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## Moving from Trauma to Healing: Black Queer Cultural Workers' Experiences and Discourses of Love

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Moving from Trauma to Healing: Black Queer Cultural Workers' Experiences and  
Discourses of Love

A Dissertation Presented

by

DURRYLE NORRIS BROOKS, JR.

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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College of Education  
Teacher Education and School Improvement



Moving from Trauma to Healing: Black Queer Cultural Workers' Experiences and  
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## DEDICATION

To all of the Black Queer folks who have ever been told or made to feel that you are not enough. You are. Get your life!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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And to my Boothang, I have never known a love oh so great. Thank you!

Ashe.

## **ABSTRACT**

### **MOVING FROM TRAUMA TO HEALING: BLACK QUEER CULTURAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES AND DISCOURSES OF LOVE**

MAY 2017

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Within the US context, there is a considerable misunderstanding of what love is. Normative discourse on love within our society is almost exclusively relegated to romance, familial relations, and or sexual connections. However, many scholars (Fromm, 1956, 1976; hooks, 2000, 2001; Tillich, 1952, 1954) have explored love within a critical theoretical construction, which has linked contemporary discourse on love to power, privilege, and oppression. In that sense, normative discourses on love are not innocuous but instead are hegemonic and serve as an ideology to perpetuate individualism and oppression.

This qualitative study explores the impact of normative discourses of love at the intersection of race and sexuality within contemporary US context. Drawing on the experiences of 14 Black Queer Cultural Workers (BQCWs), I gathered their narratives through a 60 to 90-minute, semi-structured interview protocol. The protocol was designed to elicit their conceptualizations of normative discourses of love, their own personal conceptualizations of love, and the impact of love on their everyday lived experiences.



The findings of the research reveal that the impact of normative discourses of love on BQCWs was devastating and traumatic. Normative discourses of love perpetuated the belief that love was for white heterosexual cisgender people and not Black queer people. This resulted in individual level and community level impacts. However, trauma was not their complete story. The data also revealed that they engaged in self-work and reconceptualized love. Their reconceptualized love is one that resisted erasure and dehumanization. The final finding, I call Deep Mirror Pedagogy, or the culminating journey from trauma to healing, consists of five components: 1) Recognizing Critical Incidents and Impact of Trauma, 2) Engaging, Investigating, and Interrogating Impacts of Trauma, 3) Resisting, Redefining, and Re-conceptualizing Love, 4) Getting to Unapologetic Wholeness and Completeness, and 5) Becoming and Doing “The Work” for self and community. These findings suggest that love must be redefined, and it must be stripped of heterosexism and racism and formed into a love that does not perpetuate violence but cultivates healing. This has implications for teachers and educators specifically working with historically marginalized populations and effectively meeting their needs.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

As I sit here and reflect on conceptualizations of love, I am immediately transported back to the summer of 1998 when Lauryn Hill dropped her album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. As a Black queer 10<sup>th</sup> grader growing up in inner city Baltimore, I struggled to make sense out of my own sexual and gender identities. I often wondered if there was a space for me in this world. I wondered if anyone would ever truly love me for who I really was and who I could become. I remember that moment in time as one of the critical memories in which my whole being required that love be present in my life, and yet it was so far away.

Today, as I reflect on love and what it means, I can say that my 10<sup>th</sup> grade self only had a particular lens, a very personal lens of love, whereas presently, my research draws my attention to the ways in which love manifests beyond my purely personal and simplistic conceptualizations of love. After deeper exploration of that critical moment, what I know now by engaging in critical self-reflection is that even within my story above that centered love in its purely personal/individualistic sense, my soul yearned for love to be bigger, better, more protective. As a Black, queer, gender non-confirming teenager, I needed a social theory of love that would have centered and honored my existence in the classroom and in the world to help make life easier to bear as I faced racism, sexism, and homophobia at very tender ages.

Fifteen years later, now an educator, the notion of love seems even more pressing to me than ever before. Figuring out how to teach it, exploring its shape, form, and function, how it operates and shows up in formal and informal educational spaces seems

beyond urgent. I have come to understand that the work of love is deeply personal and, more importantly, that it has to be deeply collective if we are to address some of the most pressing social issues of our time. This work then seeks to recursively move between the deeply personal and collective, to hopefully shift toward a social recognition and conceptualization of a love that Dr. King (1967) put forth many years ago when he wrote:

What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love. (p. xx)

I think about what my life could have been if the educators and community around me showed up with this type of love Dr. King spoke about. How might I/we be different?

Those are the types of questions that keep me up at night and writing.

### **Significance of Study/Problem Statement**

This research project explores the critical construction of love at the intersection and interconnections of race, gender, and sexuality, that is to suggest that this project will look specifically at Black queer experiences in a broader context of education (throughout the life span) and ask critical questions to engage the social phenomenon of love. However, before I get there, it is critical to talk more specifically about those various contexts.

The state of Black education in the United States is overwhelmingly “abysmal” (King, 2005, p. 3). Within the field of education, there are significant amounts of research on Black student educational disparities, given formal educational institutions’ overwhelming failure to effectively educate Black students (Bell, 2010; Harper & Quaye, 2009; 2012; J. E. King, 2005; Lewis, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008). These bodies of research run the gamut of discussing teacher practices, teacher attitudes, stereotype threat,

curriculum design, institutional practices, white supremacy, and ideology within education (Bakari, 2003; Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2003; Giroux, 1983, 1999, 2006; Juarez & Hayes, 2010; Leonardo, 2005, 2009, 2013; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Vaught, 2011).

When we consider the field of sexuality at the intersection of education, specifically drawing our attention to queerness, the picture for students is also abysmal and even hostile. Greater and greater attention has been given to LGBT bullying and harassment within schools and society at large, given the impact those forms of violence have on the over-all well being. Research has shown that LGBT folks at large and LGBT students face high rates of harassment, verbal, physical, and emotional, mental abuse (Kosciw 2004; Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004; Robinson & Espelage, 2011; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010). Some of the first research studies that are examining LGBT people of color and their experiences within formal educational institutions tell a startling tale. According to the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network, more than 60% of LGBT students of color had been verbally harassed in school, and LGBT students of color reported little intervention on the part of teachers or other school personnel when biased remarks were made (Diaz, Kosciw & GLESN, 2009). In those spaces, LGBT folks are navigating both sexual identity and/or gender-based violence as well as race-related bias and discrimination (Brockenbrough 2013, 2016; Kumashiro, 2001, 2002; Marquez & Brockenbrough, 2013). This not only impacts their academic achievement, it has implications and clear deleterious impact on their sense of self, identity, and their self-worth, which has been linked to poorer health outcomes among other negative things.



When we look to the literature on Black queer experiences, it becomes clear that there is continued need to explore the life and experiences of Black queer folks. However, some Black queer scholars have been writing about the continued need for Black queer voices and space across many contexts. We know that discrimination is not “equally” distributed; that is to suggest that each racial/ethnic group experiences similarities as well as differences based on their particular racializations. Given the current contemporary context—extra-judicial killings of Black people, including Black LGBT folks, the Black Lives Matter movement (Johnson, 2015), and the Black student activism (Fuller, 2015) happening across university campuses today, we are (re)experiencing a particular type of discrimination—anti-Blackness. Because of this reality, it is important not only to explore, call out, and challenge systems of oppression that are impacting Black queer folks, but it is also important to explore the ways in which Black queer folks resist and, in the context of this research project, deploy/enact a love “that does justice.” In short, the significance of this study in part is its assertion that Black lives do matter so much so that this project will engage Black love—an underexplored and under-theorized dimension of Black queer lives.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore Black Queer Cultural Workers’ (BQCWs’) conceptualizations of love and experiences with love. This project seeks to continue in the tradition of Black Liberation. Given that Black and queer discourses within the context of education are often deficit based (Brockenbrough, 2015; Irizarry, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lewis et al., 2008; Spears, 1978), it is increasingly important to explore Black queer resistance, transformation, joy, resiliency, and agency

(Brockenbrough, 2015; hooks, 1994b; Johnson, 2015; Kelley, 2002; M. L. King, 1963; Lorde, 1984). By doing this—engaging Black queer love—this project has the potential to contribute to emerging intersectional scholarship and has particular implications for teacher education, pedagogy, school climate, safe space scholarship, and beyond.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this project were fashioned after two consecutive pilot studies and years of deep theoretical work and praxis. My two overarching research questions are:

1. How do Black queer cultural workers conceptualize love in their everyday lived experiences?
2. How do Black queer cultural workers conceptualize love and its relationship to social transformation?

### **Summary of Argument**

There are two major findings that emerged within my research. The first major finding was trauma. Each of the BQCWs experienced trauma at the intersection of racism and heterosexism as it relates to their experiences and discourses of love. The second major finding within my research is that BQCWs reconceptualized love, which is different than normative discourses on love that are white, cisgender, and heteronormative. Speaking specifically to my research questions, how do Black queer cultural workers conceptualize love in their everyday lived experiences and how do Black queer cultural workers conceptualize love and its relationship to social transformation, I argue that they do that by healing at the specific intersections of their sites of trauma created by normative discourses of love. Based on the data I gathered, the overarching answer is that they must heal from the trauma caused by normative discourses of love

(white, cisgender, heteronormative, and racist) that situated love outside themselves, and I propose that they did that by re-conceptualizing love, so that they might heal themselves and the communities they serve.

I call this process of healing at the specific intersections of their identities, where they also experienced trauma, Deep Mirror Pedagogy.<sup>1</sup> Deep Mirror Pedagogy is a conceptual model of a contextually based and culturally specific process of healing oneself and community. Deep Mirror Pedagogy is the summative experience, the moving from trauma to healing that includes the findings in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. When taken together, the findings open up a world where BQCWs grapple with the material impact of racism and heterosexism caused by normative discourses on love that perpetuate love as a white cisgender and heteronormative construct. And as an act of agency, they reconceptualized love so that they could heal from trauma and increase their capacity to love.

Deep Mirror Pedagogy consists of a 5-part conceptual model that represents a more holistic picture of who these participants were and how they healed trauma so that they could love themselves and community in deeper ways. Deep Mirror Pedagogy consists of five components.

- Step 1 (Recognized Critical Incidents & Impact of Trauma): Each participant described critical moments that either uncovered deep wounds or created them as it relates to love. They started exploring what happened to them in the context of their personal lives as well as thinking about enduring histories of racism and heterosexism and the trauma that comes with simply living on this planet.
- Step 2 (Engage, Investigate, and Interrogate Impacts of Trauma): Each participant engaged, investigated, and interrogated individual level impacts. From their narratives, BQCWs explored the impact of trauma on their lives. They uncovered deep wounds and began to explore where they were hurting, why they were

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<sup>1</sup> The difference between deep mirror work and deep mirror pedagogy is in the orientation to the other.

hurting, how they were hurting, whether trauma showed up as acting out, internalizing myths of deficiency, or self-medicating.

- Step 3 (Resist, Redefine, and Re-conceptualize): Each participant had to make a choice to resist, redefine, and re-conceptualize love and rewrite social scripts and redefine themselves for themselves. They resisted normative notions of love and the messages of heterosexism and racism, and they then actively disavowed those scripts to begin a process of discovery by which they could rediscover themselves, rewrite, or reconfigure conceptualizations of love. It was also in this state that they were healing the wounded places and conjuring the things that they needed in life to get good and stay good.
- Step 4 (Getting to Unapologetic Wholeness + Completeness): Ultimately, after doing deep mirror work and getting clear about who they wanted to be and how they wanted to be in the world, they were *becoming*. They became more and more complete and unapologetic. They configured their lives in ways that allowed for wholeness to take hold of them while recognizing that healing is an on-going and life long commitment.
- Step 5 (Becoming & Doing “The Work”): Becoming a vessel is the implementation of their journey toward healing and their ability to create space in which others can move into greater degrees of healing. As cultural workers, they carried the burden of trauma, healing, and justice within themselves in order to create change as they move through the world. They were on a journey and part of their journey was creating space for others in their communities to survive, heal, and thrive.

Each chapter will highlight the voice of one primary cultural worker. I will center their voice, primarily, as a practice of humanization through a biographical sketch.

Immediately following their biographical sketch, I will draw upon the themes that emerged in their biographical sketch and will support those key themes with data from other cultural workers in the project. Each section will conclude with a discussion section about the findings and implications.

## Overview of the Chapters

Speaking specifically to my research questions, how do Black queer cultural workers conceptualize love in their every-day lived experiences and how do Black queer cultural workers conceptualize love and its relationship to social transformation, I argue that they do that by healing at the specific intersections of their sites of trauma created by normative discourses of love. Based on the data I gathered, the overarching answer is that they must heal from the trauma caused by normative discourses of love (white, cisgender, heteronormative, and racist) that situated love outside themselves and I propose that they did that by re-conceptualizing love, so they could heal themselves and the communities they serve. To that end, this section will provide an overview of the chapters.

In Chapter 1, I outline the state of Black and Black queer education. Using my personal experience as a Black queer cultural worker, I situate the centrality of love within formal education settings and the lack there of for Black and queer folks within those spaces. Drawing links to my own experience in formal education, I desired that teachers, administrators, and or staff would intervene in the bullying and harassment I experienced at the intersection of my race and sexual identity. At that moment, I knew that love was central to ensuring my safety within the classroom, and the lack of it was evident in the unchecked harassment I experienced. I then move into describing the data on Black and Black queer people within formal education settings and use the literature to speak specifically to racism and heteronormativity and the material impacts on Black/queer people. I make the point that while there are greater amounts of research on Black/queer people, they are often deficit-based and that research must explore Black/queer agency, joy, and resistance.

In Chapter 2, I describe the importance of reconceptualizing love in order to move away from normative discourses on love. Normative discourses on love situate love as romantic, familial, and sexual in nature almost exclusively. I argue in this chapter that normative discourse on love is not innocuous, but instead hegemonic. That constant perpetuation of normative discourses on love serves a particular social function, which I argue perpetuates individualism and white supremacy. I offer that the development of a critical theory of love is imperative and that love and its transformative power must be reconceptualized with an understanding of how racism, heterosexism, and white supremacy destroyed many Black/queer communities' capacity to love out of survival. Therefore, the critical study of love must explore dimensions of power, privilege, and oppression if it is to combat erasure and dehumanization of Black queer people.

In Chapter 3, I provide an overview of the methodology I used to conduct this study. Within this chapter, I describe the selection of participants, human subjects considerations, confidentiality, my own positionality, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, and procedures for addressing trustworthiness. In this chapter I describe the 14 BQCWs who agreed to participate in this study.

In Chapter 4, I describe the findings on trauma. All of the participants described experiencing both discrete forms of trauma but also named explicitly that racism and heteronormativity were forms of violence that produced trauma at the intersections of their identity and normative discourses on love. I centralize Hakeem's voice and through his narrative, with the support of other participants, my data show that at the intersection of normative discourses of love and their Black queerness, love was a white, cisgender, and heterosexual concept that impacted them through marginalization, which resulted in

three individual level impacts: myths of deficiency, brokenness, and co-dependency; that at the intersection of their Black queerness and this notion of love, they described feeling like they were not enough, that something was wrong with them for not being able to experience this white, cisgender, and heteronormative love; and described staying in unloving situations for far longer than they should. They faced trauma within communities of which they were part. At the community level, BQCWs faced a dual dilemma in that they wanted to be in community with other Black queer people, and yet, because of racism and structural inequalities, loving another Black queer person was dangerous because of the collective trauma that made sustaining relationships difficult.

In Chapter 5, I describe the findings on reconceptualizing love. All the participants described an understanding of love that was fundamentally different from normative discourses on love. Whereas normative discourses on love often situated love almost exclusively at the individual level, these cultural workers conceived love as fundamentally more complex and complicated than normative constructions of love. They reconceptualized love so that their needs and desires would be at the center of love not a white, cisgender, and heteronormative construction of love. Drawing on Marcus's narrative, the need to redefine love is about resisting erasure and dehumanization. This is a fundamental difference between the normative construction of love and a love that resists erasure and dehumanization. In this way, the five dimensions of love (self-work and self-affirmation, covenant/commitment to sustained engagement over time, unconditional with boundaries, critical awareness of racism and heterosexism in love, and wholeness, justice, and completeness) are not ancillary but, rather, the core foundation of a critical conceptualization of love. The movement from a normative to a critical

conceptualization of love would require healing from the very deeply racist and heteronormative construction of love and their impacts. Reconceptualizing love was the act of agency that allowed them to heal themselves of trauma and to create spaces for other people to do the same.

In Chapter 6, I interpret the data from Chapters 4 and 5, to lay out a culturally specific and contextual model for Black queer healing, which I call Deep Mirror Pedagogy. In this chapter I explore the five components of Deep Mirror Pedagogy and how each is supported with the data found in the prior two chapters. When taken together, what emerges in Deep Mirror Pedagogy is a process by which Black queer people heal at the specific sites of trauma so that they can heal and continue to create spaces of transformation for others. To answer my research questions, how do Black queer cultural workers conceptualize love in their everyday lived experiences and how do Black queer cultural workers conceptualize love and its relationship to social transformation, my answer is Deep Mirror Pedagogy.

In Chapter 7, I situate the significance of healing from trauma caused by racism and heterosexism within the context of formal education. Drawing on hooks' work in which she locates teaching and learning as an intimate act that goes beyond teaching to the test. Instead, teachers and educators must help students become in the context of ongoing and discrete forms of trauma. Therefore, teachers and educators must learn to love their students, in a critical and reconceptualized manner, so that they can heal from trauma and become active citizens and whole people. I also describe the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.



## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Within contemporary United States context, there is still considerable misunderstanding of what love is. Love is often understood to be affection, familial, or sexual in nature. If we look to the Merriam Webster dictionary (n.d.) as a source for normative definitions reflecting larger social (mis)understandings, love then is a “warm attachment, strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties (material love for a child), attraction based on sexual desire, and tenderness between lovers.” We can see this definition ring true as we read about heroic feats completed by parents to ensure the safety of their children, the countless “romantic comedies” that are widely circulating, and of course all of the sexual or even hypersexual media portrayals of love.

In addition to those particular normative social definitions of love permeating our society, the field of psychology has often addressed love from the individual and emotional dimensions. When we look to the fields of Communications, Critical Media Studies, and particularly Cultural Studies, we find that the proliferation of certain images and various media are not innocuous but, in fact, act on our psyche through communicative acts and begin to shape our social perceptions and social realities (Foucault, 1972; Hall, 1997). This phenomenon is well documented in critical race, gender, and sexuality scholarship (Earp, Katz, Young, Jhally, Rabinovitz, & Media Education Foundation., 2013; Jhally, Hall, & Media Education Foundation, 2002; Jhally, Kilbourne, Rabinovitz, & Media Education Foundation, 2010). Therefore, the study of love, stories, and meanings that are perpetuated within our contemporary society are productive in creating, shaping, and informing our lived realities daily. The study of love

is rendered more intelligible when one considers love as ideology in the way that Hall (1997) defines: “The mental frameworks – the language, concepts, categories, imagery of thought and system of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works” (p. 26). If dominant discourses of love are, in fact, ideologies, I am left with the question of what is the impact of contemporary discourses of love on individuals, communities, and our society? What purpose do these normative discourses or conceptualizations of love serve within our larger social and historical context? And ultimately, to the point of this particular project, how are those normative conceptualizations of love impacting us differently as it relates to race, racism, and sexuality. To answer these questions, a critical approach to love is necessary and imperative. Therefore, this literature review will draw upon critical theorists who examine and critique normative discourses of love to shed light on the power and domination of pervasive love ideologies and the roles it plays in influencing social relationships and our society.

### **A Critical Theory of Love**

Agger (1998) writes that the purpose of critical social theory is to unveil the hidden ideologies in the everyday.

The purpose of ideological critique is to uncover, demystify reification, domination, and hegemony found in people’s everyday experiences and activities [and that] everyday life is permeated with discourses and texts that both divert people from their alienation (and suggest certain reliefs, such as shopping, vacations) and portray the world as rational and necessary. (p. 81)

Therefore, the critical theory project can be understood by what it was born in response to, what it seeks to analyze, and what it seeks to change. Restated, critical theory is

concerned with social inequality, the mechanism that produces, reproduces, and maintains that inequality, and social actions that emancipate (Brookfield, 2005).

A critical theory of love is, in effect, a commentary about society and social relations. German psychologist and sociologist Eric Fromm, who is from the Frankfurt school of thought, has written extensively on love. Fromm and Anshen (1956) offer a critical analysis of the notions of love in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They draw attention to the many ways in which normative conceptualizations of love have created the conditions that position love both as abundant, as expressed in the mass consumption of self-help books, and as whimsical, as something someone does not have to learn about (p. 1). This particular positioning of both/and has created the illusion of abundance within our society when it functions to distract us from the deep lovelessness that our society feels because we are unable to create love ourselves, within our selves, or our communities. This points to one of the central tensions within his book. They write, “Is love an art? Then it requires knowledge and effort. Or, is love a pleasant sensation, which to experience is a matter of chance, or something one ‘falls into’ if one is lucky?” (p. 1). They go on to argue the latter and asserts that love is an art and that there is much to be learned about it and offer us two particular premises operating in contemporary society that obfuscates the notion of love as an art. Premise one: most people see the problem of love primarily as that of being loved. Premise two: rather than that of loving, of one’s capacity to love (Fromm & Anshen, 1956). He writes that one or both premises combine to create the conditions for possible modes of existence in which either people seek ways to be more lovable to others, which is often expressed as being popular or having sex appeal, or the fixation on finding the *object* to be loved instead of focusing on the act of loving or one’s

capacity to love (Fromm & Anshen, 1956). Based on those two particular premises, Fromm is able to then assert the link to the development of modern society. Through social and cultural processes and practices, one engages in various rituals to become more lovable or to think about ways to gain the object of their affection. For example, the juxtaposition of marriage (a contract) within Victorian era and the conflation of marriage and love within contemporary society, exemplifies the contemporary desire to find love in the object Fromm suggested (Fromm & Ashen, 1956).

In addition to the conflation of love within contemporary society with marriage, Fromm also notes specifically that one of the staple features of our society is its mass consumerism. He asserts that love has become a commodity.

Our whole culture is based on appetite for buying, on the idea of a mutually favorable exchange. Modern man's happiness consists in the thrill of looking at the shop windows, and in buying all that he can afford to buy, either for cash or on installments. (Fromm & Ashen, 1956, p. 3)

In this particular understanding of American consumerism, love is no different from any other product. Love in our society becomes a commodity that is to be bought, sold, and marketed. Love in this sense becomes another form of cultural capital. Operating within this particular paradigm situates love as something that can be bought and consumed endlessly as long as the purchaser has the resources to do so.

In a culture in which the marketing orientation prevails, and in which material success is the outstanding value, there is little reason to be surprised that human love relations follow the same pattern of exchange which governs the commodity and the labor market. (p. 5)

Fromm (1976) goes into greater detail in *To Have or To Be* in which he writes,

Our judgments are extremely biased because we live in a society that rests on private property, profit, and power as the pillars of its existence. To acquire, to own, and to make a profit are the sacred and unalienable rights of the individual in the industrial society. (p. 60)

What begins to emerge in his analysis about love and society is that they are linked. The dominant mode of existence and our social process, like our economic systems and our laws, are in effect not neutral but go into shaping our lived and material realities. Beyond what Fromm lays out as a consequence of this notion of love as a commodity, what has come to my attention is that objectification also allows for the othering of objects of love—even the human ones. If love is a commodity and can be bought, then when one has obtained it, the love object becomes property of that purchaser. We can see the deleterious consequences of possessive ownership when we examine rates of intimate partner violence within heterosexual and same-sex relationships in which possessiveness and feelings of ownership has deeply impacted the lives of those victimized (Ard & Makadon, 2011; Messinger, 2011; Whitton, Newcomb, Messinger, Byck, & Mustanski, 2016).

What becomes clear in Fromm's work is that love is an art and does require cultivation of knowledge and skills. If love is an art and requires knowledge and skills, the ways in which dominant ideologies of love are perpetuated in our society not only obfuscate the study of love but also the social function that love plays in society. To study love then is not to simply study romance, but it also put into view social relationships, process, and practices. This is evidenced in his work when Fromm speaks of the impact of mass consumerism and how it has produced a situated love as a commodity to be consumed and possessed. If love can be bought, then it is something that does not need to be worked on, cultivated, or built.

## Race, Gender, and Patriarchy

Fromm and Anshen (1956) argue that the contemporary critique of a dominant ideology of love is linked to consumerism (social processes). What he does not do within his text is explicitly critically address the intersections race, gender, or patriarchy and how they impact love. For this analysis, I draw upon bell hooks, Black feminist scholar, to speak to these connections.

bell hooks similarly captures the sentiment of Fromm's previous work by offering a critical analysis of love and social forces that go into creating possibilities of love. In *All About Love: New Vision* (2000), she notes that the exploration of love in contemporary western society is paramount and uses her personal experiences with love to etch out a new vision. This new vision, which takes up an iteration of the question that Fromm posed about whether or not love is an art or a sentimental feeling. hooks notes that when we look to current discourses of love in our society, we are left wanting more. She positions the problem through the words of popular author and rabbi, Harold Kushner, and writes: "I am afraid we are raising a generation of young people who will grow up afraid to love" (p. xix). From her own personal experience lecturing across the country, she noted that the experience of youth and adults often seemed to conceptualize love as naive, weak, and the hopelessly romantic. And what was more disturbing was that in conversations about social justice and strong love ethic, people often failed to see the transformative power of love.

In her assessment of our contemporary context, the type of love that exists is actually toxic and dangerous to our own well-being, sense of self, and our community.

There are not many public discussions of love in our culture right now. At best, popular culture is the one domain in which our longing for love is

talked about. Movies, music, magazines, and books are the places we turn to hear our yearning for love expressed. (hooks, 2000, p. xvii)

And even when we look into those spaces, we often find that notions of love are cynical as hooks would put it. What hooks actually uncovers in this work is a societal longing for something that is meaningful to address our issues of powerlessness and our great fears of isolation and separateness (hooks, 2000).

Ultimately, she points to the ways in which our deep lack of good and healthy conceptualizations of love and our deep sense of lovelessness sets the conditions for our personal addiction to love. In that sense love, the pursuit of love at all costs, positions people to forgo health in all its many manifestations to instead be driven by a high or a drug (hooks, 2000). She continues on to make clear that this addiction to love often forces people to put on masks of insecurity and live a life of pretense to hide their deepest sense of shame around not being lovable or not feeling like they are never enough. In addition to our notions of love and our deep shame and guilt around wanting to be lovable and more-than-enough, we engage in ways that are not healthy for creating loving relationships and instead draw upon domination to control. She writes, “Allegiance to male domination requires of men who embrace this thinking (and many, if not most, do) that they maintain dominance over women by any means necessary” (p. 41). In this instance, hooks draws attention to the ways in which men specifically are socialized to believe that they must dominate to maintain the mask and power within their relationships. This understanding is built in part upon the notion of women being property of men, which has a long history when one examines the development of patriarchy throughout the centuries. Within the tenants of patriarchy, one finds the foundation and the demand for domination not only of women but anyone who is not

deemed a man. For hooks, this very notion of domination is central to our contemporary experience. According to hooks, “cultures of domination rely on the cultivation of fear as a way to ensure obedience” (p. 93). From where she sits, any society that does not satisfactorily address the development of love and address the issues of lovelessness in society is bound to perish because to love is a requirement for our continued human existence.

What becomes extremely clear in hooks’ work is the notion of domination—race- and gender-based specifically. As it relates specifically to notions of love, Black love, and Black people’s experience, she argues that so much of our Black existence is informed by domination (i.e., racism). In *Salvation: Black People and Love* (2001), she writes, “In the diaspora, most Black people’s relationships to love has been shaped by the trauma of abandonment” (p. 18). In that section, she continues to outline the history of the first free Africans to fellowship with Native Americans prior to enslaved Africans being forced into chattel slavery. She goes on to note that “Black people in this country have been taught that their history starts at enslavement” (p. 19). This misinformation is not only mental but has material consequences on Black people’s capacity to connect and see themselves outside of the white supremacist gaze. Particularly, in a culture of white domination, Black people in this country have had to choose to assimilate for the purpose of survival. When one thinks about Black love in the context of racial oppression and white supremacy, Black communities and families have often had to teach Black children to survive in some ways that are not loving. hooks writes,

Prior to the civil rights movement, most parents felt it was a gesture of love to teach children skills that would enable them to survive in the existing culture of racial apartheid. At times this meant teaching habits of being that were not rooted in love. To break someone’s spirit is not a



gesture of love. It can and often does lead to what contemporary psychoanalysts have called soul murder. (hooks, 2001, p. 23)

The larger social context, in which each of us lives, impacts how we conceptualize love. This is most evident in the context of Black American and America's history of slavery in which the larger social processes impacted Black families so much so that they had to teach Black children to survive even if that meant harming them. In the context of American society, oppression implemented through various social processes, work together to create and/or limit Black possibilities—this includes love.

The reliance on lies, subterfuge, and manipulation used to get by in the world outside of home often became the standard of behavior in the home. Importantly, many of the survival strategies black people learned which enabled them to cope with life in a racist culture were not positive skills when applied to intimate interpersonal relationships. (p. 24)

What hooks points out is the use of domination in the culture has particular implications for Black people growing up in a white supremacist society. The ways that oppression has shaped and informed the Black cultural imagination and material possibilities of Black bodies when it comes to love are very much present. If we look specifically to the days during the Baltimore uprising in the summer of 2015, one of the major stories that was picked up was of a Black mother locating her Black teenager in the crowd, grabbing him while she repeatedly smacked him violently in the face and yelled at him for participating (Bowerman, 2015; Levs, Stapleton, & Almas, 2015). When she was interviewed as to why she did this, one of the main reasons listed was that she was trying to save him (Chan, 2015). This example demonstrates what hooks spoke of when she said the very tools that Black folks used to protect us and save us were also violent and not based in loving practices.

In short, to have very little public discourse on the subject of love and not to speak specifically to the ways that some Black folks have been interpolated by dominant ideologies of love (that are based in white supremacy and racism) is to allow for the proliferation of that toxic ideology.

The abandonment of a discourse on love, of strategies to create a foundation of self-esteem and self-worth that would undergird struggles for self-determination, laid the groundwork for the undermining of all our efforts to create a society where Blackness could be loved, by Black folks, by everyone. (hooks, 2001, p. xxiii)

To do the work of love with a critical lens within the context of Blackness and Black cultural imagination is to set the possibility of transformation not only within our own individual lives but also in our communities and society. Not to do so is to allow for the perpetuation of domination and modes of existence that have been engrained within Black communities as a result of white supremacist culture. Defining and redefining the discourses of love becomes not only a personal project but a political project as well. This critical definition of love is a counter-narrative with incredibly rich emancipatory possibilities. A critical theory of love has always been part of the struggle for Black liberation and valuation for centuries and to work for a critical theory of love today is to continue that tradition and legacy.

### **Power and Justice**

When we look into one central Black struggle in the United States, the Civil Rights Movement, we see Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. attempting to fill a socially vacant conceptualization of love with one that is based in (Black) justice. In a speech that was delivered to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1967, Dr. King pointed to some of the fractures that moved love away from justice.

You see, what happened is that some of our philosophers got off base. And one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites, polar opposites, so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love. It was this misinterpretation that caused the philosopher Nietzsche, who was a philosopher of the will to power, to reject the Christian concept of love. It was this same misinterpretation which induced Christian theologians to reject Nietzsche's philosophy of the will to power in the name of the Christian idea of love. Now, we got to get this thing right. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love. (para. 25)

It is clear from Dr. King's articulation that love was indeed in need of a redefinition. The normative notions that have been, in part, because of philosophical differences have left the everyday notion of love without any grounding. But to meet the particular demands for social transformation, love, its study, and its uses must be a personal and a political project to create the catalyst for change and address the deep apathy and fear in the majority of the country during that time. We see this most clearly in Dr. King's work *Strength to Love* (1963). In this work Dr. King, which is a composite of his sermons given after the bus protest in Montgomery Alabama, he writes:

By disregarding the fact that the gospel deals with man's body as well as with his soul, such a one-sided emphasis creates a tragic dichotomy.... I am certain we need to pray for God's guidance in this integration struggle, but we are gravely misled if we think the struggle will be won only by prayer. (p. 131)

What comes through in this quote is Dr. King's commitment to a social gospel that has people working to change systems of oppression and not leaving that up to some otherworldly divinity. He asked the question, is it the will of God for Black people to be in oppression, to which he emphatically says, "Of course not" (p. 92). The link between love and justice comes to light when Dr. King draws upon the Christian love ethic to

help fill in America's deficient conceptualizations of love that had penetrated deep within society because of oppression.

At the same time, within the Black cultural imagination at large and specifically within Black Christendom, there was already a cultural narrative that God was indeed on the side of the oppressed which came to light in Cone's foundational works, *God of the Oppressed* (1975) and *A Black Theology Of Liberation* (1970).

Black theologians are living in a period in which we must investigate anew "the problem of the color-line" as that problem is reflected in the social existence of African peoples...our theology must emerge consciously from an investigation of the socioreligious experience of black people, as that experience is reflected in black stories of God's dealings with black people in the struggle for freedom. (Cones, 1975, p. 15)

Again, what we see here in this text is the direct link between the social experiences of Black people and our notions of justice intimately tied up in our liberation. Whereas the white western understanding of God, and to some degree of justice, is steeped in social and historical context, Black folks' understanding of God had to be about liberation and emancipation. When we look to evidence of white western conceptualizations of God at the intersection of public life during chattel slavery, what we see is white theology working in consort to preserve social, political, and economic advantage of white people.

This is why, through simulating neutrality, white theology is preoccupied with the conciliation of things that cannot be conciliated, why it denies so insistently the differences among social classes and their struggles, and why in its efforts for social good it does not go beyond the kid of modernizing reformisms that only shore up the status quo. (Cone, 1986, p. xii)

What is exposed through Cones' work is the use of religion that is based in whiteness and white supremacist ideology that does not work toward justice for all but only for the preservation of social and political gains of white people. This is clearly seen when we examine the social uses of scriptures during chattel slavery. Scriptures were used

strategically and intentionally to justify and condone the enslavement of Black people. “Unfortunately, American white theology has not been involved in the struggle for Black liberation. It has been basically a theology of the white oppressor, giving religious sanction to the genocide of Amerindians and the enslaved Africans” (p. 4). Already alive and well within the experiences of enslaved Black folks was, to some level, the making of a God that was deeply concerned about their welfare and their liberation. For Black folks, God “came to set the captives free” (p. 52). Within Black historical context, God specifically came to liberate those who are the dispossessed, humiliated, and denigrated in our society. If these things are true, God, justice, and love must be able to account for and bring about liberation, emancipation, and social transformation for Black folks. The claim then that Black folks and our understanding of justice and love might be inextricably linked becomes more palpable.

In sum, what I have shown is that there is a need, and indeed have been, critical theories on love. What I have outlined is a critical analysis of love and how it interestingly draws one’s attention to a social critique of our society. The perpetuation of normative discourses on love that positions it as romance and pure emotion are part of a larger social process that marginalizes historical Black notions of love that are linked to justice. The absence of counter-narratives in mainstream discourse in our culture is no longer simply normative but instead hegemonic and have political implication as well as having material consequences on Black individuals and communities.

### **Heterosexism and Moving Toward a (Black) Queer Theory of Love**

Very little literature has been written specifically about Black queer love in the context of the academy. What is often found in the academy focuses on queerness and

does not necessarily speak to the intersection of race and love. To center queerness and to deploy a queer theoretical lens draws our attention to the historical context in which non-heterosexual people, LGBTQ people, have been marginalized, othered, and criminalized while also paying attention to the struggle for sexual liberation and social transformation (Furgeson, 2005; Sullivan, 2003). To draw from Queer Theory is to hone in on the ways in which sexuality has been constructed as singular and heterosexual. Doing the work of queerness is to simultaneously challenge the social construction of sexuality, to create space for sexualities and genders, challenge the normative notions of sexuality that produce sexual inequalities in this contemporary society, and to argue for sexual liberation (Foucault, 1978). However, when we seek to address queerness within the confines of the academy, it is all too often a whitewashed history laced with white supremacist ideologies and completely lacking an intersectional and material analysis which has not gone unnoticed by Black and brown queer scholars (Cohen, 1997; Ferguson, 2000, 2005; Lorde, 1984). And while Black queer scholars have called out racism in the academy, they have also had to call out heterosexism within the Black community.

In the grander scheme of things, Black queer sexuality has historically often been left out of the conversation on race. Black queer sexuality has been marked as deviant, a deviation from the norm and assumed way of being—Black and heterosexual, which has led to the marginalization of Black queer experiences (Hill Collins, 2004). Carbado (1999) argues, “Black gay and lesbian experiences are marginalized in or excluded from anti-racist discourse. The marginalization is achieved—wittingly or unwittingly—through the heterosexualized nature of some, though not all, Black political engagements”

(p. 8). At greater length, Carbado captures the tension that has traditionally existed of the Black experience regarding the intersections of gender and sexuality and the social implications of such when he talks about the political exclusion that Black gay and lesbians face:

The political exclusion of Black lesbian and gay experiences from the anti-racist discourse has left three disturbing social meanings: (1) Black people are not gay therefore they are not affected by homophobia, (2) Black gay and lesbian lives are not materially different from the lives of heterosexual Blacks, and (3) even if Black gay and lesbians lives are materially different from the lives of heterosexual Blacks we should not focus on homophobia, which may or may not explain the difference, but focus on the moral and psychological basis for their sexual orientation—we should focus on “fixing the faggots.” ( p. 9)

Then, therefore, the work that needs to be addressed is that which requires nothing less than an intersectional analysis. Black queer cultural workers are working to address the overwhelming whiteness in the academy and community while addressing heteronormativity within the Black diaspora in their efforts to work for social change.

### **A Critical Theory of Love: Renewed Visions**

One of the primary challenges facing a renewed vision of love is the absence of a critical lens. What I have attempted to offer up until this point is that critical lens. The second challenge facing a renewed vision of love that is based in critical theory is addressing the normative and dominant ideology of love and deconstructing it. The final challenge is redefining and rethinking love in order to fill in the vacant construct. I will spend the next several pages attempting to do just that.

To begin to address the last challenge posited above, I look to the work of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a guidepost and a starting place. The notion of “a love that does justice” is central to Dr. King’s social change message and my work. By engaging in a simply exegetical analysis of the phrase “a love that does justice” substantially

unpacks what this construct is and some of its corollary meaning. “A” in the singular suggests that this type of love is a particular type of love that is distinct from other potential types or even pervasive types of love. There is recognition that there are many notions of love present, but they all do not serve in preserving our dignity or humanity. I consider this to be the current dominant discourse of love. Love in this context is the subject that is moved into action by the conjunction “that” with the verb “does.” This linking joins noun and verb in action to bring about “justice” as in fairness, equality, and equity. When taken together, “a love that does justice” is a new or renewed vision of what love can be when it is moved into the realm of action with the intention of bringing justice to bear within contemporary society. This kind of love is not only concerned about love in the realm of affect, although very important to our humanity, but acknowledges and addresses the social implications of love. A critical lens of love is much more than emotion; it is embodied, holistic, and by necessity concerned with the material existence of our lives.

Furthermore, a critical theory of love as Fromm has begun to etch out offers us that love is an art. As such, love is something that must be learned and cultivated. Therefore, “Love is an activity, not a passive affect; it is a “standing in” not a “falling for” (Fromm & Ashen, 1956, p. 24). hooks (2000) echoes this sentiment, and offers that, “to truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients-care, affections, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication (p. 5). hooks also draws upon Peck’s (1978) definition of love which states, “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth” ( p. 82). And Dr. King (1963) offers that love must have power, unless it is sentimental and anemic.



Philosopher and theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1984) also brings attention to the fact that an outcome of love is one that “provides greater freedom of spirit” (p. 70). And philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich (1954) writes that love is a principle of justice and that “love does not do more than justice demand, but love is the ultimate principle of justice. Love reunites and justice preserves what has been united” (p. 70). It is this complexity and dimensions of love that must be taught and renewed if we are to address some of the most pressing social issues facing Black queer communities today.

### **Meeting the Demands of Black Queer Justice in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Now more than ever there is a need for a renewed vision of love within the Black queer community. It is well documented that the outcome of oppression is dehumanization. In the wake of this Black Lives Matter moment—this movement, which seeks to address the continual and perpetual onslaught of attacks against Black people of all diverse sexual identities and genders, an anemic ideology of love will not be sufficient to sustain those who are working for social justice and transformation. This is well documented by the continual call for and recognition of healing, self-work, and love in the blogosphere and on the ground (Khan, 2015; Powell & Powell, 2015) as well as healthy relationships and Trans-love (Moodie-Mills, 2015) The recognition that the demand for Black queer justice is costly and demands Black queer bodies and even sometimes Black-queer lives makes this project essential. As the phrase “the personal is political,” which has its roots in the Women’s Liberation Movement, a Black-queer project is a political one in that it has material implications for bodies and their capacity for civic engagement.

One of the main reasons that rethinking and redefining love is critical to this project is that it is holistic and embodied. A renewed vision of love—a critical theory of

love not only allows one to address the individual; it also links the individual to history, context, and can be used as a tool for self-preservation and collective Black-queer social activation. With a renewed vision, the work of Black queer scholars, activists, and change agents struggle to address the historic and systematic degradation of Blackness is rendered visible within that framework. By redefining and having a social theory on love, we are able to center blackness and queerness in context and develop a counter-narrative or counter-ideology of love that works to combat the dehumanizing effects of oppression while developing a pedagogy of love that is healthy, demands justice, and provides people the tools and skills to practice compassion and vulnerability as not to destroy their own lives and their interpersonal relationships. Within a renewed vision of love, it is an act of love to be engaged in critical discourse and resistance to police occupation. It becomes a part of our upbringing to resist the status quo and the marginalization that occurs because of Black queerness. It becomes a sign of love to resist sexism, homophobia, transphobia, patriarchy, and all other forms of oppression within this critical conceptualization of love. The development of an ideological counter-narrative of love that centers Black queer struggle is to set the stage of our cultural and collective mindset for truly emancipatory possibilities. To teach of love in such a way that centers Black queer resistance creates the space for other people to have a multiplicity of experiences within the Black queer community and to move away from single-issue politics. To love Blackness and queerness is to give self-care, to demand it for others, to fight the status quo, to resist, as to create the conditions for Black queer people to live their own lives their own terms (i.e., liberation).

If we teach a critical theory of love that centers Black queer struggle and resistance, the act itself becomes an act of resistance. When a critical theory of love is implemented fully, new possibilities for Black queer existence and the possibility for new and better social arrangements become possible. When Black queer folks can define for themselves and live according to their own terms—that is liberation. To teach about a love that does justice with Black queer people as its focus and Black queer liberation as its aim is to modernize Dr. King’s framework and continue in the tradition of social transformation.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Research Questions**

In order to explore Black queer love, I used the following research questions that were refined twice over the course of two pilot studies. My two overarching research questions are:

1. How do Black queer cultural workers conceptualize love in their every-day lived experiences?
2. How do Black queer cultural workers conceptualize love and its relationship to social transformation?

#### **Overall Design and Rationale**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Black Queer Cultural Workers' (BQCWs) conceptualizations of love in their everyday lives. I interviewed 14 BQCWs using a semi-structured interview guide. Each interview lasted roughly 60-90 minutes. The data were transcribed verbatim, and I used Atlas.ti coding software to code the data. I was interested in how this particular group makes meaning of love and its social implications on how they move through and navigate life at the intersections of love and multiple marginalized identities. This section covers the overall rationale of this study, research questions, participant selection, the methodology, human subject considerations, trustworthiness, data collection and management, credibility, and positionality.

To explore the inner workings and conceptualizations of love by BQCWs, it was important that I do a qualitative study. Rossman and Rallis (2012) point out that

qualitative research has two unique features: “The researcher is the means through which the study is conducted and the purpose is to learn about some facet of the social world” (p. 5). Qualitative research is an interdisciplinary method with many interpretative paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Creswell (1998) suggests that qualitative research has four characteristics. 1. It focuses in on the insider perspective. 2. It explores the natural world. 3. The researcher is the primary instrument and therefore gathers and analyzes the data collected. 4. It draws upon inductive reasoning to allow the subjects lived experiences to guide the work. According to Rossman and Rallis, qualitative research operates with several assumptions:

- 1) There are always power dynamics within research,
- 2) The research report is not objective but rather shaped through the experiences and lens of the researcher,
- 3) Social identities matter as they inform how we navigate the world, and
- 4). Historically, traditional research has silenced, abused, and/or neglected marginalized populations. (p. 66)

As a qualitative researcher, my foundation and orientation to this project is as Merriam (2002) writes:

Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding what those interpretations are at a particular point in time and in a particular context. Learning how individuals experience and interact with their social world, the meaning it has for them, is considered an interpretive qualitative approach. (p. 4)

Given that BQCWs are living intersectional and deeply interconnected lives, I took a critical qualitative approach that centered their experiences at a particular space, place, and time in historical context to understand how these factors shape and inform their reality (Merriam, 2002).

## Participant Selection

To identify the participants for this research project, I engaged in two types of strategies: purposeful sampling and snowball sampling. According to Palinkas et al. (2015), purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research in order to acquire “information rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources” (p. 2). I also utilized snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is defined as the process by which current participants provide names of additional potential subjects based within the network (Vogt, 1999). This particular strategy is used to overcome the challenge of sampling hard to reach populations, concealed populations, isolated, or sensitive populations (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997).

I reached out directly (phone, email, Facebook) to several high profile Black queer cultural workers in my social network to see if they would be interested in participating in this study. They were participants who had been working in the field and have a deep and rich knowledge, competency, and are well versed in the social phenomena, which are criteria for utilizing this particular strategy according to Creswell and Plano-Clark (2011). I asked them to identify two to three potential participants.

To ensure that I reached the expected population, I used eligibility criteria. The criterion that I used to determine eligibility for participation in this project are (1) the individual identifies as Black, (2) they identify as falling under the queer umbrella (e.g., Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Two-Spirit+), and (3) work as a cultural worker, that is, in a civic engagement capacity (e.g., activist, artist, community organizer, or scholar-activist). Once I selected the participants, I went over the criteria to ensure that they met those criteria. Once the criteria were met, I began the interview

process. I gave them the consent form. I garnered a verbal confirmation from each participant before engaging them with the interview protocol.

### **Participant Summary**

A summary of the 14 BQCWs who agreed to participate in this project are listed below. During the interviews, I asked each of the participants to define love, their personal conceptualization of love, and the role of love in social transformation.<sup>2</sup> They all identified their gender identity and sexual identity during the course of the interview. It is important to note some key terms in understanding their identifications. The definition of cisgender means that a person's gender identity and sex assigned at birth are aligned. Gender non-conforming is defined as someone whose gender presentation does not fall on the spectrum of masculine to feminine but, rather, outside or even beyond it. Queer is used as both an umbrella term and to denote an identity that is transgressive or that does not neatly fit within the bounds of the gender binary. Transmasculine is a term to denote that a person is Trans\* but on the masculine spectrum, which can include female to male transition.

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<sup>2</sup> To see the full list of questions, the interview guide is located in Appendix C.

Table 1

Summary of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender Identity & Sexual Identity	Description of Participant
Lamont	Gender Non-Conforming or Fem	Lamont is a 33-year-old performance artist and a fulltime PhD student. He writes and performs poetry. He is also an actor.
Hakeem	Cisgender gay man	Hakeem is a 43-year-old racial justice educator and trainer. His work focuses on race, gender, and sexuality identity development for young people.
Ashley	Cisgender bi- woman	Ashley is a 40-year-old racial justice educator, trainer, and consultant. Her work centers on youth empowerment, HIV prevention, and sexual and reproductive health. She lives in a large major city in the South.
T	Transmasculine straight guy	T is a 27-year-old poet, social justice educator, trainer, and loves dance. Their work intersects trans identities, gender, and race. They live in a medium-sized city in the West.
Megan	Cisgender queer woman	Megan is a 28-year-old social justice educator and trainer. She lives in a large city in the West.
Kenny	Cis-man gay/queer	Kenny is a 45-year-old minister and writer. He works at the intersection of religion, Christian identity, and social justice.
Marcus	Cis-man gay man	Marcus is a 41-year-old writer, author, educator and advocate for racial and economic justice.
Z	Transmasculine	Z is a 33-year-old poet, educator, and trainer. Their work centers on race, gender, and sexuality as well as intimate partner violence.
Donte	Cisgender gay man	Donte is a 34-year-old cultural worker. He identifies as a Black gay cisgender man. He works in data and evaluation by day and is a blogger by night. He writes about relationships, culture, pornography, and sexuality. He currently resides in a large Northern city.
Jamaal	Cisgender gay man	Jamaal is a 27-year-old cultural worker. He identifies as a Black cisgender gay man. He has worked in the field of HIV prevention and treatment since his youth. He actively creates space for HIV positive Black gay men to get them tested, treated, and linked to care. He also works to ensure that Black gay men have leadership development opportunities that address HIV, stigma, and healthy relationships. He currently resides in a large city in the South.
Dominique	Cisgender queer woman	Dominique is a 34-year-old cultural worker. She identifies as a Black queer cisgender woman with class privilege. She works actively with disadvantaged youth within the foster care system to provide them with crucial life skills as they navigate out of the system. She is a writer, published poet, educator, and community activist who reside in a mid-sized city in the South.
Jermaine	Cisgender Gay Man	Jermaine is a 31-year-old minister of music at a large progressive church in the North. He is also a singer, poet, and composer. He lives in a small city in the Northwest.
Oliver	Cisgender Gay Man	Oliver is a 46-year-old HIV educator and advocate. He works at the intersection of community health, faith, and Christian education. He lives in a large city in the West.
Daryl	Cisgender Gay man	Daryl is a 32-year-old performance artist, actor, and student pursuing his Ph.D. He lives in a small college town in the North.



## **Human Subjects and Ethical Considerations**

There are many ethical and human subject considerations for this project. Given that I am engaging a historically marginalized population, my desire was to ensure no further injury as a result of this study. Therefore, this project meets the strict standards of the Institutional Review Board at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. These rules help to ensure that the participants are treated with care and respect.

### **Confidentiality**

The safety and security of the participants are of utmost importance. Therefore, I made every effort to protect their privacy. I do not use their name in any of the information gathered or in any research reports potentially generated. Each participant was given a pseudonym to ensure their privacy and all of the data gathered will be locked up in my personal office. There will be no master key that contains any of their personal information to further protect their privacy.

### **Positionality**

As the “instrument” of this study, my experiences, lived reality, and ways of knowing, being, and experiencing the world will inform all aspects of this project. From my very personal experiences being Black and queer in formal and informal educational spaces—all these perspectives inform and contribute to the research design, data analysis, and my orientation to the participants. It was because of those experiences that I have spent the last 10 years of my formal education systematically exploring race, gender, sexuality, religion, and social change. As someone who believes deeply in the work of social transformation and someone who believes deeply in the potential of love to transform our social reality, this project required me to more deeply explore and

understand love's social underpinnings. Because I identify as a Black queer man, this uniquely positions me to add rich insights into social phenomenon that this project explored.

To mitigate bias in this project, I continuously explicated my values and beliefs in my research journal. By sharing openly about my values and connections to the population, I hoped to reveal my bias and work to ensure it does not affect my data. Furthermore, I kept a journal in which I wrote out my ideas and beliefs after I completed an interview so that I could keep track of them to see if there are valid. I engaged in critical self-reflective practice and mindfulness to ensure that my writing did not come from a place of simplistic stereotypes about the population of study. I used my interview notes, during interviews, and general reflections to identify any tropes that may have emerged from my data. I engaged in member checking throughout the process with the guidance of my dissertation committee.

### **Data Collection Method and Management**

The primary data collection method for this study was in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Wolcott (1992) writes that data collection is about “asking, watching, and reviewing.” Merriam and Merriam (2009) cite Patton referencing the interview process:

We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe...we cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of the interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter the other person's perspective. (p. 88)

Interviewing participants for this project is the preferred method, in part, because it allowed me to gather rich data from each of the participants and to interview more people

to increase my sample size. Given that there is no budget attached to this project, the ability to interview participants utilizing free software or in person dramatically cuts down the personal financial cost of this project.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

This project is a qualitative research study. Creswell (2013) says that there are four philosophical assumptions in qualitative research: ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. In this sense, ontology refers to “beliefs about the nature of reality” and “embrace multiple realities” (p. 20). The assumption regarding epistemology in this context is about knowing or rather how BQCWs know what they know about love. To do that, I had to get as close to them as possible to really experience and see through their narratives what they know to be true. Axiology explores the ways in which the values of each Black queer participant shows up in their narratives as well as explicitly stating my values within the research project to reveal me as the researcher to help others “see” my subjectivity, values, and intentions even more clearly. The final assumption in qualitative research is methodological which means that qualitative research is “inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researcher’s experience in collecting and analyzing data” (p. 22).

Merriam and Merriam (2009) write that all qualitative data analysis is primarily inductive and comparative. Therefore, I utilized thematic analysis, which draws many tenants from grounded theory to analyze the data of this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). I utilized narrative analysis, which in its essence is “the ways humans experience the world” (p. 202). I drew again upon, in keeping with the critical theory project, a critical narrative analysis approach that helped me analyze and make sense of the life histories of Black queer cultural workers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). From the data collected by the

interviews, I coded the data into categories that emerge. After each interview, I wrote memos on my thoughts, feelings, reactions, and hunches. I then compared each of the subsequent interviews to the memos so that I could analyze the data while I was collecting it (Creswell, 2013). I documented recurring themes in the data to determine the most salient emerging codes. Those salient codes became the crux of my analysis, and I utilized thick description (Geertz, 1988) to explain the experiences of Black queer cultural workers.

### **Procedures for Addressing Trustworthiness**

The notion of trustworthiness as it relates to qualitative research methods is of utmost importance. Merriam and Merriam (2009) state, “Ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research involves conducting the investigation in an ethical manner” (p. 237). According to Rossman and Rollis (2012), trustworthiness in qualitative research has three things: acceptable and competent research practice, ethical treatment of participants, and sensitive to the topic. Trustworthiness then becomes more than simply a value; it is the enactment of practices that ensure that your study is useful in the everyday world. The decisions we make about sampling, research design, conceptual frameworks are all strategies that are intended to increase validity as well as to not unduly burden or risk the safety and well being of the people who might participate in our research projects (Merriam & Tisdell, 2009). Creswell (2013) says that one of the strengths of qualitative research is its internal validity, given that the researcher is closer to the subjects of study and that,

In this type of research, it is important to understand the perspectives of those involved in the phenomenon of interest, to uncover the complexity of human behavior in a contextual framework, and to present a holistic interpretation of what is happening. (p. 215)

The quote suggests that the critical approach that this qualitative study is in alignment with this standard of trustworthiness in that it will seek to explore the full scope of Black queer humanity. I checked the results with selected participants to ensure that I captured their reality and the social phenomenon under investigation. I utilized triangulation, the use of multiple strategies, to increase the internal validity of the project. Ultimately, ensuring that I could accurately portray the full spectrum of BQCWs' conceptualizations of love is central this qualitative research project not to draw generalizable conclusions but, rather, to elicit lessons learned with pragmatic implications of love as a practice (Creswell, 2013).

## CHAPTER 4

### **BLACK QUEER TRAUMA AND THE IMPACT OF RACISM, HETEROSEXISM, AND OTHER SOCIAL TOXINS**

Trauma emerged as a prominent theme in this research project. Trauma, operating at the individual, cultural/community, and larger social/structural levels impacted the ways in which these 14 BQCWs who made up this study made meaning of their intersectional lived experiences. Through their narratives, trauma in the form of racism and heterosexism provided the social context that perpetuated sustained individual and collective violence against them. The sustained intersecting violence of racism and heterosexism emerged as a key factor that I argue traumatized BQCWs in unique ways when one considers the intersection of racism, heterosexism, and love. My findings suggest that racism and heterosexism inform and impact how the 14 participants in this study understand and make meaning of love in their own lives and communities. All 14 participants spoke to racism and heterosexism in their narratives regarding love, as well as other social toxins that impacted their lives.

This chapter is organized to highlight the shared experiences of BQCWs and will describe how the social climate in which they exist impacted their capacity to love. This chapter foregrounds the impact of trauma on BQCWs through an exploration of individual and community impacts, and their relationship to larger social toxins of racism and heterosexism. This chapter centers the voice of Hakeem, a long time racial justice educator and cultural critic and will use the voice of other cultural workers to demonstrate key themes.

### **Biographical Sketch—Hakeem**

It was mid-afternoon when I arrived at Hakeem's home. I had known Hakeem for many years now because of the racial justice work he does across the country. I had to be buzzed into his building because it was in a secure but not fully gentrified part of the city. Hakeem answered the door and greeted me with a smile. He stands well over 6 feet and has a large stocky build to him. His exquisitely moisturized caramel complected skin hides the fact that he is 43 years old. He has at least 2 decades of experience doing racial justice work, yet you would not know that just from looking at him. Hakeem's apartment was small, but comfortable with all the vestiges of pro Black middle-class bourgeois with African masks and other motifs draped throughout his apartment. Jokingly, his bourgeois is only further reinforced by his Frederick Douglas hairstyle and his seemingly infinite collection of books on Black/gay culture dating back to the late 1970s/early 1980s.

Hakeem was a cultural critic and performance artist back in the day. He is overly educated, with four and a half degrees, as he would put it. He has degrees in the social sciences and humanities. His half degree I would find out later in the interview was because he did not complete his Ph.D. "I consider myself a performance artist and of course, in Performance Studies we use performance as a way to investigate and as a way to express the results of our [cultural] investigation." He was actually diagnosed with HIV, which contributed to him not completing his Ph.D. along with bureaucratic issues at his university once he was no longer spiraling about his HIV status. No longer vexed of his unsuccessful attempt at a Ph.D., he made it clear that it was a choice made based on survival. To stay in that unsupportive environment with a new HIV diagnosis would have jeopardized his life.

Hakeem was eager to host me in his home to discuss the topic of love from a Black queer subjectivity. Being cisgender, but at times in his past, being more gender non-conforming as well as being a self-professed “fat boy” in a “skinny world,” provided the critical backdrop for our discussion on love. Hakeem had a lot to say, and this particular interview lasted nearly 2 hours.

When I asked him about love and this life at the intersections as a Black queer man, he jumped right in.

What is very clear when I listen to the stories of my own life and my friends’ lives who are queer people of color particularly black folk is that oppression touches every aspect of our lives, including our ability to love ourselves, to love one another, or our ability to be in healthy relationships with folks whether it is romantic or nonromantic.

Hakeem’s quote encapsulates the interconnected dimensions of oppression, specifically, racism and heterosexism. From his perspective, oppression and the trauma that results touches every aspect of his life and the communities in which he is a part. According to Hakeem, no part of their life was safe from the deleterious and even lethal ramifications of racism and heterosexism.

### **Themes from the Data**

#### **Myths of Deficiency, Brokenness, and Co-Dependency: Individual Level Impacts on Black Queer Cultural Workers**

Hakeem finishes preparing our tea and takes a seat on the plush two-seat sofa next to me. I opened the interview, like I opened them all, by asking what was love and what was their personal definition of love.

From a romantic sort of space one of my constant mantras is that love is not enough, that I have learned that particularly, both in romantic and non-romantic relationships, love is not enough to sustain a relationship. You can love someone and not be able to have a healthy relationship with them. I think sometimes we hurt ourselves because we are convinced that it is enough.



As a Black queer cultural worker myself, it was this inkling that Hakeem just gave voice to that propelled this project into fruition. He goes on to share a personal story about love in his life.

I am not a romantic. I am a pragmatist and so when I found myself in that space where songs on the radio made me cry or I wrote a book of poetry because I was in love with this person for the first time and remembering what and I remember that experience, I remember, um I remember feeling relieved because I was convinced that something was broken in me and that I could not experience love the way people talked about it and so to feel that way about another person it actually gave me a lot of comfort, even though while I was experiencing this love I knew that it was unrequited. But even knowing that I was still really happy to have the experience because it confirmed that maybe I wasn't broken. (Laughs) And I was like, "Oh, okay. That is great!" I used to say if I felt it once, I can feel it again. Now I have to be quite honest and say, "I don't know that I need to feel that anymore where I am up at night pacing and I can't eat and I am wondering where you are and who you are with." Like I don't know if I ever want to occupy that space, and I am not sure that is love. But that thing that makes you crazy and anxious and unbalanced, I don't know if that is love.

Within Hakeem's narrative, what we see and what I saw throughout the data was that there were critical moments at which not only did they recognize that love was not enough, but more importantly how that particular conceptualization left them feeling "broken," not enough, or that something was "wrong with them." This myth of deficiency emerged as a result of larger social beliefs about love and the overly romanticized conceptualizations of love, which lead to ideological and material vulnerabilities that impacted Hakeem's sense of self and well-being. Hakeem spoke in more detail about those feelings of being not enough.

I really discovered that I had a strong issue around codependency. I come from a background of strong self-loathing, low self-esteem, self-hatred particularly related to my body and the ways in which my gender identity manifests since I was a child and trying to reconcile a lot of those things. So around my twenties I discovered that instead of learning how to deal with myself I would sort of focus on other things. First, it was religion. Right? So then church and Jesus and the Holy Ghost became the thing that gave me value. I didn't personally think I had

value, but then I was like, “Well, if the Holy Ghost lives in me then I have value.” So that became. So I wasn’t really loving myself; I was loving that this mythical force here would possess me and that made me valuable, but that I didn’t have any value in and of myself. I mean it took me a really long time to get to a place of sort of loving and having acceptance of the good and the bad and the ugly of myself.

Daryl, a 33-year-old performance artist and actor spoke about the internalization and the impact of love and desiring to be loved early on in childhood.

Well, I do think that I did desire love early on and I started. I was sexually active at a young age, and I think that I first thought that giving my body to a man would make him want to be with me, and I learned pretty quickly that would never work. But I did develop this promiscuous behavior I think that kind of stayed with me for a really long time and maybe in retrospect I would say that is my way of reacting to not being in a relationship. Maybe? I mean I could have just been horny. But I think maybe that was my way of resisting, you know, the fact that I didn’t have opportunities to experience love. You know I think the biggest impact was that it definitely rendered this very sexually active behavior.

Lamont, a performance artist and educator, also adds dimension to the individual level impacts. When I asked him the question about love, he struggled to respond.

Um, I think that. Now see, that is a difficult question, and I don’t think I have ever felt that way [loved]. I mean holistically. It is kind of weird because how would you know that is what it is if you never felt it? I think that it is wishful thinking, it’s expectations. It’s I know what I deserve (inaudible) and that is it, and I don’t ever think I have been there entirely. I think the reason why I know that is because I think I have seen pieces of what that could look like and why... The shit that comes with a black gay queer and dating and all of that stuff. Right? But, for me as it particularly related to men I met dudes who were the rare exception. The fact that I was feminine they really appreciated that aspect of me, and I think that for me I remember saying I would go to my therapist, and I remember telling her this is the only part of my life that makes me feel whole, and I don’t know why, but this has become part of my life. I think at the time I didn’t know why, but now I do. Um and I think it was because that part of me was so hungry to feel affirmed that I was willing to create this whole life for this person just to show up and be like basically trash and still, you know, sustain that relationship because they affirmed that one piece of me that was so hungry for affirmation. And so for me I have never experienced that true, well rounded, holistic “you take me for everything that I am and I don’t necessarily have to give you something in return for that and I don’t have to sacrifice um, certain pieces of myself for that to happen.”

In Lamont's narrative, we see that as a result of his "wishful thinking" as it relates to love, he stayed in relationships with men who only took from him because they "affirmed" that particular aspect of their life. That they even sacrificed and made exceptions for this person, even though they "trashed" him because of desperation to affirmed.

Also, Jermaine shares his story about feeling left out of normative notions of love and describes the impact and the personal devastation that resulted.

Oh, well, as a black man, I learned a lot of devastating things. Um, I think I learn more and more how much tropes and archetypes of love aren't really meant for me, not really designed around me and what I look like and that is devastating. I mean, you know, when you do this self-care work of learning to like yourself and what you look like only to discover, that you know, there is a large part of any gay hook up apps that is not for you. Um, things that are closed off to you I think that people can stay in secret because of their anonymity that reveal a very not so implicit. It's implicit when you have a name beyond a face, but it's really not so implicit racial bias. That actually was a period of real devastation in my life where I had to come to terms with the idea that, you know, Grindr is not for me. Not because I don't want it to be, but it's not for me. It's a white male hook up that I am supposed to feel lucky over when I quote succeed and that is everywhere. The idea that so much of love and the way our country conceives of it is not meant for me to see myself in. On TV or movies or in a bar.

Again, we see in Jermaine's narrative that he was devastated by the realization that love was outside of his purview because of racism and even doing self-work to learn to love himself, in regards to his blackness, devastated him at the intersection of sexuality. And that ultimately, these normative conceptualizations of love are designed in such ways that does not allow Black queer cultural workers see themselves within them.

As a Black queer person doing cultural work, what Hakeem, Daryl, Lamont, and Jermaine said deeply resonates with my own personal experience with love. I have often felt that I was not enough, in part, because the ways in which I was "loved" undercut, invalidated, or even terrorized my core so much that I could hardly form, let alone sustain, a healthy relationship. And similar to Hakeem, I also used religion as a way to self-

medicate and to increase my perceived value not because I felt that I was inherently worthy, but because Jesus or the Holy Spirit filled me up. This reality had far reaching implications once my homophobic pastor came along and started delivering hateful messages in my congregation. I was left feeling empty and devoid. This particular spiritual as well as material destroying of my community led to depression and desperation, in which I used anything and everything to fill the void which included sex, drugs, emotional violence, and spiritual isolation. Daryl, Lamont, and Jermaine's narratives also spoke to the ways in which my early experiences with love left me vulnerable and wanting it and willing to do anything to get it, even if that meant literally giving my physical body to someone else. While I would not use the language of promiscuity to describe my sexual experiences, given the negative connotations, which are heavily based in heteronormativity and have been used to demonize queer folks, I share his sentiment. The myth of my own deficiency and that of my community had been internalized because of racism, heterosexism, and the ways in which my particular faith tradition used heterosexism to demonize and traumatize me. My capacity to love was damaged in the process similar to Hakeem's and internalized the way that Daryl described in their narratives.

**When Loving Us is Dangerous:  
Community Level Impacts and Dual Dilemmas at the Intersections**

In this section, Hakeem speaks to the complicated and deeply intricate realities of living life at the intersections and his social context.

What is very clear when I listen to the stories of my own life and my friends' lives who are queer people of color particularly black folk is that oppression touches every aspect of our lives including our ability to love ourselves, to love one another or our ability to be in healthy relationships with folks whether it is romantic or nonromantic. And um so we have challenges that non-queer people

and non-black people don't have. The second thing I am reminded of is actually the story of a report contained not too long ago around HIV infection in African American men who have sex with men. And it basically tells us that black gay men are more likely to contract HIV not because ... our behaviors are so less safe than anybody else, but because we are less likely to have sexual partners who are not black. And so the fact that we choose to want to be with each other actually puts us at greater risk to contract a virus that will change our life. And I remember reading that and that is where oppression is real came from. I remember thinking this is totally fucked up because I choose to want to be with another black man every time I make that choice I actually increase the opportunity to increase, well for me, I don't have to increase it anymore. I am HIV positive (Laughs). Well, that happens to us. So that loving ourselves and how we show up in each other actually puts us in danger. Like in medical danger, and that is a result of oppression. That is not a naturally occurring thing. That is no God design. That is no judgment from beyond. That is fucking oppression so that our relationships, our ability to have healthy relationships, the fact that we can even have unhealthy relationships is even a minor miracle because the factors that work against us are really powerful and overwhelming.

Hakeem' speaks about this dual reality, which has been created as a result of oppression, where to want to be in community is both desirable because of the onslaught of racism and also dangerous, given how structural inequality has fueled the HIV epidemic in Black communities. This both/and, the desire to belong and the danger that arises, Hakeem clearly points to oppression and structural brutality and how social toxins shape and deeply impacted him and his connection with Black/queer communities.

Jermaine's narrative also builds on this notion of sexual risk within the community when he says,

Yeah, well, the first two things that are popping into my mind are safety. I am thinking about sexual safety and you know the disproportionate amount of infection and disease that impacts black people and black queer people in particular. I think about the fact that, you know, my thoughts about sexually transmitted infections and such probably come to mind more often in my experience than the average say white male queer thought process and the second one is related to this idea of secrecy, which you know played a lot into my growing up as a black gay man and generally the culture it is born of this fight that black culture has had, particularly with male homosexuality, this idea that it is at odds with what masculinity should look like and so, you know, the idea that the I don't look like what my black culture would consider a man because I like

other men is quite a bit more, it is exasperated to what I think the white male experience is.

Within Jermaine's narrative, we can see this notion of "when loving us is dangerous" as shared through his fear of sexual transmitted infection. Similar to Hakeem, the fact that loving one another, which includes sexual dimensions, also potentially puts one in disproportionate risk for acquiring HIV. Jermaine has almost exclusively dated white men for the last 15 years.

Ashley offers to us:

Yeah, I mean I think we hear this a lot, but it is true, I mean people still don't get us bi folks. And I think a lot of black people can't be honest about their identities. I know so many bisexual black men and women, who, you know, giving their partners the time who are usually opposite gender aren't necessarily open about their identity, and it's not until I disclose that they feel comfortable with disclosing. It is still not safe because there is so much risk involved and honestly people still think, still hold that old belief that you know bi folks we can't control ourselves. That we have this insatiable sexual appetite that is why we have to be attracted to more than one gender. You know? And don't add poly into the mix. Oh God! You know? Um and I think as much as I think we have made a lot of progress in our identities and claiming and naming and all that shit and all those words we use in the world we still have a long way to go in terms of having safe environments for people to be their full selves.

Ashley's narrative points to the ways that being a bisexual Black women within the community is still difficult because of old, yet still pervasive, stereotypes about bisexual people. Even within communities, being Black and bisexual often does not provide a safe and affirming space for people to be their whole selves, which makes showing up in loving each other more difficult.

And finally Z, a 33-year-old poet, also adds a dynamic that emerges within communities as it relates to life at the intersections. As a survivor of intimate partner violence, Z spoke about living and doing work in communities where there is no community accountability process for intimate partner violence within. They said,

A lot of things that come up for me is a lot of times is you know we deal with so much trauma, and we don't necessarily know how to support each other, and then because of this community that we often don't know, we often didn't necessarily grow up with possibility models, um we don't know how to address problems. So, yeah, I think that actually we come up with a lot more trauma in relationships than I think that other queers often might, um because we don't really have places to go. We can't go, like, if something goes wrong. You know, I am not going to talk to my mother about this problem I am having with this queer relationship because she is going to have no idea what the fuck I am talking about.

Z's narrative also focuses us on the impact and dynamics of trauma that emerge within the community. As a poet who does racial justice work within communities of queer folks of color, they also shed light on the duality of both the desire to do the work in Black communities and also the dangers that can arise when many of us do not grow up with possibilities models. Z also highlights an impact that is often not spoken about explicitly, which is the loss of familial ties because of heterosexism and how it puts families of queer folks at a disadvantage. Parents and caretakers of Black queer folks, even if they wanted to support their child, would find it difficult because of the perpetuation of heterosexism and the lack of material resources and supports that are absent in the Black communities that would normalize sexual identities not just heterosexuality. This is a structural issue that reproduces compulsory heterosexuality at the expense of Black queer community and familial ties.

### **Racism and Heterosexism as Trauma: Intersectional Trauma Theory**

After analyzing narratives of the participants, one of the major themes that emerged as they shared their stories and experiences with love was trauma. When I began to examine the literature on trauma, it became clear that everyday forms of trauma with an intersectional analysis was challenging to find. An agreed upon definition of trauma was also elusive, and instead descriptors of trauma. Terr (1990) described trauma as

“psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from outside. Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind” (p. 8) and Van der Kolk (1989) says, “traumatization occurs when both internal and external resources are inadequate to cope with external threat” (p. 393). The Centers for Disease Control developed the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study (Anda, Felitti, Tendall, Van, & Redding, 2014), which explored early childhood experiences with trauma from a sample of over 17,000 people in California. The study explored 10 major traumatic experiences that have long-term impact on children through adulthood: substance abuse, parental separation, mental illness, battered parent, criminal behavior, psychological abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, emotional abuse, and physical abuse (Dong et al., 2004; Lanius, Vermetten, & Pain, 2010). Through that study, the CDC found that over the lifespan, people with greater levels of trauma in their background had increased chances for various morbidities ranging from unintended pregnancies and fetal deaths to premature death (Dong et al., 2004).

What was extremely clear in the literature on trauma was its connection to the body. Research talked about the physiological, neurological, and the overall biological impacts that trauma has on the body including fight or flight, dissociation, memory block and failure, and learning difficulties (Bloom, 1999).

Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. (American Psychological Association, 2014)



This notion of the body and embodied experiences of trauma over the lifetime is critical to fully understanding the impact of trauma. Rich et al. (2009) suggest, “Two key developmental processes are adversely affected by exposure to trauma— neurodevelopment (the physical and biological growth of the brain) and psychosocial development (personality development, capacity for relationships, development of moral values and social conduct. That is to suggest that the 10 traumatic experiences examined in the ACE study highlighted the connections between deeply impactful experiences and our mind and body’s ability to cope is central to understanding the long-term implications on people and whole communities.

The BQCWs in my project all described various levels of trauma that would be found in the ACE study. Those forms of trauma can be understood to be discrete traumatic instances in which the stimulus happens and presumes to stop at a given time. Also, there are chronic traumatic instances, such as alcoholism, in which case the impacted party has to live with that experience until the alcoholism is addressed and stopped. However, what is particularly disturbing about mainstream research is that it does not explore trauma in the everyday forms, particularly Black queer people’s experience. In the interviews, BQCWs spoke specifically about the trauma of racism and heterosexism and how each, at the intersections of love, had impacted their relationships with themselves, their communities, and with society at large. The ACE study does not include any discussion or mention of racism or the impact of heterosexism in its categorization of trauma. Hardy (2013) writes, “Rarely is unmasking and treating the hidden wounds of racial trauma a focal point of intervention. Instead, conventional approaches attend to family problems, individual psychological issues, behavioral

problems, affect disorders, and substance misuse” (p. 25). Hardy says in detail speaking specifically about those hidden wounds of racial trauma:

Racial oppression is a traumatic form of interpersonal violence which can lacerate the spirit, scar the soul, and puncture the psyche. Without a clear and descriptive language to describe this experience, those who suffer cannot coherently convey their pain, let alone heal. The source of their hurt is often confused with distracting secondary symptoms ranging from hopelessness to acting out behavior. Racial oppression is seldom seen as contributing to these difficulties, and discussions of race are dismissed as manufacturing excuses, justifying bad behavior.

Hardy points out that racial oppression is indeed a traumatic experience that has far reaching implications on our capacity to be human and our humanity. Their works also point to the ways in which racial dismissal serves as a strategy to continually deny the impact of racial trauma and individualize it. Hardy also offers 3 hidden wounds of racial trauma: internalized devaluation (a direct by-product of racism, inextricably linked to the deification of whiteness and the demonization of non-white hue), assaulted sense of self (the culmination of recurring experiences with internalized devaluation), and internalized voicelessness (inability to defend against a barrage of unwelcomed and unjustified negative, debilitating messages). Their work speaks specifically to the ways in which many of the BQCWs described their experiences navigating racism and heterosexism specifically regarding love. As they talked through the impact of love, loving relationships, and ingested normative social scripts about love, some of them also internalized those negative messages that they were not enough, or somehow defective for not being able to have consistent loving relationships. Instead of immediately seeing the structural and social influences, unfortunately some had internalized and individualized the problem, making it about them or the other person, instead of calling attention to the larger structures that produced those realities. As they matured and grew,

they were then able to address those structural and cultural implications in such a way to interrupt that deficient minded thinking.

The demand for race-informed trauma theory is critical for understanding the impact of racism on the bodies of Black queer folks. Van der Kolk (2014) writes about on-going trauma, though not from a race informed perspective. However, they do theorize the impact of on-going trauma that is useful in understanding heterosexism and racism as on-going traumas.

Whenever we feel threatened, we instinctively turn to the first level, social engagement. We call out for help, support, and comfort from the people around us. But if no one comes to our aid, or we're in immediate danger, the organism reverts back to a more primitive way to survive: fight or flight. We fight our attacker, or we run to a safe place. However, if this fails—we can't get away, we're held down or trapped—the organism tries to preserve itself by shutting down and expending as little energy as possible. We are then in a state of freeze or collapse. (p. 82)

Here, we see that in the context of inescapable trauma, beyond our fight and flight response, emerges another outcome of on-going trauma: freeze or collapse. Freeze and collapse phase is what happens to the body when it cannot flee from the danger that is present and no one is willing to help (Van der Kolk, 2014). Instead of fleeing, the body hunkers down, stores energy and reserves, and dampening its ability to feel in order to survive the inescapable context in which it has to exist (Van der Kolk, 2014). If we than think about the on-going ways that heteronormativity and racism manifest and are an unending form of oppression for Black queer folks, then we can began to more clearly see the implications of those forms of oppression on the Black queer folks. Unfortunately, freeze or collapse are outcomes of systemic oppression, such as racism and heteronormativity. This understanding helps shed light on the fact that many people are just maintaining and trying to survive, instead of figuring out ways to thrive, in part,

because the social and institutional contexts of which they are a part do not allow for the easy maneuvering away from ongoing traumatization. Furthermore, the continual perpetuation of notions of the post-racial and the denial of LGBT people's rights only prolong these forms of violence against each of those communities, and double for those of them who occupy intersecting identities. Also, the pervasive deficient thinking and all of the years of scientific research suggesting such has created a dearth of professionals with the knowledge, skills, and mindsets equipped to do work with these populations and to more specifically do healing work with this population.

Given the detrimental impacts of racism and heterosexism, on-going or chronic social processes that traumatize, coupled with discrete forms of traumatic experiences, the role of healing is critical for BQCWs. One of the major findings that emerged when asked about love and their journey to healing was this notion of getting to completion or unapologeticness. The desire to be complete or whole was critical as they worked and navigated systems of domination and oppression. Through their redefinition of love, it became clear that love was more than a fairytale, and with their conceptualizations of love taken together, I offered that from their collective perspective, love was the capacity, will, and courage to nourish and affirm one's self, another, and community toward unapologetic wholeness and completeness. In context, the impact of trauma robbed and diminished their capacity to feel complete or whole and to be connected with each of them, in their own way, worked toward regaining that capacity to be whole and complete.

The embodied process is really what makes this project powerful. The work these BQCWs do is also powerful because it is located in a long tradition of a feminists of color calling for action, resistance, and an embodied healing that must emerge to face the

continual and ongoing oppression of racism and heterosexism. Black, Chicana, and Third World Feminist scholars have written extensively about their lived experiences and theorized holistic and embodied ways of knowing as resistance to domination and used their local knowledges to create loving methodologies and pedagogies that are centered on interrupting oppression instead of reifying or internalizing it. Theories, such as *La Facultad*, *Borderland*, and *Mestiza* by Anzaldúa (1999), *the uses of the Erotic* by Lorde (1978, 1984), *A Theory in the Flesh* (1983) by Moraga all situate healing and wholeness in an holistic manner and in resistance to domination. These theories, based in holistic and embodied knowledges, are in direct opposition to regimes of domination that are pervasive in our institutions, classrooms, our pedagogies, and impact how people navigate everyday life. Through linking again the mind and body, their theorizing highlights the imperative for continued work that gets Black queer folks to completeness and other folks who occupy intersectional identities that have been historically marginalized. Speaking specifically about wholeness and completeness is radical and necessary for the addressing the impact of racism and heterosexism, and it is critical for ensuring the overall well-being of Black queer folks in this project.

### **Theorizing the Impact of Oppression on Love**

In 2016, Solange Knowles released an album entitled *Seat At The Table*. One of break out songs on the album is called *Cranes in the Sky*, in which she sings:

I tried to drink it away. I tried to put one in the air. I tried to dance it away. I tried to change it with my hair I ran my credit card bill up. Thought a new dress would make it better. I tried to work it away. But that just made me even sadder. I tried to keep myself busy. I ran around in circles. Think I made myself dizzy. I slept it away. I sexed it away. I read it away.

This song, and the entire album, explores Blackness, and this song in particular I believe captures the spirit and the impact of racism and historical and contemporary implications on her and also on Black queer folks. One reading of her song suggests that she was undoing the impact of internalized racism, sexism, and patriarchy. She tried everything to undo the internalized scripts, including sexing and drinking, much like we heard in the narratives of the BQCWs.

As we saw in the narratives of the BQCWs, racism and heterosexism inflicted trauma. The trauma caused by historical violence against Black and queer communities and the structural inequalities that persist had individual and community level implications. Racism and heterosexism as it relates to love, when they converge, deeply impacted the lives of the participants. One of the main ways in which the discourse of love at the intersection of racism and heterosexism materialized was in the inability for some of the participants to believe that they were lovable. This myth, perpetuated by larger social and historical forces, meant that for at least some internalized messages of lack and deficiency and others resulted in behaviors of co-dependency. The material consequences of these realities had an impact on their decision-making and sense of self-worth and dignity. When they discussed love, racism and heterosexism was present, and the deep-seated wounds that challenge their existence and understanding of themselves in relation to the world of love emerged in their narratives. Moreover, the internalization of those particular beliefs about whether or not they deserved love or if they would ever have a loving relationship caused some of them to act out. Again, this “acting out” happened within a particular context and did not merely appear out of thin air. Several participants alluded to their carrying historical trauma around, which was transferred to

them through trans-generational trauma. Rowland-Klein and Dunlap (1998) define trans-generational trauma as trauma that is passed down from one generation of survivors to the next through a variety of relational interactions. This on-going transmission of trauma not only impacts individuals but also whole communities, given such atrocities that have plagued Black folks and queer Black folks from the founding of this country.

Trauma in the forms of racism and heterosexism at the intersection of love also created community level turmoil. As we saw in their narratives, BQCWs often lived and worked at the intersections, which had implications on the community level work they do. As we saw from Hakeem, this duality emerged where the very act of being with another Black gay man literally meant the increased likelihood of HIV transmission. So, to literally be with another Black gay man could translate into a life changing illness. Hakeem was very clear that this was the epitome of historical and structural oppression materializing in real time. And with Z, we saw a similar dynamic show up—this dual dilemma of doing the work in the community you love but also to getting the support they need when their partner abused them and yet they perceived their community they were serving abandoned them. Z was very clear that the lack of a community accountability system made it hard to stay in the work and also that when they needed support, the way that racism and heterosexism converge in their lives meant that their family was not able to support them because of compulsory heterosexuality, which means that Z's family was not even equipped to help them because Z's needs were culturally unintelligible. Restated, heterosexism did not allow their family to provide support by denying them the conceptual tools to engage their lived experience. Z was also very clear

that this and the lack of social supports were also structurally based, and not some individual animus.

When I consider the impact of this section, the ways in which love is impacted by heterosexism and racism, it is clear that these social issues create an inhospitable environment for love to thrive. Racism and heterosexism serve as instruments of violence against Black queer folks, and they traumatize. When we look at the intersection of those two forms of oppression and this notion of love, love becomes a critical battleground. After analyzing their narratives, within their discourses of love, a spectrum of oppression at the intersection of love emerged. The question of what happens when oppression and love is discussed in the context of BQCWs' lives, trauma is clearly articulated; however, the conditions that they produce is rendered visible. In the narratives of the participants, we saw a world emerge that was informed by trauma.

To be Black and queer and to live in the contemporary US context is to live in conditions of lack. When I think specifically about love, systematic and structural inequalities mean that large populations of people are growing up with trauma and lacking resources for individual and community level dynamics. However, what is clear when we look at love, that systematic oppression makes it difficult to love because of the sheer amount of trauma that they experience. The eco-system in which they live, when we look closely, is attempting to rob BQCWs' capacity to love. The condition of exploring love and oppression in the context of BQCWs' lives is to explore the links between racism and heterosexism and the corollary trauma. What we see in the narratives of several participants is the suffocating of their capacity to love due to systemic oppression and the ways that normative notions of love do not speak into their context.



Indeed, normative notions of love actually positions them in a place of vulnerability because the messages of love at all costs either positions them in relationships that are potentially abusive or causes them to internalize myths of their deficiency that has them question if they are even lovable or deserving of love.

The narratives suggest that there is a crisis in the larger social ecosystem of BQCWs' lives and our society writ-large. My data suggest that at the intersection of normative notions of love and oppression, there is a violence that produces both a perceived and actual scarcity resulting in a deprivation and a desiccation. When I think specifically about my lived experiences, my environment was one in which it was love deprived, which resulted in a deep wounding that impacted my entire life. As the love that actually was nourishing continued to dry up as racism and heterosexism claimed more and more of my support systems, I acted out. And before I knew it, I was so love deprived that I was going through relationships quickly and violently draining others trying to fill up again. But I realized I was desiccated. Not dead, but just so deprived of nourishment for so long that it would take lots of love and healing to fill the holes in my being and bring me back to a place where I could not only love myself but be in relationships in which I was not draining people but, instead, nourishing them and myself.

The co-working of racism and heterosexism creates mass trauma and deprivation through the systemic violence that diminishes our material bodies and realities that results in some BQCWs becoming susceptible to even greater victimization and domination. The very idea that some BQCWs internalize normative notions of love that made them question if they were deserving of love speaks to the inherent danger of not exploring constructions of love. If these conditions are not explored, many BQCWs who experience

greater degrees of trauma and internalize normative notions of love may form relationships based on deficiencies that not only endangers them but also the community in which they are a part.

The participants in this project were navigating so many individual, community, and social challenges and yet they stayed in the work. Their recognition of the systematic and historically grounded understanding, I would argue, was the reason that allowed these BQCWs to persist. The beauty of them, in part, lies in the fact that even dealing with the individual level implications of racism and heterosexism as it relates to love as well as the dual dilemmas that emerged for them; they did not quit or leave Black queer folks behind. They did not abandon their communities because of the challenge and difficulties that emerged but doubled down on their commitment to continue working. However, to continue working, they needed to heal and do the work of undoing the individual and community level impacts in order to stay in the work.

## CHAPTER 5

### **A RECONCEPTUALIZED LOVE: LOVE AS RESISTANCE TO ERASURE AND DEHUMANIZATION**

The second major finding in this research project was how Black Queer Cultural Workers reconceptualized love. One of the most powerful aspects of listening to and witnessing the lives of BQCWs was how they redefined love and reclaimed self-love even in the most toxic situations to move toward healing. When I asked the participants to define love, there were wide-ranging beliefs about it. However, what was clear was that love was indeed something in need of redefinition. As I stated previously throughout the text, normative notions of love were toxic and were imbedded with racism and heteronormativity, which had material implications on their lives as they navigated through life with intersecting identities. Therefore, the act of reconceptualizing love was indeed a radical act of agency. I center Marcus's narrative during this chapter to explore the dimensions of a reconceptualized love its connection to unapologetic wholeness and completeness. I also center T's narrative to explore how BQCWs created space for their own healing and became pedagogical interventions through embodied service in order to heal themselves and others.

#### **Biographical Sketch—Marcus**

I had the opportunity to interview Marcus, a 41-year-old writer, actor, and activist, in person. As he entered the small and unassuming space, he was wearing an African patterned shirt, blue jeans, and a pair of retro glasses with the bold black frames. It was an honor to meet with Marcus, in part, because before I ever met him, my professors in my master's program assigned his work. And as I moved into the field of public health after completing that program, I learned quickly that he was legendary for his brilliance

and successful organizing of Black queer and trans folks over the last 20 years. I learned quickly in the interview that Marcus grew up with a tough, yet loving mom. His parents separated when he was young.

My dad was in and out so whatever. I feel like that was a difficult lesson in feeling love for people and they die or disappear or whatever. And one of the things I think early, semi early in my life. Because my parents divorced like maybe when I was five or six. So I was very, very young. After my parents split, we then moved to the projects.

He said in the interview that one of the impacts of the split was that income was different, which impacted his mom in ways that he would come to realize as depression. When he spoke specifically to the context of love at the intersections of his identities, he offers,

think about—being black/queer/in love. Let me see? Being black/queer/love. I think about that it is hard. On some level I think about like Baldwin’s work for me, the thing that is underlying, particularly his fiction. But his general theme—racism/white supremacy/blackness makes love difficult, and it makes love difficult for everybody. I mean if you think about another country. If you think about Giovanni’s Room even. If you think about all of those novels there is a level at which even the plays people are really deeply kind of seek a certain kind of love that is deep and not shallow and the ways in which the world makes that impossible. Right and so to me that is um, depressing when I think about black queer folks.

And in the same breath, he offers,

So you know Baldwin thinks about those kinds of things from that perspective as a black queer person, but it also means a way, being committed to love is a way to *resist*. You know? Uh, erasure, dehumanization it is kind of what we have on some level.

### **Healing Work as Resistance to Erasure and Dehumanization**

Bambara (1980), an influential Black feminist scholar and activist who is known for her literary explorations of Black life and experiences, wrote a powerful book called *Salt Eaters*. The very beginning of that fictional work opens with Velma, the protagonist, being asked by Ms. Minnie, a healer and “sign-reader,” asking Velma “do you want to be

well?” (p. 1) At this point, Velma was uncertain as to why the healer asked her if she wanted to be healed, noting that she was obviously there. Ms. Minnie asked her again and provided more context by saying to Velma, “Just so you’re sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you’re well” (p. 10). Velma still did not comprehend what Ms. Minnie was saying. Ms. Minnie concluded by telling Velma, “I can feel, sweet heart, that you’re not quite ready to dump the shit. Got to give it all up, the pain, the hurt, the anger and make room for lovely things to rush in and fill you full (p. 16).

As I read *Salt Eaters* (Bambara, 1980) and listened to the narratives of BQCWs in this project, I was overcome with grief and personal disappointment. I realized that as I attempted to write about Black queer trauma and healing that I too was operating under the assumption that healing was the equivalent to a miracle. Instead, healing as Ms. Millie described, was a difficult and messy process that one would have to commit to. Healing was one of the hardest things to do because “wholeness is no trifling matter.” It would require to give up, throw out the shit, and let lovely things fill one’s self up” as a process that required full commitment to being not defined by the pain and trauma but living a whole life. What Bambara wrote is akin to the demanding work that the BQCWs in this project had to grapple with and ultimately decide if they wanted to be healed.

The notion that being committed to love is a way to resist emerged often in the interviews. One of the main ways that BQCWs did this was by engaging in healing work, which was not easy but necessary. Lamont described the challenge and the need for healing.

Like this conversation that we are having, um and like knowing that there is space for me somewhere. You know I think going back to the underestimate piece I

think I truly, um, I get so complacent in not having space that I settle for whatever, um, scraps come my way. And I don't really, um, until I get that full space where I feel like I have all the space in the world and talk my shit and speak my truth I think that I typically, um, just this um I don't even know like how to name that. Like the way that I... I think I opened the phone call with I am here. I am existing. Like I am doing me. Like right it's this day-to-day monotony that I don't have a name for when you are existing. Um, but I think that healing means that I truly realize and like given and take space, um where I can be my full self, um in a very like unapologetic here is all of this kind of way, um and it is hard.

Lamont was one of several who mentioned that even having the 60-90 minute conversation about love was healing in and of itself. Furthermore, his narrative speaks specifically to the challenge of not merely existing but finding and creating spaces in which people can be fully and unapologetically themselves. Ashley, a racial justice educator said, "In my healing, we can heal others. Right? Even though people who hurt us, and it is important for us as black queer folks to continue to do the healing work. You heal yourself, you heal the world." This notion of healing one's self was integral to the process of unlearning ways of being that were informed by trauma and creating new ways of being in the world. Hakeem shared a powerful narrative about healing and self-work as forms of resisting erasure and dehumanization.

You know? My favorite story is the prophet Hosea. Right? God says, "Go and marry this whore." And he says, "Why should I marry this whore?" And god says, "Because I said so." And he is like, "Oh, God is going to change the whore because I married her." And then he marries the whore, and she keeps being a whore, and he is like, "God what is up? You told me to marry a whore, and I married her and she won't stop hoeing," and God is like, "I never promised you that she would stop. I just told you to stop." But he is like, "Hey, people think I am not a real prophet because I am married to a whore." And that story literally, it is actually the story that set me free around being gay. The struggle around being gay and Christian. If this is my truth, and I know it is my truth, I have to cling to it even when no one else can affirm that truth because when I was 18, nobody was saying, "You can be gay and Christian and Pentecostal." There was not a truth nobody around me could affirm, but I had to find a way to hold onto that truth even without affirmation for a really long time. So I think that loving yourself means you do have to find a way to hold onto your truths and affirm them until the world catches up. Loving yourself means that you have to find the strength to

value yourself even when other people can't articulate or affirm that value, and that is not easy.

Hakeem poignantly illustrates the importance of healing, in this case from religious ideologies, in order to love one's self. The power and will to hold onto something that is not yet affirmed by those around you was an act of defiance against the erasure and dehumanization that conservative religious ideologies promote and practice. And Oliver, an educator and minister, also spoke to the need for a healing space.

Healing is about being in a very brave space, and I use that word because you are not going to be safe. It is difficult work, but you are going to have to make a commitment that you are going to have to do some work in order for this healing, and it's not a one-time thing. I think it takes a combination of being in community with other folks who are trying to heal at the same time and doing some individual work.

As a Black queer cultural worker who has experienced extreme levels of religious violence at the hands of anti-gay pastors, healing from this particular violence was essential for increasing my capacity to love myself. Similar to Hakeem, I also had to get free and undo and unlearn all of the normative scripts perpetuated in my religious upbringing that suggested that I was going to hell because of the sin. That process was difficult, in part, because at that time I had no one affirming my identities and existence. I was literally being erased from existence each time my pastor spoke out against LGBT people in my congregation. It was an act of resistance to not succumb and an even more important and necessary act to heal from the trauma. Re-conceptualizing love required acknowledging the role and power of self-work as healing work in addressing the impact of oppressive forces.

**Re-conceptualizing Dimensions of Love:  
Redefining Love as a Tool of Resistance Against Erasure and Dehumanization**

In this section, I will sketch out the five components that emerged regarding love in the data that was different from normative notions of love. The five themes are: self-work and affirmation, covenant/commitment to sustained over time, unconditional love with boundaries, critical awareness of love and addressing racism and heterosexism in love, and wholeness, justice, and completeness. These five components are the tools, or rather, the materialization of a love that resists against erasure and dehumanization. The five components are in stark contrast to normative discourses on love that position it as white, cisgender, and heteronormative. Instead, what we find in the components that the BQCWs articulated is a reconceptualized love that centers their contextual and material realities so they can heal.

Self-work and affirmation emerged as a prominent theme throughout the interviews as a component in their journey to healing. Lamont said:

I really think that for me as I have sort of done some work on myself and just figuring out my own stuff and my own shit if I can speak candidly. Um, I think that for me, love is so much a part of the person that I want to be, the person that I am supposed to be, the person that I need to be.

For him, love was about the aspirational, or “prophetic knowing” that Hakeem spoke about in his liberation narrative. Lamont also reclaimed love for himself and reconceptualized it. It was no longer something outside of himself or wondering if he deserved it, but it was the deeply personal, embodied, and he recognized love as something he was supposed to be and the person that he needed to be.



Lamont spoke about self-work and self-affirmation and other BQCWs also added that love was indeed about covenants or commitments to stay in the work with self and others. Jermaine best captures this when he said:

Yeah, I know love as a decision and a set of conscious active choices. So, it's for me, love is a decision to enter into a more interconnected and bound relationship with another person. In other words, when I say I love someone I am trying to tell them that uh that when we get into places where in another situation I might bolt, um, I am going to stay and try to work this out. So love for me is an expression of commitment and um an expression of reliability... it is covenant for me that has more to do with how committed we are.

For Jermaine, love was about a covenant. A covenant, which is a biblical term, is a formal contract or agreement by the people involved. In this sense, it is intentional, deeply relational, reciprocal, and binding. It pushes against normative narratives that suggest love is will-less and whimsical and instead situates it as an intentional decision and requires reciprocity.

Another component of a love that resists erasure and dehumanization emerged in the interview with Kenny. He spoke of the desire for an unconditional, which was common throughout the 14 participants. Kenny best summed up this notion of loving without condition

The ability to love without condition...beyond our frailties, and so if we are going to live in this community of people, then we need to love without conditions because everybody has got something and that something should not affect the way that you love me.

The need to be loved and supported was particularly important, given the constant trauma that many of the BQCWs experienced, both discrete forms and on-going forms, such as racism and heterosexism. Given the way in which trauma has impacted many of the participants, it is important to note that unconditional love did mean accepting people for

who they are, but it also meant accepting that they may need to walk away from a toxic situation.

Dominique spoke candidly about the role of heterosexism and racism throughout the interview.

I think society is very much that fairytale vision [of love]. So, like I think society tells us, “Oh, you know, that we should all get married.” I think that's what I've kind of struggled with the most. I think from society like, I'm a 33-year-old woman. I'm decently attractive--my black ass should be married by now. I should have a home. What the fuck is wrong with me, you know? I must have a hump on my back or something. Something is wrong. I think that's what I've learned from society. That love exists in this white cis heteronormative chance.

Dominique clearly speaks to the ways in which notions of love are constructed as heterosexual and cisgender.

Jermaine also spoke to this dynamic.

Oh, well, as a black man, I learned a lot of devastating things. Um, I think I learn more and more how much troupes and archetypes of love aren't really meant for me, but not really designed around me and what I look like, and that is devastating. I mean, you know, when you do this self-care work of learning to like yourself and what you look like only to discover, that, you know, there is a large part of any gay hook up apps. That is not for you. Um, things that are closed off to you I think that people can stay in secret because of their anonymity that reveal a very not so implicit. It's implicit when you have a name beyond a face, but it's really not so implicit racial bias. I am pretty convinced you got to get real, real, real pissed off about the foolishness you were taught before you can get around that to a question about love that is useful for you.

As a Black queer cultural worker, both Dominique and Jermaine resonate with my lived experience. For many years growing up, the only versions of love I saw consistently were those of white heterosexual couples. What this translated into was the belief that love was only for heterosexual white couples. Racism and heterosexism converged to effectively erase my experiences all together and make me believe that love was not for me. As Jermaine said, I had to get very upset and pissed off in order to do the necessary

work of healing, and I did that through challenging dominant narratives that defined for me what love was supposed to look like and reclaim and redefine that on my own terms. Recognizing how racism and heterosexism converged in Jermaine's and Dominique's lives is critical exploration that allowed them to challenge and re-conceptualize what love is.

The notion of wholeness emerged throughout the interviews. Ashley said, "I believe that all people should be free. I believe that all people should be whole and well. Um and if you operate from that place it is not work."

Jermaine also added,

Love is freedom, and freedom is being able to be who you are without compromise, and I think and when I think about loving who. Love is being like someone say her T [colloquial term for personal information], I like to be tied up and that's how I get off, and I'm like "That's interesting. Let's talk more about that in way that is safe," and they don't feel judged. Negotiate. I would love to see a society where queer people of color can um, get to those spaces and have those conversations without there being drastic consequences. Love in a social justice frame is giving more people options than they currently have.

For both Ashley and Jermaine, love was about opening up greater opportunities and freedoms within oneself and within society for historically marginalized populations.

This particular orientation to the construct of love positions it against normative ways of knowing and being and instead in the construct of justice, which demands Black queers wholeness and freedom.

**Enhanced Capacity:**  
**An Operational Definition of a Love that Resists Erasure and Dehumanization**

Drawing on all of the narratives of the cultural workers, as they spoke about love in their own lives and communities, their hopes and desires for love and to be more loving, and the need to find and create it in the absence of it in their own lives, an

operational definition was important to develop. Thinking deeply about what Marcus said about combatting erasure and dehumanization and the themes that emerged in the participants' narratives of love, which I talked about as dimensions of love, an operational definition of love is a vital political project. Through their collective work, I would operationalize love as *the capacity, will, and courage to nourish and affirm one's self, another, and community toward unapologetic wholeness/completeness*. Contrary to normative definitions of love that relegated love exclusively to the realm of romance or familial ties and exclusively for white cisgendered heterosexual folks, the act of re-conceptualizing love serves as a rejection of oppression and an act of agency to reclaim their full personhood.

The notion of capacity is a unique contribution to the exploration, which was also drawn from the impact of trauma and the trauma literature. In their lives and the every day trauma due to racism and heterosexism that they experience, let alone any additional trauma they might experience navigating community and institutions, nourishing toward an unapologetic stance and creating the space for them and others to do so becomes a very radical personal, cultural, and political project, but it requires the capacity to do so. Capacity building then refers to "the process of strengthening the skills, competencies and abilities of people and communities...so they can overcome the causes of their exclusion and suffering" (SPADE, 2016). While hooks and other scholars outlined in the literature review speak of the importance of learning of love, which is also echoed in the literature, the notion of capacity building of love draws our attention to the knowledge, skills, mindsets, and the practical everyday tools necessary for creating long term opportunities for development. This notion of capacity building in the context of love

provides a more concrete and deepening of the re-conceptualized notion of love by illustrating the links between individual, community, and society.

Re-conceptualizing love was one of the hardest things that I have ever done in my life. Given the many levels of trauma that I experienced both at the individual and community levels coupled with the lack of role models, discovering and in many ways conjuring a love that seeks justice and wholeness took many years of navigating extremely toxic relationships and situations. At the time I did not know I was doing resistance; back then I did it out of desperation. I did the work out of my own desire to be loving and lovable and to not allow my desire for those things make me susceptible to abuse. I also had to work to ensure that I was not the abuser either. This was the need for self-work and self-affirmation that was necessary in my life for me to shift not only for myself but also for the communities in which I was a part. I had to rethink and redefine love similar to the way that each of the participants in this project had to do. I now know that my act of desperation was the very thing that saved my life. I had to re-conceptualize love, like the BQCWs in this project did, which necessitated a deep understanding of the ways in which oppression at the intersection of heterosexism and racism interconnected to deeply wound, fracture, and deplete my ability to love and act in loving ways.

As seen through their narratives, to redefine love and re-conceptualize it in a way that goes beyond normative constructions is a radical cultural and political project. Learning to nourish their selves and another toward a wholeness and completeness in the face of racism and heterosexism, was essential for these BQCWs' survival. Unlearning and relearning to be love, discovering ways to be vulnerable and courageous when discrete and on-going trauma tries to force them to collapse into themselves is a testament

of their commitment to their communities. Within the context of their every day lived experiences, this re-conceptualized love was indeed the balm that allows them to wade through the troubles of this life and allows them to stop and glare at the impact of systemic oppression directly while knowing that what they experience is part of a historical legacy that is still very much present in these contemporary times.

## CHAPTER 6

### **BECOMING THE WORK: PEDAGOGICAL INTERVENTIONS AND EMBODIED SERVICE**

In this chapter, I outline the last component in Deep Mirror Pedagogy. In this chapter, I explore the notion of the Black Queer Cultural Workers' becoming the work. Through the process of service, they create space for themselves and others to heal. In this way, they become the pedagogical instrument for their own and others' rehumanization. In this section, I center T's narrative, explore dimensions of creating space and becoming, and speak to the centrality of love and healing in the lives of BQCWs.

#### **Biographical Sketch—T**

I interviewed T via Skype just after the evening hours in the summer. T sat in their kitchen, on a wooden built-in bench, which had a rustic cabin feel. In retrospect, it is not surprising that T took the call in the kitchen, given that during the interview, they talked a bunch about how central cooking and creating community around food was to them. When I asked them about three things that came to mind when I said love, the first on the list was food. They said, "Food, like a really great book, um and like this really overwhelming feeling of warmth and calm that like crashes over your body. Very deliberately crashing." T was sharp, witty, and humorous. Their brilliance was only tempered by their smirk, which they often deployed just before and after making a satirical comment, which often distracted me from my interview questions. Within the first 3 minutes of the interview, T spoke poignantly about their gender identity and how it was important for them to become unapologetic in their identities.

What is really interesting is that if two years ago I were to introduce myself, it would be, “Hey, I use they, them, theirs pronouns, he and his pronouns if you need a binary,” and now I no longer give people that option, and I think part of that has to do in many ways with love and thinking explicitly like loving myself and very much kind of thinking about the work.

T grew up with parents who were heavily involved in the civic engagement work and ensuring that Black people had dignity and resources they need to survive. They appreciated them for giving them the space to explore and own their Blackness, but noted that they struggled to understand their gender identity. This notion of “the work,” or rather one’s commitment to healing, requires nothing short of continual exploration and personal development. During the interview, T also made it clear that they worked to create spaces where people did not have to feel rejection. They said, “So I think a lot of my work and supporting in that is really wanting to be, trying to create spaces for folks to really see themselves and heal themselves in.” This notion of creating space was central to the political cultural project that T, as well as every other BQCW in this project undertook. The project of healing is indeed a political project of great social importance, given the continual violence and oppression facing Black queer folks. To that end, each BQCW became the intervention, in which they so desperately hoped they would have received. They literally embodied the change they wanted to see in the world and used their bodies to create spaces for others.

**Creating Space and Becoming “The Work”:  
Pedagogical Interventions Through Embodied Service**

Creating space came up with all 14 BQCWs in the project, where they created liminal spaces in which transformation could occur. Through the use of their bodies, through services, they embodied intervention. Jamaal, a cultural worker who does leadership development work with HIV positive people exemplified this notion of service



when he spoke extensively about another encounter he had with a person who attended his HIV support group who was out of care because he contracted HIV from his partner whom he loved dearly.

He hasn't been in care since that point, given that he was so in love with this guy he was like if that's what love did to me, I don't want to face that or interact with that again, you know. And, this changed this past Sunday, that something that we said. It's ok, you can still live a long fruitful life with HIV. It starts with you being in control of it, and it not being in control of you. From a discussion of a conversation in 1.5 hours, from the beginning to something like that, that's love, you know. I think that is the universe smiling, telling me, you know, that I'm doing it right and that I should continue, I guess.

What is revealed in Jamaal's narrative is the capacity to create a space where a person who was previously out of care could move back into service because of the intentional time, support, and care that Jamaal provided to him.

Z, a transmasculine poet and educator, also spoke about creating space.

A lot of times, white cis folks try to be like, "Oh, your work is about getting people to understand you as a black Trans Muslim person in the world." And I was like, "No, my work is for other black trans Muslim people. I don't give a fuck if anybody else understands it. This work is for people who like to see themselves and to understand themselves and provide them the mental capacity to understand that they have a right to their voice and that they are not crazy, you know, when they are thinking certain things."

Z revealed that their work is intentionally and explicitly for other Black trans folks to create a space for them to find their voices and themselves. It was important for Z that their work allowed other Black trans folks see themselves and in ways that are unapologetically Black and trans.

Ashley also spoke about the importance of creating space.

I just try to create safe spaces for myself and create safe spaces for other people because I think it is important. And we throw that term around safe space a lot. Um, you know when it comes to love, creating spaces where people know they are free to love. It is okay to love. You are safe here. No one will harm you. No one will abuse your love, neglect it. I do my work because I want to contribute to

the healing of the world. You know? That is why I do what I do. Um and often, you know, in my roles as a trainer and facilitator, I often feel the best or the greatest kind of return in love and expressions of love after I have trained a group of people. Um and so one particular training that I will never forget actually was working with this organization in Minneapolis and the staff was very kind of like traumatized and neglected. They felt victimized, and they had all kind of shit going on, and I did an exercise with them that helped them like release the victim conversation. It was this practice where you say what happened and you keep saying what happened, but each time you do it you take away kind of the blame, and it is just, "This is what happened." When we do that exercise, the light bulbs that went off, people just, when we were processing it and kind of talking about the experiences and sharing the stories with their partner, people were kind of amazed at the space that they had been in before.

Again, we see in Ashley's narrative that love was enacted through embodied service, that while holding space for those people to explore who they were and how they were showing up, actually created a space for them to do that healing. Love was not framed in normative conceptualizations, but Ashley embodied a love that nourished others in the community to leave behind victim narratives so that they could move through trauma.

And finally, Dominique added a powerful story to explicate Black queer love as embodied work when she spoke about the youth she served.

You know I do a lot of work within foster care. I have the privilege of um running a workshop for young people in the system to prepare them for when [they] are no longer in there. I did a session for LGBTQ young people. I didn't know what I was going to do, and I got them together. It was like 30-40 kids in the workshop, and I was like I just started off telling my coming out story, which was nightmarish, you know, like as soon as I told my coming out story, after I told mine, all the kids wanted to tell their story. Like people want to share. They want to share their testimony. So we started articulating a language of joy. We read a poem, "won't you come celebrate with me." It was really hard to keep it together. They started asking me how did I survive this. From the outside, I look like I have it together, right? and how did you survive. We don't even know if we are surviving. You know, there was a part of me that felt super paternalistic, and I know I just wanted to take them all home with me that day and make sure they felt loved and taken care of. I was like, "No, you are not actually surviving. You're doing more than surviving—you're thriving!"

From Dominique's rich and textured recounting of the experience above, what stands out is that through the "becoming" of the work, which was characterized by her intentionally creating of space for Black queer youth to experience Black queer joy and celebration, she, in effect, became the pedagogical instrument. The work that she performed for her self, on her self, through working through social toxins and conceptualizing of love, allowed her to use her body and her experience to open a liminal space, a third space, that allowed her to continue to heal through the healing and restoration of a Black queer youth who are part of the system. This is a unique contribution to the field, in that what she sheds light on through her story is the actual process of creating a liberatory space for Black queer youth to share, to hear, to feel, and to see and be seen and to be affirmed. Through her narrative emerged a culturally responsive and liberatory praxis to meet the needs of Black queer youth in context. She provides us with a concrete example of what love in action looks like. She concretizes the often abstract concept of love into something that is powerful, centering the individual and collective experiences of those particular youth, doing the work of justice with love.

### **The Centrality of Love and Healing**

Ginwright (2010) offers us a conceptual framework called radical healing to help understand and situate the centrality of healing in Black urban areas and among Black youth. Ginwright writes, "In a society where African identity is devalued and demeaned, the radical healing process must consider the ways to rebuild and reclaim racial identity" (p. 122). Radical healing is an ecological response strategy that highlights, socially toxic condition, a process that builds the capacity of youth to respond to those conditions and address the role of agency and resistance in contributing to individual and collective well-

being. Given that my work examines the intersections, Ginwright's framework is incredibly powerful when we look at racism, and I suggest that radical healing as a process would also be useful in theorizing intersectional spaces where identity work, healing from social trauma (racism and heterosexism), and cultivating a context in which that can occur would also apply to working with Black queer folk through an in-depth exploration of heteronormative, social and cultural scripts, and their impacts on this community. Similarly, radical healing and the care that is present in Ginwright's work is critical, and I use the word love to speak specifically into the intersectional context of Black queer people who often find themselves in loveless places due to their queer identity, which makes their experience with love unique. I believe there needs to be work done around this notion of love specifically, even though care in many ways could stand in place of love. However, for the many overlapping synergies of care and love, love nourishes in ways that care may not. In this project, this re-conceptualized love is one that demands nourishment and does not settle for only care, even though care is an important component of loving. Nourishment is what allows folks to move into an unapologetic and wholeness that care does not necessarily afford. Re-conceptualizing love in the context of oppression becomes a critical component for in addressing and redressing the ways in which heteronormativity and racism shape how some Black queer folks conceptualize love and the impacts that it has on their overall well being. Re-conceptualizing love becomes an intervention unto itself, as it requires folks to explore and reexamine past trauma and to explicitly think about healing and their journey toward completeness and wholeness.

As I reflect not only on the reconceptualization of love that was necessary and foundational for BQCWs' healing and the use Deep Mirror Pedagogy as one mode of getting closer to healing, completeness, and the unapologetic, I also offer a model or a framework for re-conceptualizing love. Love must be redefined with a critical lens. It must be pulled out of the normative and anemic social and cultural realm and analyzed critically. It must be interrogated, tested, rethought, and redefined with justice at its aim. That redefinition must once again take into consideration the wholeness and completeness and be deeply tied to the mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, and sexual dimensions of our humanity at the intersection of personal identity and historical context. Love must then be embodied, taken into the very core of our being and personhood, to ensure that we know love deeply and intimately so that it resides within us. Love must be down within so deeply as to ensure that one performs love instead of reifying oppression through pedagogical and epistemological violence. Lastly, we must measure love. We must measure how closely what we are putting into the world brings us and others back from the brink of alienation and increase our collective capacity to fight injustice and for justice. We must measure how, if at all, or to what degree, we are increasing the capacity, will, and courage of others to nourish and affirm their own self, another, and community toward an unapologetic wholeness and completeness. To re-conceptualize love opens up possibilities for transformation not only in our own individual lives but also in our communities and society. Not to do so is to allow for the perpetuation of modes of domination that have been engrained in the larger social context for hundreds of years and to allow for the perpetuation white supremacist ideologies, racism, and heterosexism to be further ingrained in our own lives, reified in our praxis, and re-inscribed on the

bodies of historically marginalized populations. Redefining love becomes not only a personal project but a political project with implications on our collective salvation and liberation.

### **Deep Mirror Pedagogy: A Way Forward**

As I stated in the beginning of this project, Deep Mirror Pedagogy (DMP) is the summative experience of the 14 BQCWs. When I think about a way forward, I offer DMP as a conceptual model to assist in thinking about moving from trauma to healing. From the data in Chapter 4 that outlines trauma and reconceptualizing love that is discussed in Chapter 5, DMP provides a more holistic and humanizing account of the 14 BQCWs. DMP as a conceptual model challenges deficit-based frameworks by holding and honoring the reality that Black queer folks may be traumatized, but they also actively work to heal, mend, and serve. This rendering of them as more full and complete human beings challenges essentialization and other forms of marginalization that occurs when oppression attempts to erase their existence.

### **Components of Deep Mirror Work (DMP)**

Drawing on the previous chapters, each section below outlines the process of DMP. The process included 5 components, which consists of 1. Recognized Critical Incidents and Impact of Trauma, 2. Engaged, Investigated, and Interrogated Impacts of Trauma, 3. Resist, Redefine and Re-conceptualize, 4. Getting to Unapologetic Wholeness + Completeness, and 5. Becoming and Doing “The Work.” I will link the conceptual model to data using Hakeem’s total narrative and experiences as he went through the 5 components.

## **Recognized Critical Incidents and Impact of Trauma**

Step 1: Each participant described critical moments that either uncovered deep wounds or created them as it relates to love. They started exploring what happened to them in the context of their personal lives as well as thinking about enduring histories of racism and heterosexism and the trauma that comes with simply living on this planet.

When we look to the data, this can best be understood through Hakeem's narrative.

I am not a romantic. I am a pragmatist and so when I found myself in that space where songs on the radio made me cry or I wrote a book of poetry because I was in love with this person for the first time ... and I remember that experience, I remember, um I remember feeling relieved because I was convinced that something was broken in me and that I could not experience love the way people talked about it, and so to feel that way about another person it actually gave me a lot of comfort, even though while I was experiencing this love, I knew that it was unrequited.

It is within this context that we can witness Hakeem recognizing critical incidents at the intersection of love that impacted him.

## **Engaged, Investigated, and Interrogated Impacts of Trauma**

Step 2: Each participant engaged, investigated, and interrogated individual level impacts. From their narratives, BQCWs explored the impact of trauma on their lives. They uncovered deep wounds and began to explore where they were hurting, why they were hurting, and how they were hurting. Whether trauma showed up as acting out, internalizing myths of deficiency, or self-medicating, BQCWs were committed to unpacking those experiences and their impacts. This can be seen when we look at Hakeem's narrative.

But even knowing that I was still really happy to have the experience because it confirmed that maybe I wasn't broken. (Laughs) And I was like, "Oh, okay. That is great!" I used to say, "If I felt it once, I can feel it again." Now, I have to be quite honest and say, "I don't know that I need to feel that anymore where I am up at night pacing, and I can't eat, and I am wondering where you are and who you

are with.” Like I don’t know if I ever want to occupy that space, and I am not sure that is love. But that thing that makes you crazy and anxious and unbalanced, I don’t know if that is love.

Within his narrative, we can witness him engaging, investigating, and interrogating the trauma caused by love.

### **Resist, Redefine, and Re-conceptualize**

Step 3: Each participant had to make a choice to resist, redefine, and re-conceptualize love and rewrite social scripts and redefine themselves for themselves. They resisted normative notions of love and the messages of heterosexism and racism, and they then actively disavowed those scripts to begin a process of discovery in which they could rediscover themselves, rewrite, or reconfigure conceptualizations of love. It was also in this state that they were healing the wounded places and conjuring the things that they needed in life to get good and stay good. This can be seen in Hakeem’s narrative.

I really discovered that I had a strong issue around codependency. I come from a background of strong self-loathing, low self-esteem, self-hatred particularly related to my body and the ways in which my gender identity manifests since I was a child and trying to reconcile a lot of those things.... I used to say, “If I felt it once, I can feel it again.” Now I have to be quite honest and say, “I don’t know that I need to feel that anymore where I am up at night pacing, and I can’t eat, and I am wondering where you are and who you are with.” Like I don’t know if I ever want to occupy that space, and I am not sure that is love.

In this narrative, we see Hakeem becoming clearer within himself about the impact of normative notions of love in his life and how it impacted him.

### **Getting to Unapologetic Wholeness + Completeness**

Step 4: Ultimately, after doing deep mirror work and getting clear about who they wanted to be and how they wanted to be in the world, they were *becoming*. They became more and more complete and unapologetic. They configured their lives in ways that



allowed for wholeness to take hold of them while recognizing that healing is an on-going and life long commitment. This can be seen in Hakeem's narrative.

So around my 20s I discovered that instead of learning how to deal with myself, I would sort of focused on other things. First, it was religion. Right? So then church and Jesus and the Holy Ghost became the thing that gave me value. I didn't personally think I had value, but then I was like, "Well, if the Holy Ghost lives in me, then I have value." So that became. So I wasn't really loving myself; I was loving that this mythical force here would possess me and that made me valuable. But that I didn't have any value in and of myself. I mean it took me a really long time to get to a place of sort of loving and having acceptance of the good and the bad and the ugly of myself.

Through Hakeem's self-work, he was able to recognize that his own value did not reside outside of himself but instead deep within.

### **Becoming and Doing "The Work"**

Step 5: Becoming a vessel is the implementation of their journey toward healing and their ability to create space where others can move into greater degrees of healing is the work. As cultural workers, they carried the burden of trauma, healing, and justice within themselves in order to create change as they move through the world. They were on a journey, and part of their journey was creating space for others in their communities to survive, heal, and thrive. This can be seen through Hakeem's narrative.

It was all strategic. But number one was relator, and I remember thinking, "This is unusual." Like the strategic stuff made a lot of sense to me, but relator I was like, "What is that about?" That is about relationships and the value of relationships, and so I really spent time trying to process that. Like how do I make sense of that and why is that number one, right? when everything else is about being a strategist? And then it dawned on me. Again, as I said I have been doing Diversity and Education, Diversity and Inclusion, mostly doing Student of Color support work in Cultural Centers. Black Cultural Centers, multicultural centers. And then it hit me. I do this work because I committed to a community, and it is my commitment to the community that requires me to think strategically in these other ways, but it is all in service of community. Some people are not going to have this answer. But for me it hit me that the motivation for all the work that I do is the love that I have for the community, and it is that which propels everything else that I do. And although people may

not be able to perceive that component, it forced me to really process and name that as sort of the chief motivation to do the work. God knows you don't do student affair work or minority affairs work to try and get rich. That is not going to pay off your student loan debt. So, I do it because I believe that we have to, and someone has to stand in the gap. I wish someone had been able to do this for me and that these are acts of loving. Of love. So for me, I guess the love of community has really been the driving force for my whole career.

And finally, we can see that the reason and motivation to do this work was fueled by his desire to be in service of his community.

It is important to note that the work that BQCWs engaged in was not in spite of the oppression; it was a direct result of the oppression. Deep Mirror Work and Pedagogy was a necessary work; it was work for their survival and for restructuring their sense of self so that they are no longer bound by the normative notions and discourses of love that were imbedded into them through various social processes. It was the excavating, the digging through and examining the ruins of their most intimate, public, and collective encounters that they found hope, new possibilities, and to be and become complete. It is through this work on self that was brought on by the world and their deep desire to create space, to create a world in which they wished existed for them, lies one of the core/ radical dimensions of love—that these BQCWs would dedicate their lives to ensure that others would be love—loved in the sense I write about here—deeply nourished and feed so that they can grow and flourish. This radical love—or dare I say revolutionary love—literally shifts the context in which they exist—that their deep sense of rationality is what fuels, drives, and demands justice that is deeply personal and deeply collective so that their social reality would resemble a place worth living in or a place worthy of their children and chosen family.

DMP was a process and a method for interrupting hegemonic notions of love that were perpetuated through racism and heterosexism and was a place for them to rewrite or completely delete those normative scripts. This place, a third space, epitomized by trust, vulnerability, and challenge facilitated transformative learning, agency, and will to be better not merely for themselves but to be better for the community in which they serve and also are a part. In their process of getting to a place of healing, they were addressing larger social issues and alleviating community level trauma. For them, the personal was indeed political. Through challenging themselves to grow, they also created spaces for others to do the same. It was hearing and witnessing their trauma and the pain, they were and are still here, making it work, and creating pathways for healing and liberation for themselves and others. This is their genius. This is their legacy of triumph. This is their journey to healing and liberation.

**The Prophetic Witness:**  
**Bearing Witness to Healing and Wholeness of Black Queer Cultural Workers**

One of the most powerful aspects of this project was in witnessing Black Queer folks put in the work to become healed and in doing so, heal the communities that they serve. I do not use the notion of witness in its traditional nomenclature, but similar to what James Baldwin meant, in a prophetic sense, when he spoke often of the harsh truths of Black and Black queer existence within America. In this regard, I not only saw, but I also must testify on the Black queer folks who participated in this project. Deep Mirror Pedagogy is that testimony, which centers around cultural workers' ability to become and change through creating space for themselves and others in spite of ongoing oppression. All 14 cultural workers spoke about creating space, a liminal space where transformation occurred. Being in community and doing healing work in community was particularly

important for Black queer folks, given how racism and heterosexism impacted their individual and collective life. And yet, Black queer folks in this project went into places that were once toxic and potentially challenging in order to transform them by building bonds and connections that are often difficult to build because of the way that oppression and trauma tried to destroy their capacity to love and enact a loving pedagogy. Through their narratives, BQCWs made an intentional decision to stand in the gap for other Black queer folks and to create new ways, new bridges, and new opportunities to love and to love their communities. Their service is inherently and necessarily an embodied act, which could literally mean anything from helping people to physically move throughout their worlds to providing the emotional development, identity work, or the personal growth necessary for them to thrive. It is a daily and continual commitment, which is a foundational act of loving, for them to go into places where there is little to no love to ensure that others get the love they wish they themselves had received. Their sense of responsibility compelled them to be together with and not apart from Black queer folks and the communities that they served. This sense of responsibility points to the interconnections among the individual, communal, and the social in such a way that allows them to move recursively through complex social phenomena. They never leaned in only one dimension but, instead, drew upon a more complicated and holistic picture of Black queer social life. It is this holistic picture that sets these Black queer cultural workers apart—in that no one area can happen to the exclusion of the other. This fact might emerge as a poignant reminder that this project and these BQCWs resist single-issue politics, in part, because their interconnected and intersectional lived experience demands nothing less. Their capacity to serve other Black queer folks is critical,

holistically grounded, and socially informed to create new possibilities and to be creators of unapologetic spaces in which Black queer cultural workers can build a radical community of care, support, and ultimately love. This love requires nothing less than the shifting of the social and material context of Black queer people's lives so that they might find and conjure love, love deeply, and love in such a way that nourishes and transforms personal, collective, and social realities.

## CHAPTER 7

### SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Black queer cultural workers experience the trauma of racism and heterosexual at the intersection of normative discourse of love. These racialized and heteronormative discourses of love produce individual myths of deficiency, brokenness, codependency, and this is also compounded by community level issues of violence in communities, which diminishes their capacity to love one another (Chapter 4). Chapter 4 comprises the first two steps in Deep Mirror Pedagogy (DMP). To heal from the individual and community level impacts, they start doing self-work to redefine love (self-affirmation, covenant, unconditional, critical awareness, wholeness), which is an intentional act of agency and a continual commitment to their wholeness and the community (Chapter 5). Chapter 5 also comprises steps, three, four and five of DMP. When taken together, DMP is the cumulative process by which these BQCWs moved from trauma to healing. DMP emerged as a process and method to address and redress unhelpful and unhealthy normative social scripts that impacted their lives. DMP, in effect, is the process to heal themselves so they can heal their communities and continue to fight for justice. It was born out of tension, conflict, and trauma. It is process that both demanded that the BQCWs unlearn or in some cases delete entire codes of social beliefs in order to remove toxic and destructive ideologies that reproduced violence, dismay, and oppression not only on their bodies/beings and also within the communities they serve. It is a method, and it is also a process that demands attention be paid to the self, that the will of the BQCW be turned inward to see what things are swirling deep within themselves in order to precisely address the impact of living at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality.

While it demanded the self be the subject of deep personal reflection, it went beyond mere reflection to a critical self-reflection that investigated, interrogated, and internalized values and beliefs they were carrying related to racism, heterosexism, and love. This process not only asked the question of who am I? but also of how am I? and explored the difficult realities of living life at the intersections. The social scripts and messages that became embedded within them were actively worked with, pulled out, examined, refashioned, or removed completely in order for them to move toward greater healing. While it appeared that deep mirror work was an individual act, it was a collective act as well. Their literal bodies and experiences became a pedagogical act in which they healed themselves for the benefit of healing others in their communities. This simultaneous truth was brought on because of the BQCWs' fundamental truth: they do the work of fighting against oppression because of love for Blackness and Black queerness. They labored tirelessly to address the ways in which they themselves sometimes perpetuated oppressive acts all the while holding a strong structural and social analysis that points far beyond individualism that white western culture is steeped in. Instead, they healed themselves to heal their communities.

### **On Education Broadly**

There are several important implications of this work. However, the main and most apparent implication can be found in a bell hooks (1994) quote.

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred, who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. (p. 13)

hooks highlights the significance of the project and the implications on education and educators. To teach in ways that respect and nourish the souls of those that she teaches is in deed a radical and political act of loving. In this sense, education is not neutral. Freire (1972) wrote, “Neutral education cannot, in fact, exist” (p. 174). Through his lifelong work, Freire has advocated that education that created liberatory possibilities for students, which has implications for the whole structuring of systems that students engage in.

Freire goes on to suggest

It is fundamental for us to know that, when we work on the content of the educational curriculum, when we discuss methods and process, when we plan, when we draw up educational policies, we are engaged in political acts which imply an ideological choice. (p. 174)

These decisions, whether deemed important or not, are political and have implications on what students learn, what they learn, and how they learn.

Unfortunately, when we look to the data, Black queer youth and LGBT youth often not only learn in the formal classroom instruction, they also learn through the context and informal ways to be, known as hidden curriculum. While students are to be learning their course materials, they are also learning what is acceptable, unacceptable, who is valuable and who is not through cultural norms, values, discipline, and policies in the school context. These messages are often not only racist but also heteronormative, which deeply impacts their sense of self and has long-lasting impacts on their over-all well being. Hill Collins (2009) writes, “Because public schools in America are vested with the responsibility for preparing each generation of new citizens, schools are inherently political” (p. x). So what schools are permitted to teach and what they leave out has implications on Black queer youth and LGBT people at large. To realize the vision of preparing full citizenship of students, racism and heteronormativity must be



addressed at the level of education writ large so that students are no longer being harassed for being LGBT, and students are not targeted because of their race. As my research suggests, along with discrete forms of trauma, racism and heteronormative are also trauma and literally hurts, damages, and degrades their material existence. Instead of producing full citizens, school systems produce broken people not fully prepared or able to engage in the democratic process.

### **On Teacher Preparation and Schools**

There are many issues in the school context impacting LGBT students and LGBT students of color. Payne and Smith (2011) write

The creation and maintenance of this hostile environment is a complex process that occurs at institutional and interpersonal levels and draws upon traditions of exclusion and stigmatization, curricula reflecting only the contributions of dominant groups, and privileging of hegemonic gender roles and heterosexuality. (p. 175)

Teachers can play an important role in ensuring that students learn in the classroom, but my data suggest they must also be nourished in the classroom. The notion of unapologetic completeness and wholeness requires that teacher have an intimate understanding of who they are (reflective praxis), how they show up or do not (embodied awareness), the histories of their identities in relation to those whom they are teaching (historical context), and the ways that race, gender, and sexuality intersect and even collided to shape student realities and possibilities (critical knowledge). This notion is effectively what Kincheloe (2004) calls critical complex epistemologies. He suggests that teachers and educators must be equipped with various forms of knowledge and value diverse ways of knowing so that they can meet the demands of the classroom Teachers must be able to value various types of knowledge, not merely privilege the intellect but

also the knowledge that is produced through bodies and everyday lived experiences (Kincheloe, 2004). Kress and Krueger-Henney (2016) summarize Carolyn Ali-Khan's work on Embodied Ethnographic Teaching.

Radical love, in light of unspoken trauma, requires educators to listen to their own embodied experiences and acknowledge the extent to which their power and privilege are complicit with patriarchal structures of violence. Teaching with love and teaching through listening stand increasingly in opposition to current neoliberalized schooling processes. (p. 7)

It is clear in that work, teachers must think of new ways to use themselves and love in order to interrupt systems of oppression in the context of the classroom. To that end, it is no longer or ever has been acceptable to teach merely "knowledge." I think to meet the demands of the 21st century, to acknowledge and redress social ills, we must teach in ways that support that those who we serve matter, and that requires a different pedagogical approaches. I believe that it requires a reconceptualization of love.

To meet the needs of Black queer folks and LGBTQ folks, teachers will need to know deeply their realities and will have to educate in ways that bring about wholeness and completeness instead of exclusively teaching to the test. Teachers will need knowledge in critical areas, such as race and racism, gender and sexuality theory, to support their capacity to mitigate effectively reach and teach to the needs of Black queer and LGBT students, as well as creating a learning environment that affirms and not denies their lived realities. This can, in part, be achieved through inclusive curriculum development (GLSEN, 2012). Ultimately, teachers and administrators must receive an anti-oppressive education if they are to meet the needs of LGBT folks of color (Brockenbrough, 2013). "Anti-oppressive knowledge production is needed to combat the condition for queers of color" (p. 426), and this anti-oppressive education must be

grounded in the experiences of those who have been marginalized through formal and informal education space. Given that schools are sites of reproduction, whole systems need to be reworked to support the full and complete development of students and to address the on-going issues of racism, heteronormativity, as well as a host of other social “ism.”

### **Trauma-Informed Education Systems and Practitioners**

One of the major findings in my project is the role and impact of racialized and heteronormative trauma experienced by the participants. The implication of trauma is vast if we do consider racism and heteronormativity as trauma. Given that schools are sites of reproduction, they often overtly and covertly perpetuate both racism and heteronormative, along with a number of other socially oppressive conditions. Instead of living up to the standard of educating students for citizenship, those spaces wound and damage some of the most marginalized. Revisiting Van der Kolk’s (2014) work and the three stages of safety: social engagement, fight or flight, or freeze or collapse, we can begin to imagine and think through the implications of consistent and on-going oppression within the context of school.

Sadly, our educational system, as well as many other methods that profess to treat trauma, tend to bypass this emotional-engagement system and focus instead on recruiting the cognitive capacities of the mind. Despite the well-documented effects of anger, fear, and anxiety on the ability to reason, many programs continue to ignore the need to engage the safety system of the brain before trying to promote new ways of thinking. (p. 88)

This is especially telling, as it relates to working with students and people who experience trauma. For the Black queer folks in this project and other LGBT folks who experience the trauma of heterosexism and racism on an on-going basis, trying to learn when one feels unsafe has shown to be ineffective and have a consequence on their

academic achievement through the GLSEN work (Diaz et al., 2009) This reality again speaks to the need for not only trauma-informed educators; it also suggests that they will need additional skills for engagement and management as they seek to support students with a background of trauma. Knowing how trauma shows up in the body, impacts students' capacity to learn, and the role and demand for safety is central to the cause of not only an anti-oppressive education but also for equipping teachers with a holistic framework for connecting and engaging students.

### **Healing in the Classrooms and Schools**

Lastly, what my research most clearly suggests is that historically marginalized populations experience trauma, but they can heal. However, healing is difficult work and will require support from teachers and educators who are equipped to help guide them from trauma to healing. Addressing trauma in the classroom is one important foundational practice for those who teach, but creating a learning community in which people feel open, accepted, affirmed, and loved will require that teachers and educators retool in ways that are untraditional and in direct opposition to neoliberalism. Enacting an embodied love in the classroom, schools, and communities will demand that love be reconceptualized by practitioners if they are to effectively meet the needs of historically marginalized populations.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this project. The first limitation is that this study only consisted of Black queer people; therefore, these findings are not generalizable. The study participants all possessed a minimum of a bachelor's degree, which might impact how they conceptualized love, given that they had greater access to spaces where they

were engaged in healing activities. Another limitation is that the participants ranged from the ages of 28-46, which leaves large groups of young people and older people out, which might also have an impact on how they conceptualize love.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Recommendations for future research are situated at the intersection of race, gender, and educational scholarship. Future research should seek to explore how younger and older people conceptualize love and its relationship to trauma. More research should explore the role of healing practices of Black queer people and the communities in which they are part. Lastly, research comparing the role of race (in African-American, Native, Latino, White folks) and love at the intersection of sexuality might also shed light on the connections between cultural conceptualizations and how they impact people's lives.

**APPENDIX A**

**PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER**

Dear:

My name is Durryle Brooks, and I am doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in the Teacher Education and School Improvement concentration. This is a letter of invitation to participate in a study that I am conducting as part of my doctoral degree. This project will explore Black queer cultural workers (i.e., activist, community workers, civic leaders) and how they conceptualize love and social transformation.

My research will explore how Black queer cultural workers think about, feel about, and know love. This project will explore how love has shown up in their lives and how it has impacted them. Therefore, I am looking for folks who identify as Black and queer (LGBTQ) and are engaged in cultural work.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and no compensation will be provided. It will involve one 60-90 minute interview to take place via phone, Skype, or a mutually agreed upon space. You do not have to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering, and you get to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without any negative consequences. With your consent, the interview will be taped and transcribed so that I can analyze the information. All of the information will be kept confidential. Any anonymous quotes used either in my oral defense or in publication will not be traceable to you. There are no known associated risks for participating in this study.

Your confidentiality, privacy, and safety during this study are of utmost importance to me. I will provide a detailed letter with written assurance regarding how I will protect your privacy. I will check back with you regarding the accuracy of my findings in this study.

The University of Massachusetts Amherst Institutional Review Board has approved this study. Should you have any questions, please contact me at [dnbrooks@educ.umass.edu](mailto:dnbrooks@educ.umass.edu) or 443. 743. 0767. You can also contact my advisors, Dr. Keisha L. Green at [knygreen@educ.umass.edu](mailto:knygreen@educ.umass.edu) or Kysa Nygreen at [knygreen@educ.umass.edu](mailto:knygreen@educ.umass.edu). If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or [humansubjects@ora.umass.edu](mailto:humansubjects@ora.umass.edu).

Thank you so much for considering participating in my dissertation project!

Best,  
Durryle Brooks  
Doctoral Candidate  
Teacher Education and School Improvement  
University of Massachusetts Amherst

## APPENDIX B

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

#### **Study title:** MOVING FROM TRAUMA TO HEALING: BLACK QUEER CULTURAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES AND DISCOURSES OF LOVE

**Introduction to the study:** I am inviting you to be in a research study conducted by Durryle Brooks, a doctoral student in Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. The purpose of this study is to learn from Black queer community leaders (i.e., cultural workers) how they understand love as it relates to personal and social transformation in the context of their work and every day practices. Some of the questions are:

- Could you tell me what love means to you?
- So if you had to give me a definition, what would your personal definition be?
- When you think about what it means to be Black+ queer, and the notion of love, what comes up for you?
- What have been some of your early experiences with love and how may they have impacted you?
- What have you learned about love? Where have you learned about it? And how do you think it has impacted, or has it had an impact on you?
- What have you learned socially and culturally about love?
- Could you tell a story about a time when love came to the forefront and presented itself in your cultural work (broadly define- art, activism, civic leadership, etc.)
- Do you think there is a place for love as we think about social change and social transformation? If so, what does that mean or looks like?

I hope to use what I learn from the study to inform policies, and more importantly, everyday practices that create opportunities for personal and social transformation. The results of this study, and any data collected as part of it, may be used in professional reports, presentations, and/or professional discussion.

**What will happen during the study:** This is what will happen during the study that will take place either in person in a place that is most comfortable to you or over the phone. I will ask you to share your experiences and your understanding of love and how it relates to your work and everyday practices. This may include anything relating to you, your personal life, and of course work. Participation in this study will take you about 30 minutes to an hour depending on how much you would like to share.

**Who to go to with questions:** If you have any questions or concerns about being in this study you should contact me at by email at [dnbrooks@educ.umass.edu](mailto:dnbrooks@educ.umass.edu) or on my Google voice line at 443.814.9395. Should you have any questions, please contact me at [dnbrooks@educ.umass.edu](mailto:dnbrooks@educ.umass.edu) or 443. 743. 0767. You can also contact my advisors, Dr. Keisha L. Green at [knygreen@educ.umass.edu](mailto:knygreen@educ.umass.edu) or Kysa Nygreen at [knygreen@educ.umass.edu](mailto:knygreen@educ.umass.edu). If

you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or [humansubjects@ora.umass.edu](mailto:humansubjects@ora.umass.edu).

**How participants' privacy is protected:** I will make every effort to protect your privacy. I will not use your name in any of the information I get from this study or in any of my research reports. Any information I get in the study that lets me know who you are will be recorded with a code number. During the study, the key that tells me which code number goes with your information will be kept in a locked area in the office. When the study is finished I will destroy the key that can link information to you personally.

**Risks and discomforts:** I do not anticipate any personal risk as a result of this study. However, in the process of discussing the topic of love, I imagine that it may be difficult and uncomfortable for some to discuss personal experiences with love. If at any moment you feel uncomfortable, please feel free to stop, and I will move on to the next question. You do not need to answer any question. I do not know of any way you will personally benefit from participating in this study.

**Your rights:** You should decide on your own whether or not you want to be in this study. You will not be treated any differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you do decide to be in the study, you have the right to tell me you do not want to continue with the study and stop being in the study at any time.

**Review Board approval:** Again, this study has been approved by University of Massachusetts, Amherst IRB. Should you have any questions, please contact me at [dnbrooks@educ.umass.edu](mailto:dnbrooks@educ.umass.edu) or 443. 743. 0767. You can also contact my advisors, Dr. Keisha L. Green at [knygreen@educ.umass.edu](mailto:knygreen@educ.umass.edu) or Kysa Nygreen at [knygreen@educ.umass.edu](mailto:knygreen@educ.umass.edu). If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or [humansubjects@ora.umass.edu](mailto:humansubjects@ora.umass.edu).

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**PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING STATEMENT AND SIGN BELOW IF YOU AGREE**

I have had the chance to ask any question I have about this study, and my questions have been answered. I have read the information in this consent form, and I agree to be in the study. There are two copies of this form. I will keep one copy and return the other to back to you.

---

Signature

---

Date



**APPENDIX C**  
**INTERVIEW GUIDE**

Introduction of me and the project.  
Go over informed consent  
Discuss the purpose of the study

1. Tell me a little bit about you and the work that you do?
2. When I say love, name three things that come to mind.
3. What is your personal definition of love?
4. When you think about what it means to be Black+ queer, and the notion of love, what kinds of thoughts and feelings comes up for you?  
  
    -if self-love is brought up, ask about what that is, means, and looks like.
5. What have been some of your early experiences with love, and how have they impacted you?
6. Share a story or experience about a time when you've felt loved.
7. What have you learned about love? Where have you learned about it? And how do you think it has impacted you?
8. What have you learned socially and culturally about love?
9. Could you tell a story about a time when love came to the forefront and presented itself in your cultural work (broadly define- art, activism, civic leadership, etc.) Why do you do it?
10. Could you tell me about a story when you've felt like you've given love, and what did that look like and feel like?
11. Do you think there is a place for love as we think about social change and social transformation? If so, what does that mean or looks like?
12. What would you say to another Black queer person about love?
13. What does healing look like for Black queer folks?  
    -could you share a little bit about your own journey to healing?

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