sort of understanding of myself so that I could ground myself through the incessant scrutiny I experienced in my community in school and around my neighborhood. I often say now that I am very proud of who I am, though that, in a way, I was forced to be, as when you realize you are constantly visible in your identity, there isn't much room for anything else but embracing it.

In my youth, when men or boys around me (my male cousins) critiqued my music taste or fashion as unmasculine, I often shot back and critiqued their interest in Drake and other masculine rap figures as just an imitation of what the men in our lives liked; who were their fathers, uncles, etc. If they were going to dismiss my identity, I would do the same thing back to them. As I had learned from people's disdain toward me, a lot of being a boy or man was just copying without any concern for individuality. Given that I came from a line of very hypermasculine men, namely my uncles and cousins, who were respected by people for exhibiting their strength, my difference was especially stark to people in my family and community.

I consider myself Afro-Latin, as growing up, I experienced racism and realized I did not identify with the white-identifying Latinos. Similar to some of the participants in Bartone's study, I wrestled with identifying with my Dominican ethnicity as I felt like my culture did not want to own me. If my culture did not want to acknowledge me or claim me outside of it, being in a bad light, why should I claim it? So much of who I am is as a result of the struggles that came with having to navigate my gay identity and manhood within my culture, and thus I tell people I see myself as Gay first and Dominican second. This is because so much of my strength came in spite of what I went through and not due to people's support. Though as many things are, this is complex, and I do honor my heritage. Because my culture has tried to dispossess me of belonging, I believed the radical thing to do is to assert that I do not need anything that tries to contextualize my identity poorly. When your culture, because of its values, is committed to understanding your identity as challenging your manhood, not owning it is a way of saying I do not consent to this understanding and I do not need to comply with your ways of seeing things. I get to choose how I understand my identity and how I express my manhood.

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