

Melanated Ga(y)ze

A Reflection on Counternarratives of Iowa's Black LGBTQ Lives via Podcast Analysis

by

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ABSTRACT

Black LGBTQ people living in Des Moines, Iowa face challenges living at the intersection of Blackness and LGBTQ status. Critical race theory helps situate the context for understanding the lived experiences of Black LGBTQ individuals within broader systems, exposing the impact of societal expectations on identity formation and resources available to community members. Four interviewees shared their ideals and areas of opportunity that exist to strengthen resources available to Black LGBTQ people living in Iowa. This research study used an action research methodology paired with counternarrative analysis to guide the interview process. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes within and across participant interviews. Each of the interviews was edited into a podcast episode for the researcher's 'Porch Tea w/Destinee' podcast. The overarching themes that emerged from the podcast were that (1) navigating Blackness within Iowa communities is a challenge and (2) community learning is essential to understanding identities and lived experiences.

This dissertation is dedicated to the participants of the research study: Alexandra St. James, Ezra Krivolavy, Deronta Spencer, and Eugenia Stanton; my grandmother, Mary A. Buchanan; my grandfather, Robert E. C. Buchanan; my grandmother, Brenda Mae Harris; my soul sister, Yazmine (Mila) DeMournay; the kids and families of the Carpenter blocks (special shout out to siblings Kaleb, Jordan, Markus, and Brielle) of the Drake neighborhood within Des Moines, Iowa; my first house, “Old Oakie”; and my friends and family (special shout-out to my father, Alvin Harris, my mother, Natasha Jones, my sister, Amber Harris, my brother, Spencer Harris, Uncle Sean, Aunt Tina, and Aunt Teri) who checked up on me. This is also dedicated to those families who survived slavery, sharecropping, and continuous turmoil so that, generations later, I could defend this dissertation as a part of their living legacy.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Destinee's Story

My story centers around my journey navigating the intersection of cisgender female identity, lesbian identity, southern roots, and Black identity while living in the Midwest. I was a shy and awkward child with a curious outlook on life. I questioned my life's purpose at 8 years old and wondered what I was meant to do on this earth. Yes, that is a rather heavy question at any age, but I needed to know what I was supposed to do and who I was supposed to be. During my formative years, I noticed that others around me possessed an ease that I did not have. I noticed children playing freely, adults carrying on conversations, and nature seeming to embrace its system of being without extraneous effort. During my transition from adolescence to adulthood, I explored what it meant to be a Black woman who was predominantly raised by southern grandparents living in the Midwest. I was taught that strength was a primary value for Black women—strength composed of a combination of family connection, education, style and dress, thinking fast on your feet, and being hyperaware of surroundings. I possess strength based on that definition; however, the strength I attained was not paired with the wisdom of community connections that I craved, and therefore I lacked confidence and skill in holding space for my whole self that encompassed both my Blackness and my lesbian identity. As Black elders did not openly talk about sex or sexuality in a positive way, I explored sex and sexuality in a secretive manner.

This project was proposed after several changes to my dissertation topic; one move from Washington state to Iowa; my unemployment for nearly a year; news of Black Trans women being murdered; countless numbers of Indigenous and Black women going missing; numerous, flagrant Black and Asian hate crimes; Breonna Taylor's, George Floyd's, and Dreasjon Reed's murders by the police; national and international protests proclaiming that Black Lives Matter; the introduction of COVID-19 all over the world; quarantine; and a radical spiritual awakening that I am a bad mama jama in *any* situation, to paraphrase Carl Carlton's hit R&B title, 'She's a Bad Mama Jama' (Carlton, 1981). This research project blended my personal and volunteer contexts. I wanted to feel connected with and contribute to a community that allowed for me and others to embrace and feel seen living in our intersectionality. The research design used in the research study allowed me to feel connected to a community and to invite others to engage in a dialogue around their own unique experiences.

During the national quarantine period of 2020, I had discussions with my (now-ex) wife and friends about how they were keeping themselves entertained. The answers were largely subscriptions to popular media streaming platforms like Netflix, Hulu, Disney+, Paramount+ (formerly CBS All Access), and others. However, after several months of watching so much television, my eyes were tired of looking at screens. I was fortunate to be among those who were able to work from home during that period. Working from home meant bringing work into my living space by migrating my work laptop, acquiring a business cell phone, and coordinating daily and weekly routines with my wife to occupy our personal space as both a living and a working space. What was

unspoken was the sharp and sudden increase of screen as a part of the new process of working from home. I began to explore alternative modes of entertainment outside of television. In the fall of 2020, I started listening to podcasts and learning about the perks of such a platform. I was able to complete chores and professional work by tuning into podcast episodes. Somehow, podcasts felt more like a person or groups of people speaking directly to me by letting me in on a secret conversation. This is consistent with Robson's (2021) argument that "the intimate, on-demand, and idiosyncratic dimensions of podcasting afforded listeners opportunities for dependable, free, customizable sociality in lieu of their 'normal' lives" (p. 389).

It was around September 2020 that I wanted to create my own podcast, 'Porch Tea w/Destinee.' I wanted to speak with guests about topics relevant to Iowa Black LGBTQ livelihoods. I learned that there were not podcasts that invited Black LGBTQ individuals to engage in or listen to authentic conversations about what it means to exist at so many intersections at the Iowa state and local level. I love to hear life stories, volunteer with community organizations, and provide safe spaces for people to be authentically themselves. The formation of this podcast would serve not only as means to archive stories for Iowa's Black LGBTQ voices but would highlight their actual lived experiences in a way that encourages, honors, and celebrates individuals who are comfortable with sharing their story.

Storytelling to understand people and cultures is not a recent phenomenon. However, with heightened public awareness of Black, Brown, and Indigenous women going missing, being murdered, and being trafficked, there has been a hunger among the

general public to learn more from the survivors of such violence and others who want to raise awareness of the specifics of Black existence. These stories are increasingly shared through blogs, news articles, news shows, radio, and podcasts.

I spent the years 2020 and 2021 reflecting on what drives me and reevaluating my priorities. I started by asking core questions like *What is it that I want versus what society tells me I should want? How do I navigate the waters of seeking out a therapist? Do I have healthy boundaries?* and *Who is determining what is healthy for me?* These questions were shaking the very foundation of how I viewed and experienced life, the foundation drawn from familial structures, societal messages about Black women and LGBTQ people, and intergenerational communication patterns. After I asked myself those questions, I had an interesting realization about the voices that were guiding me: The loudest voices that were guiding me and setting my priorities were primarily external, with my own voice as the softest; the voices guiding me were coming from family, academia, media, workplaces, volunteer sites, and—so very quietly—my own.

After reflecting on my realization that these external voices were steering me on my journey of career and personal development, I wanted to learn about how the external voices became internalized. These two primary questions popped up: *How did the external voices persist even as they clashed with my own internal voice?* and *Should those external voices continue to guide me?* These questions served as my muse to researching within the Arizona State University's Online Library database and stumbling upon the literature surrounding motivation, specifically self-determination theory (Deci, 1971). Self-determination theory states that people are either intrinsically or extrinsically

motivated (Deci, 1971). Intrinsic motivation is understood as being driven by what feels desirable internally, as opposed to extrinsic motivation, which is led by external rewards like pay and praise from others. However, as the primary contributor to self-determination theory, Edward Deci, began to further explore the human psyche, he noticed that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are not as black and white as he initially assumed. For instance, an individual receiving high praise and/or high-performance rankings for a well-executed work project may both feel good about themselves (intrinsic) and receive a bonus or a reward of sorts (extrinsic). However, the internal reward of feeling good about themselves can become dependent on external validation in the form of the reward or bonus. The repeated process of equating high performance with high value of self reinforces the idea that external voices, not internal voices, set the tone for how one feels about oneself.

After familiarizing myself with self-determination theory, I realized that external voices had been guiding me for the majority of my life. I pursued my undergraduate degree because family and society told me that I would not fare well enough without it. I kept my hair long and straightened after the media, family, and certain workplaces told me that I needed to wear a professional hairstyle, which at the time did not include my natural hair. The media led me to accept that thinness, lighter skin tones, quieter voices, and certain foods ought to be the standard, even though I recognized that the most influential people in my life were darker skinned, not thin, and outspoken. I was conditioned to listen to voices outside of me and it hit me that, for the longest time, I had no idea that my voice was left out of my personal, social, and career choices.

There were so many questions I could have kept asking myself, but I settled on the idea that I wanted to ask questions of others who may have found themselves in a comparable situation. I am a naturally inquisitive person, always asking questions. This research is a culmination of my efforts to learn more about myself in relation to others, to learn more about others in relation to a larger group, and to examine how these discoveries might lead to a deeper understanding of how society shapes the multiple realities that people experience, negotiate, and resist.

This dissertation study provided the framework for the ‘Porch Tea w/Destinee’ podcast, describes its development, and documents the initial stories shared by Black LGBTQ folks living in Iowa, as well as the reflections of the action researcher—me, Destinee Woodris (she/they). The first two chapters and the final chapter follow the standard dissertation format, whereas the remaining four chapters (Chapters 3-6) are a blend of both traditional format and podcast episodes. In other words, this dissertation utilizes a blended, multimodal approach to fulfill doctoral requirements.

The next sections of this chapter provide an overview of the national, state, and personal context for this dissertation study, as well as describing the problem of practice, intervention, and research questions.

National Context

LGBTQ BIPOC in the United States

Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) who are in the lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) community are by no means a monolith but collectively have had disparate treatment living at the intersection of the

BIPOC and LGBTQ communities. The *2018 LGBTQ Youth Survey* distributed by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC, 2018) was completed by 12,000 respondents between the ages of 13 and 17 years. The results highlighted that LGBTQ-identified BIPOC face discrimination from both the LGBTQ communities and other BIPOC. For instance, of the LGBTQ youth of color surveyed, 80% experienced racism and 94% believed that racism affects the people they know. It was also reported that the majority of the surveyed youth did not see positive images of LGBTQ BIPOC in either the media or everyday life.

A 2020 publication by the Movement Advancement Project, *Where We Call Home: LGBT People of Color*, reports that an estimated 2.9 to 3.8 million LGBT BIPOC and families reside in the Midwest, primarily in rural areas (MAP, 2019). People who live in rural areas, including both BIPOC and non BIPOC, face a lack of resources like “fewer culturally competent healthcare providers, the ongoing opioid and HIV epidemics, over-policing and criminalization, and fewer educational, workforce development, and employment opportunities” (MAP, 2019, p. 1). These challenges are exacerbated for BIPOC by two coexisting realities: living as a BIPOC while simultaneously living as an LGBTQ individual in rural and midwestern settings.

After reflecting on the findings of both the HRC youth survey and the MAP report, I wondered how many youth and adults surveyed about positive role models might have identified RuPaul—a Black drag queen turned mainstream success as an accomplished author, television host of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, and public speaker—or Lena Waithe, actress and director of the hit show *The Chi*, or Janelle Monae, Black pansexual actress and songstress, or Laverne Cox, Black trans woman actress of Netflix’s

hit show *Orange Is the New Black*. There are so many LGBTQ folks I can identify who are performers, designers, entertainers, and executives. Important questions arose in my mind: *How are individual stories captured and shared to promote dialogue and highlight experiences?* and *Would knowledge of the everyday lived experiences of LGBTQ BIPOC assist communities in providing better care and resources for these populations?*

Within the LGBTQ community, BIPOC have experiences that set them apart from the broader group. Mainstream media streams shows like *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *Dragula*, *Glee*, and others show BIPOC in performance or entertainment fields. However, LGBTQ BIPOC livelihood outside of performance or entertainment is under researched.

Additionally, there are cultural differences within and between LGBTQ BIPOC. For instance, those who identify as Black LGBTQ individuals have experiences and cultural values that set them apart from Latinx LGBTQ individuals. Even within the Black LGBTQ group, there are differences in experiences between lighter-skin and darker-skin individuals, as well as differences in cultural norms between different regions of the country. As an individual who identifies as Black and LGBTQ, I wanted to learn more about how the intersection of Blackness and LGBTQ affect our relationships, working lives, and personal lives.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, the term coined by Crenshaw (1989), is the idea that a person can hold both a status of power and marginalized identities simultaneously. For instance, a Black woman who is in the upper class is holding both a position of power, as someone in the upper class, and two marginalized identities, Black and woman. My understanding

of intersectionality as a concept has adapted over the years. Currently, I understand intersectionality to mean existing with multiple identities and navigating a society while holding space for each identity. This understanding presupposes that one recognizes all of their identities, overt and covert, as they in certain instances develop over time. After deciding that I wanted to focus specifically on Black LGBTQ individuals for this study, I searched for articles and reports that would assist me in learning more about the livelihood, hardships, and social impact of the intersection between Black identities and sexual orientation. Thankfully, I was able to locate UCLA School of Law's Williams Institute online resources. The institute published a report called *Black LGBT Adults in the US: LGBT Well-Being at the Intersection of Race* (Choi et al., 2021). This report discusses economic and other disparities for those who identify as both Black and LGBT as compared to Black non-LGBT adults. The geographic distribution of the 1.2 million Black LGBT individuals is skewed toward the South: 51% live in the South, 18% live in the Midwest, 10.8% live in the West, and 19.8% live in the Northeast (Choi et al., 2021). Black LGBT adults are more likely to be unemployed and experience economic hardship than Black non-LGBT adults. The report also identified more frequent mental and physical health issues for Black LGBT adults, as well as higher instances of discrimination. On a similar note, Fields et al. (2022) explain that a combination of stigma and social marginalization are at the root of health disparities for Black LGBTQ individuals, conceptualized by the socioecological model. The socioecological model states that personal and environmental factors contribute to the overall health and

psychological wellness of individuals and groups of people (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Egan et al., 2011).

Black LGBTQ-Serving Institutions

Thankfully, there are organizations that exist explicitly to provide resources and opportunities to Black LGBTQ people throughout the United States. Black LGBTQ-serving institutions exist because nonprofit leaders and stakeholders recognized a need to provide resources, like a safe place to hang out, leadership/professional development opportunities, and a means to connect with partners who seek to understand the plight of Black LGBTQ folks. Admirable outcomes for Black LGBTQ-serving institutions are the creation of anti-discriminatory policies and procedures in the workplace or partnerships on projects that raise awareness of barriers that Black LGBTQ people are likely to face and direct resources toward overcoming or eliminating those barriers.

While these Black LGBTQ-centering institutions can be helpful, there are a limited number of them. Also, most of them exist in geographically defined locations, and while a brick-and-mortar building is a great way to connect, lack of transportation and proximity can serve as a barrier for some Black LGBTQ individuals to accessing their services.

Black LGBTQ Podcasts

Podcasting as a means to connect and reach an audience is a solid supplement to a brick-and-mortar institution. Podcasts allow listeners to encounter material at their own pace and have instant access to the communities they choose to be a part of, providing an accessible alternative to finding a community in a brick-and-mortar building that might

be out of reach. After narrowing my research focus to the Black LGBTQ experience, I sought out Black LGBTQ-centered podcasts with Black LGBTQ podcast hosts. These podcasts provide great insight into the livelihood and perspectives of folks who identify as Black and LGBTQ. Each of the podcast hosts speaks from a place of lived experience and explores the focal areas of their podcast with a unique rhythm and cadence. For instance, the podcast ‘Stop! Horror Time’ is hosted by two Black gay males who talk about horror films from their perspective.

State Context

Iowa LGBTQ Population

According to the *Adult LGBT Population in the United States Fact Sheet* (Conron & Goldberg, 2020), sourcing data from Gallup, of the total population in Iowa, 3.6% of adults 18 years and older are LGBTQ, roughly 87,000 individuals. The UCLA School of Law Williams Institute *LGBT Data & Demographics* dashboard (2020) reports data disaggregated by socioeconomic indicators, demographics such as child-raising, age, and gender (male or female). Most of Iowa’s LGBTQ individuals are female, not raising children, and between the ages of 18 and 24, though the median age of an LGBTQ person is 38.1. The Williams Institute’s study did not provide demographic breakdown of race for the state of Iowa, so it is difficult to determine the exact racial breakdown of the LGBTQ population that resides in Iowa. Still, it was found that 20% of Iowa’s LGBTQ surveyed population identified as BIPOC.

Iowa LGBTQ-Centering Organizations

There are LGBTQ-centering organizations in each region of the state, but the majority of the resources for LGBTQ individuals reside in Des Moines, the state’s capital. Table 1 lists LGBTQ-serving organizations within Iowa.

Iowa is composed of 99 counties, many of which are rural. A report by the Williams Institute (2020) states that 20% of Iowa’s LGBTQ population identify as BIPOC; however, it was not clear how many LGBTQ BIPOC live in each county, and even less is known about what type of support they need. State-level data on the type of assistance needed and received by LGBTQ BIPOC and families is also severely lacking. Without such data, it is challenging to formulate an effective strategy to provide resources to the LGBTQ BIPOC, yet the reports and data provided by the Movement Advancement Project (2020) lead me to the understanding that Iowa is not unique in the Midwest in the challenges faced by its LGBTQ BIPOC.

Table 1

LGBTQ-Serving Institutions in Iowa

City	Name of Organization	Focus	Scope	Year Established
Ames	Ames Pride	Youth and adults	Local	2018
Cedar Rapids	CRPride	Youth and adults	Local	1992
Davenport	Quad Cities Pride	Youth and adults	Local	2008
Des Moines	Iowa Safe Schools	Youth	State	2002
Des Moines	One Iowa	Youth and adults	State	2005
Des Moines	Capital City Pride	Youth and adults	Local	1984

Des Moines	Iowa Queer Communities of Color Coalition	Youth and adults	State	2019
Des Moines	Pride Center DSM	Youth and adults	Local	1980
Des Moines	Sunseed Community	Youth and adults	State	2020
Sioux City	Siouxland Pride Alliance	Youth and adults	Local	2012

Personal Context

My Experience on the West Coast

After my wife, Leslie, and I graduated from Emporia State University in Kansas, we decided to move to Washington State, go to grad school there together, get married, and be authentically us. We held hands in public and introduced each other as ‘wife’ or ‘spouse.’ It felt so freeing for us to be who we were without a looming sense of fear about what other people thought of us as an interracial lesbian relationship. We were able to work without harassment because of our marriage or race. I was respected for my work contributions and had insurance, solid transportation, and a safe place to live. But eventually the Midwest called us back. Before we moved back to the Midwest, my wife and I shared with each other that we were grateful for our time in Washington and the opportunity for us to develop as younger professionals and newlyweds, and become comfortable with our authentic nature individually. I made some great friends who were White, Black, gay, trans, of faith, agnostic, funny, serious, and at varying levels within the university at which I worked.

My Experience in the Midwest

Our experience on the West Coast was short lived as we wanted to get back to the Midwest to be closer to our nuclear families. My wife and I moved to Des Moines, Iowa in 2018. We were welcomed by a polar vortex and a dirty apartment. Still, we were excited to be back home. I was enrolled in spring-semester courses and applying for university jobs. I applied for several jobs to no avail, always a finalist but never the final candidate. I decided to branch out and try my hand at nonprofit directorships after a hiring manager recruited me. Again, I was a finalist but was not selected as the top candidate. By that point, my wife was working two jobs and we were burning through my savings and credit cards. I could not understand why someone with a master's degree pursuing a doctorate was having a difficult time securing employment. Around that time, I took a survey administered by the Iowa Queer Communities of Color Coalition (IQCCC), which I found embedded in an article titled "Iowa Native Shares How Her Race and Sexuality Blurs Lines" in the online version of *The Des Moines Register*. The survey was intended to identify the needs of LGBTQ BIPOC living in Iowa. I took the survey and contacted the survey administrators to learn more about how to get involved with the IQCCC. Eventually, I secured employment with the Iowa Department of Public Health as a project evaluator within the Bureau of Substance Abuse; however, my research took place in a volunteer context.

Volunteer Context

Volunteer Roles

I served on several boards, councils, and committees within my Iowa community, including the IQCCC, the City of Des Moines LGBT Advisory Council (LGBTAC),

Primary Health Care’s Prevention Advisory Board (PAB), and Capital City Pride’s Board of Directors. These organizations allowed me to expand my understanding of what resources exist for LGBTQ BIPOC in Iowa.

Role Within IQCCC

My volunteer role within IQCCC was as ‘the plug.’ I was charged with tracking local-, state-, and national-level partners, powering community engagement by seeking out opportunities to collaborate. This role was a heavy lift for an organization composed mainly of the executive board. Human rights commissions throughout the state had voiced support in advancing IQCCC’s mission. My role was to sustain existing and forge new relationships with organizations and individuals who might serve as allies, collaborative partners, volunteers, donors, and sponsors.

Role Within City of Des Moines LGBTAC

The City of Des Moines’ LBG TAC is predominantly concerned with promoting LGBTQ-friendly housing and economic equity. This council is under the umbrella of the Civil and Human Rights Commission of Des Moines and is composed of several members of the LGBTQ community living, working, or attending school in Des Moines. My role was to connect the city with community organizations and individuals who would be willing to share their experiences concerning housing in Des Moines.

Role Within Primary Health Care’s PAB

The PAB is composed of individuals who may have HIV/AIDS, want to learn more about HIV/AIDS, have deep connection to their respective communities, and enjoy collaborating with a team driven by promoting safer sex practices. I served as a general

board member who assisted in the coordination of planning and execution of community events.

Role Within Capital City Pride Board of Directors

Capital City Pride of Des Moines is a nonprofit responsible for the annual pride parade in Des Moines. My role as the director of Community, Diversity, and Education (CDE) was multifaceted. I led a team that organized the Mr. Ms. Mx. pageant, the speaker series, storytellers, the pride parade, and the pet parade. In particular, I took responsibility for overseeing the delivery of the speaker series. Each month, I negotiated contracts, coordinated schedules, and facilitated virtual and/or in-person discussions with various speakers. My team showcased stories of the LGBTQ communities. Yet, I noticed that Black and Brown voices were not as loud as those of the rest of the community.

Reflection on Volunteer Roles

Each of the volunteer roles I held contained either an indirect or a direct responsibility for communicating stories of the broader LGBTQ community to the general public. However, it was the role I had with Capital City Pride that allowed me, as a part of the monthly speaker series program, to ask speakers to share parts of their stories that were impactful to them. Most of the speakers I interviewed were either women or nonbinary individuals who identified as Black or Brown. The other volunteer roles I occupied did not have the audience engagement that the Capital City Pride's speaker series provided. A lot of the audience and board feedback that I received was that we needed to hear and learn about more Black LGBTQ stories. This resonated with me,

as I have a personal interest in learning more about how stories and experiences shape the society in which we live.

Through reflecting on each of my volunteer roles, I was able to narrow down my research focus and brainstorm what next steps I would take to position myself as both a researcher and an engaged listener within this research project.

Problem of Practice

Currently, the Des Moines LGBTQ community does not have a platform explicitly for Black LGBTQ folks to share their stories. I explored the various state/local nonprofit and for-profit businesses that center Black LGBTQ experiences, as well as LGBTQ archives of digital content that showcase experiences in Des Moines or surrounding cities, but noticed that there was not language specifically in the mission statements of any organizations to address social inequalities by collecting and sharing stories of the Black LGBTQ community specifically. I chose to focus on Black voices in this research study to test a strategy for how other researchers, research practitioners, and/or volunteers may be able to engage with other BIPOC communities. My desire to reach a potential audience distributed across rural communities as well as cities made podcasting an appealing and potentially popular strategy for my innovation.

Innovation: Podcasting as a Tool for Knowledge-Building and Change

After reflecting on the problem of practice, familiar Black LGBTQ podcasts, and my roles as both a researcher and an engaged community member, podcasting seemed

like a great opportunity for the audience, including me, to learn more about Black LGBTQ lives in Iowa. On the one hand, Kincaid et al. (2020) argue that podcasting adds additional depth to educational research due to the audience's ability to hear the tone and inflection of researchers' and participants' voices that are otherwise lost in written research. On the other hand, podcasting poses challenges for the research process and design. Kincaid et al. (2020) argue that it is necessary for researchers and participants to have a shared understanding of the goals of podcast episodes to ensure the success of the intervention. Podcasts serve a unique role in adding voice and emotion to research. Asynchronous learning opportunities created by podcasts can reach potential audiences anywhere in the world with access to internet service.

The first podcast I listened to regularly was 'And That's Why We Drink' (Schulz & Schiefer, 2019). This podcast blends true crime and supernatural storytelling. The two hosts, one who identifies as a lesbian and the other as heterosexual, read audience-supplied true crime and supernatural stories and discuss their reactions to those stories. Additionally, the podcast hosts share personal experiences with listeners prior to reading the stories. I found myself cleaning the house, driving on long stretches of road, and winding down for the night while listening. After listening to this podcast for a few months, I found myself wondering what type of questions or topics I would want to discuss if I were a host. Given my unique perspective, framed by my personal, professional, and volunteer experiences, I was most interested in understanding the intersection of Black and LGBTQ identities and connecting with others who might be interested in learning more about their own identity transformations.

In September 2020, the idea to develop my own podcast emerged. I found after numerous conversations on my porch—for the sake of COVID safety—with strangers, close acquaintances, friends, and family members that people were hungry to delve deeper into critical dialogues about pain points, sources of joy, and everything in between. ‘Porch Tea w/Destinee’ emerged as the name for a podcast co-created by me and my audience. I was eager to develop this podcast because I was interested in hearing community stories and engaging in dialogues about intersectionality, community engagement, familial development, and intergenerational learning, with the hope of understanding a bit more about human experiences.

The Origin Story of the ‘Porch Tea w/Destinee’ Podcast

‘Porch Tea w/Destinee’ is a podcast born out of people sharing pieces of their life with me while sitting on my porch. When my wife and I bought our house in the Drake neighborhood of Des Moines, Iowa in April 2020, I knew immediately that the porch needed to be fixed and wanted that to be the first house project completed. It probably wasn’t the most practical project to start with; it would have made more sense to address the plumbing issues, the lighting fixtures, or the foundation walls. Yet, when I saw that porch, I knew it would be important to fix up.

Porch culture is a staple of the South, and to a lesser extent the Midwest. It is home to conversations that begin, “Hey, there! How’s your momma and them?” or “Did you hear what happened at the city council meeting last night?” Community conversations stemming from being visible to neighbors is critical to community-

building. The porch allows for people to see their neighbors and make themselves available to the possibility of making connections and strengthening community bonds.

We started the porch repair project in the early summer of 2020, and it was completed toward the end of the summer. During that time, George Floyd was murdered, on May 25, 2020. George Floyd's horrific murder brought back the pain of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Sean Reed, Philando Castile, and countless other Black women and Black men being murdered or going missing. The COVID-19 pandemic was still novel, a looming economic crisis was ever-present, public perception and fear of police intervention was increasing, and the era of social media captured overwhelming evidence of social injustice. The marches, protests, and drive-by threats of White supremacists promising to bomb and shoot up my neighborhood because it was predominantly Black and Brown was so much to shoulder. There were days I was afraid to leave my house. KKK flyers were making a resurgence, and I was worried about being able to protect myself and my wife. All the while, I was trying to find the energy and capacity to write this dissertation and be a supportive spouse, sister, daughter, granddaughter, and friend. And through it all, I was grappling with the fact that I was a Black woman married to a White woman in the Midwest during a period of social unrest. It got to be heavy. I remember thinking how much I needed that porch. I needed to sit, watch the birds fly in the trees, see neighbors walk around, hear cars drive by, hear music playing. I needed a sense of comfort from the community of which I was a part.

Finally, during Labor Day weekend 2020, some of the neighborhood children asked, "Ms. Destinee, can we have a block party?" By that point, those kids saw me

every day after school sitting on my porch with my laptop. I became a consistent presence in their life in a short amount of time. Somehow, they perceived how sensitive I was to listening to community members, including children. On October 24, 2020, we had our first block party, a collaborative effort between neighbors, the Drake neighborhood association, and Drake University. It was cold that day, but it reinforced the notion that porch culture is about still doing the damn thing! We needed that Block party; it was a way for the community to see that there were members who wanted and needed to feel seen. It warmed my heart to see Black and Brown children freely playing in the street, their caregivers smiling, and people forming new memories.

In October 2020, Yazmine DeMornay, the performer, cousin, sister, auntie, mother, mentor, and friend to so many in the Black LGBTQ and broader LGBTQ community stopped by my porch. She told me a bit about her life, how her grandmother and mother accepted her for who she was: a gorgeous Black trans woman who dated men and performed at the Garden Show Lounge, a gay/drag bar in Des Moines. We sat on the porch together, physically distanced and wearing masks, for nearly four hours. She shared so much about her experience in Des Moines, how she was a bit rougher around the edges than indicated in her current reputation as being a strong yet quiet force in the local Des Moines community. I made my mind up that day that folks needed an outlet to share their experiences, specifically Black LGBTQ folks living in Des Moines or other parts of Iowa. I asked Yazmine if she would be on my podcast if ever I got one started. She replied, “Of course!” Before she left my porch, she invited me to meet her boyfriend and come over for dinner with Leslie.

Sadly, in December 2020 Yazmine passed away due to heart complications, before she was able to be my first podcast guest.

Figure 1

Yazmine DeMornay



Dissertation Overview

This dissertation’s structure reflects my journey of collecting information to frame the research study. Chapter 1 has outlined the need for the study and my personal reasons for embarking on the journey. Chapter 2 reviews the personal process of selecting a guiding theoretical framework, critical race theory, and outlines this research study’s methodology and corresponding methods. Chapters 3 through 6 cover each of the podcast episodes, broken down by overview, pre-production activities, overarching themes and supporting subthemes, and critical reflection. Chapter 7 discusses my overall findings, the implications of the research, boundaries of the inquiry, and future considerations.

Research Questions

My study will address the following questions:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How does the creation and analysis of Black LGBTQ counternarrative podcast episodes yield insights that can inform how the broader LGBTQ community ought to engage with non-dominant LGBTQ groups?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What does an independent community organizer learn by facilitating counternarrative dialogues with fellow Black LGBTQ individuals?

CHAPTER 2

FRAMING THE STUDY: THEORY AND METHOD

Grounding theoretical frameworks play an integral role in this research study. One could argue that the frameworks are significant in every study; however, without the frameworks for this research topic, it would have been difficult to ascertain what steps were needed to situate and explain the significance of the study. There is already a lack of understanding that surrounds Black LGBTQ behavior, attitudes, and needs in organizations, especially in nonprofit work. So, it was necessary to seek out theories that seek to add to understanding of the broad nature of both the Black and the LGBTQ communities. This research study is guided by one primary theoretical framework: critical race theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This theory allowed me to view the research study through different lenses and increase the depth of the study.

What This Theory Means to Me

CRT provided me with a deeper connection to my research and a way of understanding the limitations of my work. In this chapter, I describe my theory selection process and provide CRT's overview, implications of the theory, applications of the theory to my research, and theory-driven research questions. The process of my theory selection was guided by my personal volunteer experiences as detailed in Chapter 1, conversations with my dissertation chair, and my personal navigation exploring how my intersecting identities show up in my experiences. Critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) was a natural fit to inform this study. This theory prompts researchers,

scholar practitioners, and readers to reexamine the roles of race and racism in societal development, institutional function, and systems of power and oppression.

After I reflected on the problem of practice, CRT seemed like it would assist me in both delving into the nuances of listening to participant stories and critically reflecting as a researcher on the process of meaning-making surrounding lived experience. This theory challenged me to situate my research so that it centered participant stories as the main sources of information to make connections with, draw conclusions from, and inform next steps for moving forward with lessons learned.

The theory selection process was personal and tailored to fit the needs of this research project. It took many conversations and reflections on what I had learned over the course of my doctoral, professional, and volunteer journeys. This research sits at the intersection of all three of those journeys, and theory selection is an extension of the broader research process. It was an honor to hold space for individuals and groups to tell me their stories about their journeys as both Black and LGBTQ, what the nonprofits could mean for them, the resources they need, and how joy could show up in their life as a result of intentional giving and having a platform to share their ideas about the formation of a community that they are both a part of and represent. Theory selection for this research project was a practice of balancing active listening and engagement.

Guiding Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory Overview

Critical race theory is a tool that assists researchers in understanding experiences of People of Color within various sociopolitical contexts. Further, CRT challenges the

notions that broader societal systems exist within a singular reality—Whiteness as normative—and posits that education as a field is a contradictory institution, in that it upholds traditional research and methods that have historically excluded People of Color’s perspective and experience (Solóranzo & Yosso, 2002). CRT as a means of critique in education was introduced by Ladson-Billings (1995). She and other researchers assert that explicit attention to the intersections of race and racism is critical to raising awareness of the inequities that exist within functions of society more broadly. Meaning-making through the CRT lens calls for researchers, scholar practitioners, and educators to incorporate the lived experiences of People of Color as significant and valid pieces of information that may inform policy, analyze and transform structures, and critique dominant cultural ideals (Matsuda et al., 1993). As a derivative of critical theory, CRT examines society through “social, political and economic inequities” but specifically looks through the lens of the social construct of race (Rocco et al., 2014, p. 460).

CRT is also a source of major controversy within the United States. Opponents of CRT argue that, by merely focusing on race to examine systems of oppression, CRT is ignoring the realities that White individuals may experience low socioeconomic status, that the United States is past the effects of racism because BIPOC are being hired for jobs, that affirmative action needs to cease and desist, and that focusing on race exacerbates racial inequality concerns rather than eliminating them. Yet proponents of CRT insist that racism is permanent and integral to society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Fredrickson, 2002; Sue et al., 2007). Delgado and Stefancic (2001) state that there are at least six agreed-upon tenants of CRT:

- (1) Racism is endemic and ordinary, permeating all aspects of society in such a way as to be unnoticed.
- (2) Race is a social construction that has no biological significance.
- (3) Differential racialization means that different minority groups are racialized at different times depending on economic need, geographic location, and current events.
- (4) Interest convergence and material determinism occur when the dominant group works to advance social justice for People of Color or minority groups when both groups' interests, needs, or expectations converge, especially for economic or material gain of the dominant group.
- (5) Intersectionality and anti-essentialism is the notion that individuals do not have unitary identities; instead, many characteristics intersect in a person, such as race, sex, class, and national origin, and therefore a person's identity cannot be reduced to one essential characteristic or identity.
- (6) Voice is the notion that people of color have a unique voice that exists because of experience with historical and current oppression, and as such, they can share stories about oppression that Whites are unlikely to know because they have not experienced oppression in this way.

Critical Race Theory Implication

Researchers who adopt CRT as a guiding theoretical framework do so with the understanding that it is imperative to center Black and Brown voices in research.

Historically, within traditional theories and methodology, Black and Brown voices were

deemed illegitimate and non-critical to understanding. Scholars and researchers who adopt this theory accept that “lived experiences, including storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, testimonials, chronicles, and narratives” are strengths and have the ability to shed light on diverse perspectives that illuminate the existence of oppression and systems of power and its influence (Yosso, 2002, p. 27). Moreover, CRT highlights stories of experiences as rigorous sources of contextualizing social happenings. “Master narratives” are scrutinized as standardizing Whiteness and discounting the significance of situating race and racism within the creation of a collective narrative on human experience (Yosso, 2002, p. 27).

Certain conditions must exist for systematically oppressed groups to have a platform to engage with researchers as informants and experts in their lived experience. Researchers who attempt to engage and collaborate with systematically oppressed groups accept that there are diverse ways of being and living within a system that was specifically created to center White voices and experiences. Additionally, researchers forming research questions that examine or explore the impact of laws and policies do so with the understanding that race and racism are justifiable lenses through which to view those laws and policies.

Critical Race Theory Application

CRT, as applied to this research study, situated participant stories and researcher reflections as central to making meaning of the lived experience of Black LGBTQ people in Des Moines, Iowa. The participants’ accounts of living as Black LGBTQ people within Iowa assists the audience in grasping lived experiences at the intersection of Black

and LGBTQ identities. CRT suggests the need for attention to diversity and multiplicity, as well as similarity, when interviewing participants and interpreting their stories. The interviews conducted in this study called on the willingness of the participants and the researcher to discuss the role of their Blackness within their personal accounts of living while Black and LGBTQ. In a step further, this research was guided by action research as a methodological framework. Action research calls upon the researcher to be a part of their research context. This work called on me to be vulnerable by reflecting on participant stories wearing both my researcher and my personal hat.

This theory also informed the method selection for this study. CRT places significance on the value of storytelling to understand the role of racialization in experiences; therefore, CRT's tool of counternarrative storytelling was the method for capturing Black LGBTQ voices as a part of this study. Counternarrative storytelling is based on the assumption that majoritarian stories do not account for people living on the margins, such as but not limited to People of Color. CRT challenges researchers, educators, community members, and other stakeholders to reimagine their ways of understanding people and experiences. This process of challenging internal belief systems is time consuming and requires patience from all parties involved. It is difficult to chart a single sequence of events that might lead to a new way of interpreting information about people and situations. The act of forming spaces for counternarratives requires thoughtful consideration and patience.

This study could have been framed entirely around the steps a researcher takes to create spaces conducive for storytelling in general. However, the 'Porch Tea w/Destinee'

podcast episodes were concerned with eliciting more specific stories related to Black LGBTQ livelihood in Iowa. The participants who agreed to be featured on the podcast shared their stories with the understanding that not many within the broader LGBTQ community have heard how LGBTQ identity intersects with race. Therefore, they shared counternarratives, stories that go against the familiar or widely expected.

Reflection on Drafting the Guiding Theoretical Frameworks Chapter

This was the most time intensive of all of the chapters to draft. It challenged me in ways for which I was not prepared. I widely researched CRT and was continuously applying counternarrative theory to my own experiences as I learned more about it. Left with my own thoughts, I found myself reflecting on and challenging my own internal meaning-making systems after literature reviews of counternarrative theory. Questions that popped into my mind included, *Have I been hijacked by the dominant culture's view of Black women, Black people, and LGBTQ folks?* and *How am I going to make sure that the questions I am asking lead to critical dialogue without criticizing ways of being?*

Learning more about the guiding theoretical frameworks for this study prompted more self-reflection than I anticipated. My internal belief system was challenged by the new information I was reading. I was forced to take a look at my own thoughts about how I view myself as holding space for both my Blackness and my gayness and how I was unintentionally holding that space for others—and this is precisely what is necessary for a research study like this one. This research study is about challenging belief systems and reflecting on experiences through a lens of exploration rather than absoluteness. CRT served as a sort of collaborative partner in guiding my research. This theory was central

for me in understanding the significance of my research study and how my audience might find themselves challenging their system of prior learning.

After preparing for this research study, I now view my theoretical framework from a new perspective. I have a more personal connection with CRT, understanding the context it was born out of, the significance of societal influences on the theory, and how the scholar practitioner, researcher, and/or stakeholder ought to situate themselves in the work based on its theoretical perspective and assumptions. Identifying with my guiding theoretical framework in this way was a much more intimate process than I previously could have fathomed.

Methodology

Podcasting as a means for intervention requires a great deal of trust and vulnerability from both the researcher and the participants. The researcher in this instance was fully immersed in the act of learning about participant experiences by facilitating initial questions and follow-up questions that allow for a richer dialogue and deeper connection to the participants' lived experiences. For a research study such as this, the methodology reflects the relationship between the overall goals of the study and its specific methods, such as how the researcher intends to engage with the participants and define their role. As such, it was only natural that action research served as the methodology for this study and provided a rationale for data collection and data analysis strategies to assist me in achieving the goal of uncovering the stories of systematically excluded voices.

Action research is cyclical in nature, based on the premise that the researcher has a stake in how processes are improved based on stakeholder engagement, simplification and enhancement of process steps, and commitment to regularly examining the quality of the process based on process outcomes, i.e., attitudes, performance, product, or a combination of the three. Additionally, said processes are to be within the locus of the researcher's control. As Buss and Zambo (2014) state, "Action research requires a researcher to work with others to develop a deep understanding of a problem, implement an appropriate action, systematically investigate the effects of that action, and decide on next steps" (p. 2).

The Research Design section below outlines how the researcher collected and analyzed data and shares the steps used to complete both processes. The section will conclude with a reflection on how the methods used assisted the researcher in answering the guiding research questions. Counternarrative analysis supported the process of executing the methods outlined for this research study.

Research Design

The research design utilized in this study is guided by the principles of counternarrative analysis in qualitative data collection and analysis. After learning about the problem of practice, my chair, Dr. Elisabeth Gee, and I engaged in dialogue about the storytelling nature of the communities served by my volunteer roles. I informed her that storytelling is a huge part of the cultures represented within the communities served. Additionally, we spoke about the challenges of understanding and responding to needs of the Black LGBTQ community because we have so little representation in Black- and

LGBTQ-serving institutions. It is that very point that illustrates the practical use of counternarratives in assisting educators, researchers, policy-makers, and community members in learning more about systematically oppressed groups. According to Miller et al. (2020), “Counternarrative holds promise to expose, analyze, and critique the racialized reality in which those experiences are contextualized, silenced, and perpetuated” (p. 273). For purposes of this research, the research design called for systematically gathering input from those who identify as Black and LGBTQ.

Blended Cycle 0s With One Major Outcome

In the action research methodology, the research design is informed by Cycle 0, which sets the tone for subsequent cycles of research. However, this research design is informed by several cycle 0s as a result of several topic changes. Below, I describe the outcomes of a “blended cycle 0,” which comprises outcomes of all the cycle 0s that occurred since beginning my doctoral research. The overall impact of those shifts brought me closer to the root of why I am pursuing both my doctoral degree and this particular research topic. My doctoral journey began with researching targeted outreach and engagement strategies for students transferring into a four-year institution. Then the topic shifted again to forming a community of practice within substance use providers providing suicide safer care within the state of Iowa; next, it shifted to understanding how the Iowa Queer Communities of Color Coalition might begin its process for transitioning from a basic organization to a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Finally, it landed on the research topic of understanding the experiences of Black LGBTQ lives in Iowa. Each of those research topics were accompanied by Cycle 0s that allowed me to explore the impact of the

community on the topic. The research contexts explored during my doctoral work led me closer to what became most clear: It is my calling to hear stories about how a community could be better served.

The Current Research Project: The ‘Porch Tea w/Destinee’ Podcast

‘Porch Tea w/Destinee’ is a podcast that seeks to spur dialogue between the guests and the podcast host and researcher (me) on topics such as sexual orientation, relationships, family, and community development. These conversations took place virtually. Guests on the show had a platform to share their stories and perspectives surrounding their stories as they relate to topics of interest. For purposes of this research study, the podcast served as the host site for collecting and storing data in the form of recorded conversations.

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher was to be an interviewer/podcast host, reflector, and coordinator. I interviewed the guests on the podcast about their experiences at the intersection of Blackness and LGBTQ status. In addition to interviewing participants on the show, I kept a reflection journal of my thoughts throughout the process of preparing the podcast for participants, reflecting on my own experiences at the intersection of Blackness and LGBTQ and how my perception of self might be challenged because of the research study. The journal was kept on a running Google Document, marked by day and year, tracking my attitudes about participant selection, pre-production, post-production, and wrapping up the interviews with Black LGBTQ folks living in Iowa.

Role of the Participants

The participants were the interviewees for ‘Porch Tea w/Destinee.’ They participated with the understanding that the episodes would be stored and could be viewed later by a wide and varied audience. The participants reviewed the researcher’s questions prior to taping to gain familiarity with the intent of the episode/their portion of the research study. Once the participants agreed to be interviewed, they coordinated with the researcher on potential interview dates. The introduction of the Omicron variant of COVID-19 led me to cancel plans for in-person taping. For this project, I was stationed in my podcast room at home while participants took part in the taping at their own home or wherever they could access a stable internet connection, and we recorded episodes on the virtual platform Zoom.

Participant Selection and Interview Process

The participant selection process was guided by the need to have participants who identified as both Black and LGBTQ, were willing to have their responses taped for a podcast, and had a flexible schedule that allowed them to choose at least a couple of dates for a possible interview. Therefore, the participant selection style used for this research project was purposeful selection. The purposeful selection process is one in which participants are selected by the researcher to meet specific characteristics (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). For instance, since this study is focused on Black LGBTQ individuals in Iowa, I invited only Black LGBTQ individuals living in Iowa to participate.

A participant recruitment letter was sent via email to those individuals I knew personally who identified themselves as Black and within the LGBTQ community. It informed potential participants that their participation was requested as a part of a doctoral research study that would involve interviewing them about their experiences living as Black LGBTQ people in Iowa and that their stories would be shared with the public as a part of my podcast ‘Porch Tea w/Destinee.’ The potential participants were informed that the interview would last between 30 and 45 minutes.

The participants were Alexandra St. James (she/her), Ezra Krivolavy (they/them), Deronta Spencer (he/him), and Eugenia Stanton (she/her). Alexandra is a Garden Show Lounge performer, preschool teacher, musical theater performer, and avid doll collector. Ezra is a Drake University student passionate about social justice, dismantling oppressive systems, and learning how to navigate Blackness. Deronta is a statistician for a state department in Iowa and an active volunteer with Prevention Advisory Board. Eugenia is an active community member who has served on a multitude a boards and councils and is a mentor to Black and LGBTQ young professionals.

After each participant agreed to participate, they selected possible interview dates to tape the podcast and additional dates to meet with me to touch base via phone call or virtual meeting to discuss the nature of the interview and interview questions. Each interview time selected was padded with an additional 30 minutes: 15 minutes to prepare prior to taping and 15 minutes for a post-taping debrief or additional chat.

Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, the podcasts served as the innovation as well as a primary means of data collection. Below, I describe the overall process of creating the podcasts, followed by a description of how I used both the process and the content of the podcasts to answer my research questions.

Production Process

The filming of the podcasts were virtual via the Zoom platform. I was stationed in my podcast room, located on the second floor of my house. The room has a couch in front of an accent wall. The virtual platform allowed the interviewees to participate in the comfort of their own home or in another place that had stable internet access.

Pre-Production

There was a standard process that I followed prior to filming each podcast episode. First, the participant received the questions and could get back to me if they needed additional information about the rationale or intent of the questions. Next, the date was set for recording, via a Doodle poll sent to participants with possible dates and times. After the dates were set, I coordinated with each participant to determine their comfortability with the Zoom platform and the interview questions. We discussed the process of preparing for the podcast, included topics, microphone usage, where to sit, adjusting camera settings to ensure picture quality was enhanced for optimal viewing, and how I would introduce the speaker to the audience. Additionally, I asked the participants for a short biography and a high-resolution headshot. I concluded each planning exchange by thanking participants again for their willingness to speak on air

about sensitive topics such as living at the intersection of Black and LGBTQ identities and asked them what they hoped to communicate while recording the podcast episode.

Production

The setup for production included signing into the Zoom platform, turning on the computer's camera, allowing the platform to use the computer's audio, and ensuring that my internet connection was strong. The filming began after the participants and I reviewed the questions and uploaded them to the Zoom chat and the participant indicated they were ready to record the interview.

My proposed time frame for interviewing the participants was between 30 and 45 minutes, giving enough time for participants to answer the questions while remaining manageable for editing purposes. It was imperative that I paced each interview well and effectively guided the conversation. The interview questions are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Interview Questions

How would you describe your connection with the LGBTQ community in Iowa?
Tell me about your experiences as a Black LGBTQ-identifying individual in Iowa.
How would you describe your connection with the Black community in Iowa?
Could you share any stories about your experience of community in Iowa?
What experience have you had interacting with other Black LGBTQ-identified people in Iowa?

Post-Production

Apple's iMovie was the platform used to edit the participant podcast episodes. Apple's iMovie allowed me to add intro and outro music (a theme song with

corresponding logos that were created by Leslie Woodris); cut rambling, if necessary; and polish the interview into a podcast episode for ‘Porch Tea/w Destinee.’ After the podcast episode was edited into its polished version, the video was uploaded to Google Drive within a folder that housed all of the ‘Porch Tea w/Destinee’ episodes.

Researcher Journal

I also collected data via journal entries to capture my reflection on the process of bringing ‘Porch Tea w/Destinee’ online, including reflecting on the experiences of the pre-production, production, and post-production processes and collaborating with participants. The goal of the researcher journal was to track my attitudes over time and have a space to process interview codes and themes. I wrote a total of five journal entries, with four journal entries that reflected on preparing for and interviewing each participant. The fifth journal entry reflected on the process of filming and working with participants, and what the key takeaways were for being both an interviewer and a member of the Black LGBTQ community in Iowa as an active and engaged community member.

Data Analysis

Research Question 1 (RQ1)

Research Question 1 was: How does the creation and analysis of Black LGBTQ counternarrative podcast episodes yield insights that can inform how the broader LGBTQ community ought to engage with non-dominant LGBTQ groups?

This question was answered by noting what process was taken to ensure that the interviews were turned into the ‘Porch Tea w/Destinee’ podcast episodes. All of the interviews took place via the web-based video conference tool Zoom. Each of the

interviewees were comfortable with the platform and were technologically savvy enough to operate the video and audio recording from their laptops. Once the interviewees were ready to start recording, I hit 'Record' on Zoom, and when we determined the interview was done, I hit the 'Record' button once more to end of the recording. The recording in its raw form was saved to the Zoom Cloud. Each recording took approximately 12 to 15 minutes to upload to the Zoom Cloud. Interviews were then downloaded to play on Windows Media player. I watched each of the raw interviews five times, each time for a specific purpose. The first time watching was to note proposed cuts to make for a smoother transition and ease of flow for the corresponding podcast episode. The second time was to listen to the new flow after implementing the proposed cuts. The third time was noticing key words for coding, and the fourth time was watching again for coding and picking up on patterns. The fifth time was to take note of the themes that seemed to emerge from the codes and flow of the dialogue.

After the interviews were watched with the proposed cuts and the codes, patterns, and themes were noted, the interviews were then turned into podcast episodes. Links to all of the podcasts can be found in the Appendix.

Research Question 2 (RQ2)

Research Question 2 was: What does an independent community organizer learn by facilitating counternarrative dialogues with fellow Black LGBTQ individuals?

This research question was answered by reflecting on interviewee responses to the interview questions and crafting a final critical reflection.

The subsequent chapters are the heart and soul of this dissertation: the podcast interview chapters. Each of the chapters highlights a single participant, sharing their podcast title, their biographical overview, their relationship with me, my process of preparing for their podcast interview, emergent themes, and critical reflection upon what was shared during their interview.

CHAPTER 3

A BLACK WOMAN ROCKS THE CRADLE

*“How you gon’ win when you ain’t right within? Uh uh, come again! Yo yo, come again,
brethren come again, sistren come again, come again!”*

~ Lauryn Hill

“For the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world”

~ William Ross Wallace

Figure 2

Porch Tea w/Destinee Welcoming Alexandra St. James



Porch Tea w/Destinee – Alexandra St. James

The first interview I conducted was with Alexandra (Lexi) St. James, a Black trans woman. She is a Des Moines local drag performer, trained opera singer, teacher of small children, Miss Iowa Leather, and what some in the Des Moines LGBTQ community may consider a mother-like or auntie-like figure. The dialogue in general felt like Alexandra was describing her journey of becoming the woman I know now. She spoke of her experiences growing up in a Black family, learning from the women in her family how to step into both her Blackness and her womanhood, and navigating her lived experience as someone well known in the local LGBTQ community.

The podcast interview itself was like speaking with a wise elder who I kept asking to “Tell the story about that one time again!” There was a sense of intimacy that I did not expect, though in hindsight I realized that much of the intimacy stemmed from her sitting in front of her ‘doll wall.’ The doll wall, as she explained in her podcast interview, is a collection of dolls purchased by or gifted to her during significant periods of her life: celebration of milestones, getting jobs, performing in a show, birthdays, meeting friends, and so on. As exemplified by the dolls, the stories that Alexandra weaved together illuminated her as a Black trans woman who has accepted her life’s purpose as a “hand that rocks the cradle,” molding young minds and therefore shaping the evolving world.

Prior Relationship With Alexandra

Alexandra and I met at 2019's 'Illuminating Intersections' event, the product of a collaboration between the IQCCC, the local Des Moines chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Color People (NAACP), the local Des Moines chapter of the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement (NOBLE), and One Iowa, a statewide LGBTQ advocacy group. Alexandra was sitting at a table with several local LGBTQ folks whom I had met prior to the event, and that is where I chose to sit. The event was highlighting folks living at the intersection of Black and LGBTQ identities via the medium of storytelling. Right away, Alexandra and I spoke, and she said that she was a seamstress, that her people were from Mississippi, and that she was a trained opera singer. I remember leaning over to my wife, Leslie, and us agreeing that Alexandra reminded us of my mother. We chatted right away, and since then we have referred to each other as "cousins" and speak regularly over the phone or over meals. Our conversations are usually about growing up with our families, the church's influence on how we were shaped, life lessons, and life in Des Moines.

Alexandra "Lexi" St. James' Brief Biography

Alexandra was born in 1972 in Chicago, Illinois and is the oldest of four children. She grew up singing in the Baptist church with her sisters, aunties, and other family members. From an early age, she had a knack for singing and helping out her mother in the kitchen. Family is of great importance to Lexi. For instance, her Aunt Phyllis Gray played a significant role in her life by instilling in her the value of education and pursuing it with a fierce passion. Alexandra cited her Aunt Phyllis as the reason that she believes so strongly in education and giving back to the community. When she was an infant,

Alexandra attended her Aunt Phyllis's graduation at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa in 1973. Eventually, Alexandra went on to attend and graduate from Luther College herself, in the class of 1995, and becoming another of several family members who graduated from Luther College, including her father, Teddy Gray.

Alexandra has been actively involved in the musical arts since she was roughly 10 years old. She is a trained opera singer and has starred in award-winning leading and supporting roles in musical theater productions. For instance, Lexi played the lead character Delores Van Cartier in *Sister Act: The Musical* in 2016 at the Des Moines Community Playhouse. In 2022, Lexi starred in the musical *Singing in the Rain* as Zelda Zanders. Alexandra is also well known for performing in Des Moines local gay clubs the Garden and the Blazing Saddle. Alexandra is recognized in Des Moines as an LGBTQ leader, advocate, sister, cousin, auntie, and woman who can burn. She makes a mean pound cake and enjoys bringing people together with a good story and good food.

Currently, she is a Pre-K teacher in West Des Moines. Some of her past awards include the 2022 One Iowa Donna Red Wing Advocate of the Year award, being crowned 2017 Miss Iowa Leather, being crowned Empress 3 and 8 of the Imperial Windy City Court of the Prairie State Empire, and the Dionysos Outstanding Performance award for her performance as Delores Van Cartier in *Sister Act: The Musical*.

Researcher Journal Entry

Pre-Interview

The same day I sent out the email to potential participants, which included a cover letter asking for participants with an embedded link to the consent form, I received a

signed consent form from Alexandra. I immediately followed up with an email that both thanked her for her interest and asked her for her short biography and high-resolution headshot with two accompanying attachments, the interview questions and the post-interview questionnaire. I remember thinking, *This is it! It's finally time!* Then, almost instantly after, an intense bout of internal questions began to flood my mind, but there was one question that just kept lingering: *Am I really ready this time?* At that point, my tech guru had to step away from the project due to competing priorities, I had just started a new job at Planned Parenthood North Central States as the director of community engagement, and I was practicing two staples in self-acceptance: the art of saying no and the art of firming up boundaries. There was so much to juggle day to day, and yet I made my mind up after several hours of going round and round in my head and got back to Alexandra with an excited, "Let's do this!"

I sent reminder emails and texts to Alexandra on Friday, March 18, 2022, letting her know that I still needed her biography and a high-resolution photo of her choosing. Thankfully, I had her cell phone number to text her and give her gentle reminders. She had let me know that she was preparing for the musical *Singing in the Rain* and that she would be all over the place mentally. It takes a lot of energy to play a part in a musical production, and she was still teaching during the day and performing at the Garden, a local Des Moines gay bar. It was enough to make even my head spin, yet keeping busy to pass the time is something that I know about very well. I was so appreciative that she was able to work in time for me to interview her.

Interview Day

Alexandra elected to do the interview on Saturday, March 19, 2022, at 10:00 a.m. I was so relieved she did not want to have the interview earlier. I was already scrambling and my nerves were starting to bundle by 7 o'clock that morning. Questions that were plaguing me were, *What should I wear? Does my hair look okay? Lord, this internet better work! Is the internet working?? What if the Zoom decides to cut up? Oh shit, did I eat??* and the question that had been with me since starting this doctoral journey: *Am I ready for this?* Even so, I headed up to the second floor of my house, where I was set up for the podcast interview in a room smack dab in the middle of the house cleverly dubbed "the Podcast Room." I was looking forward to having a celebratory cookie (purchased the night before) from Insomnia Cookies after the interview wrapped. The cookies were not intended to be celebratory cookies, but I thought about the timing of how close they were purchased to the first interview of this research project and decided that is what they were.

At approximately 9:55 a.m., Alexandra texted me stating that she couldn't get into the Zoom room where the interview would take place. I thought to myself, *Are you kidding me???* *Why, Zoom, why???* *What do I do??* I had to take a few short breaths, text Alexandra my apologies, and then send a new Zoom link. After I sent that Zoom link, I was able to go ahead and enter the Zoom room, and about a minute later, I saw Alexandra's name pop up in the waiting room. I was relieved that the new link was working. After a few measured breaths, I let Alexandra into the Zoom room. The interview was ready to begin.

Podcast Interviewing With Alexandra

Alexandra entered the Zoom room without any traces of what folks may consider nervous energy. She had on a black head wrap and a T-shirt, and had a relaxed appearance. Just prior to the interview starting, I put the interview questions into the Zoom chat and reminded her of the purpose of the research study. I asked her if she had any questions, and she replied, “No, I am ready to go when you are. We can start rolling anytime.” I remember being nervous about how we were going to do on time and if we would get through all of the questions. Alexandra St. James likes to talk! However, once we got going, the storytelling experience allowed us to organically shift from one topic to the next, answering the questions in a natural order instead of the arbitrary order in which I had listed them. As the interview went on, I was able to relax and not get hung up on how the questions “should” be answered. I found myself flowing along with her story, noting the questions that were answered along the way. I told myself that if I found that a question wasn’t answered I could gently shepherd us back and guide Alexandra to answer any questions that remained outstanding. But Alexandra hit every question.

The interview lasted 50 minutes, which was five minutes over the maximum time allotted for the interviews. I figured that, with all of the proposed cuts, the interview would shake out to be between a 40- and 45-minute podcast episode. Alexandra’s pacing for answering the questions and telling stories was slow and deliberate. Her gaze was dreamy, as if reliving the memories of which she spoke. I found myself immersed in the stories and wondering, *How might we follow up after this interview?* Prior to the interview, Alexandra and I had had conversations about having an in-person dialogue on the ‘Porch Tea w/Destinee’ podcast. The image brought a smile to my face. It is difficult

to find somebody who understands Southern comfort and porch culture up north in the Midwest. Future audience members would stumble upon a real treat in the episode with Alexandra, from the story about the doll wall to advice she gave people going through a tumultuous period of life.

Alexandra's Counternarrative

Alexandra's story is a rich counternarrative that I had the honor to capture. As described in the previous chapter, I used a process of inductive coding followed by thematic analysis to identify key patterns in her counternarrative. Through this process, I identified one overarching theme: Blackness is the center of identity. Five subthemes reflected and supported this broader theme: (a) reimagining the Black family structure, (b) Barbies are for Black LGBTQ people, (c) exposed: living while Black and trans, (d) leaning on sources of familial comfort, and (e) holding both Blackness and transness. Below are explanations of the main overarching theme and corresponding subthemes from Alexandra's podcast interview.

Emergent Theme: Blackness Is the Center of Identity

Alexandra mentioned during her interview that, first and foremost, she is Black. Whatever happens in the Black community impacts her. She mentioned George Floyd's video-recorded murder and it being made public. At that point during the interview, she mentioned that, while there is dissonance between the Black community and the LGBTQ community, it was time to set that aside because the Black community was hurting. Additionally, she spoke about her experiences as a Black person growing up and what role her sisters, aunties, and mother played in shaping her identity as a Black woman. She

recalled that she learned from Black mothers what it was like to be a Black mother, learned from Black sisters what it was like to be a Black sister, and learned from Black aunties how to be a Black auntie. During the interview, she mentioned that a deceased local drag performer, who went by the stage name Yazmine DeMornay, was like a sister to her and that they were close like Tyler Perry's characters Madea and Bam. Yazmine also identified as a Black trans woman.

During her interview, Alexandra recalled a conversation with her mother about why she needed to be outspoken and embrace who she is inwardly and outwardly. When her mother questioned why Alexandra needed to share her identities in an open forum, she stated, "In my world, I'm you." This was a powerful statement that called onto the stage the vulnerable truth—difficult to embrace at times—that the structure of her Black family was dear to her and that she thought highly of it enough to replicate that structure in her life.

Subtheme 1: Reimagining the Black Family Structure

Early in the interview, Alexandra shared that she learned from the Black women in her family how to be a Black woman and how that played a role in shaping her understanding of what she desired in a family of her choosing. Chosen family in the LGBTQ community is often understood as people who are able to provide support that one's birth family is unable to provide due to religious ideologies, personally held beliefs, and general lack or absence from that person or person's life. Similarly, for Black LGBTQ individuals, there exists a need for familial support. Alexandra spoke about how close she was to Yazmine DeMornay, another Black trans woman. Yazmine, in addition

to being Alexandra's chosen cousin, was a local LGBTQ staple prior to her death in December 2020. Alexandra also has a host of nieces, nephews, daughters, grandmothers, and mothers who play a part in her chosen family, and she in theirs.

Subtheme 2: Barbies Are for Black LGBTQ People

Alexandra explained that she collected dolls into adulthood and has played with her dolls since childhood. Alexandra explained that her parents did not care what their children played with as long as they were keeping themselves entertained. During her interview, Alexandra was sitting in front of her doll wall, which is composed primarily of Black and Brown female and male dolls, and shared with me that the wall brings her a sense of peace. Each doll has a story and carries a significant memory of a special occasion: someone she knew got married, someone passed away, there was a moment of celebration, and so on. The Barbie doll's initial release by Mattel in 1959 was met with criticism due to the unrealistic expectations of Barbie's proportions, with her extremely cinched waist, large breasts, small bottom, and lengthy legs (Lord, 2004). Additionally, the original Barbie dolls were uniformly White dolls geared toward cisgender White girls. Fast forward to May 2022, when Mattel released the first trans doll in the likeness of Laverne Cox, a Black trans actress known for her groundbreaking role in the Netflix smash hit *Orange Is the New Black*. Still, long before this first trans doll hit the market, Alexandra was able to reimagine Barbies and other dolls as signifiers of positive events in her life.

Subtheme 3: Exposed: Living While Black and Trans

Alexandra said that her connection to the LGBTQ community is more outward than most because she is a well-known member of the local LGBTQ community. She performs frequently at the local gay bar the Garden and the Des Moines theater the Playhouse, had been crowned Miss Iowa Leather, sang in the opera, and is an active performer for charitable events and organizations around the Des Moines metro area. She shared during her podcast interview that, for her, it is not possible to hide. She is both Black and trans. She recalled living in Chicago for a time and that there were conversations between her aunts and uncles about how hard it was living as a Black man in Chicago. That she chose to present herself as a Black woman made it doubly hard to navigate life. Alexandra went on to state that Black trans women have an average life expectancy of 36 years. When I first heard that, I was flabbergasted. I remember thinking to myself, *Why didn't I know that statistic?* and *Damn, that's heartbreaking!*

Subtheme 4: Leaning on Sources of Familial Comfort

During the later portion of the interview, I asked Alexandra what folks could do to connect back to themselves during times of turmoil. She responded that folks ought to go back to their roots by making the familial traditions work for them, suggesting that folks ought to take the pieces that work for the individual and make them their own. Alexandra told a story about her sister asking her for the recipe for their mother's pound cake. She told her sister to go to the store, buy the Swans Down Cake Flour mix, and look on the back of the box for the recipe. She cautioned her sister, though, that their mother had used special tricks that were not listed on the box to make it taste the way it did. Alexandra said she herself knew the recipe because she had watched her mother

make it. Baking a cake, singing, sewing, and playing with dolls were all activities that Alexandra found comfort in when societal noise began to get too loud.

Subtheme 5: Holding Both Blackness and Transness

It is still widely believed that Black LGBTQ people need to choose between their Blackness and their gayness, selecting one identity they will prioritize. Hatfield (2021) explores the reactions of Black parents to their children's identities as both Black and LGBTQ. She found that the parents were fearful of increased scrutiny of their children due to an additional barrier of being LGBTQ. In the Black community, there is often a statement of "You're already Black, and now you wanna be gay?" This statement captures the frustration and fear of the uncertainty of knowing how to navigate the in-between space of holding unfamiliar identities. Alexandra shared in her interview that her Black family's structure worked for her as she was growing up and that she set out to create a chosen family in a similar fashion. She spoke of her ability and knowledge of how to navigate her identities as both a Black individual and a trans individual. However, it does need to be noted here that Black trans individuals face additional scrutiny from Black communities and LGB communities due to the stigma that still exists for trans individuals in particular.

Critical Reflection

Alexandra St. James' interview evoked powerful memories in me from my own childhood and adulthood. Hearing about her being "booty naked in a peach tree" made me chuckle and remember the innocence of being a child learning how to navigate societal and familial structures. My roots are in Louisiana and Mississippi, so hearing

about how she learned how to make her mother's pound cake reminded me of my very own Aunt Zula from Tchula, Mississippi teaching me how to make a pound cake when I was a teenager and the joy I felt when I mastered the recipe. I could only imagine the joy that Alexandra felt when learning how to make that cake and what it meant for her when she did. As an adult navigating my multiple identities, I will admit it is still difficult for me to know how to hold them in a way that honors my whole self.

After reflecting on Alexandra's words and powerful statements about awareness and acceptance of self, I found myself contemplating what I could be doing in my own life to practice self-awareness and self-acceptance. Throughout the dissertation process, I was challenged with discerning between actual self versus aspirational self. My actual self is a Black, cisgender female, possessing childlike energy and embarrassed by making many mistakes in attempts to uncover more of myself. My aspirational self is a Black, cisgender female, possessing childlike energy and embracing the messiness of becoming who you are meant to be. I am learning in 2022 how to embrace the messiness of becoming me. I was so excited to think about what self-reflection journeys others might go on as they are listened to Alexandra and learned about her life experiences. After all, the focus of this project was to gain insight into how Black LGBTQ lives in Iowa are lived, and what a way to honor someone by taking their words to heart and finding use for them in one's own capacity.

I am excited for another opportunity to interview Alexandra. I look forward to conducting that interview in person sitting on my porch. After the doctorate is officially awarded, after all the celebratory cake is eaten, after I have recovered from the emotional

rollercoaster of the journey of pursuing my doctoral degree, I will reach out to my dear friend Alexandra and set the date for another episode. Fingers crossed she and I can talk about how she discovered her love of music and found her inner strength to pursue that!

CHAPTER 4

BLACK ENOUGH

“To know how much there is to know is the beginning of learning to live.”

~ Dorothy West

Figure 3

Porch Tea w/Destinee Welcoming Ezra Krivolavy



Porch Tea w/Destinee – Ezra Krivolavy

The second interview I conducted was with Ezra Krivolavy, a mixed Black trans nonbinary individual with a White mother. They currently reside in Des Moines, Iowa and are active in the local social justice movement for trans visibility and support. Ezra is passionate about social justice and mobilizing efforts to support individuals who are nonbinary, trans, Black, femme, masculine, and struggling to recognize and accept their identities. They spoke of their realization of their Blackness, how the church's existence in their life conflicted with both their queerness and their Blackness, and how they are still fresh on their journey of understanding their Blackness.

Interviewing Ezra was like having an everyday conversation with them on the phone or having them right in person with me. We talked and laughed about the difficulties of navigating White spaces in nonprofit organizations and in everyday life, specifically calling in our existence as both Black and queer. There was a heaviness to the conversation that I was not expecting with Ezra, as I thought that we would be speaking about our usual topics of race, racism, and navigating oppression in the present day. What actually transpired during the interview was a journey that connected me to Ezra's younger self learning how to come into being and how that journey was riddled with unanswered questions around who gets to speak up and out, how Blackness was not understood in their hometown, and how that has shaped their outlook on the quest for understanding who they are in relation to the system of oppression.

Prior Relationship With Ezra

Ezra and I met at the 2020 Unity March in Des Moines. This march was a product of a collaboration between the Black Liberation Movement (BLM) of Iowa, the IQCCC, Movement 515 (a Des Moines youth spoken word group), members of the local drag community, and a host of other partners and organizations. I was emceeding the event when I saw Ezra in a sharp pink suit, hair pulled back in a ponytail with their curls standing proud. The event itself was about calling Black LGBTQ identity into spaces of Blackness, challenging the broader community to come together for peace and understanding. I will never forget that day. It was a beautiful day, there was an absence of counterprotesters, the police did not break up the march, and people were sharing amazing stories, songs, poetry, and performances. I learned that I would be introducing Ezra. They were so magnetic in how they delivered their speech! I looked out at the audience, where jaws were dropped, and thoughtful glances were all that I saw. From what I remember about the speech, Ezra was calling out White people for allowing oppressive systems to exist and talking about the idea of still marching getting old, about living as a light-skinned mixed individual, and about Black and Brown murders going unnoticed. I was blown away by the rawness of the moment and space that Ezra created. Eventually, Ezra and I went to serve at Capital City Pride of Des Moines and the IQCCC together, sharing countless conversations about what was going on in the community and ways we were tired from showing up and in oppressive systems.

Ezra Krivolavy's Brief Biography

Ezra grew up in the small but touristy town of Okoboji, Iowa, which is in northwest Iowa. They grew up in the care of their White maternal grandmother. However, after their grandmother's stroke, Ezra became her primary caretaker as a young child. Ezra's birth parents were out of the picture during the early stages of their life. Ezra is a Drake University graduate student in mental health counseling invested in developing a practice that is culturally relevant, affirming support for BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ folks. They understand that mainstream western psychology is largely culturally appropriated from Indigenous peoples and repackaged ideas from Eastern practices, so they are seeking to cultivate a space of healing that is accessible, affordable, anti-capitalist, and anti-oppressive. Ezra serves on the Iowa Trans Mutual Aid board with people who, in Ezra's perspective, are cool cats. Ezra enjoys playing video games, such as Valorant, Elden Ring, and the Legend of Zelda series, among many more. They are a proud cat parent to their almost-one-year-old Maine Coon, King, who graduated from an intensive treatment program for a disease known as feline infectious peritonitis (FIP). Now in observation, King can often be found resting with his owner.

Researcher Journal Entry

Pre-Interview

The same day I sent out the email to potential participants, which included a cover letter asking for participants with an accompanying link to the consent form, I received a signed consent form from Ezra. Before I sent the consent form out, I remember being

really excited to let them know that ‘Porch Tea w/Destinee’ was finally happening. This project had been living in my brain since late summer/early fall of 2020, so I was really excited to get these consent forms out and back. There was only one follow-up text I sent to Ezra to ensure that they received the email with the consent form, and within the hour the consent form was back. I was expecting an email notification about the consent form being signed, but it seems that particular feature was not enabled. That was my bad, but I was just so happy to get the IRB approval that I didn’t go through triple-checking my Qualtrics project the way that I normally would. Still, it did not interfere with the process of sending or receiving information, because I was monitoring Qualtrics like a mother with a newborn baby.

I followed up with Ezra via an email that thanked them for sending back that signed consent form and asked them to send me a short biography and high-resolution headshot. In that email, I attached both the interview questions and the post-interview questionnaire. They followed up with a response stating that they received the email and were looking forward to the much-anticipated interview. I thought to myself, *Wow, the stars are finally aligning!* There were so many starts and stops on getting this dissertation’s study together that, at this point, I was just grateful to keep going.

Ezra at the time was going through a rough patch with their cat, King. They informed me that their cat had COVID-like symptoms and was undergoing an expensive experimental treatment program. Also, this was a busy season for them as they were also in grad school and decompressing from the continuous pressure of academic spaces. They were in the thick of it! I was so grateful that they could make space for me during a

high-stress time. Between their cat, school, and learning how to navigate Des Moines, they were plenty busy and made time for an interview.

Interview Day

Ezra elected to do the interview on Saturday, March 19, 2022, at 1:00 p.m. This was only a few short hours after the Alexandra St. James interview. Thankfully, I had a test run of how the interview would go and anticipated some of the technology issues. Still, I had a similar issue with my Zoom to what occurred during Alexandra's interview. Ezra reached out to me and said that they could not get into the Zoom room. The bloody link would not work, and I was delayed yet again! Curses! I remember looking up at the ceiling in the podcast room thinking, *You've gotta be kidding me! Jesus, fix it!* Almost immediately after that thought, my computer decided to shut down and reboot. I was able to sit and compose myself. I realized that my energy was not in the right place to hold space for an authentic interview, and I used the time while my computer was rebooting to reset and relax. Apparently, the universe was telling me to take a chill pill. After a roughly 10-minute delay, I was ready to start.

Podcast Interviewing With Ezra

Ezra and I entered the Zoom room, and I noticed how calm yet contemplative Ezra seemed. They had on blue jean overalls with a black long-sleeved shirt underneath. Additionally, they were wearing a headset and sitting in front of a black sound-canceling curtain. I thanked them for their patience, to which they responded, "No worries, Des!" I threw the interview questions in the chat for ease of reading and reflecting in the moment. I did not have any expectations of how we were going to hit the questions; I had learned

from Alexandra's interview to go with the flow and not worry so much about the order of the questions. I informed Ezra that the questions would be there for their reference and to not worry about them. They let me know that they had reviewed the questions and that it made them contemplate their upbringing and current reality of living at the intersection of Blackness, fatness, and queerness. I could have caught on then how heavy the interview was going to be, but that realization came later on. Eventually, we began to record.

The interview itself lasted an hour and 10 minutes, though the editing brought it down to 50 to 55 minutes. Still, this was way over the goal of it being between 30 and 45 minutes. There was so much weaving of stories and reflection that was happening in real time for Ezra. I found myself thinking, *I don't know what my dissertation committee is going to say, but going over the time was worth it.* I found myself reflecting about my own experience with Blackness during Ezra's interview. I asked myself a lot of what-if questions; however two of the most critical questions were, *What can we do to support Black children in small towns?* and *Would the presence of Black family members make a difference?* Prior to the interview, Ezra and I had already made plans to do another interview with whatever we wanted to talk about because we just vibe, the giggles take over, and we make light of scary situations, such as surviving a system of oppression.

Ezra's Counternarrative

The snippet of Ezra's story that I was able to capture was so profound in touching on the lived experience of someone born and raised in small town in Iowa. Add on the additional layers of being Black and Trans and living in predominantly White spaces until college, and you have quite an experience of emotions and reflections. I used a

process of inductive coding followed by thematic analysis to identify key patterns in their counternarrative. Through this process, I identified one overarching theme: Identifying with Blackness is a continuous learning process. Four subthemes reflected and supported this broader theme: (a) mixed children have no traditions, (b) a contentious trio: Blackness, gayness, and the church, (c) othered in other communities, and (d) self-acceptance is learning about yourself.

Emergent Theme: Identifying With Blackness Is a Continuous Learning Process

Ezra mentioned during their interview that they did not know that they were Black until the community told them that they were in elementary school. During the interview, we spoke about how they grew up in predominantly White spaces within their community and household. Learning to navigate their own space of Blackness was something that was difficult, as they did not have any Black elders to rely on to pass down historical knowledge of the processes needed to navigate Blackness in predominantly White spaces. They spoke about not having a realization of how Black and Brown folks had to navigate until their undergraduate experience at Iowa State University. It was at that institution that they saw more than a handful of Black and Brown people at one time. Ezra candidly shared that they were a bit shell-shocked to see them on campus in larger numbers.

During their interview, Ezra recalled how they viewed the Evangelical church and its centrality in their lives, until their later years at the university when they accepted that they were Black and queer. They read up on the church's treatment of Black, queer, and female individuals and was dismayed at the historical exclusion of those groups of people

despite Ezra internalizing the Evangelical church's message that it was for all people. Ezra took up learning on their own what they could about themselves by simultaneously looking without and within themselves. They recalled elementary school and college experiences to weave a beautiful story about whole-self acceptance and love even as the broader community and LGBTQ community in Des Moines is predominantly White.

Subtheme 1: Mixed Children Have No Traditions

Ezra set the stage early in the interview about how they grew up in a small town in Iowa with their White maternal grandmother. Ezra spoke about how they were shielded from Whiteness until they were in elementary school, being called names like "Oreo," meaning Black on the outside, and "Poofy," stemming from their full, thick curls. They stated that, "I didn't know I was Black until the community told me I was." Ezra shared during their interview that they saw Black people primarily on television, where they were often stereotyped and portrayed in a poor light. They recalled that living as a person who is of mixed heritage was a challenging space to be in as the White community did not want them and the Black community did not think they were Black enough. They shared that mixed children, "have no song, no dance, they have no language, and no traditions." According to Wilder and Cain (2011), Black grandmothers are caregivers and sources of economic support for the Black family and aid the family in racial socialization alongside Black mothers as a part of child development. Mixed children may not have that same benefit.

Subtheme 2: A Contentious Trio: Blackness, Gayness, and the Church

Ezra shared that, growing up in their small town, they regularly attended Evangelical church services with their grandmother. In their formative years, Ezra recalled the pastor preaching that gay people were going to hell. Already struggling with holding space for their Blackness while grappling with acknowledgement of queerness, Ezra shared that they accidentally stumbled into an Evangelical cult while at Iowa State University. They claimed that the cult used predatory practices to entice students (typically in their first year) to join them. After Ezra did some research on their own, they came to the conclusion that White supremacy is intermingled with Christianity. During their interview, they stated how wrapped up they were in that church and that it was a difficult process separating themselves from the church, but they ultimately made the decision to do so because there was no reconciling their relationship with the church as they were coming into acceptance of Blackness and queerness.

Subtheme 3: Othered in Other Communities

During the interview, I asked Ezra to describe their relationship to the Black, Black LGBTQ, and LGBTQ communities. Ezra explained that those relationships were complicated. They felt as if they were not Black enough for the Black community, that they have connection with the Black LGBTQ community on an individual basis and that there is not a community feel amongst the Black LGBTQ population, and that their relationship/connection with the broader LGBTQ community is “frustrating at best.” Hearing Ezra say that activated a deep-seated sense of loneliness within me that I had not felt that deeply since before I left Kansas as a graduate student at Emporia State

University. The feeling of being othered in other communities, like the Black community or LGBTQ community, is isolating, thereby cutting off possibilities for social interactions. Ezra and I spoke about the Unity March, how that was the most Black LGBTQ folks either of us had seen at one time and how beautiful that day was. Toward the latter half of the interview, I asked them to name something that communities could do to better support Black LGBTQ folks, and they responded that communities needed to be open minded and seek to learn about different ways of being.

Subtheme 4: Self-Acceptance Is Learning About Yourself

Ezra and I spoke about learning to accept the multiple identities and holding them simultaneously. Ezra takes learning seriously and during their interview spoke about how a classmate asked them to share their perspective on social justice issues and what their ideas were about how to conceptualize a path forward. Ezra replied that there are books that the person could read and that, if they expect Ezra to answer questions, they would need to compensate them. Ezra explained that they would not be sacrificing time and emotional labor anymore without compensation. They stated that they are still early in their journey of self-acceptance with the assistance of a counselor, but that they spend most of their days grappling with who they have been, who they want to be, and who they are becoming. At the time of the interview, they discussed that they are working through their preference for Whiteness in critical relationships, challenging their inner notions, perpetuated by an oppressive system, of predisposition for Whiteness. It was a vulnerable act to admit such an exposing truth for an interview, yet they explained that

acceptance is also calling yourself out for furthering injustices of the larger oppressive system.

Critical Reflection

The interview with Ezra just kept bringing up feelings of sadness and anger in me. Somehow, when Ezra was speaking, I was transported back to a time when loneliness was most apparent in my life as an elementary school girl. Often, I sat alone at lunch. The other kids had their cliques, while I had braces and glasses and was adorably chubby. Sometimes I wonder how much different life would have been if I were a popular kid. One thing I was grateful for was that I had strong Black figures, men and women, who poured into me from a young age. Ezra did not interact with Black elders until around the time they began serving on community boards and after they got out of Okoboji. For the majority of their life, they did not have what I was so grateful for: my Black family. They taught me how to behave at traffic stops, tame my temper in predominantly White spaces, dress for success, and have a relentless drive to make it, sleep deprivation be damned. One thing I would really like more of is Ezra's ability to push back against a big, old, and seemingly unshakable system. Sure, I am obtaining my doctorate, working for Planned Parenthood as their director of community engagement, holding my own financially, charming people with a smile, and putting on the razzle dazzle if necessary, but I am just now realizing that my life experiences and realities are a packaged product of the system that was built to sustainably oppress my ancestors and living relatives.

My family taught me how to survive and fight to stay alive, but I am learning in 2022 how to heal from wounds I did not even know existed—wounds from pushing past

exhaustion, needing to constantly be on guard as a Black, cisgender, gay woman, and powering a relentless drive, playing and replaying scenarios in my head before I make a move. I began to look in the mirror and notice how my life was a crumbling masterpiece that I did not want to create; I was told to create it through societal reinforcement of what success looks like. I was hanging on so much to the idea that, if I had certain material resources, dressed a certain way, and behaved a certain way, I was good. I became who I did not want to be, one of the “good ones,” a trophy Negro. Even though I advised people to live authentically and stand in their own light, I was falling into the enticing trap of going along to get along. Ezra’s interview reminded me that I was born into a family to be proud of and, simultaneously, that I have so much work to do to take off the layers of systemic generational gunk that I was wearing like armor. This quote found me as I was typing up this critical reflection for the dissertation: “When inward tenderness finds the secret hurt, pain itself will crack the rock and, Ah! Let the soul emerge” (Rumi). No more words needed after that!

CHAPTER 5

SEE THE PERSON FIRST

“The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members”

~ Coretta Scott King

Figure 4

Porch Tea w/Destinee Welcoming Deronta Spencer



Porch Tea w/Destinee – Deronta Spencer

The third interview I conducted was with Deronta Spencer (he/him), a Black cisgender gay man living in Des Moines, Iowa. At the time of the interview, he was employed as a statistician for the Iowa Department of Agriculture. He is an active cat dad, a member of the Des Moines Primary Health Care’s Prevention Advisory Board, and

involved in the Des Moines community on the basis of personal relationships. The flow of the dialogue captured Deronta's essence as a quiet yet insightful individual on the subject of community development and approach to relationship building. He spoke about how he builds relationships by connecting with the community based on individual connections or relationships with those in the community. Deronta cautions that people who solely look for relationships or partnerships on the basis of race run the risk of missing out on genuine connections. He also speaks about the fact that he is not regularly out at social event, but that a personal connection could draw him out of his shell to be more active in community festivities or events.

The podcast interview was like watching a seed grow into a budding flower. Speaking of which, he did remind me a bit of a blossoming flower. He was slow to warm up, but once he found his rhythm he was in his element, sharing out his rich introspective reflections. His apartment kitchen was the backdrop of his interview. He seemed comfortable to be at home and was up for the challenge of speaking to an unknown audience. Prior to the interview, I was not expecting that he would open up so freely, though in hindsight the interview questions did call on the interviewee to reflect and connect with their own stories to provide their authentic answers.

Prior Relationship With Deronta

Deronta and I met at a board meeting while serving on the Primary Health Care Prevention Advisory Board (PAB) in February 2020. This board is composed of people local to Des Moines. These folks are predominantly Black and Brown individuals with lived experience with HIV/AIDS or who want to learn more about HIV/AIDS and

broaden their capacity for community advocacy. The PAB meetings were in person before COVID-19 encouraged our move to the virtual meeting platform Zoom. My first impression of Deronta was that he was quiet, though I found myself wondering what his story was. Although he was quiet, he had a gentle genuineness about him that was endearing. After I was in several board meetings with Deronta, he began to get more comfortable speaking up about meeting topics. I learned that he lived with his cat and that he was a fellow transplant like me, hailing from South Carolina.

Deronta and I went on to table events and served on a virtual panel on the intersection of Blackness and HIV/AIDS. He had a presence on the virtual stage that was infectious. He was careful and contemplative about his words and the situations he shared, but the audience and fellow panelists were taken with his thoughtful responses and candidness living as a Black male dating other men. He shared his personal experiences with HIV/AIDS and his own coming out as a Black gay male to mixed reviews from his family. He displayed a quiet strength. Deronta is naturally soft-spoken, yet when he began to speak about his lived experiences he began to talk as though he was speaking with a close friend. After reflecting on his statements about his lived experience, I began to think about additional outlets for him to share parts of his story. Thankfully, the ‘Porch Tea w/Destinee’ podcast was able to capture a considerable amount of his thoughts surrounding lived experience in community.

Deronta Spencer’s Brief Biography

Deronta Renard Spencer was born June 15, 1985, in Atlanta, Georgia. He has three younger sisters, an older brother, and five nieces and nephews. His family moved to

Greenwood, South Carolina in 2001, when he was 16. He graduated from Emerald High School in 2003 and attended Piedmont Technical College from 2003 to 2006. Afterward, he transferred to the University of South Carolina (USC), where he graduated with a Bachelor in Sociology in December 2009. He continued his education at USC, entering the graduate program for sociology, from which he graduated with a master's degree in 2013. Immediately afterward, he enrolled in the sociology PhD program at the University of Connecticut. However, he took another educational route and obtained another master's degree in sociology instead in 2016.

He briefly worked as a grocery store cashier/bagger and as a substitute teacher after graduate school. Since 2017, he has been employed as a survey statistician at the Department of Agriculture. He enjoys reading, listening to music, listening to podcasts (in particular true crime, history, and political podcasts), going to the movies, and hanging out with friends. He likes meeting new people and experiencing different places and cultures. He is very close to his family and hopes to have a family of his own one day. He cares deeply about issues of justice, fairness, and equality.

Researcher Journal Entry

Pre-Interview

I was so shocked but grateful that Deronta said yes to the interview. He got his information right away and asked follow-up questions about what he could do next. I told him to review the interview questions and to let me know if there were any questions, in addition to thanking him for completing his consent form. At that point, I felt like I had a good handle on how to prepare folks for the interviews, already having Alexandra's and

Ezra's under my belt. I was beginning to feel like I was on a roll. Instead of the intrusive question *Am I ready this time?* I found myself thinking, *Here we go. Let's get this party started!* There was a completely different vibe getting ready for this interview compared to the other two. I was starting to find my groove.

The day before the interview, Deronta shared that he was preparing to move down to Atlanta, Georgia, but I was so glad that he made time for me. He was also studying to pass a driving test for a standard operating license, which he wanted to get before his move. It did make me sad that he was preparing to leave Iowa, and it also got me thinking about how many Black LGBTQ folks considered leaving Iowa and what the circumstances were that influenced that decision.

Interview Day

Deronta elected to do his interview on Tuesday, March 22, 2022, at 6:00 p.m. I was slightly worried about my energy levels being that the interview took place after a day of work. Still, I was so glad to be meeting with him, so I monitored my energy all day and made sure that I had enough energy to engage in the interview. The workday was long and I needed to raise my energy, so I ate a snack at the house and then headed up to the podcast room, where I was happy to power on my laptop. At 5:45 p.m. I was able to get into my laptop and get everything situated. I had some time to spare before the 6:00 p.m. interview.

That day, I was able to clear my mind and focus on the interview as another task. Somehow, reframing the interview as just another box to check took the edge off. Deronta and I were both able to open the Zoom link and get right in. He was sitting in

front of his kitchen looking calm, and he brought the calm energy into the virtual space. I was ready. He was ready. It was time for the interview!

Podcast Interviewing With Deronta

Deronta and I reviewed the interview questions again after I entered them into the Zoom chat. I asked him if he was ready to go or if he had any last-minute questions before we got started. When he replied, “No,” I told him I was getting ready to hit record and get the ball rolling. I remember before starting that he seemed to look calm, but there was a curiosity in his eyes. I wondered if he was wondering what emotions or stories would come out. He is normally calculated in looking at problems, but it seemed that he was uncertain of what was going to happen next. The interview started out a bit stiff, moving question to question. It took a while for Deronta to open up to the process of storytelling. Once he was able to get locked into a memory and allowed himself to flow, it felt much more like a conversation than an interview, which was the goal. From that point, the interview questions were answered organically and we were able to answer all of the questions.

The interview lasted between 31 and 32 minutes, which was right within the goal time frame of 30 to 45 minutes. Yet, I wanted to keep going with him. Once he got comfortable, there was a solid pace of answering the question, reflecting, and follow-up questioning. We fell into a groove and had a pace that began to feel like two old friends who were reconnecting after several years separated. After we wrapped the interview, he was primed to go for another interview! I was blown away. He was talking to me about how good it felt to talk about his experiences in a reflective state. He was a chatterbox!

Who knew? It was so refreshing to see and hear him open up even after the interview wrapped. Deronta even spoke about wanting to come back to do another episode. I thought about that and thought to myself, *That's three out of three interviewees wanting to come back again to tell their story!* It was amazing to me that folks wanted to come back again. It was great to be able to provide the atmosphere for folks to be comfortable sharing and exploring feelings.

Deronta's Counternarrative

After interviewing Deronta, I used inductive coding to identify one overarching theme in his comments: Personal connections drive community engagement. There were three subthemes supporting that main theme: (a) Connections based on shared experience, (b) personal connections are the basis for building community relationships, and (c) the intersection of Black, male, and LGBTQ identities are difficult to navigate in broader LGBTQ spaces.

Emergent Theme: Personal Connections Drive Community Engagement

Deronta's story was vastly different from the stories prior. Of course, one of the key differences between his story and the previous ones is that his shared perspective centers around personal connections with people. He informed the audience that one ought not seek out relationships based on race, but rather people should seek out relationships based on personal connection. Deronta's perspective on community development through deep one-on-one conversations was something that left me

questioning the way I form relationships personally, organizationally, and at the community level. It made me wonder if I was able to take the intimacy of developing a personal relationship and relate that to organizational and community levels. There were so many wonderful nuggets that Deronta shared about valuing the individual in the community and tailoring opportunities to engage with the community.

Subtheme 1: Connections Based on Shared Experience

Deronta explained to the audience that basing connections solely on being LGBTQ backfired on him back in college. He then described a period, while pursuing his undergraduate degree, when he attempted to make and feel connections to the Black community via a Black student organization. Deronta shared that he was uncomfortable due to the noise level and large size of the student group. It was after that interaction that he determined that he would not base his connections to the community solely on his major identities but rather on his interests and personal connection to individuals. He further explained that his Black friends are in the South, where he went to school and grew up. He claimed that his friend group in Iowa is primarily White and based on shared experiences and interests such as cats, knitting, and books.

Subtheme 2: Personal Connections Are the Basis for Building Community

Relationships

Deronta is a member of Primary Health Care's PAB. He shared that he joined the board based on his connection to Noah Beacom, who at the time was a staff member involved with coordinating the efforts of the board. Noah reached out to him personally and asked him to join. Deronta further reiterated that it was his personal interests that

allowed him to connect and develop community connections. Furthermore, he went on to explain that he is an introvert who has difficulty putting himself out there.

Subtheme 3: The Intersection of Black, Male, and LGBTQ Identities Are Difficult to Navigate in Broader LGBTQ Spaces

Deronta explained during his interview that navigating spaces, whether personal or public, proved to be difficult for him as a Black Gay male. He mentioned that on dating sites he has a difficult time attracting a potential partner because he is Black. During his interview, he stated that he called out a White gay male for having a preference for non-Black dating partners. This is not uncommon within the LGBTQ community. There is a saying among the gay community: “No fats, no femmes, no Blacks.” The saying is laced with shame and exclusion, including fat-shaming, anti-femininity, and anti-Blackness. This is to indicate that gays who identify as any of those three are less-than. Additionally, Deronta mentioned that, when serving in predominantly White community organizations, the burden is put on those of marginalized identities to educate the larger group or unofficially serve as the spokesperson of those identities.

Critical Reflection

Reflecting on the interview with Deronta left me questioning how I have made connections to communities over the years. My drive to connect with community members and organizations has stemmed from a place of curiosity and personal interests. For instance, when I was a student at the University of Indianapolis, I wondered what it would be like to join student organizations that allowed me to explore how campus culture was formed and sustained. I was curious about how connections across different

roles impacted the formation of culture and how campus operations revolved around it. The campus organizations I joined allowed me to learn more about different levels of the institution and let me explore relationship formation and how it impacted strategic planning and implementation efforts. Today, I seek out organizations that aim to assist Black, Brown, Indigenous, LGBTQ, and other groups that have been systematically excluded and oppressed. I have a personal interest in these particular groups and make it a priority to seek out new community partnerships and connections based on those.

Additionally, I am what one would consider an extroverted introvert. I resonated with Deronta's experience of being an introvert. I appreciated that he shared so candidly about what it means to be an introvert, wanting connection but needing folks to reach out to him to get involved. I thought back to my experiences wanting to connect with other people, organizations, and causes. It was quite the journey getting comfortable with my external voice while still maintaining my inner dialogue. People who have known me since I was a little girl know that I was shy growing up but was still active in the activities that interested me even if I was the only participant. Deronta's statement about being an introvert made me think about my current role as the director of community engagement at Planned Parenthood North Central States. I wondered what a solid community engagement strategy could be that called folks in and created a personalized experience of getting involved. I will be thinking about Deronta's words as I contemplate my next steps in developing a community engagement strategy.

CHAPTER 6

WHERE ARE ALL THE BLACK PEOPLE?

“It’s time for you to move, realizing that the thing you are seeking is also seeking you”

~ Iyanla Vanzant

Figure 5

Porch Tea w/Destinee Welcoming Eugenia Stanton



Porch Tea w/Destinee – Eugenia Stanton

The last interview I conducted was with Eugenia Stanton, a Black cisgender woman. Eugenia is a Des Moines, Iowa transplant. She is a founding member of the Iowa Queer Communities of Coalition (IQCCC), has previously served on the Board of Directors for Capital City Pride Des Moines, is a 2021 recipient of the Iowa LGBTQ Legacy Leader award, and the list of accolades go on. Within the LGBTQ community in Des Moines, she is regarded as an auntie-like figure who was also Mr. Capital City Pride in 2011. The interview felt like I was sitting on the rooftop of the Garden with her while we enjoyed a warm breeze and a seltzer. She was easygoing and open about her feelings surrounding Blackness in Des Moines and within the LGBTQ community. I learned about her college experience pledging Sigma Gamma Rho and her subsequent transition from Jackson State University to Missouri to Des Moines in 2004. Her story centered around creating a community that she wanted to see and be a part of when she first moved to Des Moines.

I was curious to see what Eugenia had to say about her experience of living Black and LGBTQ in Des Moines. I had consistently observed that she was purposeful in her speech and willing to open up with people once she was certain that folks were genuinely interested in what she had to say. Eugenia shared a roadmap of what brought her to Des Moines, how she was let down by the lack of diversity in Des Moines, and what it meant for her to be Black in Iowa and within the broader LGBTQ community. I was not

expecting her to speak about how critical her sorority was for her back in the 1990s and their significant role of acceptance.

Prior Relationship With Eugenia

I met Eugenia in the summer of 2019 at an IQCCC general meeting. The meeting took place in the Iowa Department of Human Rights space within the Lucas Building across from the Des Moines capitol building. There I met founding members and board members. The members were discussing the results of an LGBTQ demographic survey IQCCC administered in the spring of 2019. The survey asked respondents to list what ZIP code they were in, resources they might need, and how they identified themselves based on race and sexuality. Following the meeting, I met Eugenia in the parking lot and struck up a conversation about why she had stayed in Des Moines so long. She told me that she fell into a groove and got to meet some cool folks, whom she would later describe in her interview as “the Order of the Swirl.” Prior to leaving the parking lot of the Lucas Building, Eugenia invited me and my spouse to her pool party the following weekend.

Eugenia Stanton’s Brief Biography

Eugenia Stanton was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. Eugenia earned two master’s degrees—an MBA from the University of Iowa and an MS in biology from the University of Missouri—and an undergraduate degree in biology from Jackson State University in Jackson, Mississippi. She began her career as a research scientist at Monsanto before joining DuPont Pioneer. She currently works at Corteva, an agriculture organization based in Johnston, Iowa, which is a community neighboring Des Moines.

Education played a significant role in her upbringing, which was shepherded by both her father and her mother. Eugenia is passionate about mentorship and developing up-and-coming Black women and LGBTQ folks who live in Iowa. She is a board member of the Greater Des Moines Leadership Institute and actively provides outreach to recruit institute participants.

Eugenia also has interests in podcasting and learning more about the LGBTQ bar scene. One day she hopes to start her own podcast in Des Moines to talk about topics that are near to her heart: the gay bar scene in the last few decades, intersections between Blackness and gayness, the bar culture and how it has shifted over the years, and other topics that are pressing on her heart and mind. She is an avid researcher in and outside of work and goes to great lengths to understand concepts applicable in real-life scenarios. Her podcast will certainly be one that is well researched and thought provoking when it hits the public!

She challenges people to “give a damn” about the community and care about the citizens within regardless of status. Eugenia is a sought-after speaker and strategist in community relations, community development, and organizational planning. It is her hope that one day within her communities people will feel seen and respected. She credits her involvement with community organizations and special projects as a means to do her part in shifting the culture toward equity and inclusion in Iowa, especially within Black LGBTQ communities.

Researcher Journal Entry

Pre-Interview

Whew! I had been trying to have a sit-down with this woman for two years! I was so honored that she was willing to tell her story and share with the audience ways that she came into being and what community engagement meant to her. The pandemic slowed our meeting for many reasons, including fear of the unknown virus, moving, navigating new spaces, and trying to get accustomed to a new way of making meaning in a primarily virtual setting. Eugenia has a busy schedule, and I was grateful she was able to work me in. I knew that she would do her best to assist me given the topic and her vested interest.

It was the last interview already! I finally felt like the kinks were worked out from the previous interviews. I didn't think Zoom would be an issue anymore, knock on wood! Following the conclusion of each interview, the prior participants had all indicated that they want to be interviewed again for follow-up episodes of 'Porch Tea w/Destinee.' I was so overjoyed that people enjoyed their experience interviewing with me. During the interviews, I had a running list in my head of what I could have done better or differently, but it was such a rewarding experience to create a shared space for learning and sharing. I was excited to learn what kind of space Eugenia and I would create.

Interview Day

The day was finally here! Eugenia elected to have her interview on Sunday, March 27, 2022, at 10:00 a.m. At that point, I feel like it should be smooth sailing. I was so glad to have the final interview, I could have jumped up and down like a little girl on Christmas day. I was most looking forward to centering on how she experiences the

LGBTQ community, the Black LGBTQ community, and the Black community. When we met each other for the first time following the IQCCC meeting, I had wanted to learn more about the Black LGBTQ community and how connections were made. The day had finally arrived where I got to hear her perspectives. I wondered how her responses to the questions would differ from those of my prior interviewees.

Podcast Interviewing With Eugenia

Eugenia entered the Zoom room early and was immediately ready to jump in. She had on a headset and a yellow sweater. Her Zoom background was gold and sported the Sigma Gamma Rho Iowa chapter logo. I posted the interview questions in the chat, as I had done for the participants prior to her. I asked her what she thought about the questions, and she replied “These were thought-provoking questions, and I think about these often. The questions allowed me to reflect on my experiences in Iowa.” The internet was stable for both of us, and we were both ready and eager to dive in. I was so glad that she started by speaking about the role she played in creating mentorship opportunities for young professionals and youth in the Black and Black LGBTQ community. We were both so excited to speak about the topic that we forgot to hit record for the first 10 minutes of speaking with each other! After, it dawned on me that we needed to record, I said abruptly, “Wait! We need to hit record!” Eugenia and I both burst out laughing. The laughter carried over into the recording, and the conversation continued to flow.

Eugenia is a natural at answering questions one by one, but she made a point that she wanted to talk about the “Black” part first. She did eventually answer the questions about her lived experiences as a Black lesbian woman in the Midwest; however, it was a

flow that was unique to Eugenia. I found myself lost in the stories that Eugenia weaved together. She spoke at length about the importance of building and sustaining a community and the main keys of embracing community members and trust. The original interview last 56 minutes. With the suggested edits and cuts, the interview fell between the target 30- to 45-minute range at approximately 43 minutes. Eventually, as the interview went on, it felt like I was sitting right across the table from Eugenia. There was so much laughter, joy, and real moments of “calling it like it is” during the interview. Like the previous participants, Eugenia shared with me after we wrapped that she would like to collaborate with me on another episode.

Eugenia’s Counternarrative

Eugenia’s story had multiple layers that I did not anticipate, but I felt honored to capture them. Consistent with previous interviews, I utilized a process of auditory inductive coding followed by thematic analysis to identify key patterns in her counternarrative. As a result of this process, I identified one overarching theme: Creating a community that embraces those who live at the intersection of Black and LGBTQ identities in Iowa is necessary. These subthemes supported the main overarching theme: (a) Chosen community is based on trust and embracing its members, (b) Iowa has a unique culture, and (c) Communities exist within communities.

Emergent Theme: Creating a Community That Embraces Those Who Live at the Intersection of Black and LGBTQ Identities in Iowa Is Necessary

Eugenia mentioned during her interview that Iowa being predominantly White, even in the more diverse Des Moines area, was shocking to her after growing up in St.

Louis, Missouri, with its large and prominent Black community. Additionally, Eugenia recalled her some experiences of attending Jackson State University, which is an Historically Black College/University (HBCU), and pledging her sorority, Sigma Gamma Rho. She alluded to experiencing culture shock when moving to Iowa. She made mention that transplants have a different lens to experience a “new to them” state. She stated during her interview that, prior to her move to Iowa, she had the “good sense to contend with the Black part first.” Upon moving to Iowa in 2004 after securing a job, she felt she would need to look for the Black community first as she is “Black first.” She said that Black people in Iowa were few and hard to find and that the folks she did find were generally unwelcoming once they knew she was gay and in an interracial marriage.

Building a community, Eugenia explained, is necessary because “people need people.” She shared that, after she was dismayed by her reception from Iowa’s Black community, she decided to start forming her own community within a community, the “Order of the Swirl,” which is an exclusive group of folks who are products of swirls (an interracial coupling) or folks who are in interracial couplings, are allies of interracial couples, and are Black LGBTQ. This group relies on each other for hair tips, grocery trips, “shooting the shit,” and being there for life’s critical moments. Still, Eugenia cautioned that folks need to start earlier with community building and mentorship opportunities, as youth are progressively coming out as LGBTQ in early years. Still, she noted that she has hope for the future of the LGBTQ community and the Black LGBTQ community because the youth are so active.

Subtheme 1: Chosen Community Is Based on Trust and Embracing Its Members

Eugenia shared that a community is a safe space where you know that you are welcome. She further explained that a safe space is built on trust and embracing its members. Embracing its members, Eugenia highlighted, goes beyond acceptance. She gave an example of Iowa's Black community accepting her equating to tolerating her once they found out that she is gay, is in an interracial relationship, and has a daughter. When I heard that, I immediately thought, *I need to update my vocabulary with this new perspective that was just shared. I tell folks I'm close with, say family and/or loved ones, that I accept them, but with hearing the difference between acceptance and embracing, it turns out I need folks to know that I embrace them.* Trust in a community means that a member can ask questions because "people need people," as Eugenia clarified.

Subtheme 2: Iowa Has a Unique Culture

Throughout the interview, Eugenia made mention of the idea that Iowa has its own unique sense of culture and community. As a transplant, she had more of a generalized idea surrounding the look and feel of a community. She explained that "Iowa nice" is experienced differently amongst those who consider themselves Iowans or folks who identify as Black living in Iowa. "Iowa nice" is described as being overly friendly or going out of your way to help someone in need while at the same time is also described as conflict avoidance. Eugenia explained that Iowa nice is not real, especially when referring to Black individuals. Additionally, Eugenia shared that the Black community in Iowa is weak, fragmented, and siloed. Furthermore, Eugenia informed me that her concern was not connecting with the LGBTQ community first; rather, she was concerned

about the “Black part first,” and she also noted that it was also difficult to connect to that community as well.

Subtheme 3: Communities Exist Within Communities

Finding pockets of support for being both Black and LGBTQ is coveted amongst those who hold both those identities. During the interview, Eugenia shared that she was fortunate to experience a strong Black community in St. Louis, Missouri, and to attend HBCU Jackson State University. She went on to say that the Black community within the LGBTQ community was strong there and that, at one point, St. Louis had a Black LGBTQ-owned bar. Eugenia recalled her undergraduate experience and noted that she pledged Sigma Gamma Rho, a Black sorority that is a part of the “Divine Nine” Black sororities. She explained that she was not only accepted but embraced by her sorority sisters as another sister, despite her being “quiet, nerdy, and gay.” When she moved to Iowa, she eventually helped start an Iowa chapter of Sigma Gamma Rho because it meant so much to her to be a part of it. She worked extensively with the Iowa chapter to become active and inclusive of LGBTQ folks, because it was important to her for people to be included holistically.

Critical Reflection

“Where are all the Black people?” This question is one that stuck with me because the central question that was guiding me was so different. The question that was guiding me was “Why are the Black people’s heads down?” I’ll never forget walking through Des Moines International Airport for the first time. My wife and I had just arrived from Washington state with several bags, and I noticed primarily Black staff working in the

airport and that their heads were down, their shoulders sunken, and their eyes weary. The heaviness of seeing them like that stayed with me, haunting me. I have never seen Black people look like that, even in other parts of the Midwest. It was devastating.

Listening to Eugenia's recounting of her experiences allowed me to think about my own experience as a transplant. I remember when I was still working for the Iowa Department of Public Health, and there was a vibrant food bus that was outside in the parking lot in front of the building. The bus had veggies painted on it. I walked closer to the bus and realized that 'Veggie Thumper' was written on it. It was certainly an eye-catching visual, this colorful bus with veggies on it. I was hungry and decided I was going to check out that menu listed on the side of the bus. I stepped up to the window excitedly and was greeted by the cashier, an older Black woman named Delores. I spoke with her: "Good afternoon, how are you doing?" She replied, "I'm just fine. Now, baby, where are you from?" I replied, "Ma'am, I've been asked that by Black women over a certain age. Now, why is that? I'm from Indianapolis. My people are from Mississippi and Louisiana." She responded, "Well, you don't seem like you're from around here. For one, you're a little too upbeat and you're smiling. Mississippi and Louisiana roots explain it." I responded internally, *Aw, damn!* It let me know that how I felt about interacting with Black people in Iowa was not in my head.

Eugenia's experience as a transplant allowed for her to share a distinct perspective on what opportunities ought to exist for Black folks in Iowa. She not only noticed there was a need, but she also went ahead and did something about it. She got involved with community organizations, started her own small community—which is her family, the

Order of the Swirl—assisted in developing mentorship opportunities for Black and LGBTQ folks, and is considering starting her own podcast exploring bar culture in Iowa. Following her interview, she followed up with me and asked me how I got started with the idea and conceptualization of ‘Porch Tea w/Destinee.’ We went on to discuss the possibility of collaborating on a project following my graduation from Arizona State University.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION

Overview and Findings

Problem of Practice

This study was conducted to address the problem of practice, which was that Black LGBTQ people in Des Moines do not have a platform for sharing their lived experiences. The problem of practice surfaced as I learned about the resources offered by LGBTQ organizations that exist in Des Moines and throughout the state of Iowa. There were general resources available for connecting with the broader LGBTQ community and even the LGBTQ BIPOC communities, but there was not anything specifically for Black LGBTQ folks. During 2020 and 2021, I had the honor of serving as the director of community, diversity, and education for Capital City Pride Des Moines. One of my responsibilities was to serve as the interviewer for the monthly speaker series. The speaker series was an opportunity for audience members to hear from LGBTQ individuals or allies about their business, nonprofit, special hobby, or areas of focus for between 45 minutes and an hour and a half. This was the closest platform established that had the potential to showcase Black LGBTQ stories, but the scope of the speaker series was much broader than solely Black LGBTQ stories.

Innovation

The innovation of this study is the ‘Porch Tea w/Destinee’ podcast. I decided on the idea of the podcast as an incubator of knowledge after I reflected on the realities that exist in Iowa. Of the 99 counties that are in Iowa, most of them are rural, with limited

access to stable internet. The benefit of the podcast is that the episodes are downloadable, allowing community members to make their way to internet-stable areas to (in theory) download the episodes and listen/watch them later. While the interviewees were living in Des Moines or the surrounding areas, it is possible that this podcast will be of interest to those who live outside of Des Moines. Each podcast interviewee was asked five guiding questions that framed the flow of the interview and drew out stories.

Framing This Study: Theory and Methods

There was one guiding theoretical framework, critical race theory (CRT) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), that situated the research and informed both the overarching questions and the supporting interview questions. CRT proposes that there are inequities based on race, perpetuated by the broader societal system, that have damaging effects on education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Rocco et al. (2014) explain that this system of racial inequities is so entrenched that its function is normalized and difficult to recognize. Specifically, they call attention to white supremacy and its difficulty to spot due to how it is embedded in the social system.

This research study was framed by an action research methodology (Mertler, 2017). Led by counternarrative analysis to guide the interview process (Miller et al., 2020), this study captured four participants' attitudes about and reflections on living while Black and LGBTQ in Iowa through podcast recordings, a researcher reflection journal, and a researcher reflection summarizing findings and drawing conclusions based on data analysis of participant interview themes and researcher connection with the data. The research questions answered by this study were (RQ1) How does the creation and

analysis of Black LGBTQ counternarrative podcast episodes yield insights that can inform how the broader LGBTQ community ought to engage with non-dominant LGBTQ groups? and (RQ2) What does an independent community organizer learn by facilitating counternarrative dialogues with fellow Black LGBTQ individuals?

Summary of Findings

The counternarratives were intriguing and unique to each individual. The first guest, Alexandra St. James (she/her), wove several stories together to illustrate her experiences as Black trans woman living in Des Moines. She spoke of her upbringing in a Black family surrounded by strong Black women as models; her creative outlets of singing, dancing, sewing, and cooking; her day job as a pre-K teacher; and her journey to becoming a well-known figure in the LGBTQ community. The second guest, Ezra Krivolavy (they/them), explained that, as a person with mixed lineage raised by White family members, they were often researching their intersecting identities as they present within systems of oppression. During the interview, they mentioned that growing up in the small town of Okoboji, Iowa was a challenge to navigate without Black relatives. Ezra shared that the intersection of Christian, Black, and gay was troublesome for them. The third guest, Deronta Spencer (he/him), discussed his preference for community engagement based on personal connections. He explained that he did not base connections on his identities as a Black gay male, but rather on his interests and hobbies instead. He spoke against forming relationships based on race or sexual orientation. The last guest Eugenia Stanton's (she/her) interview was guided by the central question, "Where are all the Black people?" She told her story about coming from a vibrant Black

LGBTQ community in St. Louis, her time as an undergraduate student attending Jackson State University as a Sigma Gamma Rho pledge, and finally her first experiences of Iowa through her lens as a Black mother in an interracial marriage with a Black child. Her involvement in community organizations was fueled by her desire to learn more about her community and connect resources to Black and/or LGBTQ youth and young adults.

Participant interview themes are listed in Table 3, below. As the interviews progressed, the themes transitioned from primary focus on the significance of the Black family to the importance of representation of Black and Black LGBTQ individuals in broader communities. For example, Alexandra and Ezra both spoke of the importance of Black elders and family members when learning how to navigate society; the difference was that Alexandra had Black elders to learn from, whereas Ezra did not. Alexandra's central theme was, "Blackness is the center of identity," while Ezra's was, "Identifying with Blackness is a continuous learning process." By contrast, Deronta and Eugenia centered their interviews on the importance of Black and Black LGBTQ representation in community broadly, moving beyond the single family. Deronta's central theme was, "Personal connections drive community engagement." His interview was focused on community connections broadly, but he did make mention that living at the intersection of Black and LGBTQ meant that he was seen as the expert on Black and/or LGBTQ in community organizations and work contexts, highlighting a broader representation issue. On a similar note, Eugenia's interview centered Black people in LGBTQ and Black spaces. Specifically, she called out Iowa community for not having a strong Black community, a space for folks living at the intersection of Black and LGBTQ, and

mentorship opportunities for people to connect. Her central theme was, “Creating a community that embraces those who live at the intersection of Black and LGBTQ identities in Iowa is necessary.”

Table 3

Participant Interview Themes

Participant	Main Theme	Subthemes
Alexandra St. James	Blackness is at the center of identity	(1) Reimagining the Black family structure (2) Barbies are for Black LGBTQ people (3) Exposed: living while Black and trans (4) Leaning on sources of familial comfort (5) Holding both Blackness and transness
Ezra Krivolavy	Identifying with Blackness is a continuous learning process	(1) Mixed children have no traditions (2) A contentious trio: Blackness, gayness, and the church (3) Othered in other communities (4) Self-acceptance is learning about yourself
Deronta Spencer	Personal connections drive community engagement	(1) Connections based on shared experience (2) Personal connections are the basis for building community relationships (3) The intersection of Black, male, and LGBTQ identities are difficult to navigate in broader LGBTQ spaces
Eugenia Stanton	Creating a community that embraces those who live at the intersection of Black and LGBTQ identities in Iowa is necessary	(1) Chosen community is based on trust and embracing its members (2) Iowa has a unique culture (3) Communities exist within communities

The two themes that were common across the interviewees were, “Navigating Blackness within Iowa communities is a challenge” and “Community learning is essential to understand identities and lived experience.” Each participant addressed their concerns with navigating Blackness in Iowa during their interview. Alexandra recalled a conversation with her mother where she explained to her that it is important to be “out”

and proud about it, even as a Black person. Her mother's response was that she was already Black, so why flaunt the gay piece. This story illustrated the tension between Alexandra and her prominent female figure. The entirety of Ezra's interview was about their quest to understand systems of oppression, from undergraduate studies to present day, primarily through the Black lens. Deronta's experience in Iowa was distinct from the other interviewees in that he named struggle with Blackness in dating and as a token. Eugenia's identity as a Black woman transplanting from St. Louis, where there is a strong Black LGBTQ and Black community, spurred her on her quest to find out where the Black people were.

Implications

The implications of this study largely involve the need to create Black LGBTQ spaces to share voices and perspectives. Each of the four participants had significantly different life experiences, but the common thread between them existed at the intersection of their Black and LGBTQ identities. The counternarratives diverged from one another at the mention of upbringing; however, when the participants spoke about living at the intersection of Black and LGBTQ identities, the similarities in the stories shone through. For instance, each of the four participants expressed that they feel more connected to individuals than to a large group, in part due to difficulty navigating in larger communities. Eugenia co-created the "Order of the Swirl" to have a community built on trust, identity, and common interest, while the other three participants had varying degrees of connectedness to the broader community. Alexandra sang, cooked,

taught, and performed to connect with the broader community. Deronta placed his efforts in establishing personal connections. Ezra connected with individuals and text.

Creating a community of belonging with sparse numbers is an ongoing challenge. It was difficult to track the actual number of Black LGBTQ folks living in Des Moines, though, as the participants alluded to, it could be beneficial to connect with folks one on one and ask individuals who they know and if they would want to get together. A community of practice (Wenger, 1999) for the Black LGBTQ community in Des Moines could be beneficial to learning more about that group's lived reality. Wenger (1998) defines a community of practice as a group that is learning, making meaning, and forming identity. The unique challenge for Black LGBTQ folks in Des Moines is that the community is fragmented. During Eugenia's interview, I asked a question along the lines of, "What can we do to outreach to folks who may not be into the bar scene?" The LGBTQ community has ties to the bar scene, as it was viewed as a place of refuge for many. Still, there are LGBTQ folks who would not set foot in a bar. Thus, a community of practice could be attractive for folks who transplanted from another city or town to learn about the landscape of LGBTQ communities and Black communities that exist in their new home.

Boundaries of Inquiry

This study had several noteworthy boundaries. First, the study took place virtually via Zoom. The original intent was to have the sessions on my porch, but caution surrounding COVID-19 took precedence. It would have been beneficial for me to read participant body language and for us both to ground ourselves in the space of the

interview in closer proximity to each other. The second limitation is that the participants were actively involved in community organizations. It could have been insightful to connect with Black LGBTQ folks who are not actively participating in community organizations. Third, the participants were personal connections I made after serving on boards and/or coalitions together. Thus, there was already a certain level of familiarity that we had prior to setting a time to interview.

Practical Lessons Learned

Logistics

Zoom was a challenge to work with for editing purposes. After the final interview wrapped, I researched alternative web-based video-recording platforms and stumbled upon Riverside.fm. With this platform, there was an option for both participant and interviewee video to be simultaneously displayed. Additionally, the video and sound quality is sharper with Riverside. Also, the platform Type Studio allows for video and audio upload with automatic transcription. Both Riverside.fm. and Type Studio are pluses for the continuation of the ‘Porch Tea w/Destinee’ podcast and hosting additional guests on the show.

Rest and Relaxation

Rest between interviews would have been beneficial for me. There were so many swirling thoughts going through my head between interviews. I was digesting the words of the participants. Alexandra and Ezra’s interviews being back to back was, in hindsight, a challenging choice. I understood that at the time I felt like I was in a pressure cooker as time seemed to ever be slipping away from me. This project already faced so many

delays and challenges; I wanted to get through the interviews. Yet, slowing down and giving myself at least a week between interviews would have allowed more space for initial processing. The practice of relaxation was not a part of the plan, and it ought to have been. There were many challenging themes and realizations that emerged throughout the interview. Relaxation would have assisted me in the process of naming and ordering the realizations that eventually wound up in my reflections.

Researcher Reflection

In addition to the more practical issues discussed above, I gained insight into the significance of my personal mindset and my connection to the study topics as a researcher.

Critical Roles of Open-Mindedness and Willingness to Challenge Systems of Belief Within Inquiry

The dynamic duo consisting of open-mindedness and willingness to challenge belief systems was central to inquiry for this study. Applying CRT to research was a challenge. White supremacy is difficult to spot! Going back to the lessons learned, rest and relaxation were something I needed. I was so hung up on the notion of time that the research nearly suffered. The concept of time in this context was a tool of perfectionism. Some scholars assert that perfectionism is akin to white supremacy. Within perfectionism also lies a sense of urgency. I had to go back and check where the sense of urgency was coming from. On the one hand, the research project had faced significant delays and shifts. On the other hand, the research took a direction that was better than the original scope of work. I had to challenge my own notion of time and sense of urgency for the

sake of both the research and my sanity. Reflecting on my reactions to learning more about the theoretical framework of CRT allowed for me as a researcher to remain objective, utilizing open-mindedness as the catalyst for challenging belief systems. CRT made me question my ability to be flexible with unlearning and relearning ways of existing as a researcher conscious of white supremacy within Black and LGBTQ spaces.

In practice, open-mindedness and willingness to challenge systems of belief were difficult for me to manifest while conducting research at the same time. The methodology and methods for conducting this research did allow me as a researcher to take creative liberties with how I captured my changing attitudes and preconceived notions of navigating Blackness and LGBTQ status in Iowa, while simultaneously reifying equity-based research for personal use. I often found myself reflecting on participant responses to interview questions and, mid-stream of thought, my mind would shift and I would be thinking about what this study means for equity-based research and how this research study may assist researchers struggling with how to balance research and equity within scopes of research similar to my own.

Separating Self From the Research

This research project was so deeply personal to me. It called on my experience living at the intersections of the Black, LGBTQ, and Midwesterner identities. There were times that it was difficult to discern my own feelings from those of my participants. I found myself often checking my awareness and familiarity with my own lived experience to remind myself of the ways that the participants' lived experiences were similar to and contrasted with my own. The researcher journal was instrumental in capturing my

attitudes over time and reflecting on my own thoughts and comparing them with what the interviewees shared. It was imperative that I separate myself from the participants. Over the course of the study, I found that going on a walk or talking on the phone was effective in breaking up my thought patterns and giving me the necessary pause to step away from the work and get back to it when I felt I was able to self-regulate.

Personal Reflection

This research project brought me so much joy. It was an honor to capture those narratives, prepare for the defense, and feel a sense of closure as the project wrapped. I have changed so much since beginning the doctoral program back in October 2018. There have been so many ups and downs, yet what remained constant is that I am Black, I am lesbian, and I spent my formative years in the Midwest. This project is an extension of the curiosity that I had about living in my intersections. Mainly, the perceptions of others who were not living at those intersections piqued my interests. Although this project was about capturing Black LGBTQ lived experiences, I had lingering thoughts in the back of my mind: *What will hearing these stories mean for those who are struggling with their family members who came out as gay?* and *If hearing these stories mean something, will these episodes bring peace to them?*

Interestingly, I plan to leave the state of Iowa and head to the Twin Cities of Minnesota. I question what lived experiences of Black LGBTQ folks are there. Personally, I wonder what my experience will be like when I get there. It will be the first time I move somewhere to live totally on my own, as just prior to the end of the research project, my wife and I decided to get a divorce. I chose to move to the Twin Cities for

me. It was the first decision of many more to come that were made solely on my own. Now, I get to take what I have learned from the participants, my reflections, and research surrounding CRT and move it forward into the next phase of my life. Of course, this also means that I will once again be a transplant in a new city, which is similar to how my doctoral journey began.

Future Considerations

Expanding the research could go many ways. One consideration is that this research project could have easily been stretched to a yearlong project of listening to Black LGBTQ voices across Iowa. A team of researchers, editors, and participants ought to be recruited to ensure that the workload is spread evenly. There is such limited information that exists for participants living at the intersections selected for this study. Another option to consider is recruiting several nonprofit organizations that identified a need to increase the inclusivity and equitable representation of their organizations. They could benefit by listening to the episodes and reflecting on the lessons learned from participants who shared their experiences, reviewing their strategic plans for employee and community engagement and performing a needs assessment on the plans using a CRT lens and adjusting accordingly. Still another consideration could be to develop a questionnaire for LGBTQ-serving institutions about lessons learned and what future plans could be to engage with Black LGBTQ individuals and communities. This research project could be replicated for other systematically oppressed groups, such as Indigenous, Asian, and Latinx populations.

Conclusion

Elementary school Destinee, with the pet rock, braces, and chubby cheeks, would be so impressed with the woman who conducted this research study. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to showcase this work. Black LGBTQ folks are your neighbors, friends, colleagues, volunteers, gas station attendants, local cyclists, local library co-patrons, struggling college students, spouses, siblings, and people doing their best to make it in society. I am proud to say that I, Destinee Shontalé Woodris (she/they), conducted this research study in collaboration with the communities that I love so much. Folks reading this dissertation, please know that this was a labor of love and that those four people who shared their stories were incredibly brave and beautiful beyond measure. Please say “Hey!” to your neighbors and judge them not based on their skin color or LGBTQ status; instead, share your pronouns and get ready to hear a good story!

Figure 6

Destinee’s Porch



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APPENDIX A

ALEXANDRA ST. JAMES PODCAST EPISODE

Porch Tea w/Destinee – Alexandra St. James

APPENDIX B

EZRA KRIVOLAVY PODCAST EPISODE

Porch Tea w/Destinee – Ezra Krivolavy

APPENDIX C

DERONTA SPENCER PODCAST EPISODE

Porch Tea w/Destinee – Deronta Spencer

APPENDIX D

EUGENIA STANTON PODCAST EPISODE

Porch Tea w/Destinee – Eugenia Stanton