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## Sacramental Shame in Black Churches: How Racism and Respectability Politics Shape the Experiences of Black LGBTQ and Same-Gender-Loving Christians

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## Sacramental Shame in Black Churches

### How Racism and Respectability Politics Shape the Experiences of Black LGBTQ and Same-Gender-Loving Christians

*Theresa W. Tobin and Dawne Moon*

*Spiritual violence* occurs when churches and their agents use religion to make people think God hates them or wants them to suffer, or to diminish their capacity to participate in religious life (Tobin 2016).<sup>1</sup> Historically in the US, Christianity's spiritual violence against African Americans dates back to Anglo-Europeans' use of the Bible to 'justify' slavery and portray Black people as inferior to whites on the basis of alleged sexual difference. Any theology that actively perpetuates or ignores Christianity's collusion with white supremacy is spiritually violent toward people of colour. Today this spiritual violence is still sometimes overt, but more commonly manifests through white Christianity's silence about racism in the US (Cone 2004). In many cases, responses in predominantly Black churches emphasize what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) calls the politics of respectability, which aims to counter racist sexual stigma by calling on Black people to demonstrate conformity to dominant gender and sexual ideals.

In our qualitative study of the conservative Christian lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) movement for affirmation, *sacramental shame* is what we call a different form of spiritual violence, in which conservative Christian churches, which are predominantly white, effectively treat shame as a special, unspoken sacrament just for LGBTQ<sup>2</sup> people. Anchored in the

<sup>1</sup> Spiritual violence is violence in the sense of violation, which can mean to transgress a rule or law, but it can also mean to debase or fail to respect a person, or to treat something sacred with irreverence.. Spiritual violence violates persons and so carries the latter of these meanings (Garver 2007; Holmes 2007). It is distinctively spiritual in terms of both its means—religiously significant texts, objects, or rituals, for instance—and its targets—a person's spiritual self, experience of God, and relationship with the church.

<sup>2</sup> The dynamics for intersex people (those born with physical characteristics typically characterized as both males and female) seem often to differ from those of LGBTQ people, unless they are perceived as LGBTQ. The question of whether intersex people should routinely be grouped into the LGBTQ movement is far from settled. We do not use one consistent abbreviation here because intersex people

doctrine of gender complementarianism—which sacralizes social constructions of gender as dichotomous, incomplete halves to be completed in heterosexual marriage—sacramental shame is a form of stigmatizing shame that impacts the lives of LGBTQ Christians of many races, but the same logic also sexually stigmatizes all people of colour as ‘deviating’ from white sexual norms (Crenshaw 1991; Douglas 1999, 2004; Schneider 2012). Thus, sacramental shame takes on distinctive dimensions for Black LGBTQ and same-gender-loving (SGL) Christians.<sup>3</sup> Here, we begin to analyse how racism and responses to it influence the ways Black LGBTQ and SGL Christians experience sacramental shame, and their routes to resistance and healing.

Homophobia and transphobia are no worse among African Americans than among whites. But if LGBTQ people of colour are to resist and heal from sacramental shame, it helps to recognize the specific forms it takes. Drawing from our qualitative data and building on Higginbotham (1993), Douglas (1999), Snorton (2014), Collins (2005) and others, we argue that African-American churches have long resisted the spiritual violence of white supremacy; however, with the goal of protecting an image of Blackness that defies the sexual stereotypes at the root of white supremacy, they often unwittingly instil in LGBTQ members distinct forms of sacramental shame. At the same time, many in these churches cultivate personal relationships with a liberator God who sides with the oppressed, avenges those who endure injustice, and inspires communal work for justice, promoting a life-enhancing ethos of love that can promote thriving.

We draw from our hybrid sociological and philosophical study based on participant observation, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of conservative Christians who are engaging in conversations about their churches’ spiritual violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) people and their routes to reconciliation. We’ve conducted 500 hours of participant observation and seventy-three semi-structured, qualitative interviews with sixty-two conservative Christians in this movement, which is intentionally multi-ethnic but predominantly white. Both being white ourselves, we hired Alicia T. Crosby, a queer Black woman involved in this movement, to conduct forty supplemental interviews with

are part of the broader movement we are studying, and so when we reference this movement we include ‘T’, but we are not primarily talking about the experiences of intersexed people of colour in this paper. Similarly, if a church only advocated for or against LGBT people, we do not impute any understandings of queer-identified people to them, and use an abbreviation consistent with their own.

<sup>3</sup> In light of broader gay rights movements ignoring the intersectional needs and experiences of LGBTQ people of colour, Cleo Manago coined the term *same-gender-loving* in the 1990s as a more culturally affirming term for African Americans than *gay*, *bisexual*, or *lesbian*. Respondents used different terms and we follow people’s own usage when referencing their experiences.

LGBTQ Christians of colour to supplement our dozen or so, bringing the total to 113.

Given the political variation across Black denominations and independent churches that Shelton and Cobb (2017) highlight in their statistical work, Lincoln and Mamiya's (1990) now-classic language of 'the Black Church' seems to portray a monolith, but captures important commonalities. We use the term 'the Black Church' in the looser sense Lincoln and Mamiya describe, referring to a shared culture of Black Christians who belong either to the many denominations of churches populated predominantly by Black people that have emerged in response to institutional and cultural racism in the United States, what Flunder (2014) refers to as the 'Metho-Bapti-Costal' tradition of Black America, *and* to predominantly Black congregations in predominantly white denominations, particularly the officially LGBT-affirming United Church of Christ, of which several respondents were or had been members.

We begin by describing sacramental shame and its roots in gender complementarianism. We then discuss the confluence of several social and religious factors that set the stage for sacramental shame experiences of Black LGBTQ Christians situating complementarianism historically as a major force in white supremacy's dehumanization of Black people, and discussing how the politics of respectability arose to counteract racist sexual stigma. Next, we examine the forms of sacramental shame Black LGBTQ respondents report, showing how these forms are shaped by racism and Black churches' responses to it. Concluding sections show how respondents also found sources for resistance and healing in predominantly Black churches, and foreground a sub-movement of predominantly Black churches led by Black LGBTQ Christians who are paving the way for the radically inclusive love that Christians believe God commands of all people.

## 1. Sacramental Shame

Shame is an emotion in which one feels exposed as defective to important others—in this case to God and the church—in ways that threaten belonging and worthiness (Thomason 2015; Velleman 2001; Calhoun 2004; Scheff 2000; Lynd 1958; H. Lewis 1971; M. Lewis 1992). Whereas guilt says I *did* something bad, shame says I *am* bad in ways that make me unworthy of relationship. Shame feelings indicate both a desire to turn away or hide the defective self from others and a longing to re-establish connection and belonging (Sedgwick 2003; Burrus 2007, Ahmed 2015; Shotwell 2011). Shame's ambivalence has led some to consider it an important moral emotion, an affective cue that one's behaviour or character harm or threaten to damage important relationships (Manion 2002; Shotwell 2011; Flanagan 2013). This cueing can make shame a potentially fitting

emotional response to sinfulness, which breaks relationship, but there are many types of shame and not all of them are restorative.<sup>4</sup> *Reintegrating shame* aims to protect relationship and belonging and is dispensed with love and respect, assuring the person that connection is not permanently severed (Braithwaite 1989). In contrast, *stigmatizing shame*, such as the shame enacted by racism, aims to shun people by defining them as unworthy of relationship (Harris-Perry 2011).

Many heterosexual, cisgender members of conventionally conservative churches find that shame about their own sinful desires, such as lust or greed, can motivate repentance and help them become better people; they thus believe that shame will have similar reintegrative effects for people ‘struggling’ with same-sex attraction or being ‘confused’ about their gender identity. But shame does not operate redemptively in the case of being LGBTQ for two main reasons: that being LGBTQ does not generally respond to acts of will, which makes the shame perpetual, and that these characteristics do not in themselves break relationship as sins do, but constitute a person’s capacity to relate to others. Thus the shaming in these cases perpetually attacks not a person’s ability to break relationships, but their ability to form them.

It is jarring to think of shame as a sacrament. Defined broadly, sacraments are religious ceremonies or acts of the church that are considered visible, tangible signs of God’s grace. In the sacramental shame dynamic, churches require LGBTQ people constantly to feel and display shame about their same-sex attractions and/or gender difference as the sign that they want to be worthy of God’s love and dwell in God’s presence. People often dispense this shame believing it will help their loved ones to conform to God’s will.<sup>5</sup> In effect, the sacramental shame dynamic makes perpetual shame about one’s capacity for relationship the visible sign to the community that a person has not rejected God, and paradoxically makes constant awareness of unworthiness of relationship the condition for relationship with God and other people (Moon and Tobin 2018).

Even LGBTQ people who commit to celibacy and do everything their churches require of them often remain under constant suspicion and scrutiny and are deemed unfit to serve. A Black, gay male respondent in his mid-thirties we call Jamal shared that when he was committed to celibacy, he was questioned by the

<sup>4</sup> Shame experiences may be episodic or chronic, in which case people can develop a disposition of shame (Bartky 1990; Lehtinen 1998; Woodward 2000). They may target part of the self or the whole self, although acute shame episodes tend to *feel* totalizing even if they are about an aspect of the self (Karlsson and Sjöberg 2009). And, shame can be experienced traumatically or non-traumatically (Clare 2017; Woodward 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Claiming to ‘love the sinner but hate the sin’, church members, family, and friends often dispense sacramental shame ‘compassionately’ with sincere albeit misguided attempts to love. We have observed that ‘compassionate’ sacramental shaming can increase its toxic effects by making a person believe that their capacity for love must really be damaged, since what is supposed to be loving and comes from people who claim to love them feels like abuse.

pastor at his multi-ethnic, ‘welcoming but not affirming’ church because he had been seen by other church members at a restaurant with another man. He had to ask whether he was allowed to leave the house and have a nice time with a friend. In the sacramental shame dynamic church members break relationship with LGBTQ people when they disclose their difference or are outed, blame and shame them for the break, and leave them with nothing they can do to re-establish full belonging. Living in fear of being unworthy to love and belong becomes the condition for receiving ‘love’ and belonging.<sup>6</sup> Sacramental shame is chronic, stigmatizing shame that *poses* as reintegrative.

Where does sacramental shame come from? Given that many Protestant churches have few or no sacraments, the existence of this informal, unspoken one just for LGBTQ people teems with ironies and makes it difficult to detect.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, respondents repeatedly indicate with a resounding ‘Yes!’ that the term captures their experience of a toxic shaming dynamic that disguises itself as sacred. Conventionally conservative Christian churches<sup>8</sup> define same-sex attractions and variant experiences of gender as sinful (and shameful) because they adhere to the doctrine of gender complementarianism. This doctrine takes different forms, but all posit that God created two opposite sexes, male and female, for the purpose of completing each other in marriage.<sup>9</sup> In effect, conventional conservative Protestant teachings treat binary gender and heterosexuality as a commandment, preceding the Ten Commandments in time and importance, so any challenge to this doctrine appears as a sinful rebellion against God. Within this logic, an individual’s ability to be recognized as a person, worthy of belonging, depends on being recognized as heterosexual and cisgender, making LGBTQ and intersex difference appear monstrous (Moon and Tobin 2018). Gender complementarianism rests on theologies that rebuff the idea that LGBTQ identities could

<sup>6</sup> The sacramental shame dynamic often instills shame in LGBTQ church members as a disposition, the affective background that frames one’s experience of self, others and often of God. Cultivating a disposition to feel shame has toxic effects in the lives of many of the people we have heard from, including suicidality, addictions, depression, and even somatic symptoms including uncontrollable asthma attacks, a case of heart failure in a healthy person in their early twenties, and in the case of a Christian music star, a severe autoimmune disorder (Tobin and Moon 2019).

<sup>7</sup> Contrast this with sacramental traditions, for instance, the formal exclusion of women from the sacrament of Holy Orders in the Roman Catholic Church, where debates about the legitimacy or spiritual violence of this exclusion can point to a formal sacrament with a history and competing theological justifications.

<sup>8</sup> By *conservative*, we mean that most participants experience a personal relationship with Jesus, hold a ‘high view’ of scripture, adhere to the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, and other characteristics of evangelicalism (Bebbington 1989). Given predominantly Black churches’ commonalities with both conservative and liberal white churches, it seems more likely for Black Protestants who affirm LGBTQI identities, same-sex marriage, and gender transitions to find a home in conventionally ‘liberal’ churches, particularly UCC congregations, or in explicitly affirming churches. The challenge, however, is to find affirming congregations that affirm traditionally Black theologies and ways of worship and do not stigmatize Blackness.

<sup>9</sup> Brownson (2013) identifies arguments citing anatomical, hierarchical, and personality trait complementarity, but argues that the Bible actually says none of these things.

be expressions of personhood, and instead describe these individuals as ‘struggling’ with same-sex attraction or ‘being confused’ about who they ‘really are’.

The sacramental shame dynamic is complicated for Black LGBTQ and same-gender-loving Christians because gender complementarianism—which anchors sacramental shame—is expressed in race-neutral terms, but it is actually a white-centred doctrine that allows white cisgender/heterosexual marital sex alone to escape sexual shame. Complementarianism emerged historically as a major force in the sexual shaming of Black people that fuels white supremacy (Douglas 1999, 2010; Copeland 2002; Donaldson and Kwok 2002; Ferguson 2004; Schneider 2012). A version of complementarianism was at the root of European colonial conquest, where not conforming to European Christians’ gendered and sexual norms was seen as evidence of non-Europeans being subhuman (Schneider 2012; see also Goldberg 1992; Nagel 2003; Brayboy 2017). The gendered and sexual norms that underwrite complementarianism are *racialized* norms, defined historically in terms of and against nonwhite people as the ‘sexual other’ (Griffin 2004: 134; Monroe 2004; Schneider 2012). White Christian enslavers invoked these norms to bolster their ‘justification’ of slavery, to ‘legitimize’ their sexual control of and violence against enslaved peoples, and to cement in the white social imagination racist stereotypes portraying Black people as sexually deviant (Griffin 2004; Monroe 2004; Harris-Perry 2011). To this day, racist stereotypes that fuel white supremacy define Black people as inferior to whites on the basis of supposed sexual difference, associating blackness with unrestrained sexuality, and specifically linking Black men with sexual violence and Black women with promiscuity (Collins 1990, 2005; Douglas 1999).

Sacramental shame attacks a person’s sexuality and/or gender identity (which complementarians treat as the same thing). Whether one is LGBTQ or transgender, sexuality is the capacity that sacramental shame most directly diminishes. Sexuality is about much more than sex. We follow scholars who define sexuality broadly as the human capacity that urges relationship with others, including with partners and spouses, children, and friends (Nelson 1979; Lorde 1984; Douglas 1999). Sexuality in this broad sense refers not only to things conventionally thought of as ‘sexual attraction and behaviour’ but is the capacity that fuels intimacy and connection, including the care and affection we feel and express when bonding with a close friend, for instance, or expressions of appropriate affection toward one’s children.<sup>10</sup> Sexuality is not the whole of love, but as Douglas argues, it is ‘a gift from God that, if properly appreciated, helps [people] to become

<sup>10</sup> Conservative Christians who adhere to complementarianism might disagree with this broad definition of sexuality, but they implicitly accept the idea that (hetero)sexuality and (cis)gender experience are foundational to the human capacity for relationship; the complementarian interpretation of the Genesis creation stories is premised on this relational capacity.

more fully human by entering into loving relationships' (Douglas 1999: 115).<sup>11</sup> Douglas draws an explicit link between this broad understanding of sexuality and the ability to cultivate agapic love rooted in compassion that extends even to people we do not know personally, and that Christians believe is central to loving and serving God and our neighbour (1999: 115). Chronically shaming people about their capacity for relational connection can diminish their capacity for loving relationship with self, others, and God.

Internalizing sacramental shame often leads LGBTQ people to see their capacity to form relationships and love others as damaged and potentially harmful to others. In many instances, they shut down this capacity, cutting themselves off not just from romantic or sexual relationships, but from relationships of any kind. Before finding a 'welcoming' church, Jamal had been ministering in a Pentecostal church and campus group. He shared that once his pastor had shamed him for being gay:

As far as friends, there were a lot of people that I cut off. And I thought I was endangering them. I thought that I was going to poison them, I thought that my struggles were going to disillusion them, because I was ministering, and some people have ministers on some kind of pedestal. So I felt that all the stuff that was going on, would be so harmful, and so from my perspective I felt that I was doing good [...] by pushing them [away].

LGBTQ Christian respondents of many races share similar experiences of rigidly policing their emotional attachments to others, of remaining aloof and not letting themselves get too close to anyone even in friendships, for fear that they were unfit for relationship and their love would harm those they loved.<sup>12</sup>

Sacramental shame harms a person's capacity for relationship not only by making them think their love will harm others, but also by making them feel shame about their own longing and need for relationship. Jamal shared a painfully powerful experience of this:

I remember in my own experience I was running towards [...] sex with addictive behaviors because I wanted intimacy, just to be known. I wanted somebody to really get me and to really understand me. **But the only thing I could think about was the shame of wanting to be known, the shame of wanting to be close, the**

<sup>11</sup> This broader understanding of sexuality encompasses a variety of ways humans may experience sexual attraction in the narrower sense. Asexual persons, for instance, are not excluded from this broad understanding of sexuality as capacity for intimacy and connection.

<sup>12</sup> As white, gay, celibate movement participant Ron Belgau wrote in his 2003 statement advocating celibacy for all gay Christians: 'This is not to single homosexual acts out from all other acts which bring condemnation. But [...] Paul argues that homosexual acts can 1) keep us from the kingdom of Heaven; 2) defile the temple of the Holy Spirit within us; and 3) place us back under the judgment of the law. Given the stakes involved, it is not a risk I am willing to take. Even more so, I would never risk inflicting consequences that serious on another man whom I loved.'

shame of wanting to be touched even, because we're embodied creatures. If the only thing I could deal with was *that* being shameful, then I could never find out, 'Oh, there is some authentic need in here. There are some healthy ways that I could have my needs met.' [Emphasis added]

By making people believe and fear that their capacity for relationship is fundamentally corrupt—which is not the same as acknowledging that one might misuse that capacity—sacramental shame inhibits people from responding appropriately, or at all, to the Gospel command to love. And the church erects this barrier in God's name, leading people to believe that they are unfit or unworthy to follow Christ's example of love and service to others.

## 2. Racist Spiritual Violence and Respectability Politics

In the US, historically and continuing to this day, a version of white Christianity itself bolsters the sexual stigma of Black people through what Kelly Brown Douglas (2004: 353-355) calls a *Platonized* interpretation of the New Testament that vilifies the body, and sexuality in particular, as the source of all sinfulness. Platonized Christianity colludes with white supremacy to perpetuate racist spiritual violence toward African-American Christians by in effect characterizing Black people as at the bottom of the hierarchical dualism of spirit/body, more 'embodied' and thus more sexual and more sinful than whites. This version of white Christianity says sexuality is the source of evil and disrupts connection with God, and in its collusion with white supremacy sexually stigmatizes Black people, making them seem farther than whites from God.

Because Blackness is 'read off' of a racialized body, this form of stigmatization generates an experience of perpetual exposure and constant white surveillance and judgement (Harris-Perry 2011: 111; see also Fanon 1967; Goffman 1963; Collins 1990, 2005). Through the white gaze, Black sexuality is inescapably 'on display' as perpetually failed virtue, making Black people vulnerable to chronic sexual shame (Snorton 2014). In order to survive psychically against relentless racist shaming, historians have noted that Black people (and especially Black women) practiced dissemblance by 'creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness... while actually remaining an enigma... thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility' (Hine, quoted in Harris-Perry 2011: 59-60). Dissemblance 'took on a specific, class-defined form for middle-class African American women' in the politics of respectability, which was heavily influenced by the Black Church (Harris-Perry 2011: 60). Respectability politics implied especially that women's ability to represent the Black community and to demand just treatment from society 'rested on their sterling moral character' and their ability to present an 'untarnished self to the public at all times' (Harris-Perry 2011: 62).

Recognizing that stereotypes of Black sexual deviancy drive racism, the Black Church historically preached respectability, especially around marriage and sexuality (Collins 2005: 106–8). Higginbotham explains:

The church played the single most important role in influencing normative values and distinguishing respectable from non-respectable behavior among working-class Blacks... [T]he competing images of the church and the street symbolized cultural divisions within the mass of the Black working poor... [T]he street signified male turf, a public place of worldly dangers and forbidden pleasures. Churches and households, both rejecting the worldly attractions of male social space, signified fame and also sacred space. Women who strolled the streets or attended dance halls and cheap theaters promiscuously blurred the boundaries of gender. (Higginbotham 1993: 204)

Respectability politics holds Black people accountable for living up to white Christian sexual norms and proving racist stereotypes incorrect when applied to respectable Black people. Although intended to procure dignity for working-class African-American women in particular, ‘the politics of respectability basically aimed for White approval’ by demonstrating that Black people were capable of living up to the complementarian ideal that whites were presumed to embody (Collins 2005: 72).

Because respectability politics emphasizes *appearances*, its enactment works to conceal from the white gaze anyone who might be perceived as confirming racist stereotypes about Black sexual deviancy, including people with HIV/AIDS, gay, lesbian, or bisexual people, single mothers, and transgender people (Cohen 1999; Collins 1990, 2005; Harris-Perry 2011; Higginbotham 1993; Morrison 1992). Respondents who had experienced both predominantly white and Black or multi-ethnic church settings could make explicit comparisons. Aurora, a Black, twenty-six-year-old trans woman, spoke of having grown up in predominantly Black or multiracial churches and schools until her mother died when she was sixteen, at which point she moved and began attending her stepmother’s predominantly white, Assemblies of God church. As conservative as the white church was, her experience captures the focus on an outward presentation of respectability in predominantly Black churches and multiracial Christian schools she attended. Reflecting on her youth, when others saw her as a feminine boy, she said:

I felt more accepted [at the predominantly white church] because [...] it seemed as though gender was the currency in the Black spaces. In the white spaces the gender expression wasn’t as big of a deal as the sexuality. What I mean by that is, they didn’t necessarily care that I was more flamboyant in say, my hand gestures

or more eclectic in my style of dress, as long as they knew privately that I was not sexually engaging in anything that would be considered deviant. [...] Whereas, you know, in Black spaces it seemed to be [...] opposite, [...] where you needed to have an outward gender expression that was cis[gender], while what you did privately wasn't as much of a concern. I still didn't feel liberated because I knew I couldn't be who I really was. Definitely not openly without being rejected.

### 3. Black LGBTQ and Same-Gender-Loving Christians' Experiences of Sacramental Shame

Through respectability politics, Black churches coming out of Platonized Protestant traditions aim to discredit racist stereotypes of Black sexual deviancy by projecting an image of Blackness that defies these stereotypes. However, because respectability answers to complementarian ideals, a distinct sacramental shame dynamic emerges in these churches for their LGBTQ and same-gender-loving members. Under the weight of respectability, Black LGBTQ and SGL Christians need to experience a sacramental shame that is both *detectable enough within* the community to give assurance that they do not repudiate God or the Black community, and simultaneously *hidden from the white gaze* in order to maintain the image of Black respectability.

Respondents name a range of spiritual harms that result from prolonged exposure to the sacramental shame dynamic. Here we discuss five overlapping dimensions of sacramental shame experiences that Black LGBTQ and SGL Christians report, which reflect the distinctive shape this shame takes under the mantle of respectability.

#### 3.1 Alienation from God and Church

One is distance from God. For example, a twenty-nine-year-old Black, bisexual pastor we call Imani shared that as a child she felt very close to God, and prayed all the time about everything. When her feelings of sexual difference emerged, she felt she couldn't bring them to God, which left her feeling alienated from God and her faith for years, an experience she recounts as a devastating waste of time. A thirty-two-year-old gay, Black man we call Lucas said that no matter how much evidence he acquired to the contrary, he could not shake his fear that God just might despise gay people. He shared:

I have all the information that I would need to know that, like, same-sex unions would not be a problem. I can tell you right now I'd probably accept a proposal. I'd have the party, [...] I'd invite all the people, and I'd get to that church, and I'd

probably faint. [...] I have all the social references, I have all the relationship models, I have all the ministry models, I have all the organizational models, and I even, like, can sit down and exegete scripture [...]. So, I mean, I know these things but, like, it's not satiated. The fear just still hasn't gone away. [...] I guess that's the fear [...]—not that we get there and there's no God, but that we get there, there is a God, and this God is this hateful person with this trident and this long beard and this dress and is, you know, crazy homophobic.

Even respondents who have found a church community they feel 'pretty comfortable' in, still spoke of a latent, underlying fear of pushing too far that leads them to feel like second-class citizens. An African-American, SGL woman respondent in her mid-forties spoke about the storefront, Holiness church her family has led for forty-two years. Her uncle is now pastor and remains silent about gay people, neither condemning nor speaking in support of them, but preaching a lot about love, which she said made her feel:

... not extremely, but pretty comfortable going to church. [They're very nice and loving and ask 'How's your wife?' ...] But there's still times when I would like—my children haven't been christened and I would like to have them christened, but I'm afraid to ask people at my church to do it, because I don't want them to say no and then I'm gonna feel bad. [...] I'm always afraid of pushing them too far or my family might say something that I'm gonna feel is rejecting. I already feel like a second-class citizen with them. I do.

Feeling alienated from God, fearing that God might be 'crazy homophobic', and feeling like a second-class church member who fears asking the church to christen their children, something available to full members of the community, are spiritual harms that can result from sacramental shame.

### 3.2 Exiled Within, Quietly Ostracized

Sacramental shame is not ritualized the way sacraments typically are; it is constant rather than in special moments, and typically it involves some kind of exile or separation while the person works to 'fix' themselves (Moon and Tobin 2018). Jamal's experience—while extreme—reveals the contours of exile sacramental shame produces under the weight of respectability. Having grown up in a 'not-too-churchy' Catholic family with parents who supported him, Jamal joined a Pentecostal ministry while attending a Catholic university. He had come out as gay in his first year of college, and then found deliverance in his second year—which, since he was well known on campus, caused a lot of debate over whether he could simply not be gay anymore. Right before he was about to be ordained that

year, his pastor heard that he had been talking about his gay past, pulled him aside, and:

told me I should never talk about it again, and I should be ashamed that it was ever part of my life, that I should forget it ever happened, and that people would not be able to receive me if they knew that that was part of my story. And that was the first time I ever had—shame.

Not knowing how to process this shame, and being told to never speak of it again, he says that was:

the beginning of me struggling with sexual addiction, because what ends up happening, you know, I've got this guilt, I've got this secret now. [...] And so I spent years struggling, continuing in silence and isolation, putting myself in really dangerous situations, anonymous sexual hookups, that kind of thing, all the while becoming more and more active in serving the church and leading the church, and [...] maybe around 2003, I was held up at gunpoint, pursuing one of those hookups, and I came back shaken and asking for help from my church.

Eight months to a year later, his pastor responded:

'Well you just need to stay in the church. Don't do anything. [...] If you really want to be saved, if you *really want* to be Christian...' Yeah. So that starts about a three and a half, almost four-year process of me living in the church, cutting myself off from family and friends, shutting down my business, quitting school. Two of those years, I moved to Indiana, to live in the church there.

Jamal's church saw no difference between a gay orientation and sexual addiction, and saw both as possible only in someone who was not *really* Christian already. For roughly four years, his pastor had him live in the church, fasting two days per week, sleeping on the altar, and praying morning and night for God to help rid him of his demon.

When the pastor told Jamal that God wanted him to paint the church, Jamal decided it was time to move back home, stop hiding from life, and focus on his relationship with God rather than his pastor. At first his pastor offered to keep Jamal locked up in his basement, but that was not what Jamal thought he needed. Jamal's return home inspired the pastor to keep him invisible in another way:

And so the day I moved back, he had someone call and tell me, 'Don't touch the microphone.' Because I had been serving, I had been leading the dance team, I had been teaching, I had been doing all kinds of things. 'Don't touch the mic, you just need to seek God right now.' And to this day, that's the last time

I directly heard from any of them. And you know, no fanfare. It was never a public scandal in the church, it was never anything that became like public knowledge and was a disgrace to the church. [...] I'd cut off all ties, all this other stuff, so that church, that communion was my everything, and to be kind of ostracized from that, and privately ostracized, because they never publicly said, 'You can't be friends with Jamal,' but they stopped talking to me, and it just left me in this weird place.

In white churches sacramental shame also produces isolation, but in these churches there is often a degree of collectivity to it. On their website, Rob and Linda Robertson (c.2011) write of having entire prayer teams praying for their son and arranging mentor relationships with 'straight, manly men' in order to help him heal his 'broken' (gay) masculinity. Some white, LGBT Christians have been sent to 'ex-gay' residential programmes or support groups with others, so that even the sending away in predominantly white churches has a collective dimension (Lee 2012; Conley 2016).

By contrast, Jamal was sent to live *alone* in the church building, separated from his family, school, job, and community until he could be made rid of his gay demon and worthy of their vision of God. He demonstrated his commitment while shut away. When he moved back home, there was no fanfare or scandal; he was just quietly banned from leadership until he went away.<sup>13</sup> For Black respondents, sacramental shame experiences involve separation; in keeping with a politics of respectability their LGBTQ and SGL members are *exiled within* or quietly shunned if they threaten to 'expose' the community.

### 3.3 Invisibility and Silencing

Even in cases less extreme than Jamal's experience, the focus on outward display could have the effect of silencing Black LGBTQ Christians or making them invisible, which could generate confusion and anxiety.<sup>14</sup> Imani, the bisexual UCC pastor, grew up in a predominately Black UCC congregation with an affirming pastor who said supportive things about LGBT people from the pulpit, which she would eventually recall and find helpful. However, she described growing up in a Black Church culture that enforced silence about and invisibility

<sup>13</sup> Black transgender pastor Carmarion Anderson's (2015) story is different. She was dragged up to the altar repeatedly to have the demon of femininity purged from her by the church. She was not physically isolated, but physically assaulted by the people who were supposed to love her, a different form of spiritual violence.

<sup>14</sup> White respondents also report feeling silenced about their sexual or gender difference, but largely because of the vocal and explicit messaging from their faith communities about what this difference would mean for them, rather than from communal silencing that produced confusion.

of LGBTQ people, which overshadowed her pastor's affirming messages at the time. She recalled:

I got all that information filtered through [older relatives]; it was still very hushed and [there were certain] words people wouldn't use. And people's partners were their 'friend' and, [...] no matter how clear the people were about who they were and who they loved, everybody else talked about it as if they could create a secret out of something that wasn't a secret. And then [my cousin] who was in the same congregation, came out. Her mama had a fit, and their relationship was so strained I didn't even see her for a while.

Under the weight of respectability, their shame is kept within them, preferably, or failing that, within the family, or failing that, within the church, and people who fail to keep it within quietly disappear.

Imani experienced that silence as a child and teenager, trying to make sense of her difference, which resulted in her trying to figure out whether she could even *exist*. She recalled:

You end up thinking for a long time that it's not real or it's not there, and [...] these ways of being these people literally, like, whole people don't exist. And then you're like, 'But I literally see them every day. What are you trying to tell me about these people? And what are you trying to tell me about God? I don't understand.' [...] I didn't know how to see and understand the reality of people in the world, and [...] I was scared to ask questions [...] because I didn't want to offend anyone, and I didn't want to hurt anybody [...]—I didn't want to disappear too. You know what I'm saying? Like, 'You all are literally telling me whole groups of people don't exist. Like, am I going to stop existing if I ask you these questions?'

Adherence to complementarianism ties recognition of full personhood to being recognized as heterosexual and cisgender (Moon and Tobin 2018), and ultimately as white (Douglas 1999, Schneider 2012). Respectability politics pressures communities to demonstrate that their members live up to complementarian ideals in order to prove racist stereotypes wrong and show that they are persons deserving of equal moral consideration and respect. Imani's experience reflects the particular manner in which under the mantle of respectability her church's members, including her family, dispensed sacramental shame through concealment and silence.

Her experience also reflects the core spiritual violence of sacramental shame, which in God's name stigmatizes a person's capacity for relationship. She remarked that her church's silencing around sexual differences and imposed invisibility of LGBTQ people, in her case compounded by the large-scale societal

erasure of bisexuality (Yoshino 2000; Eisner 2013), led her to experience her sexuality as something abject happening *to* her and to think that her difference could only be explained by some unremembered tragedy. She shared:

People literally would say verbatim like, ‘Bisexuality—that’s not a thing.’ [...] People literally would say that over and over again, and it would just be like, amplified in those spaces. And so, I didn’t think that what was happening was a thing, so I had to find another way to label it, to define it, and that was the first thing. Like it was something that was happening to me. Like, this is not who I am, this is not a sense of being. This is something *happening* to me, and I had to figure out what was *happening* to me. [...] Something must be wrong with me, something tragic must have happened to me. I’m sorting through my childhood, trying to figure out what *ruined* me, and locating stories that I let people define in that way for me.

Imani’s experiences within a predominantly Black UCC congregation resonate with other respondents who searched for the aberrance in their life that made them LGBTQ. For instance, a twenty-two-year-old respondent we call Derek, who grew up in a predominantly white Nazarene church, entertained the possibility that he was gay because he was mixed race.

Most of the Black respondents we heard from spoke of the invisibility of Black LGBTQ people not only in the church but also in the broader culture, including in gay rights movements and in the civil rights movement (D’Emilio 2003). A respondent we call Simone shared that even once she felt comfortable naming the truth of her sexual difference, the invisibility of Black LGBTQ people in broader culture left her to believe that Black people were not gay in the sense that they did not outwardly claim this identity or truth about themselves regardless of how they related to others in their personal lives. This dearth of representation reinforces narratives within the Black Church that gayness is a ‘white thing’, again complicating the dynamic for Black respondents because of the threat that in naming their sexuality they might be perceived not just as sexual deviants, but as race traitors (Collins 2005; Douglas 1999).

### 3.4 Compartmentalizing

Conservative churches that abide by complementarianism frame identifying as an LGBTQ person as wilfully embracing sinfulness and rejecting God. Within this worldview it is not possible to *be* both Christian and gay or Christian and transgender, for example. Many white respondents shared that when they tried to come out, the first response of their pastors, parents, or friends was an attempt to take control over their identity, saying things like ‘You are not gay; you are a

beloved daughter of the King who struggles with same-sex-attraction' (Rodgers 2016) or, as a white trans man's Christian college friends told him, 'You are not transgender; you are a beautiful woman of God.'<sup>15</sup> Parents and churches then frantically mobilize to tell the person who they 'really' are and to affirm the person's identity as a child of God by 'fixing' their 'broken' gender and sexuality. Control is prioritized over relationship (Moon & Tobin 2018).

Black respondents also report experiences of a sacramental shame dynamic that attempts to control peoples' identity, as when Imani recounts that people's partners were called their 'friend', and that people 'created a secret out of something that wasn't a secret'. However, consistent with differences between predominantly white and Black churches in general, we found that Black respondents faced a more complex convergence of controlling pressures when their community fears that the 'blight' of an individual will tarnish the image of collective respectability. Because respectability politics frames gayness as a 'white disease', a white assault on the Black community, a Black person's claim to be gay, for example, appears not only as a violation of sacred gender complementarianism and an affront to God but also as wilful embrace of the temptation to repudiate the Black community, leaving many to work to partition their spirituality and/or sexuality from the rest of life (Collins 2005).

Sociologist Richard Pitt's Black, gay, Christian male respondents spoke to him of the difficulty of reconciling their sexual and religious identities. Some tried rejecting their religious identity, but 'a number of them suggested that doing so would be as difficult for them as no longer affiliating with the Black community.' Others tried more affirming churches, but miss consistent championing of moral standards from the pulpit; another of Pitt's respondents said 'I come out of a holiness church and probably shouldn't say this, but I wanted a little hellfire and damnation every now and then' (Pitt 2010: 46). But most needed to compartmentalize, 'being' Christian in some places and gay in others. Jamal also spoke of a pattern of compartmentalizing among his gay Black Christian friends:

There's about four churches that are pretty much known as where all the [Black] gays go in Chicago and they've all been very publicly, actively, politically anti-gay. On any given Sunday somebody might be praying against the spirit of homosexuality or encouraging some hyper-masculine behavior and response to a more effeminate or a less manly expression. [...] In those churches I have lots of friends and when I talk to them about [...] the culture of their church the response I get over and over again is that, 'Well, I know they're going to be that way. I know they're going to act that way, but I like the music, or I like the

<sup>15</sup> This attempt to control others reflects a form of epistemic violence that Kristie Dotson calls testimonial quieting, in which an audience (inaccurately and unjustly) fails to identify a speaker as a knower, in this case to know who they are (2011: 242; see also Fricker 2007).

sermons, and so when they do that I just tune out.’ What I’m hearing them say is that they’re effectively leaving entire parts of themselves and their experience at the door, bottling that up, compartmentalizing it.

White respondents could often find affirming white churches where they could bring the fullness of who they are to communal worship. In contrast, some Black respondents found predominantly white, liberal congregations ignorant of Black traditions, interpretations, and styles of worship, leaving them feeling like they had to compartmentalize in *any* faith community. Pastor Eronica King (2016) described this experience as ‘spiritual homelessness’.

### 3.5 Controlling Perfectionism

The logic of respectability connects membership in the Black family (literal and figurative) to control and promises of retribution for sin—particularly the sins of racism—but also anything thought to fall short of perfection. White LGBTQ participants also reported feeling like they had to be ‘perfect Christians’ in order to be acceptable to the church and even then often achieving only second-class standing. But as a response to the sexual stigma of white supremacy, respectability in Platonized Protestant Black churches generates a hyper-controlling culture of perfectionism around Black sexuality, which Simone described as ‘anti-everything’ and Imani learned about as ‘beating back the flesh’, and which many respondents described as demanding unreasonable moral perfection. Jamal describes respectability as:

a perspective that’s built on these very high, unreasonable, ideals. And it comes from leaders that project themselves as perfect. They only preach about what’s wrong with *you guys*. They only preach about how *you* need to get your family together, even though their kids can’t stand them. They preach about all these external things to keep the focus on *you* and what’s wrong with *you*.

Jamal remarked that he and friends from other churches had similar experiences of God and church. He remarked:

It was very control centered. And if you keep people dependent, then you can make that theology make sense. You can be like, ‘Oh yeah, because God is perfect, therefore, he’s just waiting to judge.’ I have a friend who’s been through some horrible church experiences, not in my church, but in his own world, where he can only resonate with the scriptures of judgment. With the scriptures of punishment. There can literally be love and judgment in the same verse, and he will only see the judgment part. [...] It teaches you that [...] people who

teach too much about grace, ‘They’re just sinnin’’, and ‘They’re not really saved, they’re not *saved*-saved.’ You know, it teaches people to discredit the grace of God. [...] And then another part is, there are so many churches, and again I can mainly speak to Black Church culture, there are so many churches where you’re hearing them preach the same thing. So if all the church people you know are saying the same thing, then why would you think otherwise?

Jamal linked this emphasis on moral perfection to a vision of God as one who judges racists harshly and must therefore judge everyone. Referencing his first church, which downplayed forgiveness because, at least in part, of the insurmountable evil so many endured, he continued:

Now we did say, ‘Oh that’s white people. White people always think, “Oh, it’s just love and peace and grace”, but we got the *righteousness* of God. We know the *things* of God. We know the *Truth* of God.’ And so it became a racialized kind of issue too. Where again, you’re a minority group, you’re disadvantaged in society, your safe place becomes church, it becomes a hub, and the center of your family and your social connections and your world, and so you become ever more fearful of things outside. And so this peaceful, passive, grace of God, which you might hear in another denomination, it becomes scary. Because you think, if I’m not afraid then I won’t see God. If I’m not scared of losing my salvation, then I’ll just do any old thing, and then you start thinking like the slippery slope, doomsday prophets.

Having worked to communicate these experiences to white churchmates later, Jamal articulated the difference in an interview, saying:

So [a white person looks] at somebody who has faith like mine, and you’re like, ‘Why would you think that?’ But then it does match up with [Black people’s] spirits. You do need God to be a provider. You do need God to avenge you of the wrongs of the police department, to avenge you the wrongs of what whatever government agency has done. Whatever it is. And so it makes sense in a lot of ways that God would be this more vengeful, more judging God, to *everybody*, because he’s ‘not a respecter of persons’.

Conditions of racism breed shame, and when church leaders to some extent internalize white supremacy, they hold individuals accountable for their failures both to match the white-defined ideal and to uplift the community as a whole. Looking respectable can become prioritized over relationship with God and others, because looking respectable seems more closely related to proving white supremacy wrong. And the fierce, liberator God who smites evildoers who

perpetuate white supremacy, might just smite the Black person with same-gender attractions or feelings of gender difference for their betrayal of respectability.

#### 4. Resources for Healing and Resistance

African-American LGBTQ Christians' intersecting modes of oppression create distinctive experiences of sacramental shame including alienation from God, feelings of invisibility and exile, and compartmentalization. However, Black churches also provide unique resources for liberation, which facilitate particular modes of healing and resistance to homonegative messages as well (Moore 2011). Respondents point to the experience of God as a liberator and someone who loves them and speaks to them personally about their struggles, and of a clear distinction between God's voice and people's.

Douglas (1999, 2004) explains Black Christians' generations of knowledge that white pastors could distort scripture to further unjust and ungodly ends, a history that is well known today within Black churches. Speaking at the Gay Christian Network conference, Black, gay, Episcopal pastor Broderick Greer (2016) remarked:

I descend from enslaved people. From lynched people. From racialized people. From people who took the Jesus their white enslavers introduced them to—a white Jesus happy to watch them suffer in order to maintain the proper social and economic order—and understood him not as enslaver, but as emancipator. [...] These were people [who] just had each other: families and communities forged during the evil institution of African enslavement. And that's what 'powerless' people have to do: theology on the go, without books, seminary, theology on the streets, in the face of people wearing white sheets. Theology after we've been kicked to the corner for a perfectly holy and wholesome sexual orientation and gender expression, from the text of our very lives.

Similarly, reflecting on feeling blindsided and 'cut' when his parents' pastor started preaching on the story of Sodom two days after Christmas, Lucas understood that the pastor's point was to invoke Lot's wife (who was punished for looking back at her city in flames) to say 'don't look back'. But Lucas's immediate response was, 'Which, by the way, I don't agree with because we are Black people and we believe in Sankofa: you have to look back to move forward.' A message of Black resistance helped him resist the pastor's homophobic message.

The Black Church culture of liberation helped Greer and Lucas to overcome dehumanizing Christian messages about LGBTQ people. As a child, Imani could have benefited from someone to make such connections. Her experience reflects

the support she got as a Black child and young woman, even though she expresses it as regret that she lacked the same ‘fierce’ support for her queerness. She reflects:

I wish that my community stood up just as hard for me in that particular part of my being as they did my Blackness. I wish they had celebrated it as much as they did my Blackness. [...] I think that I wish that there was a fierceness, the same fierce dedication to that [sexual] part of people as fiercely as we were for Blackness [...]

Given the ‘queerness’ of *all* Black sexuality as stigmatized by white culture (Snorton 2014), fully defending her Blackness would include fiercely defending her queerness against racist sexual stigma. As an adult, Imani names that fierceness, and works to provide it for people in her life.

The personal relationship with God cultivated in many, especially charismatic churches, gave some respondents resources for distinguishing between people’s teachings and God’s will. A same-gender-loving Pentecostal respondent in her forties was able from a young age to distinguish between human rules and God’s, comparing her church’s teaching about gender and sexuality to the church mother who made her wear a girdle under her usher’s uniform when she was fifteen. She remarked:

I didn’t think that the church would be approving, but I always felt that God always loved me. Every time I would talk to God, he was never mad at me. He never made me feel like he didn’t love me, or that I was a bad person. So I was able to separate my relationship with God [from] the teachings of the church.

Similarly, when Jamal’s pastor told him God wanted him to paint the church and stay locked up, Jamal was able to think, ‘God’s not saying this to me. [Laughs] You may be saying this, but God’s not saying this to me.’ The ability to talk to God and hear God’s voice was given to them by their churches. And Aurora could distinguish people’s hostility from God. She remarked:

I know there are some people that have come out either as trans or gay or anything else and they not only have an anger towards the people of God but they have anger towards God as well. Because they feel like God has this same perception [as people] and, luckily for me, I do not hold that view. I feel that God has always embraced me, always accepted me, and the people just were not able to do that. [...] I talk to God regularly, which is very empowering for me, especially where I am at in my life today.

Coming from the Black Church tradition, this cultivation may be more explicitly linked to resisting the temptation to internalize oppression.

## 5. Moving Forward

The liberatory language of the Black Church can help some LGBTQ and SGL members resist harmful messages and create sustaining relationships, but a lifetime spent navigating these complicated dynamics can be hard to set aside. Some found a home in predominantly white churches that affirmed LGBTQ identities, same-sex marriages, and gender transitions, but others report that predominantly white liberal churches gave them experiences of racialized stigmatization and silencing. Others worked within their churches to try to be present as openly LGBTQ people, available for people to ask questions and see beyond stereotypes. Finally, others—like Jamal and Imani, Bishop Yvette Flunder of City of Hope Church, or Pastor Jamie Frazier of Lighthouse Church of Chicago—work to create inclusive spaces with no need for compartmentalizing or code-switching. In different ways, African-American LGBTQ Christians are drawing from the liberatory traditions of the Black Church to undo the particular spiritual violence done when sacramental shame is added to the crucible of white supremacist culture (Lewin 2018). They work to create spaces—and a world—where LGBTQ people of colour and others can express what some call ‘the fullness of who they are’, confident that no one falls outside of God’s love.

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