

Qualitative Inquiries in Music Therapy
2023: Volume 17 (Monograph 4), pp. 28-61.
Barcelona Publishers

COME AS YOU ARE:
A QUEERSOUTHERNBLACKPREACHERBOI FINDS SAFE
HAVEN THROUGH ARTS-BASED AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

This arts-based autoethnographic project explores my lived experiences as a former queer adolescent grappling with my sexual identity while growing up in the Black Church. Utilizing Black Feminist Thought, Johnson's quare theory, and a queer Black theology of liberation lens, I engaged in a five-week series of self-exploratory "Sunday Services," a dynamic ritual process designed to mirror my previous worship experiences in the church, weaving Black music-making aesthetics with storytelling, biblical scripture, poetry, improvised loop-based vocal incantations, among other Black liturgical technologies. In service, I investigate my relationship to safety and attempt to facilitate a deeper knowing of my body/spirit/being. Primary data were collected through audio-and-video recordings of services and diarized voice memos then subsequently analyzed. Eight core themes were derived: 1) reverent-intuitive listening, 2) identity/being, 3) storying/remembering, 4) reclaiming queer as sacred resistance and resilience, 5) darkest hour, 6) "prodigal son/sun", 7) safety/refuge, and 8) (be)coming/outness. A narrative playlist was curated using audio fragments of arts-based data collected during services or sourced from archived materials. With this work, I provide one example of how culturally resonant practices can be implemented with Black Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ+) individuals within music therapy and related healthcare disciplines. Additionally, this study critically examines the complex role of the Black Church as both a source of healing and harm due to stigma surrounding non-dominant sexual and gender identity-based oppression rooted in white supremacy. Implications for practice and future research in music therapy are discussed.

Keywords: arts-based research, autoethnography, music therapy, queer identity, Black Church, African American spirituality, religion, sexuality

Acknowledgements: I would like to acknowledge Drs. Natasha Thomas and Marisol Norris for developing the *Justice and Equity Mentorship Program* to provide emergent, underrepresented voices in the field of music therapy with access to peer-reviewed research spaces. I sincerely thank Dr. Kate Myers-Coffman, my mentor through that program, whose immense support, guidance, and encouragement have been invaluable to this project. Thank you all for stewarding early phases of the work. To my ancestors/transcestors/predecessors, those who have dreamed me and paved the way for my fully alive freedom path. *thank you. I am because you were/are.*

Order of Service

Call: Praise the Lord/Lorde¹ saints!

Response: Praise the Lord/Lorde!

Call to Worship (excerpt of “opening call” vocal looping improvisation, from Sunday Service #3)

i

Enter the temple

Come before the presence

With singing

(original, redacted, from Sunday Service #3)

Opening Hymn (excerpt from “Battlefield”)

I’ve been up and I’ve been down

But *i* never turned around

‘Cause I’m fighting

(fighting for the Lord!)

I’ve had heartache and pain

Sunshine and rain

But I’m fighting

(fighting for the Lord!)

(by Norman Hutchins)

Scripture Reading/Black Feminist Text

3. I have told

you my name

so there is

tomorrow

4. See me through

Your own eyes

i am here.

(Sonia Sanchez, “Poem” Stanzas 3-4)

Invocation/Prayer

I give thanks...or this morning, for the breath of life, for the heart to inhabit, for the courage to be here, be here *now*, and to be with this story...may this service be nourishing and rich, life-giving, joyous, tender, all that it needs to be.

(original spoken invocation, from Sunday Service #5)

Prayer Chant (excerpt from “Who I Am”)

Who I am...Who I am.. Who I am.. Who I am...

Who I am...Who I am...

I have always been who *i* am.

(original, vocal improv, from Sunday Service #2)

Sermonic Hymn (excerpt from “A Secret Place”)

For you shall hide me in your tabernacle

From the rain and storm

And even when my enemies pursue me

You’ll keep me safe from harm....

There is a place, a secret place

A place where I can go

(by Karen Clark-Sheard)

Sermon (excerpt from *Down at The Cross:*

Letter to a Region in My Mind, James Baldwin, pp.15-16)

I underwent, during the summer I became fourteen, a prolonged religious crisis. I use the word “religious” in the common and arbitrary sense, meaning that I then discovered God, His saints and angels, and His Blazing Hell. And since I had been born in a Christian nation, I accepted this Deity as the only one. I supposed Him to exist only within the walls of a church- of our church- and I also supposed that God and safety were synonymous....

¹ A reference to Audre Lorde (1934-1992), Black Feminist, lesbian, writer, activist, poet <https://alp.org/about/audre>

Figure 1. “Saint” James Baldwin



Note. Image of “Secular-Saint” James Baldwin devotional candle on shelf surrounded by various other objects, visual inspiration for this work, from my personal collection

INTRODUCTION

In his debut novel, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, the late African American writer James Baldwin (1953) characterizes 14-year-old protagonist, John Grimes, as a budding Pentecostal preacher who wrestles with racial, gender, sexual, and religious conflicts both internally and systemically. When I read the book at the age of 17 or so, I found solace in its pages, inspired to learn that this beloved text was an autobiographical fictional account of Baldwin's lived experiences as a young Black man with same-sex desire growing up in Harlem, NY, and *in* the Black Church. As a child of the Black Church myself, I identified with John's character and felt a special connection to his story. *Go Tell It* portrays Black life in America, illuminating a struggle-and-salvation narrative as well as the complexities of soul and body endangerment (Mathis, 2020). For many African Americans, the Black Church was and is a source of community, hope, justice, and healing, but for some LGBTQ+ people, it has also been a source of pain, repression, and sadly deep wounding. In one 1987 interview, Baldwin riffs on faith as if delivering a sermon, his cadence a melody, giving voice to some of my own revelations:

It was incoherent, adolescence is an [incoherent] time, but certainly that had something to do with it, but it wasn't conscious. That became conscious when I began to be aware that as I stayed in the pulpit, as I began, against my will, perhaps, to learn more and more about my congregations, how little I could really console them. I was much [too] young to give them any kind of wisdom. I was learning more and more about myself and I began to see, in a sense, I was hiding in the pulpit. And if I kept on doing that I would become a liar. Lie to my congregation, lie to myself, and whatever faith, whatever possibility of faith and love that there might be in my life, I would destroy it, so I left. (ThamesTV, 2014)

Baldwin's "insider's look" (Dean, 2020, p.19) into self-discovery regarding sexual identity is a wondrous gift, I find, a beacon and north star (Figure 1). His is a radical view between church and street. Between religiosity and revolution. Though he loved his people, Dean reflects, Baldwin refused to let his sexuality conflict with God's word and the people's salvation.

I can testify.

Like John Grimes, I too was a young Black teenage preacher with same-sex desire, the eldest and first born, raised in a Southern devoutly born-again Christian family of origin. *see*, my people are "church folk" - musicians, singers, healers, prayer warriors, usher board members, and laypeople - who unapologetically love the Lord. Admittedly, the prayers, hymns, scriptures, and songs from their lips, ringing out from the hallelujah pews to the Sunday dinner table, have lifted me in some of the most triumphant moments of my life and they've also carried me through some of my darkest times. The music of the Black Church in particular has been a *bridge over troubled waters*, a lily in the valley, a bright and morning star. *The songwriter says:*

(Somebody) prayed for me
had me on their mind
took the time and prayed for me
i'm so glad they prayed
i'm so glad they prayed
i'm so glad *they* prayed for me

- "Somebody Prayed for Me" by Dorothy Norwood, 1994

The song goes on to name names, calling out the “somebodies” who *prayed*, like: *my grandmother, my mother, my sister, my brother*, etc. A Black church staple. What I later came to realize, however, is that not all of those prayers were meant for my best and highest good. y’see, some prayers that the church folk prayed were as one of my former pastors used to say: “*wrapped up/tied up/and tangled up*” in White patriarchal, cis-hetero-normative expectations, ideologies, and conditions. Situated in this present critical Black religious discourse of mine, alongside my love for Black people and the Black Church, also lingers a terror, in memory. This terror of the flesh, as Baldwin notes, surrounding sexuality, God, and (his) Blazing Hell² did not allow me to be my full and authentic self — not when it conflicted with the beliefs of the church. Christian values were instilled in me as a child for better or worse, and to be honest, sometimes worse. Meaning, queer people were seen as abominations, sinners we were expected to love but whose sin we were commanded to hate. To speak plainly, I found this to be a rather grueling psychological and moral conundrum, one that I felt unprepared to resolve during my adolescence. Yet, I take comfort in knowing, in this right-now-moment, that Queer and Trans Black people have been praying for me and *interceding* on my behalf for a very long time. *C’mon somebody*.

Dean (2020) expressed:

The Black Church is filled with black queer folks, and regardless of one’s sex, sexuality, or sexual preference the black community needs all spiritual and prayer warriors to combat the continued racism, ageism, genderism, homophobia, and heterosexism black people face in America and abroad. There is a high need for all black bodies, souls, spirits, and minds in the fight against oppression and patriarchy; the fight requires the recognition and acceptance of all forms of black cultural contributions and aesthetics in the imagining of black futurity. (p.21)

Although the church is largely unaccepting or non-affirming of gay, lesbian, bisexual, queering, or non-heterosexual persons, we/they have been there from the beginning, lining the pews, the pulpits, the hymns, the choir stands, and beyond, with musical prowess, spiritual gifts, and our proverbial coats of many colors. To speak of “homosexuality” in some churches or families never mind to actually *be* non-heterosexual is taboo. Furthermore, to show any signs of dissent may also be perceived as a form of betrayal — to the church family, to the gospel, to one’s Blackness, or, to *the culture*. I was told once: “We don’t do that [be gay] in our family.” *Ouch*. As a young person, I didn’t fully comprehend the harm in that statement, but I deeply sensed the boundary. I gathered that to be queer, to even be questioning my sexuality, my romantic desires, or to be anything but straight, was forbidden and discouraged. Eventually, a time came when I could no longer “lie” to myself, my family, or my congregation. *So, I left*.

“The Doors of the Church Are Now Open but Not if You’re Queer”/ *the issue*

The doors of the church go open and shut. open and shut.

open and shut de’ do, keep out the funny folk.

But we be (are) the soundtrack of the black church.

Dat tambourine tap, dat organ hum, dat slay-dem solo, dat shout music drum.

The issue is *complex*. tender. painful. Sometimes hard to articulate in language.

The issue is that queerness introduces the threat of injury (Avilez, 2020).

After all, anything that encounters Blackness is queer (Kornegay, 2013)?

Queer “not as in who you have sex with”

“that can be a dimension of it”

“but as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it”

“and has to invent and create”

² Baldwin (1963). *The Fire Next Time*.

“and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live”
(hooks, 2014)

Quare as in the way Johnson’s (2001) Southern Black grandmother said it.
queerBlack as in these unique lines and experiences of *living and thriving*.

The issue is that the Black Church condemns its queer members (Barnes, 2013).

The issue is that the Black Church damns us to a brimstone-laced *hell*,
a kind of spiritual violence (Tobin, 2016).

The issue is that Black Church Homophobia is rooted in whiteness (Ahiokhai, 2020).

The issue is that *queerphobia* in Black communities is a health risk (Ward, 2005).

The issue at hand is that the *Black church hurt* me, and I am still in recovery.

The Black Church is by far one of the most important cultural institutions in African American life, which makes the Black religious experience particularly prominent (Andrews, 2017; Winder, 2015). Queer people with a Christian upbringing in the church routinely encounter homonegativity (i.e., negative attitudes towards same-sex sexuality), negative religious rhetoric (i.e., sermons, teachings, conversations, or words that degrade queer people), (Garrett-Walker & Torres, 2017), and microaggressions (Lomash, Brown, & Galupo, 2018). Scholars across various disciplines have investigated the impacts of heterosexism and homonegativity in religious contexts on the health and wellbeing of Black LGBTQ+ communities (Lefevor et al., 2020; Quinn, Dickinson, & Gomez, 2016; Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2013). *The psychological risks?* Anxiety, depression, suicidality (Balsam et al., 2011). Just to name a few. Even though queerness has always existed in Black social life and sacred communities, the stigma that queer people face in Faith Spaces can contribute to unsettling dissonance between one’s sexuality and religious beliefs. Given the historical significance of faith and spirituality among African Americans and the fact that many religious institutions perceive LGBTQ+ people as immoral, the church’s rejection of queer folk can negatively affect Black LGBTQ+ health. The potential then for healthcare professionals within and beyond music therapy to expand and diversify resources to adequately address racialized trauma and anti-LGBTQ+ oppression is profound.

Within the field of music therapy, there is currently a lack of justice-seeking research about Black LGBTQ+ communities, even less critical scholarship that centers the narratives of Southern (U.S.) Black Queer and Trans people, and none that explicitly examines religious-based identity conflict *within* this population. Drawing from Black Feminist Thought, Johnson’s (2001) *quare* theory³, and a queer Black theology of liberation lens, this qualitative study explores the relationship between racial identity, sexuality, and faith through a deeply personal, arts-based autoethnographic process. In my writing, I deliberately shift between African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Black *religious* vernacular, and more dominant (academic) forms of English in an effort to purposefully disrupt “color-evasive, depoliticized stances” in music therapy literature and practice (Norris, 2020b, p.2). Thus, this paper will be/read like music, like blues, or “gospel prose” (Kornegay, 2013, p. 39), a truth-telling of Black experience, strife and resilience, my personal story of growing up in the Black Church as a closeted queer adolescent, struggling to reconcile my then Protestant evangelical Christian faith and my racialized sexual identity, all while navigating my role as an emerging religious/spiritual leader. *Hear my prayer*.

Locating myself / *positionality statement*

I am a Black, queer, non-binary, assigned female at birth (AFAB), non-disabled, board-certified music therapist (MT-BC), musician/songwriter, professor, and PhD student living and working in the New England region of the United States. My level of education and current work in academia grant me

³ Johnson’s (2001) vernacular re-articulation of “queer” for LGBTQ+ People of Color to account for a person whose sexual and gender identities intersect with their racial subjectivity; a theory that takes into account the unfair treatment/stigma/prejudice/discrimination that QPOC endure within queer communities and racial communities.

privileges that may have otherwise been inaccessible to me. As a transmasculine person, I also benefit, in varying degrees, from privileges associated with masculine spectrum identities. Although I identify as spiritual, I was raised in a western Judeo-Christian tradition that espoused anti-gay, queer-antagonistic rhetoric and doctrine. Despite this indoctrination, I believe and affirm that Queer and Trans Black people are inherently *Sacred*.

Poetically speaking,

I am a storyteller,
a sound-sermonist,
artist-healer,
former evangelical preacher,
and queerBlack gender expansive Southern boi,
with a praise (song, story, truth, gospel prose) on my lips.

The Story / *in the beginning*

I grew up in New Orleans, Louisiana, in the A.M.E. (African Methodist Episcopal) Church, one of the oldest if not the first Black Protestant denominations organized in the United States (Gates, 2021). Originally founded as the Free African Society in 1787 by people of African descent (some formerly enslaved), the A.M.E. Church was born out of resistance to racial discrimination and Black people's political agency. In my training as a young minister, I was always struck by this history, inspired by its theological and people-powered vision. My tenure as an A.M.E. started relatively early. At our local "home" church, my maternal grandmother served as the organist, choir director, and minister of music, and my great aunt (her sister) assisted, playing piano/organ and directing the adult choirs. At the age of 5, my grandma insisted that we forgo Saturday morning cartoons to instead attend youth choir rehearsal. To be honest, I was neither pleased or amused by this heretical act against Saturday mornings, but I surely, most certainly, listened to my elders, and did what I was told. Despite my early childhood angst, it didn't take long for me to fall in love with singing in the choir. As I got older, the church became like a second home. I adored the sense of intergenerational family, community, and belonging that it provided. The choir especially became one of the safest places for me to express myself, to develop my singing (and preaching) voice, and other musical talents. It was there that I learned the power of call-and-response, witnessing/being witnessed, the affirmation of my Blackness and racial identity, and how to use music in service of collective and individual healing. [**Call:** Let the church say, Amen. **Response:** Amen]

Motivations for study / *the why*

As someone who struggled to cope with my own "church hurt" and to lovingly embrace and integrate my sexuality and faith, I wondered: How could I address the self-loathing that I battle(d) in the name of theology? I thought, what could I do? Rather, what could I create? How could music, more specifically, companion me through this healing journey? As I am often tasked to do in my work as a music therapist, I considered the ways in which music could be utilized to facilitate the transmutation of spiritual violence and faith-inflicted psychological and emotional injuries that I endured as a teen through my young adult years. How could music help me to express my truth and to welcome the stories of other queer Black people who have found themselves wrestling with their faith or belief systems in oppressive and hostile religious environments. What unfolded was an artistic process ---- ?³⁵ ("*Question Thirty-Five*")⁴.

⁴ ?³⁵ will be discussed in further detail in the section/heading labeled "The Question."

?35 is a multimedia, multi-phase, storytelling project, musical album, and performance ritual about my experience of growing up and coming out in the Black Church, one that I have been conceptualizing since 2015. Guided by values of community, fellowship, and holistic care, the goals of ?35 as described below are relevant to the focus of this present study:

- to tell my story and chronicle my spiritual journey in relationship to the Black Church
- to address and heal intergenerational wounds, spiritual violence, and “church trauma”
- to reclaim my power, agency, selfhood, sense of worthiness and sacred-folk ways, and,
- to shed light on the harm caused by religious structures, ideologies, beliefs, and practices that are oppressive for Queer and Trans Black Indigenous People of Color (QTBIPOC)

Grounded in critical theories, radically inclusive theologies, and in the lineage of Black Feminist autobiography, this study serves as the foundational research for ?35 and its ongoing development. Building on these ideas, inspirations, as well as my own professional and personal contexts, not to mention heeding Love’s (2017) call for messy, humanizing, hyper-local research, I endeavor to excavate and describe the complex links between Blackness, sexuality, and faith. My purpose for this solo ethnographic arts-based exploration is to amplify the interconnectedness between music, health, and spirituality within Black living, to resist the erasure of *queer folx* in Black sacred spaces, and to reclaim queerBlack divinity in a world that tells us we are unholy and that we do not belong. *But what does this have to with music therapy?*

Music, defined by Douglas (2015) as a cultural/historical/theological “reservoir” (p.141) has offered (safer) spaces for Black people to communicate about the hardships and joys of life and to share our deepest aspirations of freedom (i.e., singing spirituals while enslaved). In other words, music has been essential to Black people’s survival, healing, coping, and thriving for a very long time. When I consider this study’s relationship to music therapy within my current understanding, I begin here: music therapy is a profession and a therapeutic modality that uses music to promote health-oriented outcomes for a wide range of diverse service users (Bruscia, 2014). However, BIPOC identities and perspectives are currently underrepresented in the field. Thus, I am here to *stand in the gap* for queerBlack folk whose narratives are missing from the literature. Holding this awareness, I desire to contribute one example of how music can be leveraged as a resource in music therapy to explore experiences of safety and to optimize health and wellbeing in Black LGBTQ+ communities. Moreover, my hope is that this study illuminates some of the generative possibilities that are available in arts-based self-exploratory forms of research, and ultimately, that it supports future and present professionals to practice in more culturally sustaining ways.

“THE GOSPEL” ACCORDING TO THE *LITERATURE (REVIEW)*

Welcome to queerBlackChurch. A traditional “lit review” this will not be. By calling it “the gospel” I do not mean to imply in any-way-shape-or-form that academic research is superior to other knowledges or ways of knowing. Or to suggest, as some biblical literalists have, that the written word (published scholarship) is indisputable. In keeping with Kornegay’s definition of *gospel prose*, I use Black (religious) vernacular to *revise* what Christianity means in the context of (my) Black life, and, to (re)define the queerBlack gospel on my own terms. This linguistic bridge, Kornegay insisted, is one that all must and can *cross*, a release from the Eurocentric “psychological trap” (p.41) that queerBlack bodies are cut off from or void of sacredness. So, I am here / at the bridge / to self-reflect / to unsettle seemingly settled notions (Crawley, 2021), and, to *trouble* these scholarly waters.

The Black Church / *meta-actual form*

The Black Church is a diverse, non-monolithic community of churches that share a unique history, culture, and collective identity (Douglas, 2006). For centuries, the Black Church has operated at the center of Black people's lives—from its origins as a so-called “invisible institution” during chattel slavery (i.e., hush arbors, shout houses) to present day places of worship, not to mention its role in the Civil Rights Movement (Gates, 2021; Griffin, 2000). Yet, the legacy of Black Christianity is not without its problems as many African peoples to the Americas were forcibly converted to Christianity in the context of slavery and colonization (Gates, 2021). Despite subjugation and violence, we/they (my ancestors) were subversive, conjuring trans-denominational faith spaces to practice forbidden (read as deviant) religious and spiritual traditions, *away* from the white gaze of their slave owners. So, one might begin to understand how in a country where people of African descent have not historically been afforded many safe spaces, the Black Church has been more than a sanctuary or religious institution, it has also served as a force for social change and political activism. Theologian, scholar, and activist, Holmes (2017) suggested that the phrase *black church* is often used in theological circles to refer to different aspects of African worship life. Despite this trend however she defines the historical-cultural Black Church as such:

a dynamic religious entity forged in oppression and sustained by practices that were often covert and intuitive. All who have lived within its embrace know that the historical Black Church exceeds its walls, preachers, ideology, denominational focus, and Protestant/Catholic differences. (Holmes, 2017, p. xxiii)

Here, Holmes suggests that the Black Church has an actual yet “meta-actual” form, inhabiting the imaginations of its people beyond ideological and institutional bounds. It is this meta-actual form of Black Church-ness that has in many ways incited my research and the larger artistic project in which it is situated. The Black radical imagination is no doubt a wonder-working power all its own. Our ability as Black people to vision/manifest worlds when our very bodies, psyches, spirits, and lives are threatened is a miracle. *Can I get a witness?*

The Black Church and Sexuality / *pray the gay away*

Despite its legacy as a pillar of justice in the face of anti-Black racism in the United States, the historical Black Church also developed a reputation for being steadfast in its commitment to sexism, homophobia/heterosexism, and transphobia/cissexism, othering and outcasting members who don't fit dominant sexual or gender identities or those perceived as incongruent with Black Church respectability (Harris, 2008; Kornegay, 2013). Black queer individuals in the church typically exist as an open secret, subject to what Greene-Hayes (2022) described as “Black Church rumor,” a theoretical lens and practice which functions to “invisibilize and hypervisibilize Black religion, sexuality, and gendered performance by a sexually repressive theological culture (p.116),” thus reinforcing Christian hegemony, heteronormativity, white supremacy, misogynoir, and even abuse. Similarly, Douglas (1999) situates Black sexuality as a “pawn of white culture,” amplifying the necessity of white society to suppress Black people's sexuality (bodies and reproductive capacities) in order to control them as a people. This has its roots, again, in slavery and colonization, as the ability to “freely exploit Black bodies [as free labor and eventually cheap labor] with little impunity” was critical to the labor market and white economic power (p. 23). Furthermore, to devalue non-white sexuality reinforced the position of Black people as inferior or immoral beings. In a word: *dehumanization*. Ward (2005) proposed three factors for the persistence of theologically-driven heterosexism in Black churches: 1) religious beliefs rooted in the literalist interpretation of biblical scriptures 2) fear of sexuality grounded in Euro-American ideals and 3) race survival consciousness—a

belief that in order to preserve the Black race and community, we need “strong Black men” (hypermasculinity) to fight against White/European dominance. Sadly, not only do these kinds of patriarchal normative gender role expectations affect heterosexual cisgender men, but people of all genders and sexualities. Bridging the theological perspectives of James Cone and Katie Geneva Cannon, Ahiokhai (2020) insisted upon the re-imagination of the Black Church and its theologies that speak to Black experiences in ways that do not “reinstate the hegemonic power of whiteness as a mode of being in the world” (p. 1). *My, my, my*.

Religion and Safety / *prolonged religious crisis*

To speak of adversity, religious participation among Black Americans in particular has often provided a respite and sacred solace against systemic ills and the complex interactions of racial and economic disparity (Holmes, 2017). Religious involvement may also provide a sense of safety, meaning, and connection to a loving community and higher power (i.e., God), offering a space for belonging and relational development (Mattis & Jagers, 2001; Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2013). *But what happens when the spaces we expect or desire to keep us safe are unable to do so* (Lane, 2018)? Kornegay (2013) defined “safety” as “human relief from danger” (p. 27) and evaluates this construct from a Baldwinian queer Black theological lens. For James Baldwin (according to Kornegay), threats to safety are essentially four-fold: 1) theological 2) sociological/racial 3) sexual and 4) gendered. Baldwin’s fear is perhaps less about sexual awareness and more about wanting/being wanted by someone in a society that deemed him (as a gay Black man) *undesirable*. Surely, an inward awareness and outward fantasizing of (forbidden) bodies accompanied by religious-social accountability sounds like a recipe for trepidation to me! While Black faith can be a means of accessing safety, the failure to recognize the lack of safety related to Black social, religious, and sexual categories is “hazardous” (Kornegay, p. 26). Altogether, this “theological terror” is thought to be fueled by puritan Protestant Christianity, one that situated Blackness and Blackbodies as a social evil, and Black (homo)sexuality as depraved (Kornegay, p. 39). To this end, Baldwin’s *prolonged religious crisis* can be described as “the inheritance of a religious tradition that didn’t offer [him] the moral authority, safety, or acceptance” (Kornegay, 2013, p. 39). The safety that he (Baldwin) or I initially sought in the church lacked the moral authority to speak for racialized and sexualized bodies that fell in the gap between (sexual) problem and (racial) protest.

LGBTQ+ and Religious Harm / *spiritual injury & the souls of queerBlack Folk*

Although religiosity is thought to provide many health benefits, as well as an improved quality of life for many individuals, this does not always extend to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons (Nadal et al., 2015; Page et al., 2013). Many religious institutions in the U.S. condemn members of the queer community. Furthermore, participation in non-LGBTQ+ affirming Black churches has been associated with internalized homonegativity, psychological distress, shame, and low self-esteem (Lefevor et al., 2020). This is often the result of heterosexist discrimination as well as stigmatization and persecution of individuals based on one’s sexual identity. Meyer’s (2003) minority stress model has been one of the most prominent theoretical frameworks for understanding sexual minority health risk and marginalized groups. Meyer’s theory posits that experiences of stigma and discrimination create a stressful social environment which can lead to mental and physical health problems for LGBTQ+ people. Stressors may be *distal* or relating to external conditions or events (i.e., discrimination, housing insecurity, hate crimes, police violence, etc.) or *proximal* which are more subjective and related to self-identity (i.e., internalization of a negative societal attitude). When compounded with other marginalized and disenfranchised social identities such as race/ethnicity, gender, and/or class (Crenshaw, 1989), the interactions between these stressors are often complex and, in some cases, can be detrimental to one’s overall health, resulting in intersectional minority stress (Cyrus, 2017; Sarno et al., 2021).

Understandably, being subjected to religious hate speech on a regular basis can be psychologically damaging. In some instances, LGBTQ+ persons who are pushed out of Faith Spaces may even experience symptoms that closely resemble post-traumatic stress (Winnell, n.d.). Studies have shown that religious institutional devaluing of same-sex behavior can amplify internalized homonegativity (Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2013), and while the notion of family and fear of ostracism may exist in other religious groups, these factors may be greater for Black Americans due to histories of oppression (Robertson & Avent, 2016). Even though a significant amount of literature suggests that religion *influences* mental health but does not always predict poor health outcomes, theological and other violence can't be ignored.

It's also very important to consider the fact that LGBTQ+ Black people may compartmentalize their religious and sexual identities to maintain relationship and connection to their more non-affirming, but more culturally relevant religious environments. In other words, Black queer/trans/gay/sexually prismatic people will stay in churches that harm them/us because we also feel resonance and connection with the music, with the culture of the Black Church, despite the messaging that being who we are, at least out loud, is unacceptable. Some LGBTQ+ Black individuals even disconnect and distance themselves from the church because the discrimination and shaming become too much to handle. This kind of pressure, ridicule, and condemnation lead many to reject their religions as a result of being rejected and made to feel ashamed about their sexuality. While some queer people leave religious institutions and are perhaps less likely to attend than their heterosexual counterparts, this becomes more nuanced and complicated for Black Americans, particularly Black youth and emerging adults. In one study, young Black gay-identified men were 2.5 times more likely to participate in non-affirming Protestant congregations than straight churchgoers despite stigma and discrimination against sexually minoritized individuals (Quinn et al., 2016). The struggle to manage negative stressors in the family, in society, perhaps at work, and in the religious domain can be challenging for this community and the many ways they/we seek to express our personhood. It was for me. *How do we (I) reconcile this?*

Quoting Kelly Brown-Douglas, Kornegay (2013) said: "Blues bodies are a literal and physical force reconciling sexuality to sacredness." (p. 52). When I think about what it means to house my queer Black spirituality, I reflect on the concept of habitation - the state or process of living in a particular place, the indwelling of Spirit, the evolution of sacred being-ness, the essence of a trans-denominational divinity, God/Spirit/Universe, living in me, with me, and as me. I am at once Black, (gender)queer, and divine. *My theology/theory of change?* It is most certainly queer/quare (Johnson, 2001; Kornegay, 2013), intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989; Donaldson, 2017), womanist/womxnist⁵ (Douglas, 1999), and Black (Church'd) (Holmes, 2017).

Music therapy and queerBlack identities

A fresh wind of inspiring music therapy scholarship examining Black perspectives, voices, as well as justice and equity issues (Leonard, 2020; Norris, 2019; Norris 2020a/2020b; Thomas, 2019/2020; Webb, 2019) has created an opening in music therapy theory and practice. While there has been a growing interest in LGBTQ+ communities in music therapy over the last decade (Bain, Grzanka, & Boggan, 2016; Whithead-Pleaux et al., 2012), until very recently, literature examining the lived experiences of Black queer people in music therapy clinical work has been incredibly scarce (Perkins, 2021). Perkins' master's thesis, for example, explored how five queer Black men experienced intersections of racial identity and sexuality in various social contexts using piano-based improvisation, revealing participant experiences of homophobia within families of origin and larger societal spaces. Understanding the multitude of stressors that Black queer men and non-men face in social environments is key to working effectively with Black LGBTQ+ clients. Still, very little research in music therapy has explicitly addressed the intersections of racial, sexual, and religious identities. Scholarly discourse surrounding faith, spirituality, music, and

⁵ A queer spelling of the term womanist, coined by Alice Walker (1983), from *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*

health (Lipe, 2002) has certainly been engaged by several authors, practitioners, and scholars (Potvin & Argue, 2014), missing is a queerBlack lens.

PRESENT WORK / *OFFERING*

This *gospel prose* arts-based auto-ethnography is a personal narrative of my journey as a queer/questioning adolescent coming to terms with my sexual identity while growing up and ministering in a Southern Black Church. From a broader sociocultural perspective, this research underscores the impacts of heterosexism/homonegativity in the Black Church on Black LGBTQ+ individuals as it relates to identity, health and wellbeing, and various domains of safety. Personally, I understand safety to be a dynamic phenomenon, specific to each person and context, and largely influenced by environmental and systemic factors. My perceived sense of safety, be it psychological, emotional, physical/material, or spiritual/transcendent, is constantly changing and situational. At best, I feel safe when I am able to embody my radically authentic, fully alive, holy-spirited queerBlack self, without fear of being harmed, discriminated against, taunted, or violated. I tend to feel safe(r) and more seen in Black Queer and Trans community. When I can take up space and be who I am.

Through a series of self-exploratory ritual Sunday Services, I attempt to recover memory, a deeper knowing of my queerBlack non-binary body and being. It is also my intention to present and analyze my lived experience as a queer Black person to foster critical dialogue about music therapy theory and practice. With this work, I hope to contribute to the growing body of literature on LGBTQ+ BIPOC populations in music therapy and beyond, inviting clinicians, students, educators, scholars, and co-conspirers to imagine and create new ways of being and beholding one another, especially multiply marginalized communities.

The following questions guide me in this arts-based solo ethnographic process:

1. How has my experience of (internalized) heterosexism/homonegativity in the Black Church affected my discernment of safety as a Queer Black person (body/spirit/being/soul)?
2. What is the living (alive, dynamic, emergent, evolving) structure (sacred, church, order of service) within me, in my Queer Black body (spirit/being/soul)?
3. How am I naming and (re)claiming (my) sacredness through (my) spiritual-cultural traditions and practices of the Black Church?

COMING OUT / *TESTIMONY*

Like John Grimes in *Go Tell it On the Mountain*, I *knew* the deep abiding threat and torment of theological terror as a queer young person growing up in the Black Church. From a very early age, I was taught that homosexuality, or “being gay,” was a sin, an abomination against God, a deviant, deceptive path leading to eternal suffering. In a word: *hell*. Yet and still, the church gave me a reference point for the Black Church aesthetic and pedagogy that informs my work today and one that has certainly enlivened this process. At the age of 15, I entered a period of prolonged religious crisis. My faith became more personal to me, more intimate and meaningful, and my curiosities about spirituality were activated. Around that same time, I began to question my sexual orientation and identity, though not uncommon for typically developing teens in middle to late adolescence (Page et al., 2013). Following a series of vivid dreams, I discerned a religious call to preach - to ministry - and I pursued it with passion and my whole heart.

Vignette: I will never forget the day my mom asked me if I was gay, for the second time. I was 15 years old the first time it happened - newly discovering my queerness as a closeted gay youth and coming into awareness of my spiritual purpose and calling - my faith - and my queer/non-straight sexuality. “We do men in this family,” she said, implying a heteronormative construct as normal, acceptable, and right, given my young assigned female location. The historical-cultural Black Church in which I grew up reinforced these gender and sexuality norms with its queer-antagonistic rhetoric. The religious doctrine decreed and declared that homosexuality was perverse, a serious offense against an all-powerful and all-knowing God. I was pretty confused, conflicted, and afraid of messing up, being *bad*. I concluded that these were feelings I could never act on, let alone entertain in the privacy of my own thoughts. So, life continued. On and off again, I struggled with questions, feelings, desires, that I was taught were immoral. I sought counsel from mentors and spiritual teachers I trusted and respected, who advised me to pray and remain steadfast, seek deliverance, read the scriptures, and to recognize that “the greater the anointing on my life” the greater my cross (burden, temptation, test, trial, and tribulation) to bear. *Help me. Save me. Deliver me.*

The Question / “*Question 35. Are You a Homosexual? Yes___ No___*”

As I got closer to starting college, my training as a young minister began to involve participation in what was known as the Board of Examiners Meeting. The Board, made up of seasoned ministers, elders, and senior leaders in the church (majority cisgender Black men and literally one cisgender Black woman) offered instruction and guidance as we prepared for our more formal ordinations. In a personal journal entry, I reflected on some of my thoughts and feelings connected to that experience and the question that has seeded and sparked this very work:

I remember sitting in those church pews on a hot summer evening in a rural Louisiana church. I might have been the youngest person there, I think I was. Each time we gathered, we opened with praise and worship, scripture, a prayer, then split off into our respective cohorts and ended the night with some food in the fellowship hall. Each meeting, every quarter, we had to fill out a new application for the Itinerant Ministry, updating records and our soul conviction. The questions ranged from basic demographic info to why I wanted to preach and whether or not I truly felt called to ministry? Most of the time I breezed through each inquiry without a hiccup. But see question *thirty-five*? That question always gave me pause. It read: “Are you a homosexual? Check *yes* or check *no*.” That is the question, or at least it *was* the startling question printed on the A.M.E. Louisiana Conference Board of Examiners Application, roughly between 2004-2008. I would honestly hesitate each time I had to fill one of these out. I wondered what would happen if I told the truth, or, if I wasn’t sure of what that truth actually was. *Would I be punished?*

The Wilderness

Time passed and I continued to struggle. Socially, I was involved in a lot of extracurricular activities, serving in multiple student leader positions in school clubs, bands, church, and in my local community. I felt so much pressure to be perfect. I was pretty depressed in high school too, but no one would know it. I secretly carved tears into my flesh (self-harming) because I wanted my skin to cry. I wanted my body to feel the pain that I was suppressing on the inside. By the time I got to college, I was still very deep in the church, my faith stronger, and my life and ministerial work more visible. But I could not shake it; I could not shake or pray the gay away. Believe me, I tried, but it became like a fire shut up in my bones. I could no longer contain the lie/double life. For almost two years before coming out as gay I went to

therapy to address my deteriorating mental health and fears related to “outing” myself. I used that time to build my “love army” (those who supported/affirmed my queerness *too*) and to develop my resources and confidence to name/embody/live my truth. At the age of 21, close to graduating college, I came out to my sister and my mother, in that order. Although I didn’t disclose to any other immediate family members directly that I was, at the time, a lesbian, news traveled fast. Not only did my extended relatives find out, but so did my pastor, a close family friend and trusted mentor. I wish I could say that they took the news well, but sadly, they did not. At the same time, I would be remiss if I do not mention the support that I did receive from my biological father, who did not raise me, but whose validation, gave me comfort during a time of grief and loss. One such loss was connection with my grandmother. I missed sitting across from her in the choir stand on Sunday mornings. She played organ. I played piano. Our thing. Or traveling together to Gospel Music Workshop of America conferences. *This* was my wilderness. My world, turning upside down.

The Exodus

Months before my 22nd birthday and my college graduation, I left the church and moved *out* of my mother’s house. I was finishing up my undergraduate music therapy studies, so it helped to have school to focus on. That, internship applications, and my senior flute recital. I had always felt an immense amount of support from my family, so this level of distance and rejection was almost unbearable. In a word: *heartbreak*. After graduation, I moved to Philadelphia to start the next phase of my life and to complete an internship in music therapy, working with adolescents in a “trauma-informed” residential treatment program. Like church, Philly quickly became a home away from home. I was enamored by all the street art, murals, and appreciated the visibility of affirming spaces for queer community and Black folk. As a music therapy intern, I found safe haven in our department, and with my supervisor, who happened to be a White gay man. Recently, I shared with him (Matt) how much I appreciated his care and how much I needed that reflection and affirmation, perhaps more than I realized (M. Phillips, personal communication, 2021). Those experiences, and many others like it, were very healing and reassuring for me, especially on the heels of leaving the church/home. I found Black affirming churches like the MCC (Metropolitan Community Church), which gave me a taste of A.M.E vibes, something familiar, and soulful. I loved it. I could be queer and Black and spirited in my ever-expanding faith. The whole experience added a different layer of meaning to the Black religious notion of “come as you are.” I never joined another historic Black church, or any church for that matter, but I visited a few from time to time and opened myself to Buddhist thought and more socio-political texts. It was a very formative time. As this was unfolding in PA, my mom became very depressed, we weren’t speaking hardly at all, and I was estranged from my family. To say the least, it was hard.

METHODOLOGY / PROCESS

Given the depth and breadth of my experiences, how could I then investigate my research questions in a way that would honor my stories and the aesthetic and explorative qualities in art that I deeply value? Arts-Based Research (ABR) (Leavy, 2017) felt like a space that would be both systematic and emergent. As defined by Austin and Forinash (2005), arts-based research involves rigorous engagement with art as central to the research process. In particular, the concept of “translation” in ABR, or the act of transforming one form of knowledge into another, invites and empowers me to explore these questions with critical reflexivity, curiosity, and sensory-knowing (Gerber & Myers-Coffman, 2015). Music therapists have utilized ABR to explore a variety of topics, employing a range of theories and approaches (Thomas & Blanc, 2021; Viega, 2013; Webb, 2019). Personally, I was drawn to this research paradigm for several reasons 1) the centrality of art in the research process 2) its reliance on creativity and

expression as a path of inquiry 3) emphasis on deeper ways of discovering, knowing, and understanding some phenomena in/through/by way of/as art 4) the creative/imaginal/sensory/aesthetic possibilities that can emerge when we consider/convey an experience beyond literal words and 5) its disruption to more traditional forms of scholarly investigation.

Similarly, autoethnography (Holman & Jones, 2005) involves the analysis of one's personal experiences in the context of their environment and culture to bring awareness to broader social, cultural and systemic issues. More recently queer autoethnographic studies have emerged in music therapy (Gumble, 2020; Lee, 2019), which offer unique points of reference for my work. In this piece, I look to interpretive traditions (Hiller, 2016) and transformative paradigms (Rolvjord & Hadley, 2016) in qualitative research to interrogate various dimensions of Black religious life as it intersects with (my) queer Black identity both in the past and in the present.

Like most autoethnography practitioners I presume, I value the power of stories (Rambo & Ellis, 2020). Stories help us make sense of the world around us. Stories have the capacity to expand our understanding of the human condition, especially perspectives that decenter whiteness as a normative lens of social identity construction (Ahiokhai, 2020) and challenge dominant narratives (Hadley, 2013). Throughout my research process, I was often reminded of the ways that the stories of my family, my people, my ancestors, and those who have come before me, have shaped/continue to shape my worldview and all dimensions of my work. I hold reverence for this memory work and the oral/aural/written transmission of knowledge.

When I refer to this work as autoethnographic, I think about the ways that my personal experience in the Black Church (one person's story) highlights at least some of the issues that LGBTQ+ Black individuals and communities may face as we are situated in a culture that favors whiteness, one that upholds a white hegemonic understanding of Black sexuality and faith experience, further perpetuating queer-antagonistic views, homophobia/heterosexism, cissexism/transphobia, as well as Christian supremacy, spiritual violence, and religious-based oppression. These issues aren't specific to the Black Church or Black people, but I locate them here in the context of telling this tiny part of my story. I tell it because it matters as much as yours. I (go) tell it because it is likely that music therapists will continue to encounter LGBTQ+ Black individuals in our therapy rooms and healthcare settings who have been harmed by their spiritual and religious communities, many who may even be navigating varying degrees of outness surrounding their sexual or gender diverse identities.

Black Church Aesthetic(s) and Contemplative Practice / *entry, engagement, effect*

My process included a series of weekly "Sunday Services" where I reflected on my personal connection to the Black Church, my coming out experiences, and my evolving relationship to safety as a Black LGBTQ+ adult recovering from religious-based trauma and spiritual harm. Holmes (2017) formulates three categories of contemplative practice as informed by African-diasporic religious and spiritual traditions, specifically the historical Black Church: *entry*, *engagement*, and *effect*. Each category is characterized by distinct, although at times overlapping experiences and functions. *Entry*, where we begin, marks a shift from the everyday world to the liminal space that worship creates; a moment when word, song, movement, and other portals meld with one's internal knowing and recognition, whereby some degree of control is relinquished. *Engagement* refers to a willingness to involve body and spirit in the encounter with the Holy, a space of "covenantal reciprocity" (p.7) where relationship is key; at times this process may be uncomfortable as one engages in activities that bring memories of pain back to consciousness. Lastly, *effect* is specific to the person and community; it reflects an intimacy with the sacred that expands and awakens knowledge towards action. While I see threads of each of Holmes' categorizations of Black contemplative practice in my research, I primarily situate this phase of the work at the place of personal entry-engagement, and aspire towards a collaborative, community-level impact and liberatory action.

Sunday Service / *order of service*

Over a period of one month (April 2021-May 2021), I engaged in a total of five self-guided, ritual meetings affectionately known as “Sunday Service.” Each service, I immersed myself in receptive/listening, improvisational, re-creative, and compositional experiences, which are four major types of methods used in music therapy (Bruscia, 2014). I intentionally drew inspiration from hymns, traditional and contemporary Black gospel music, sermons, and sacred texts. For the purpose of this research, sacred texts are identified as literary works by Black Feminist writers, Black LGBTQ+ authors and essayists, who have shaped my thinking and development as a human being and whose work and /or legacy challenges dominant oppressive discourse, such as: Toni Morrison; James Baldwin; Sonia Sanchez; Alice Walker; and bell hooks.

I held service in the same location (“sanctuary”) every time, the living room of my current home which for now doubles as my music room and creative space (Figure 3). Services lasted anywhere from 60-90 mins and typically took place in the morning, during the first half of the day, although Service #3 was held in the evening due to unexpected scheduling conflicts. Each live service was audio-and-video recorded, archived, then subsequently analyzed. Immediately following each service, I recorded a voice memo, or diarized voice journal, on my cell phone to capture feelings, reactions, thoughts, and questions that emerged. When possible, I also wrote out my reflections on paper or in a journal to help further flesh out my ideas and inquiries.

Following the initial service, I caught inspiration for a structural idea: to implement a mid-week check-in for myself to reflect on the previous week’s service and to prepare for the week ahead (i.e., listen to service recordings, make “sermon notes,” review literature/readings, etc.). From a Black Church perspective—we might refer to this as a “bible study” or “mid-week service.” I successfully managed to do one of these check-ins, but unfortunately, I was unable to sustain them due to my work schedule and capacity. The structure for each service was largely influenced by a liturgical tool that I learned and internalized from the A.M.E Church, the “Order of Service.” While it was my intention to use this framework as sort of a guiding script, or session outline if you will, I allowed the flow and order of each Sunday Service to emerge as organically and intuitively as possible. Each week I set alters/altars (Figure 2) and allowed myself to stay open to what arose. Additionally, Saturday night sermon listening was a practice I implemented once after discovering an old cassette recording of a sermon I preached as a teenager.

My materials included: studio-monitoring headphones (Audio-Technica ATH-M50x), a laptop (MacBook Air), and (2) two microphones (Shure SM58 condenser and Shure SM7B) for capturing live sound/audio in the room (singing, talking, body percussion, vocal looping, etc.). I recorded this audio into GarageBand, my primary DAW (digital audio station), although I did some work in Logic Pro X as well. For still images and video, I used an iPhone XS to capture live action footage and photos during service and related processes. I also utilized a vocal processor with basic looping capabilities (Boss VE-20 Vocal Effects Performer), an M-Audio MK61 keyboard controller, a C-pitched, root chakra crystal singing bowl, and C soprano flute. Although I remained open to using a variety of instruments throughout the process, I found singing and vocal looping (the use of voice) to be incredibly powerful and central to my music-making.

Analysis and Interpretation / *study*

My analysis process consisted of three primary components or steps: 1) content analysis of audio recordings 2) audio selection/fragmentation and 3) thematic analysis.

Once all Sunday Services were complete, I listened back to each one in its entirety (n=5). While listening, I manually transcribed the emergent order of service that unfolded (Figure 4) and I used a Google JamBoard to organize/make sense of all data collected. I identified excerpts of service content (audio) that I deemed to be rich, salient, and most relevant to my research questions. Then I isolated those fragments (i.e., musical moments, verbal monologue) as individual audio files. Next, I used thematic

analysis to code major themes, comparing these to my diarized voice memos and written journal reflections. From there, I generated a track list of select audio files (fragments). These audio files were then curated as a composite narrative playlist (further discussed herein) which can be accessed via this private Soundcloud link: <https://soundcloud.com/southernblack-preacherboi/sets/comeasyouare/s-azHtoQwe5ox>. Links to individual audio tracks (Dropbox files) along with track information are included in Table 1.

Throughout every phase of analysis, I engaged in reflexive processes (i.e., journaling) to externalize my thoughts, emotions, meanings, and interpretations. Before, during, and after data gathering was complete, I created a personal Padlet to archive materials and media related to the theme of this project. This living archive served as my research “vision board,” so to speak, and I’m excited to keep adding to it for future projects. A full and complete representation of creative content generated and/or utilized during each service is available [online](#). This Padlet offers an interactive virtual platform for individuals to further engage with the work in community, a place to share curiosities, reflections, stories, resonances, and other meanings in a co-creative space.

Figure 2. *the alter/altar*



Note. personal alter/altar, Sunday Service #2

Figure 3. *the “Sanctuary” / Creative Space*



Note. Music Workstation, Sunday Service #5

Ethical Considerations

Some of the ethical considerations I contended with included: 1) personal safety/boundaries during the process 2) sharing my personal story of coming out as a queer youth/young adult, and 3) ethics related to bringing in other people, actual community members, family, etc., who were and some who still are involved in my life. Throughout the process I found myself considering my own personal limits, particularly emotional and psychological safety as I floated back to sometimes painful memories. In a conversation with Kate Myers-Coffman, my mentor through the *Justice and Equity* Mentorship Program, Kate reflected to me the ways in which I seemed to be considering “safety within the context of the Sunday Service,” knowing or intuiting when to set boundaries for myself, to take breaks, or to say enough, leave it alone (K. Myers-Coffman, personal communication, April 30, 2021). With respect to referencing people in my life, I wanted to be considerate of the fact that other people are not able to tell their version of the story in relation to mine, a valid critique of autoethnography as a first-person qualitative research genre. Another point of tension for me is who this writing is *for*, wrestling with and endeavoring to write past the white gaze in academia (Goitom, 2019). Who am I to be putting Black (church) folk business out there, and why here? Additionally, Viega and Forinash (2016) discuss the artist’s desire, in arts-based research, to create an aesthetically satisfying product which can sometimes

lead to the risk of misrepresenting results. In this work, I chose to present any raw artistic data, including music, with little to no production or editing. This was done to preserve some of the in-the-moment, palpable emotion and authenticity of a specific point in time. Finally, due to the nature of this first-person study, IRB approval was not deemed necessary nor was it pursued, although I did consult with several colleagues and relevant literature on the matter. To address some of these ethical concerns, I consulted with a few trusted colleagues of mine to open dialogue and to extend my perspectives around the risks and utility of sharing such personal material in research. I also engaged in creative reflexive processes in the form of journaling, song creation, and expressive writing to help me process issues arising within my consciousness and body. Finally, I reviewed literature on the ethics of autoethnography, including self-disclosure (Lapadat, 2017), to inform my thinking and decision-making.

FINDINGS / *SERMON*

In general, I found the repetition of ritual meetings (Kenny, 2002) to be comforting, predictable, and familiar, much like what I experienced in church. The order of service is what it is; we must open and we must close, but there's always a little room left for the Mystery. During services, a natural semi-structured order unfolded from week to week. Despite the fact that certain musical motifs and themes recapitulated and came back around, anything that surfaced whether in the music or the flow of my process was dynamic and responsive. I noticed an intuitive and bi-directional relationship between myself and the service order, between me and the music, a call and response. To speak of safety, the Sunday Service method provided a container and structure for me to hold my healing and reflexive process while not being constricted by it.

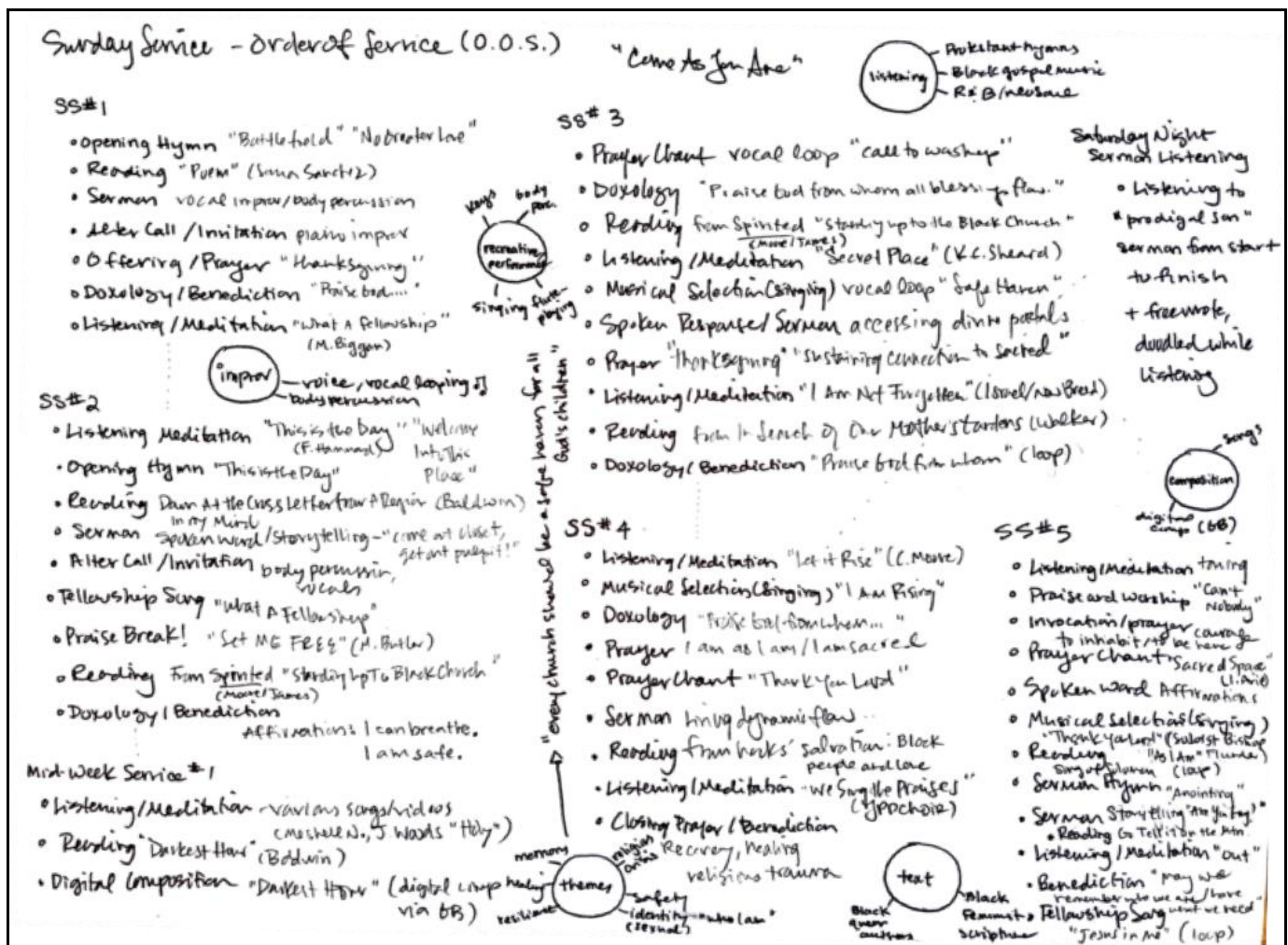
The music primarily consisted of improvisations via live vocal looping, voice-body percussion, as well as recreative experiences, performance, songwriting, and digital composition, all of which were inspired by the sounds and musical cultures of the Black Church as they've taken root in me over the years. With the exception of one song that I wrote in 2012, none of the original material was pre-written or pre-recorded. It all unfolded live and spontaneously as part of service. Also salient was the spontaneous, emergent, oral transmission of story. *Church*.

For the sake of this paper, I will discuss eight (8) core themes that emerged during the process of analyzing data from Sunday Services and related processes. These have been coded as such: 1) *reverent-intuitive listening* 2) *identity/being* 3) *storying/remembering* 4) *reclaiming queer as sacred resistance and resilience* 5) *darkest hour* 6) *"prodigal son/sun"* 7) *safety/refuge* and 8) *(be)coming/outness*. Each category includes discussions of arts-based data and data derived from my individual reflections (i.e., diarized voice memos and written journals).

Theme 1. Reverent-intuitive listening / *discerning flow*

I wasn't always sure what would happen when I sat for service, but I committed myself to showing up for the process. The "flow" and contents of each service changed slightly from week to week, but as I mentioned, there was some consistency in at least some of the structural elements as I embraced the living, sacred, and emergent order of service that lives within me (Figure 4). The more I trusted that process, the less attached I was to what happened each time.

Figure 4. Emergent Order of Service



Note. Image of handwritten transcription of the "Order of Service" that emerged during Sunday services

Some of the elements that remained constant across weekly services included the following:

1) *Opening*; I always opened and closed with a moment of silence, meditation or prayer, followed by the "opening hymn," which typically looked like listening to pre-recorded music from my childhood church days, songs or melodies that brought me back to being in youth choir.

2) *Scripture reading*; there was always a sacred text to be read aloud, usually from a Black Feminist poet, womanist theologian, and/or materials written by Black queer authors. I did not set these readings ahead of time, rather intuited in the moment, although I'd like to experiment with prepared readings in future work. 3) *Invocation/prayer*; spoken word, connecting to higher self and higher power, welcoming guidance for the process 4) *Listening/Meditation*; a receptive experience that could involve listening to music or a moment of breath 5) *Musical selections*; improvised vocal looping, singing songs, or composing new music material.

6) *Sermon*; there was usually a "sermon," although not always spoken or with literal words. For instance, during Sunday Service #1, I used vocal and body percussion to respond to Sanchez's (1998) "Poem" in *Like Singing Coming Off the Drums*. The music created was a medium tempo free associative vocal improvisation with a steady beat, using snaps and the chest as bass drum, syncopated vocalizations, playing with dynamics and articulation, returning to a clear refrain. After a few minutes, a series of sung

and spoken questions came forth from my voice and being. 7) *Alter call/invitation*; I describe this as a call to action or a new way of being; an integration of experiences from service, insights, transfer of knowledge to the rest of my life.

8) *Doxology/benediction*; “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.” A short hymn of praise (doxology) followed by a short prayer (benediction), usually tying in some theme from the sermon before singing a round of three “Amen,” marking the end or culmination of the service.

In the sermonic moment described above, I felt safe enough to bring curiosity to my experience through the art, through the sounds and stories that were seeking to express themselves through me. This form of reverent-intuitive listening, as I describe it, is a form of brave witnessing, being aware of what is arising, discerning, and making choices, sometimes felt and sensed, in order to give myself what I need(ed). Overall, my listening supported a sense of safety by affirming my ability to trust myself and the directions I desired to take, or resist. Holmes (2017) says: “in the Black church, silences are interactive, malleable, often punctuated by vocalization....” (p. 7). I did my best to hold silences (spaces/reset) with reverence, to notice without judgement. This was not always easy for me and at times thought, I could be *doing more*. I am particularly moved by Norris’ (2019) description of “liturgy” as a “cultural resource” (p. 108) that can be evoked by the performance of worship. Liturgy, defined as “the principal act or form in which public worship is performed or conducted,” can also be found in session structures and musical forms, at times reminiscent of one’s previous worship experiences, thus conceived as liturgical performance (p.108). The more I reflected on this, the more connected to this idea of Sunday Service as queerBlack liturgical performance and a methodology of reclamation. Tapping into Black music/worship helped me explore/express my Black selfhood (Norris, 2019).

Theme 2. Identity/Being / *who I am*

Throughout the process I reflected a lot on my identity-based oppression as a queer youth/young adult, particularly my own internalized homophobia / heterosexism, and the shame and guilt I carried. Being a minister gave me a sense of purpose and identity that became fragmented after leaving the church. I was terrified to be open about who I was, or to even question my sexual orientation. I didn’t believe that I could *safely* be anything but straight or heterosexual. Musically, a lot of my free improvisations, and storytelling moments, and prayerful musings, reflected a theme of being, actually being, accepting, and radiating more of who I was, who I am, and who I am becoming. In one improvisation, I catch myself singing “Who I am, who I am....I have always been who I am.” The song flows out of a voice and body percussion arrangement of a traditional hymn “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” Through song and lyric improvisation, I resisted the notion that my queer identity, for instance, is a “sin” or “iniquity.” The more I repeat the words, my voice begins to crack and tears fall from my eyes. An affirmative chant emerges, interrupting messages that code LGBTQ+ individuals as deviant or bad. With my voice and body rhythms, I affirm the soul of my queerBlack self. This stirred in me a radical remembering of my power, the journey I have taken thus far, and continue to make, towards radical authenticity. The words go on to say: “I am love. I am peace. I am joy unspeakable. That’s who I am.” *Who am I when I am safe to express my fully alive radically authentic self?*

Theme 3. Storying/Remembering / *memory work*

Nothing was as central to this process as telling, re-telling, and (de)constructing my coming out story. This required me to face some fears and to name some hard truths about what happened to me as result of years of religious hate speech, problematic teachings, and family chatter that made me believe I was “disgusting” and “going to hell.” I was empowered and emboldened to tell parts of that story that felt I personally safe and brave enough to disclose. The ongoing process of coming out to family, social circles,

and my religious community started with “coming out to myself” and first embracing my truth. Things I forgot came to light. Pain and discomfort surrounding my religious narrative had room to breathe and be held. Each time I told pieces of the story a different way, diversifying the medium (i.e., flute, voice, spoken word), translating from one form of knowing to another. I *remember* who I am. I move between musical expression, improvisation, listening, and verbal monologue. The music I improvised was rooted in Black sound, dialoguing with historical archives and personal life events, and facilitating the revelation of some conscious and unconscious content, which may have some implications for dynamic processes in music psychotherapy (Bruscia, 1998). I look to the past to help me move forward and to construct new realities. Future orientation (i.e., the extent to which one thinks about the future) among adolescents could potentially help to mitigate depressive symptoms and the development of hopelessness following emotional victimization (Hamilton et al., 2014).

Theme 4. Reclaiming Queer as Sacred Resistance and Resilience / *healing church trauma*

So, how is my Black genderqueer body a site of sacred (social) resistance and resilience? In Service #5, I play the sermonic hymn on flute -- a song that I grew up singing and hearing often, “Anointing,” a very slow ballad-like tune inviting the divine to “fall [fresh] on me.” As I play, I find my way back to the notes, to the tones, to the feeling, articulating a new kind of acceptance that my *anointing* was never lost. As a young minister, in the limelight, visible, with my life “on blast,” I could not fully reconcile being gay with being God-called. I had always been taught that being gay was wrong, and that there were biblical interpretations and scriptural “receipts” to back it up. I can’t talk about safety without considering the ways in which church trauma or spiritual violence has impacted my life and shaped my story. Personally, I struggled to love and accept myself as sacred/holy/worthy. I was wrecked with a lot of internalized shame. As an adolescent, I hid my pain from others, which negatively affected my health and my relationships. Working through this story, my shame and hurt, in the Sunday Service allowed for a space of healing, deeper reflection, and reframing of what it means to be a queer person of faith.

Theme 5. Darkest Hour / *weeping may endure*

During the first and only mid-week check-in, themes of darkness and despair came up. Service took place later in the evening, and it happened to be raining that night. I turned down the lights and lit a candle. This was two days after news broke that Daunte Wright, a 20-year old Black man, had been shot and killed when Kimberly Potter, a police officer who is White, threatened to tase him but instead used her firearm (The New York Times, 2022). I was grieving, sad, angry and frankly thinking about safety in a broader systemic and socio-political context especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the police-involved murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmad Arbery, Tony McDade, among countless others in 2020. I sang, I wept, I danced, and moved, I allowed myself to channel and conjure whatever the moment needed to be. I felt a little freer actually, less restricted than I sometimes felt during Sunday Service. I listened to a lot of Black music that I enjoy, from Jazmine Sullivan and Me’shell Ndegeocello, to Walter Hawkins, Bishop Yvette Flunder, finally landing on Jamila Woods’ (2016) “Holy.”

Towards the end of this service, I was led to read a poem by James Baldwin that inspired the creation of “Darkest Hour” (of the same title), a short digital music composition that sounds like a battle cry, a fight, which I think accurately portrays an authentic dimension of what I was experiencing in that moment and in my church-centered past. I included organ sounds and talking drums in the track and ethereal blips that gave me the feeling of cosmos and space. Over the track, I read Psalm 23 from the Bible. This psalm is about protection and safety, one my grandmother would read to me—that even though I may walk or move through shadows, darkness, and the unforeseen, I will be comforted, I will be kept. Coming out in the Black Church, my church, and to my family was terrifying for me. What

happened after was truly one of the hardest things I've faced in my life. In solo Sunday service, I felt like I was reclaiming space and giving myself the safe haven that I didn't always receive when I was in the church; or *after* the church.

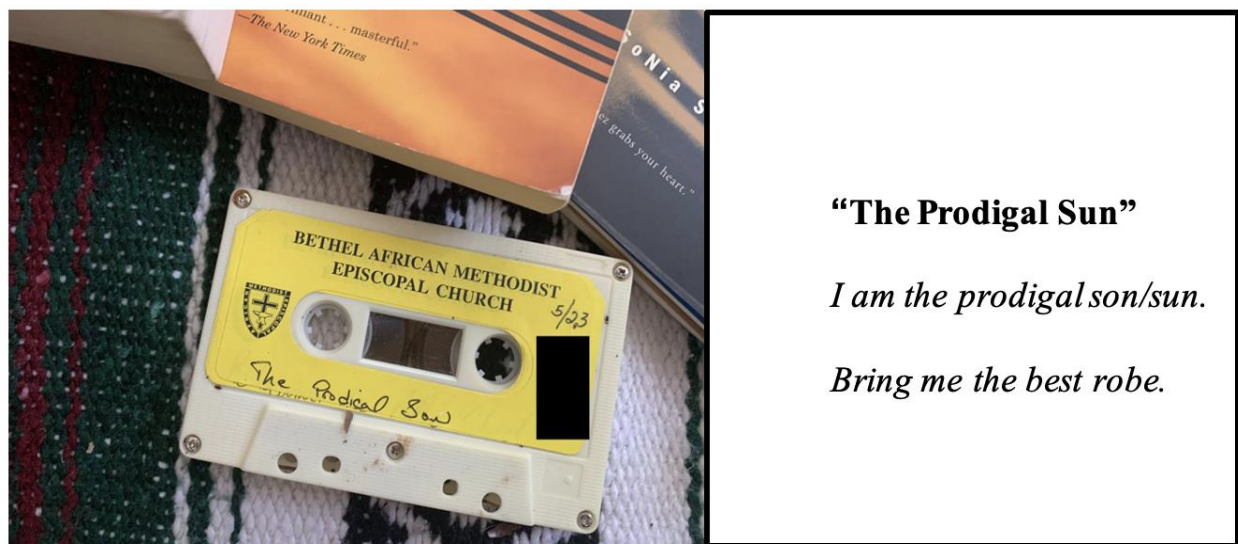
Theme 6. Safety/Refuge / *safe haven*

While working on this project, I thought a lot about the concept of *safety*. As a kid, in the church and in the *closet*, it was difficult to find safe people or safe places to talk to about what I was experiencing, about the inner confusion I was carrying. During Service # 3, I recall listening to "A Secret Place" by Karen Clark-Sheard (2002), one of my favorite gospel singers. As I listened to this song and as I reflected on what it means to find hiding place as a queerBlack non-binary person, I just remember weeping. *Where were these safe places for me as a kid? In my home? Family? In the church? In my community?* As I got older, these places became more visible and accessible to me. Places where I could be both queer and Black, "masc." Where I could be all. In the music, I found myself in one service riffing on the phrase "safe haven." I use vocal percussion to kick out the bass drum sounds, layering melodic phrases on top. Here I conjure a (quare) space for myself that my ancestors conjured at the hush arbors, a safe space to queer my theology away from those who dehumanize and judge me. Using music as a resource, as holding, and as a field of protective energy, I embodied that which was/is affirming to my soul, mind, body, and spirit; that which affirms the wholeness and wellbeing of my Black life.

Theme 7. "Prodigal Son/Sun" / *returning to self-love*

One of the most profound, meaningful moments of this whole process surrounded an old cassette tape that I found in my personal archive with the words "Prodigal Son" written on it (Figure 5).

Figure 5. "Prodigal Son" Sermon on Cassette and Poem



Note. Image of yellow cassette tape

I came across this tape while looking for a recording of my first "trial" sermon (age 16), but couldn't find it. The title seemed relevant for the project, but I honestly assumed that the preacher (on tape) was one of my former pastors. Until one day, one random day, I popped that tape into a portable cassette player and out of those tiny speakers came my 16- or 17-year-old voice, preaching and shouting and delivering the

good word. I was SHOCKED and almost speechless. My stomach turned, my jaw dropped, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. The fervor, passion, heart, boldness, *fire*, that came through—I just couldn't believe it was me. For years, I felt like I lost some of that passion, or like I've been waiting for permission to be *that* full/fierce/free. In some ways, this paper is a re-telling and a re-writing and a queering of the prodigal son (sun) parable. The night before the final Sunday service, I listened to that old cassette tape from start to finish and made word art/doodled as I listened (Figure 6). The sermon was titled *there's no place like home*. Intriguingly, I defined home as a place of security, safety, refuge, and comfort. In the tape: our youth choir sang; I heard the voices of ministers and church members that I have not seen in decades, and some who have passed away. It brought me right back. While listening, I remember feeling anxious, at times uncomfortable, humored, surprised, and a little uneasy. It was definitely a rollercoaster of emotions. Yet, I allowed myself to be there, to feel all of that, to return with self-compassion, *self-love*, but not to push myself beyond my own spiritual, psychological limits. *Safe here*. When I moved back to New Orleans as an adult, I returned in a way that felt more *me*. I was more self-assured and grounded in my truth.

Theme 8. (Be)coming/Outness / *the exile and the promised land*

In 2012, two years after I moved to Philadelphia to complete a music therapy internship, I felt a song “rise up” in me that needed a way of escape, a song that spoke to my coming out experience in the Black Church. That song was/is called “Out.” I recorded “Out” live in one take in my Southwest Philly living room, and have since changed a few lyrics. An excerpt of these lyrics is included below. I have never published or released this song, outside of playing it for a few trusted friends here and there, or bouncing it around people's email inboxes. Over the course of this project, I revisited the song. I listened, reflected, and allowed the music and the story to wash over me. The instrumentation is simply voice and acoustic guitar. During data collection, I intended (desired) to improvise along with the song to create a new conversation and piece of music, but again due to time constraints was unable to do so. Negotiating “outness” in a Black church or other religious context is nuanced, and everyone's journey is different and their own. I respect that. For me, coming out led to a lot of loss, rejection, and negative reactions from some of my closest people, but, over time, also a lot of beautiful and life-giving experiences, more than I could have imagined. That said, I recognize that a number of Black queer folks choose not to disclose their sexuality, orientation, or identity for reasons related to safety, agency, family dynamics, or something else entirely. Family support and connection to the LGBTQ+ community tend to be strong predictors of outness for LGBTQ+ individuals (Pastrana, 2014). Hailey and colleagues (2020) cite chosen and created families as a protective factor against racialized trauma and anti-LGBTQ+ oppression among African American sexual and gender minority youth. *Chosen kin* is important in the Black community/the church, which is why rejection from these spaces, Black Faith Spaces, can be so distressing and devastating for queerBlack folk.

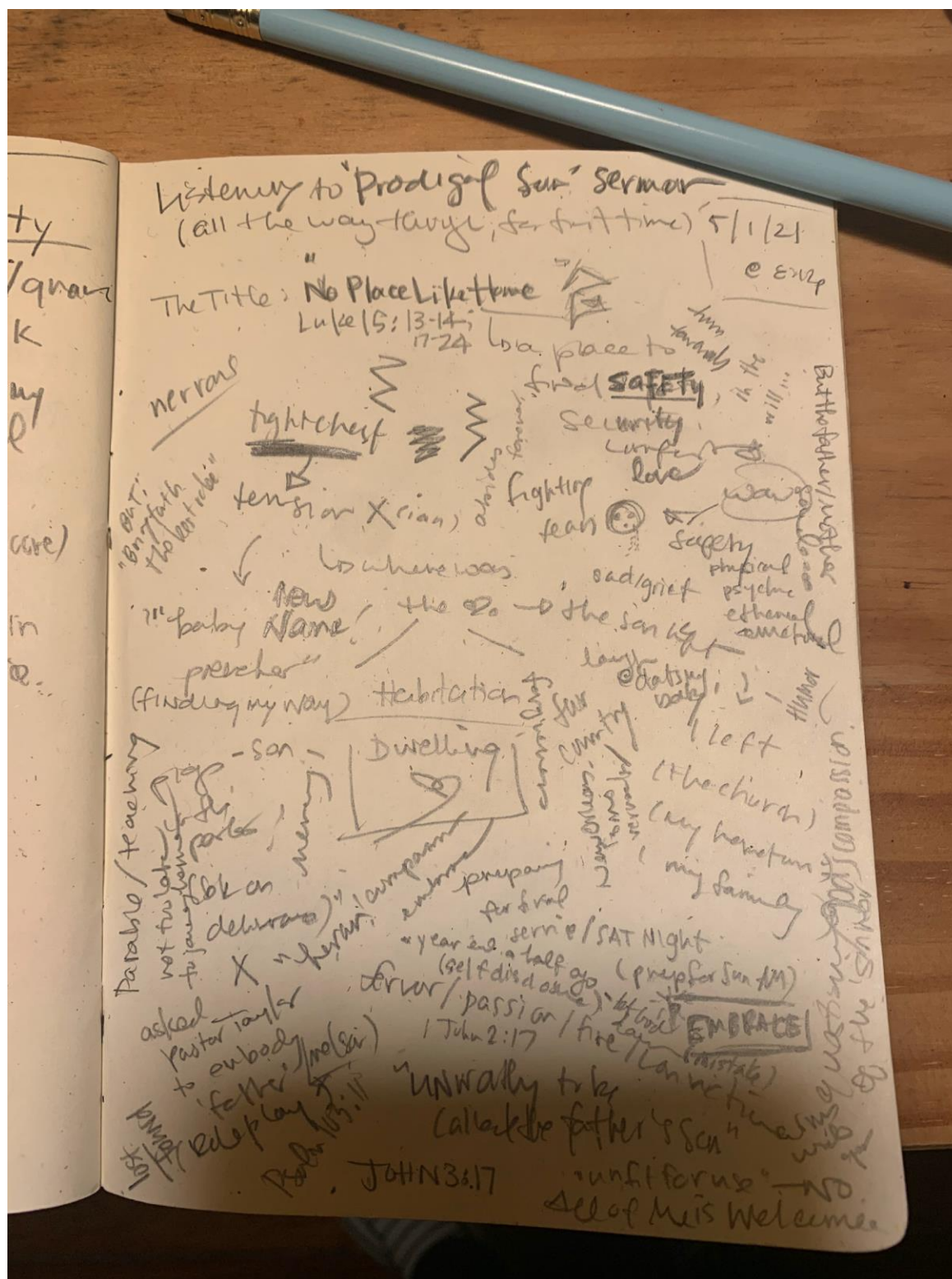
Excerpt from “Out” (lyrics):

Verse 1

Far away from southern church bells
But living ghosts they linger here
Taunting my wayward soul
Damning my love with their fear
Couching their curses in skewed bible verses
Shouting their fervent prayers
As I fall from the throne of grace

-author, “Out,” original song, 2012

Figure 6. Reflexive Word Art - free form writing/doodling



Note: Handwritten doodle/word art, sketched while listening to the sermon on cassette titled "There's No Place Like Home" based on the "prodigal son" bible story.

Narrative Playlist / *the "psalms"*

When thinking about how to best disseminate the arts-based findings derived from this study, I initially considered a musical album, EP, or performance, but eventually determined that a Soundcloud playlist (audio) would be most fitting for this stage of the process. Thus, I chose to conceptualize my artistic response as a *narrative playlist*, in that it is one that tells a story. Like a concept music album, where the collection of songs or tracks are built around a core or central theme (i.e., lyrical, compositional, or story-based), this playlist is modeled after that structure. As previously mentioned, the playlist (titled Come As You Are) was curated with care and intention. It includes audio fragments of raw materials deemed most salient and relevant to my research questions and the issues at hand. Most of the audio fragments that are included on the playlist were sourced from select Sunday Services though a couple were pulled from archived materials.

A link to the composite playlist is embedded above in the Data Analysis and Interpretation section, and as previously mentioned, links to individual tracks are available below in Table 1, along with detailed track information. This includes track number, track name, length, service and type from which the audio was sourced, if applicable, and a link to listen.

To note, audio files can either be played as isolated fragments using the links provided in the table or streamed sequentially on Soundcloud. Although conceived as a musical set, rather than disparate tracks, I invite readers, those meeting and touching the work in any way, to engage the material, this *offering*, as desired. In my imagination, this playlist serves as a template and demo, if you will, that lays the groundwork for a more developed and fully produced album, and eventually, a live, interactive community-based performance ritual. Nothing is set, as this is evolving, but using art to explore and activate queerBlack joy and liberation is the mark.

Table 1. *Narrative Playlist (track sequence, title/length, service number/type, and individual audio links)*

Track No.	Track Title and Length	Service Number and Type	Links to Individual Track
1	Call To Worship (1:28)	SS #3	Link to Audio
2	<i>Interlude: Couldn't Be Full (story)</i> (1:56)	SS #4	Link to Audio
3	Darkest Hour (1:46)	MWS #1	Link to Audio
4	Out (6:47)	N/A	Link to Audio
5	<i>Interlude: Prodigal Son (sermon)</i> (0:53)	N/A	Link to Audio
6	Anointing (on flute) (2:32)	SS #5	Link to Audio
7	Safe Haven (2:49)	SS #3	Link to Audio
8	Doxology (0:46)	SS #4	Link to Audio
9	<i>Interlude: Benediction/Closing Prayer</i> (1:52)	SS #5	Link to Audio
10	Come As You Are (3:34)	SS #5	Link to Audio

Note. SS = Sunday Service; MWS = Mid-Week Service; N/A = not applicable

DISCUSSION / *GO TELL IT*

This study was conceptualized as an arts-based autoethnographic account of my lived experience as a former queer youth growing up and coming out in the Black Church. Through a series of self-guided, music-based rituals (Sunday Services), I explored my identity at the intersections of race, sexuality, and faith and investigated my relationship to safety. Over the course of five consecutive weeks, I engaged in a dynamic creative process designed to mirror my previous worship experiences in the Black Church. Drawing from the cultural aesthetics, musical lineages, and liturgical technologies of my religious upbringing, I reinterpreted traditional Protestant hymns, sermons, biblical scripture, and Black gospel music, and invoked Black literature.

After working on this project for several months, I felt incredibly humbled, enlivened, nourished, and reconnected with the power of music as a healing medium. I was a bit ambitious — and nervous — to start this process as it was my first entry point into critical arts-based inquiry, one that was very personal. When it comes to safety, as it was contextualized herein, I would say that my definition has expanded to include manifestations of courage and bravery, radical authenticity, boundary-setting, and self-compassion. In this work, safety looked like: the practice of being with / holding / caring for and tending to myself as I engaged in deep memory work. Safety looked like knowing when to slow down or adjust my pace when I became overwhelmed. During each service I gave myself room to interrogate and express my knowledges. I made choices to be with my story, some parts very painful, but when I needed to pause from the listening, the speaking, the telling, or the being told, I found a pathway and a portal through the music or the breath (praise break). I used art to respond, to carry me through to the next point in time. This allowed the memory work to be contained. Safety also looked like making sure I energetically opened and closed the space with intention for my own grounding and self-care.

Engaging in this work led to so many beautiful insights, artistic creations, and musical musings, which have certainly stimulated ideas for future projects. There is something incredibly vulnerable and intimate about sharing parts of my personal life in a research paper, particularly this story, but my hope is that others can benefit. Overall, reflecting on my coming out narratives, writing and musicking about them, has been profoundly healing. A salve. Medicine for my soul.

Clinical Implications / *alter call*

Possible implications of this study could be to encourage music therapists to recognize the inextricable link between music and African American spirituality, to identify the repercussions of toxic religious ideologies and environments on the health/wellbeing of Black LGBTQ+ persons as a function of white supremacy, and to build knowledge and skills to more effectively collaborate with Black Queer and Trans communities through the design and delivery of culturally affirming healing practices. Ultimately, music therapists who are aware of these factors, among others, may be better able to understand and optimize health for queer Black clients. This project also revealed the following as relevant to music therapy theory, research, and practice: a) personal protections b) arts-based critical inquiry as social justice and c) queerBlack Church aesthetics. In the next section, I discuss these implications in further detail, threading together ideas and resonances from my personal/professional life, existing literature, and core research findings.

Personal Protections

When I think about my work as a queerBlack gender expansive music therapist, I consider what *safety* means for me in each of the professional contexts that I traverse. Whether it be in the classroom as an educator, or as a clinical supervisor, or a practitioner myself, under what conditions am I safe to be myself without fear of physical or psychological harm, retaliation, racial/gender/sexual microaggressions or

violence? Furthermore, what does safety mean for my LGBTQ+ Black Indigenous and POC clients? What contributes to a sense of safety for these individuals, and what might be some barriers to (feeling/discerning) safety and/or full-aliveness in music therapy settings (Scrine, 2021) and in their daily lives? As previously mentioned, the Black LGBTQ+ community is not monolithic as every person brings a unique set of experiences to the therapy space. That said, I believe that music therapists have a unique opportunity to support Queer and Trans Black clients dealing with religious-based identity conflict. For instance, when working with Black sexually minoritized individuals it could be helpful to assess the ways that religious and spiritual harm, as well as spiritual coping, may be mitigating health concerns.

Critical arts-based inquiry as social justice

Music therapy has been slow to engage in social change work for Black people (Leonard, 2020) as well as LGBTQ+ service users more broadly. There is an urgent need and rather timely call for critical, innovative approaches in music therapy research, practice, theory development, and advocacy efforts to more effectively address the needs of Black communities (Norris, 2020a/2020b). Arts-based research, when enacted through a transformative research paradigm, can “reveal mechanisms of oppression with the endeavor to contribute to the liberation of those who are oppressed” (Rolsvjord & Hadley, 2016, p. 764). queerBlack folk have always used art to make room for justice (Avilez, 2020). As consistent with the goals of transformative research then, critical arts-based inquiry in tandem with (auto)ethnographic genres can serve as an important investigative vehicle to elevate our understanding of broader sociopolitical issues and contexts in which Black LGBTQ+ people are situated. Moreover, these types of research methodologies can serve to enrich researcher reflexivity and awareness and further contribute to the liberation, the living, and the thriving of oppressed groups. Finally, I maintain that arts-based autoethnography is *one* socially conscious approach to engage, synthesize, and uplift queerBlack narratives and to further amplify voices that are marginalized, erased, appropriated, or ignored.

queerBlack Church aesthetics

Although the (meta-actual) Black Church has resisted racism, it has also suffered from an “anthropological vision” that is “reactionary to the stimulus of whiteness,” and thus “lacks the breadth of creativity that a freed imaginative power brings out” (Ahiokhai, 2020, p. 9). Queering music therapy in/with/by Black LGBTQ+ communities most certainly requires an imaginative power, an embodied commitment to anti-oppressive practice (Baines, 2021), and a valuing of Black aesthetics (Norris, Lipson, & Williams, 2021). In this study, a Black Church aesthetic in particular was central to my research method and is foundational to my work with S O U L F O L K Sounds, a music and wellness practice that I started in 2018 that centers Black Queer and Trans people. During this process, it was also essential for me to engage in healing rituals that affirmed/reflected my Black *somebodiness*. Thus, the implementation of Sunday Service provided a culturally resonant way for me to reflect on my coming out story and related experiences. Most notably, using Black music and Afro-diasporic spiritual practices (Norris, 2019) connected to the Black Church helped to facilitate a more generative, meaningful experience for me overall.

Limitations and Future Research / *gaps*

Although autoethnography is a promising form of inquiry, it requires balance. Moreover, it can be hard to keep a fair amount of distance when investigating one’s own subjective experience. As this was a solo ethnography, the work can and should not be generalized as it provides a small window into *my* life and perceptions of safety as a queerBlack person living in a U.S. Southern context. Nor is it lost on me that I hold proximity to a dominant religious identity/location. This axis of privilege that I touch is important to re-articulate and here’s why. Despite the U.S. being one of the most religiously diverse countries in the

world, we live in a society where Christian hegemony is normalized and where fundamentalist Christian entities/groups function to condemn other religions or so-called non-believers. Future research could pay closer attention to within-group biases and more pluralistic experiences of individuals within LGBTQ+ Black communities, including more diverse faith affiliations, genders, abilities, and so on. For example, collaborative ethnography (Lapadat, 2017) has the potential to offer far more nuanced and wider perspectives beyond a single story. With respect to queer identity and the Black Church, predominant literature focuses on Black gay men. Less is known about the experiences of women, AFAB, or gender diverse individuals (Page et al., 2021). A deeper dive into these intersections in future research is recommended, especially given the injustices that Black women, Black femmes, and Black transgender people face daily. With respect to gender, the narratives presented in this paper primarily reflect an earlier time in my life (middle to late adolescence). For this reason, I do not delve into my experiences of cissexism/transphobia or sexism in the church in detail. Doing so feels incongruent to me currently and is thus beyond the scope of this work. There are however very explicit forms of gender-based discrimination against women, trans, and non-binary folks in Black religious life that merit further attention and care.

As music therapy clinical work with gender diverse populations increases, I hope to see music and health studies that more deeply examine the unique stressors that Black Trans people face in BIPOC communities, families, healthcare settings, Faith Spaces, and other social contexts. Lastly, time and feasibility are other factors to consider should a study like this be replicated. There was a significant amount of data that came out of this process, perhaps more than I expected. Due to personal/professional time constraints and capacity issues, I was unable to review all the materials with the level of depth I had hoped. Data derived and coded herein could be worthwhile to revisit and further examine in the future.

Conclusions & Future Directions / *benediction*

From the Civil Rights Movement to #BlackLivesMatter, the Black Church has been a beacon of hope and a bastion of social advocacy for Black people dating back to the time of slavery and beyond. Yet, for some sexually minoritized individuals it has also been a source of pain and identity conflict due to heterosexist messaging and discriminatory practices. Ethical practice in American music therapy insists that practitioners respect the dignity and rights of all persons. This includes affirming lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer clients across racial-ethnic backgrounds, class positions, genders, abilities, religious orientations, and other sociocultural identities (AMTA, 2019). In the same manner that the Black Church must reckon with the ways it has treated its queer members (Crawley, 2021), so must the field of music therapy, a profession dominated by White cisgender women, and one that has benefited from the musical cultures of Black people, of Queer and Trans Black people, our language, sounds, and aesthetics, without always fully understanding or honoring its history or significance (Reed & Brooks, 2017). Although Black queer narratives are grossly underrepresented in current music therapy literature, I remain hopeful for the development of critical scholarship and queerBlack authorship that compassionately and creatively elevates Black LGBTQ+ voices and artistry “in the city and in the field.”

When this journey began, I set out to investigate the impacts of homophobia/heterosexism in the Black Church on my wellbeing and sense of safety, to intuit the living/emergent “order of service” within my queerBlack body, and to explore the ways I could reclaim my sacredness through learned practices of the Black Church. Arts-based autoethnography offered a fitting structure and framework for me to follow. I used these methodological tools to (de)construct my lived experience as a former LGBTQ+ youth growing up and coming out in the Black Church and to critically evaluate how these experiences inform who I am, how I embody my is-ness, discern safety, and how all of these things shape my practice as a music therapist. The Sunday Services, an intentional culturally resonant process, ritual space, and Black liturgy, was how I chose to fill that out, to give it body, breath, and life. What resulted was cathartic, liberating, and at times quite joyful. As previously underscored, it is an ethical imperative that we as music therapists affirm the liberation and wholeness of all Black lives, including members of non-dominant sexual and gender identity groups and those most marginalized among us.

So, consider this an altar call. An invitation to make our professional, academic, and clinical spaces, wherever we inhabit, a more socially just, safer, braver context for Black LGBTQ+ people, to *queer* the way we do and *be* music therapy. As a music therapist who is also Black and queer, I reflect on what it means to activate the meta-actual Black Church within my being, to embody radical authenticity, and to co-create Trans-denominational portals of possibility and full-being soul aliveness amidst a tumultuous sociopolitical climate of prejudice and discrimination, victimization and violence. At a time when Black bodies continue to be under attack and our communities threatened, I wholeheartedly affirm, decree and declare, that Black Lives Matter, that Queer and Trans Black Lives Matter, and that our lives are indeed: *Sacred*.

And now, may we remember who we are. May we inhabit our full-being aliveness. May we conjure spaces of hope, freedom, community, belonging, healing, joy, and refuge. May we ever affirm y/our queerBlack somebodiness. Henceforth, now, and forever more.

-a prayer for/of [queerBlack] somebodiness, author

Invitation to Full Being Discipleship

(excerpt of “Come as You Are” from Sunday service #5, vocal looping)

*Come as You are.
Come as you are
Oh, Come as you are
Fierce as you are
Love as you are.
Joy as you are.*

(original, from Sunday Service #5)

Doxology/Benediction

(excerpt of “Doxology” from Sunday Service #4, accapella, vocal)

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise [them] all creatures here below
Praise [them] above thee heavenly host
Praise Father/Mother son/sun
And Holy Ghost
Amen.*

(adapted by author, from AME Doxology)

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