ABSTRACT

HARRY, DION TREMAIN. An Unbounded Existence: A Visual and Quared Exploration of Black Queer and Trans College Student Well-Being and Joy (Under the direction of Dr. Joy Gaston Gayles).

This goal of this study was to explore the experiences and well-being of Black queer and trans college students, in addition to understanding their experiences with joy. This study utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological approach and employed photovoice, photo elicitation interviews, and focus group interviews as data collection strategies. Furthermore, this study was guided by the usage of the radical healing framework and quare theory. Altogether, nine participants, who were all current college students, participated in this study. As a result of this study, four overarching themes emerged. Theme 1, *Navigating Hostile and Isolating Experiences*, encompasses participant reflections of hostile experiences that that to endure and navigate on and off campus. Theme 2, *Identity Exploration and Navigation*, includes recounts of participants finding the beauty in their experience, resisting societal norms, and exploring ways to live and express themselves authentically. Theme 3, *Joy Starts with Me*, highlights the ways participants experienced joy as Black queer and trans college students, both on and off-campus. Lastly, Theme 4, *Spaces of Affirmation, Validation, and Solace,* focuses on the people and spaces that affirmed their identities, comforted them, and contributed to their joy. This paper concludes with a discussion this study's findings in conversation with existing literature, in addition to a list to implications for practice, policy, and research unique to the experiences of Black queer and trans college students.

Keywords: Black queer and trans, college students, well-being, joy, radical healing

An Unbounded Existence: A Visual and Quared Exploration of Black Queer and Trans College Student Well-Being and Joy

by
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DEDICATION

To the next generations of Black queer and trans youth – you are amazing, beautiful, and worthy of so much love and joy! Keep shining and being the beautiful spirit that you are!

BIOGRAPHY

Dion Tremain Harry was born and raised in Lynchburg, SC, and is the youngest son of Robert and Denise Harry. He is a proud product of the Lee Country School District (SC) and is a two-time alum of Clemson University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Health Science (Health Promotion and Education) and Master of Education in Counselor Education (Student Affairs). Dion always had a passion for helping others, particularly students, and often sought out opportunities to reach back to support them. As an undergraduate student at Clemson, Dion served as a CONNECTIONS Peer Mentor and Orientation Ambassador, among other leadership roles on campus. It was his involvement in these programs where Dion discovered the field of Student Affairs and made the decision to pursue a career in higher education.

After graduating with his bachelor's degree in 2015, Dion started his higher education professional career as an Admissions Counselor and Event Coordinator for the Office of Admissions at Piedmont Technical College in Greenwood, SC. In 2017, Dion returned to Clemson as an Admission Counselor for the Office of Undergraduate Admissions. Shortly afterward, Dion began his graduate studies in the Student Affairs concentration of Clemson's Counselor Education program. In 2019, Dion transitioned to a role as an Academic Advisor and the First-Year Experience Coordinator for Clemson's General Engineering program. There, Dion advised first-year engineering students, in addition to planning co-curricular programs specifically for first-year engineering students.

While in his master's program, Dion was introduced to engaging in academic research with his involvement in the Action Research Collective (ARC) at Clemson. At the core of ARC was a research team focused on emancipatory participatory action research and highlighting the experiences of graduate students of color. However, for Dion, ARC was also an integral part of

his work and graduate school life, serving as a much-needed community, being the catalyst that helped him discover his love for research, and empowering his decision to pursue his doctorate upon graduating with his master's.

In the fall of 2020, Dion enrolled at North Carolina State University in the Higher Education Opportunity, Equity, and Justice doctoral program. During his time at NC State, Dion engaged in a plethora of research experiences that bolstered his confidence and skillset as a researcher and led to his active involvement in the conference space, specifically his academic home, the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE). Dion was also afforded multiple opportunities to teach since his first semester at NC State and has taught college classes on every academic level, specifically for the Impact Leadership Village, Higher Education Administration master's program, and Higher Education Opportunity, Equity, and Justice doctoral program.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A growing concern in higher education practice and research is the state of college students' psychological well-being[1]. For traditional-aged college students (18-24 years old), suicide is the second leading cause of death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018), underscoring a need for institutions to establish environments that promote more positive psychological well-being for their students. In addition, there needs to be more conversation about factors influencing poor psychological well-being (Flett et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019; Pedrelli et al., 2015). From a broader scope, poor psychological well-being for college students has been attributed to a variety of factors and stressors, including but not limited to, balancing the demands of academics and social life (Paralkar & Knutson, 2021; VanKim & Nelson, 2013), adjusting to the transition from high school to college (Conley et al., 2013; Hicks & Heastie, 2008), feeling a lack of belonging or connection to campus (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Moeller et al., 2020), and, recently, COVID-19's impact on the college student experience (Clabaugh et al., 2021; Salerno et al., 2020, Xiao et al., 2021).

However, a more nuanced and intersectional analysis of social identities (e.g., race, gender, and sexuality) unearth unique experiences and stressors commonly experienced by Black and queer and trans (QT) college students enduring anti-Black and anti-LGBTQ+ ideologies, policies, and practices on their campuses (Busby et al., 2021; Lipson et al., 2019; McClain et al., 2016; Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011; Smith et al., 2016; Woodford et al., 2018a; 2018b). While the research addressing these issues is in abundance respectively, there is a severe lack of research

[1] Psychological well-being refers to the optimal psychological functioning and experience. It may be defined as including hedonic (enjoyment, pleasure) and eudemonic (meaning, fulfillment) happiness as well as resilience (coping, emotion regulation, healthy problem solving). (Tang et al., 2019)

on, and attention being paid to the well-being of students at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities.

Parallel to discourse focusing on psychological distress and well-being, explorations of joy and the ways marginalized communities, particularly Black people, find it in the wake of socio-political unrest have started to take shape in education literature (Blockett et al., 2022; Okello et al., 2022; Ekpe et al., 2023; Love, 2019; Tichavakunda, 2021; 2022). A common theme found in this research is the need to listen to the narratives of Black students and educators as they reflect on their manifestations of joy and the role it plays in their lives *despite* these turbulent times. In addition, understanding the role joy plays in Black communities could be highly beneficial to institutional leaders as they reimagine campus environments for the benefit of Black educators and students on their campuses (Ekpe et al., 2023).

Still in its early stages of emergence, scholars have started taking joy-centered approaches to focus on Black educators broadly (Hall, 2023; Okello et al., 2022), Black queer educators (Blockett et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2023), Black college students (Tichavakunda, 2021; 2022), and queer communities in education (Duran & Coloma, 2023). However, the joy-centered narratives of Black QT collegians are missing in this emerging sector of research. As "joy-centered" research continues to take shape in education research, an understanding of joy for Black QT collegians: 1) could prove to be informative to constituents that interact with Black QT collegians (e.g., faculty, staff, counselors) and 2) urges institutions and administrators to be more mindful of Black QT narratives when curating inclusive, affirming, humanizing, and joyous academic environments for Black QT collegians. Therefore, this study brings more attention to Black QT narratives of their experiences holding together and navigating trauma, resistance, and joy to reimagine the future of higher education for Black QT college students.

Black and QT College Student Well-Being

Scholars have brought attention to the impact oppressive collegiate environments have on the psychological well-being of Black collegians (Busby et al., 2021; Corbin et al., 2018; Lipson et al., 2019; Masuda et al., 2009; 2012; McClain et al., 2016; Mushonga, 2020) and QT collegians (Busby et al., 2020; Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011; Salerno et al., 2020; Woodford & Kulick, 2015; Woodford et al., 2014; 2018a; 2018b). For Black collegians, scholars have highlighted the overall health implications of Black students enduring racism and anti-Blackness in collegiate spaces (Corbin et al., 2018; Masuda et al., 2012; McClain et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016). Some implications include reports of increased depression and anxiety, in addition to bouts with racial battle fatigue, or the "psychosocial-physiological impacts of racist micro and macro-aggressions on racially marginalized targets" (Corbin et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2016). In addition, Black collegians also report an overall decrease in mental health due to experiences of discrimination, exclusion, harassment, and being left in isolation because of their racial identity by peers, staff, and faculty (Masuda et al., 2012; McClain et al., 2016). Furthermore, research shows that Black college students are also less likely to seek mental health support as these instances arise (Busby et al., 2021; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Masuda et al., 2009). Scholars have begun to highlight this aversion to support, often attributing it to perceived stigmas around mental health and unfavorable feelings about seeking care that stems from a history of medical harm, mistrust, and trauma inflicted on Black communities (Pugh et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2019).

Similarly, research on QT communities has also highlighted the impact negative collegiate spaces have on the well-being of QT collegians. Like Black collegians, QT collegians report poorer mental health than their non-QT peers, including increased anxiety, depression, stress, and suicide ideation (Busby et al., 2020; Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011; Salerno et al., 2020;

Seelman et al., 2017; Woodford et al., 2014; 2018a; 2018b), due to experiencing transphobia and homophobia from peers, faculty, and staff (Seelman et al., 2017; Woodford et al., 2014; 2018b) and the existence of anti-QT policies and practices on campus (Woodford et al., 2018a). For example, Woodford and colleagues (2014) suggest that sexual minority students[2] that experience hostile collegiate environments, such as blatant discrimination and harassment, often report increased risks of moderate/high anxiety and depression symptoms. Furthermore, scholars have also pointed out QT students' aversion to seeking medical assistance in these moments (Busby et al., 2020), which is in line with studies on Black students' – lack of – usage of medical care (Busby et al., 2021; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Masuda et al., 2009).

Research on the psychological well-being of Black and QT collegians is essential to educating college stakeholders (e.g., faculty, staff, board of trustees, counselors) and rectifying the stressors caused by the oppressive environments on college campuses. However, as this research continues to grow, a large gap exists. None of the higher education research on well-being takes an intersectional approach to explore the psychological impact of assaults inflicted upon Black QT collegians. Instead, Black QT college student research is often limited to narratives of their experiences navigating and surviving hostile campus environments (Blockett, 2017; Coleman et al., 2020; Ford, III, 2015; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011; Johnson, 2021; Jourian & McCloud, 2020; Mobley Jr. & Johnson, 2019). For example, Black QT collegians often recount being excluded from Black and white-dominated QT spaces, respectively, on predominantly white campuses and having to forge their own communities that include and support the intersection of their race, gender, and/or sexuality (Blockett, 2017; Goode-Cross &

[2] Sexual minority is typically attributed to those whose sexual orientation differs from normative (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, etc.)

Good, 2009). Additionally, research also documents anti-QT moments present at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), such as anti-LGBTQ+ campus policies and norms that target attire and seek to tone down the ways Black QT collegians outwardly express their sexuality and gender (Ford, III, 2015; Johnson, 2021; Mobley, Jr. & Johnson, 2019; Patton et al., 2020). Research has also highlighted within-group tensions within Black QT communities, such as Black queer men's discrimination resistance to their Black femme, trans, and gender-nonconforming peers and their expressions of authenticity (Mobley, Jr. & Johnson, 2019). In addition to learning more about these experiences, further exploration of the psychological impacts on Black QT collegians is nonexistent as institutions continue to focus more on the well-being of their students, particularly those who do not receive adequate care and support.

Black QT Youth Experiences and Well-Being

While limited in higher education, a growing sector of research on Black QT individuals' well-being does exist outside the scope of higher education, particularly in K-12 education, gender and sexuality, psychology, and sociology scholarship (Haynes & Dale, 2017; Joe et al., 2022; Prince-Feeney et al., 2020; Truong et al., 2020). Within K-12 education and gender and sexuality research are two widely known nonprofit organizations devoted to the well-being of QT youth that has explored these concepts specific to those who identify as Black: (1) The Trevor Project and (2) the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN).

The Trevor Project is a national organization that provides crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to QT people under the age of 25 and is committed to producing research related to QT people, crisis intervention, and suicide prevention. According to their report on the mental health of Black QT youth, (Price-Feeney et al., 2020), Black QT youth are more susceptible to negative experiences and poorer mental health than their Black youth and QT

youth counterparts due to the interlocking impacts of anti-Black and anti-QT moments that exist within society. This research also shows that for Black QT people between the ages of 20 and 26, 60% report symptoms of depression, 51% report symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder, and 39% report moments of self-harm. GLSEN is an organization founded by teachers and advises for, advocates for, and research policies created to protect QT students in a K-12 context and provides QT resources for educators across the country (GLSEN, 2022). In addition to adding an educational context, GLSEN focuses on the well-being of Black QT students in middle and high schools (Truong et al., 2020). Like the Trevor Report, GLSEN reports high rates of depression (68.5%) among Black QT students who experience victimization at their schools in their 2020 report on the experiences of Black QT youth in U.S. schools.

Data from both reports are alarming and bring attention to the need to dismantle societal barriers that adversely impact the mental health of Black QT youth and young adults. However, while the Trevor Report does explore experiences up until the age of 25, there is no direct focus on the unique experiences of college students or narratives that accompany these statistics. Additionally, while GLSEN does provide an educational context centered on the impact of hostile educational spaces, the experiences specific to Black QT students are limited to middle and high school students. Furthermore, a qualitative approach to exploring these concepts is also lacking. Therefore, this study aims to explore the psychological well-being of Black QT collegians, fill these gaps, and provide more context to their lived experiences.

Conceptualizing Joy

"*Unlike happiness, joy is a lasting state that can be sustained even when everything is not the way we want it to be…"* (hooks, 2003, p.166)

The concept of joy is broad, encompassing various aspects of human existence. According to Johnson (2020), joy can be viewed as an emotion, mood, disposition, and/or spiritual fruit, all related to one's elation, the feeling of fulfillment, and greater sense of self. In addition, joy extends past happiness, which it is often confused or used interchangeably with. While happiness is a fluctuating or fleeting emotion that disappears or grows in response to external circumstances, joy exists as a state of being that has a deeper and long-lasting connection to self and can continue to exist despite moments where happiness is nonexistent. In the face of social change, Love (2019) presents a conceptualization of joy focused on humanity – whereas finding joy in the midst of violence is the fight for full humanity and a journey toward wholeness. Furthermore, Love also asserts that "acknowledging joy is to make yourself aware of your humanity, creativity, self-determination, power, and ability to love abundantly" (p. 120). In short, both authors present joy to readers as a state of being that exist across moments of happiness and conflict and essential to one's survival and journey to a life of wholeness and fulfillment.

When associated with Black and QT communities, joy is often situated within these conceptualizations and is often viewed in relationship with the violence both communities have been forced to endure over the years. Cruz (2023) asserts that Black joy exists alongside the suffering, pain, trials, and tribulations Black people have endured for centuries and continue to experience today and is essential to our survival. In response, Cruz asserts that Black joy is an act of resistance to these obstacles and is the force that powers Black people through this opposition. Further, Black joy can appear in a multitude of ways – dancing, storytelling, music, and other forms of art; outward expression through clothing and hair; honoring and celebrating Blackness history, culture, and existence; imagining, dreaming of, and planning for liberation

and better futures for Black people, etc. As a result, the manifestation of Black joy tends to lead to restoration, regeneration, and, sometimes, healing for Black people. For QT individuals, this concept of joy is very similar as much of their existence has been in contention with a society that deems their existence as unfit and undeserving. Like Black communities, queer and trans joy shows up in art, outward and authentic expression, celebrating QT history and existence, and radically imagining more positive futures for queer. When combined, an understanding of joy for Black QT individuals embeds aspects of both conceptualizations. For this study, I lean on these conceptualizations of joy to aid me as I explore Black QT college students' relationship with joy - specifically, how they define it for themselves and experience it on and off campus.

A Call for Black QT Healing, Liberation, and Joy in Higher Education

Recently, scholarship has taken a much-needed shift to explore liberation, healing, and joy experienced by marginalized communities within educational contexts (Chong et al., 2019; Dillard, 2019; Duran & Coloma, 2023; Ekpe et al., 2023; Gayles, 2022; Hall, 2023; Hillier et al., 2020; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Mushonga, 2020; Okello et al., 2020; 2022; Grier-Reed, 2010; 2013; Robinson & Schmitz, 2021; Tichavakunda, 2021;2022; Travers et al., 2022). In her Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) presidential address, Gayles (2023) calls for the humanization of higher education practice and research in response to the socio-political unrest and violence marginalized communities continue to experience. In this address, she urges scholars and practitioners to depart from dehumanizing ideologies and perspectives that perpetuate systemic oppression and treat those with marginalized identities as inferior. Instead, Gayles calls for scholars and practitioners to take steps to prioritize livingness, compassion, healing, and critical hope as we strive to make higher education a space where everyone, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, can navigate without violence.

In addition, Okello and colleagues (2022) urge Black educators to "live freely" in academia; not in a way that does not acknowledge the trauma of racial battle fatigue, but by naming that trauma and finding ways to live in spite of it – e.g., living in joy, in freedom, in community, and liberation. Furthermore, psychology research has also begun to call for applications of liberation psychology, or psychological approaches to addressing oppression through the encouragement of empowerment, healing, and transformation (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020; Martín-Baró, 1994), when discussing healing, coping, and resilience within Black and QT communities (Bryant-Davis et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2020). With these notions in mind, this study is an opportunity to lean into these liberatory and humanizing ideals and accompany the emerging research focusing on marginalized communities "living freely" and in joy within educational spaces (and society at large) that diminishes their existence.

For Black populations, researchers have called for the centering of health, wellness, and healing when exploring experiences with racism and anti-Blackness (Ginwright, 2010; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Okello et al., 2020; 2022; Grier-Reed, 2010; 2013). For example, McGee and Stovall (2015) urge researchers to resist "grit"[3] research by interrogating terms like perseverance, mental toughness, and grit, which are often used to explore Black college students' "ability" to persist and overcome academic spaces not created for their success. These terms, and grit research often fail to acknowledge and account for the role racism (i.e., racist stereotypes, insults, assaults, and ideologies) plays in inflicting trauma on Black students who fail" to adhere to Eurocentric forms of educational advancement (McGee & Stovall; 2015). In opposition,

[3] Grit is commonly defined as one's ability to overcome undesirable conditions. In education research, grit typically appears when referencing students with marginalized identities enduring and, sometimes, overcoming educational spaces that uphold environments that are oppressive to them and the identity/ies they possess (McGee & Stovall, 2015).

McGee and Stovall call upon Ginwright' (2010) conceptualization of radical healing, or "healing as the process of restoring the health and well-being of students who have been exposed to chronic poverty, racism, and violence," to center students' cultural backgrounds to resist and heal from these educational environments.

In line with healing, Grier-Reed (2013) introduces the concept of informal therapeutic groups for Black college students at PWIs. Influenced by indigenous styles of coping and healing, these informal spaces serve as "culturally sensitive therapeutic interventions" for Black students and allow them to make meaning of their campus experiences, establish meaningful connections with Black students, faculty, and staff, and cope with personal and academic stressors. In addition to the urge for more research that emphasizes healing within Black communities, Mushonga (2020) calls for more research on the positive mental health[4] of Black collegians to gain a more accurate depiction of mental health to improve overall well-being and academic success.

While limited, some studies have answered the call, highlighting the relationship between factors like spirituality, social support, and heightened racial identity (Lewis et al., 2018; Mushonga & Hennesberger, 2020) as critical factors that positively affect the well-being of Black collegians and Black populations overall. Additionally, Tichavakunda's (2021;2022) focus on the ways Black students at historically white institutions (HWIs) find joy has broken the ground for more joy-centered research about Black collegians, highlighting the importance of Black spaces, organizations, and achievement at HWIs and their impact on the academic success of Black students. Lastly, Okello and colleagues (2023) push the concept of Black joy forward

[4] Positive mental health (PMH) refers to one's ability to realize their own potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to one's own community (World Health Organization, 2014, as cited in Mushonga, 2020).

by aligning it with an analysis of the ways Black students imagine their futures as they engage in moments of suffering, resistance, and liberation on campus.

For QT communities, studies have focused on moving narratives beyond resilience to narratives of increased self-efficacy, empowerment, agency, and resistance. However, these studies are primarily situated within the context of QT youth and K-12 educational settings (Chong et al., 2019; Hillier et al., 2020; Robinson & Schmitz, 2021; Travers et al., 2022). While higher education research taking similar approaches (e.g., positive well-being, healing, joy, liberation) is scarce, they are growing in number (Duran & Coloma 2023; Farmer et al., 2019; Nicolazzo, 2016; 2019; Nicolazzo et al., 2017). For example, Nicolazzo and colleagues (2017) examined various roles of kinship[5] (i.e., material, virtual, and affective) on and off campus and highlighted the positive impact they had on trans student success. In addition, students in Farmer et al. 's (2019) students convey an increase in self-acceptance, self-reliance, self-advocacy, and self-empowerment despite existing on campus (and in a society) that upholds the gender binary and cisnormativity[6]. Further, Duran and Coloma (2023) argue for more conceptualizations of queer joy in PK-12 and higher education practice and scholarship to expand our understanding of what "success" means for queer students.

Scholarship on Black QT experiences in higher education has begun to break the ground for this work by (1) moving away from the overwhelming presence of scholarship highlighting the negative experiences and (2) emphasizing resistance to normative ideologies (Mobley Jr. et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2023). Mobley Jr. and colleagues (2020) refer to this phenomenon as

[5] Kinship (or kinship systems) refer to interpersonal relationships extending past biological and normative assumptions of a nuclear family (Nicolazzo, 2017).

[6] Cisnormativity refers to the notion that being cisgender (gender identity aligns with sex assigned at birth) is normative or preferred within society.

"tragically queer" as they recount the experiences of Black queer male faculty members at historically white institutions. Here, "tragically queer" refers to the normative and pervasive messages within academic and societal settings that portray queer communities in negative, hopeless, and despaired ways. Taylor and colleagues (2023) respond to this resistance by foregrounding the history of Black queer resistance throughout society and amplifying the possibilities of Black queer educators resisting, disrupting, and thriving within academic settings. While these studies focus largely on the experiences of Black QT educators, they do spark my imagination on what this realm of research could look like for Black QT collegians. Doing so gives way to a more expansive approach to exploring the range of experiences Black QT collegians can have on our campuses.

Together, the research mentioned above provides an avenue for inquiry to take a more critical and expansive approach to understanding well-being (Bryant-Davis et al., 2020; Grier-Reed, 2010; 2013; McGee & Stovall, 2015; Mobley Jr. et al., 2020; Mushonga, 2020; Okello et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2023; Tichavakunda, 2021; 2022). A critical analysis of well-being underscores the need to hold struggle and possibility together, acknowledging hostile moments, prioritization of healing, and the capacity for those in the margins to live in liberation despite hostility. Furthermore, this analysis of well-being emphasizes the need to remain honest about the challenges systems of oppression produce and how those in the margins can (and do) resist this oppression and prioritize care in the process. That said, a critical exploration of well-being for Black QT collegians — specifically the experiences of Black QT collegians, their resistance to being perceived as being in a constant state of despair, and amplifying the ways they heal, live freely, and experience joy within educational and socio-political contexts is necessary. While focusing on these negative experiences continues to be

important as institutions aim to create more equitable environments for Black QT students, I believe having insight into these moments of healing, liberation, and joy is also informative and essential to establishing healthy, safe, inclusive, and joyous collegiate environments.

Purpose Statement & Research Question

In response to higher education placing more emphasis on the well-being and needs of college students, this study centered that conversation on Black QT collegians with the goal of improving policy and practice that impedes Black QT collegians' well-being and ability to "live freely" in our educational spaces. First, this study explored Black QT collegians' unique experiences at the intersection of their race, gender, and/or sexuality and the ways anti-Black and anti-QT moments, on and off campus, impact their psychological well-being. Specifically, this study considered the implications of the US' current socio-political context and how harmful and discriminatory ideologies and policies, such as the uptick in political assaults on the trans community from anti-trans bills being introduced by conservative political figures (Home et al., 2022), influence Black QT collegians' experiences and well-being on and off campus.

Additionally, most existing research on Black QT collegians tends to bring attention to negative experiences (Mobley Jr. et al., 2020), particularly experiences with racism, transphobia, sexism, and homophobia. While amplifying the negative experiences is extremely important when creating more equitable learning environments for Black QT students, it is also essential to explore the positive experiences associated with Black QT students despite the negative experiences they may endure. Doing so coincides with Mobley Jr. and colleagues' (2020) resistance to the tragically (Black and) queer ideology and helps us better understand factors that contribute to positive collegiate experiences and overall well-being. An exploration of these factors has the potential to inform educators, mental health and wellness professionals,

community partners, and other stakeholders about ways to establish environments that humanize Black QT collegians and provide space for them to live authentically and feel supported throughout higher education.

Lastly, this study was an opportunity to also expand the literature and provide more comprehensive examinations of Black QT collegians' lived experiences and well-being, specifically their reflections on moments of distress, healing, and joy. An examination of this phenomenon is essential to the livelihoods of Black QT bodies and could spark more research and practice dedicated to improving the educational experiences of Black QT collegians. That said, a phenomenological approach and the following research question guided this study: *How do Black queer and trans collegians experience radical healing amid the collegiate and socio-political environments they navigate*? Accompanying this research question were the following sub-research questions: (1) How do Black QT collegians make sense of their racialized, queered, and/or gendered realities?, (2) How do Black QT collegians describe the impact their campus and socio-political environments have on their well-being?, and (3) How do Black QT collegians make sense of and experience joy?

Overview of Theoretical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks guided this study to explore the well-being of Black LGBTQ+ collegians: the radical healing framework (RHF) and quare theory. The RHF emerges from the foundational work of Ginwright (2010), who introduces radical healing as the process of helping young people of color build the capacity to both acknowledge the existence of interlocking systems of oppression and hate in our socio-political worlds and create the worlds they desire despite the oppressive environments they navigate. Together, these approaches to radical healing contribute to the personal and collective well-being of young people of color and

their manifestations of hope, optimism, and visions of liberation. With this notion at its core, French and colleagues (2020) build upon radical healing to develop the RHF. This more psychologically-centered framework includes concepts of liberation, Black-centered psychology, and intersectionality as its theoretical underpinnings.

The RHF consists of five components: (1) critical consciousness, (2) radical hope, (3) cultural authenticity and self-knowledge, (4) strength and resistance, and (5) emotional and social support (French et al., 2020). Critical consciousness refers to an individual's ability to reflect on the realities of our sociopolitical world and existing power relations. Radical hope refers to reimagining present and future possibilities for the greater good of all people. Cultural authenticity and self-knowledge refer to honoring individual, cultural authenticity, and ancestral ways of knowing and doing while resisting colonized knowledge and practices. Strength and resistance refer to the commitment to living joy-filled lives despite navigating oppressive environments. Lastly, emotional and social support refers to connecting and belonging to one's cultural and ethnic communities. Altogether, each component of the RHF emphasizes cultural and communal approaches to healing and joy and will be helpful in the development of the data collection and analysis procedures of this study. Throughout this study, I will focus on all five components of the RHF and use them to (1) guide the construction of my interview questions, (2) support my analytic tools as I analyze shared narratives, and (3) explore the full breadth of radical healing and each component's relation to the unique experiences of Black QT collegians.

Quare theory is a theoretical approach that helps to amplify the experiences unique to queer people of color. Queer people of color's lived experiences and the nuances relative to these experiences are often pushed to the margins and overlooked in the literature about queer people and their experiences (Johnson, 2005). In response, Johnson uses quare theory as a critical tool to

critically examine the intersection of race, sexual orientation, gender, class, and other marginalized social identities. By doing so, quare theory resists the dominance of whiteness in this work, centers on queer people of color experiences, and rejects exploring these experiences as separate identities (Eguchi et al., 2014; Johnson, 2005; Means, 2017). For this study, quare theory will operate as the theoretical underpinning to complement radical healing and provide an analysis that specifies the interconnectedness of Blackness, gender, and sexuality that the radical healing framework does not directly address.

Overview of Methodology & Methods

For this study, I utilized photovoice and photo-elicitation and phenomenological interviews as tools for participants to share their experiences. Phenomenology focuses on lived and first-person experiences with the assumption that there is some essence of lived experiences shared by individuals around a specific phenomenon (Van Manen, 2016). In short, phenomenological research aims to understand shared conscious experiences about the phenomenon of interest. Photovoice is a visual qualitative research method that uses photographs (or other photographic means) to explore the lived experience of participants (Latz, 2017; Wang, 1999). In addition, photovoice allows the participants to take a more active role in the research process and analysis of the data collected. Historically, researchers have used photovoice to highlight the stories and experiences of marginalized communities, primarily communities whose voices are often silenced and not acknowledged by those in power (Latz, 2017, p. 3). This method allows participants to share their experiences to identify, represent, and enhance their community. Participants submit photos that align with the study's goal and provide prompts prior to their photovoice interviews. Before their interviews, the researcher organizes the photos and prepares them for reference when interviewing the participant. During the interviews, photos are

referenced, allowing participants to share more details about the photos submitted and how they align with the guiding prompts provided by the researcher (Wang, 1999).

Significance of Study

When approaching this work, it is important not to dismiss or overlook the role systems of oppression (e.g., transphobia, anti-Blackness, homophobia) play in the construction of the sociopolitical world we navigate. I also do not urge Black QT people to simply ignore the interplay of these systems and how they shape their lives. I do, however, approach this work with the idea that Black QT people cannot wait around for society to honor and respect their existence and make the changes needed for an overall better quality of life. Instead, Black QT people deserve opportunities for positivity, healing, and joy as they navigate the treachery of society.

When I consider the significance of this study and its potential impact on Black QT collegians and the people who support them, three overarching goals emerge: (1) to explore the experiences and well-being of Black QT collegians navigating hostile campus and socio-political environments, (2) to emphasize the needs of Black QT collegians in terms of their well-being, and (3) emphasize the ways Black QT collegians may be resisting and living joy-filled lives. I approach this research with the belief that learning directly from and centering the experiences of Black QT collegians is vital as institutions continue to improve their environments. Specifically, amplifying Black QT student voices as they speak on the ways they practice care, sustain positive well-being, and find joy could illuminate areas of growth as institutions strive to support and meet their needs. Just as deficit-based research uses student narratives to inform institutions about barriers, asset-based and liberatory approaches can also help them become more aware of the factors that are key to the livelihood, well-being, and collegiate success of Black QT students. Additionally, emphasizing joy could provide a more comprehensive understanding of

Black queer and trans experiences in academic literature broadly, help inform scholarship focusing on the Black QT populations, and expand our knowledge and imaginations of what Black QT life could be.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used extensively throughout this study and are key to understanding the lived experiences of Black QT collegians:

Anti-Blackness

Defined as the beliefs, attitudes, actions, practices, and behaviors of individuals and institutions that devalue, minimize, and marginalize the full participation of Black people — visibly (or perceived to be) of African descent. It is important to note that anti-Blackness is not synonymous with racism, as a key component of racism is an emphasis on power, privilege, and dominance being enacted by White individuals upon people of color. Conversely, anti-Blackness is experienced by Black people specifically and can be perpetrated by individuals of any racial identity.

Ballroom (or Ballroom Community)

A communal network of Black and Latinx queer and trans* individuals who utilize these communities as spaces of refuge from racist and cis-heteropatriarchal norms. An essential hallmark of Ballroom communities is that its members challenge and confront dominant notions surrounding sexuality, gender, and even gender identity (Mobley Jr. & Hutchings, 2022).

Black

A racial identifier used to describe individuals that identify as Black, African American, of African descent, or belonging to the African diaspora.

Cis-heteronormativity

Refers to the combination of cisnormativity and heteronormativity (see below).

Cisnormativity

Refers to the ideology that being cisgender (having a gender identity that aligns with the sex assigned at birth) is normative or preferred within society.

Demiboy

Demiboy refers to "a person who feels their gender identity partially identifies with a masculine identity but is not wholly binary".

Femme

Femme refers to a queer person who presents in a feminine manner. They can be a cis woman, a trans woman, a gender-nonconforming person, or a nonbinary person.

Gender/Gender Identity

A social construct framed by a society's understanding of masculinity and femininity as related to roles, behaviors, expectations, activities, identities, and attributes. This term is often understood as a binary, however, historically, and presently, gender is expansive and dynamic.

Gender-nonconforming

Refers to Individuals whose gender identity and expression does not conform to the traditional norms of the gender binary (male and female).

Heteronormativity

Refers to the notion that heterosexuality is the normative or preferred sexual orientation within society.

Homophobia (or Homophobic)

Refers to the negative feelings and attitudes (e.g., hatred, discrimination, fear) attributed to those that identify or are perceived as queer, gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

LGBTQIA2S+

An acronym used to refer to individuals that identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or gender expansive, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual, and/or two-spirit.

Nonbinary

Describes gender identity when an individual does not identify within traditional categories of male or female. It is important to note that all nonbinary people do not identify as trans and not all trans people identify as nonbinary.

Psychological Well-being

The optimal psychological functioning and experience. It may be defined as including hedonic (enjoyment, pleasure) and eudemonic (meaning, fulfillment) happiness as well as resilience (coping, emotion regulation, healthy problem solving).

Queer

A term for people of marginalized gender identities and sexual orientations who are not cisgender and/or heterosexual. This term has a complicated history as a slur and has, since, been reclaimed by many individuals within the LGBTQ+ community.

Racism

Refers to one racial group (White individuals) having the power to carry out systemic discrimination and oppression upon people of color through institutional policies and practices of society and by shaping the cultural beliefs and values that support racist policies and practices.

Trans (or Transgender)

An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.

Transmisogynoir

Transmisogynoir refers to the interlocking oppression of transphobia and misogynoir (misogynoir directed specifically at Black women) often inflicted upon Black trans women.

Transphobia (or Transphobic)

Transphobia refers to the negative feelings and attitudes (e.g., hatred, discrimination, fear) attributed to those that identify or are perceived as transgender, genderqueer, nonbinary, or gender-nonconforming.

Overview of Dissertation

This dissertation study is an opportunity to expand our knowledge and understanding of Black queer and trans college students' lived experiences. To guide this exploration, I employed the following research question: *How do Black queer and trans collegians experience radical healing amid the collegiate and socio-political environments they navigate?* In Chapter 1, I provided a broad overview of the research problem and background context that supports the necessity of this study. I also provided a quick overview of the literature that supports the purposes of this study, in addition to some gaps and deficiencies that may exist among them. Lastly, I wrapped up Chapter 1 with definitions of key terms that will be used throughout the entirety of this study. Looking ahead, I begin Chapter 2 with an introduction to the theoretical frameworks that guided this study, the radical healing framework and quare theory. In addition,

Chapter 2 includes an overview of relevant literature related to the experiences of Black QT college students broke down in the following subsections: (1) experiences of Black college students, (2) experiences of queer and trans college students, and (3) experiences of Black queer and trans college students.

In Chapter 3, I outline the methodological approaches I took to conduct this study and analyze the data this student presented, with an in-depth overview of how employed hermeneutic phenomenology and used photovoice and photo-elicitation interviews as my data collection and analysis strategies. Chapter 3 also includes my study's participant criteria, ethical concerns, and the positionality I bring to this research study. In Chapter 4, I provide an overview of my findings organized in the overarching themes that emerged from my study. Finally, in Chapter 5, I summarize my dissertation study, discuss my findings, and provide implications for practice, policy, and research that could enhance the lives of Black QT college students.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the following sections, I provide an overview of the literature and theoretical perspectives that inform and guide this study. I begin this chapter by giving an overview of the framework and theory that guides my study (e.g., the radical healing framework and quare theory) and an explanation of how they complement each other for the purposes of this study. Next, I review academic literature related to the experiences and well-being of Black, QT, and Black QT people within a higher education context. In alignment with these communities' lived experiences and the aims of the radical healing framework, I include literature related to hostile campus experiences, the impact and importance of kinship and identify-affirming spaces, acts of resistance and liberation, and engagement in healing and joy as they apply. Throughout my review, I switch between the usage of LGBTQ+, LGBQ, trans, lesbian, African American men who have sex with men (AAMSM), transgender and gender-expansive (TGE), etc., to align with the terminology scholars used in their respective studies when referring to the various groups within the queer and trans community.

Theoretical Frameworks

Guiding my study is a combination of the radical healing framework (RHF) and quare theory. The RHF serves as the core framework that helps me explore the well-being of Black QT collegians, in addition to how they grapple with living in a world full of systemic oppression and reimagining worlds of liberation. In addition, quare theory will operate as a theoretical underpinning to complement radical healing and provide a lens that specifies the interconnectedness of Blackness, gender, and sexuality. In the following sections, I provide an overview of both the RFH and quare theory, its origins, studies that have used them, and how both theoretical perspectives guide the development of my study.

Radical Healing Framework

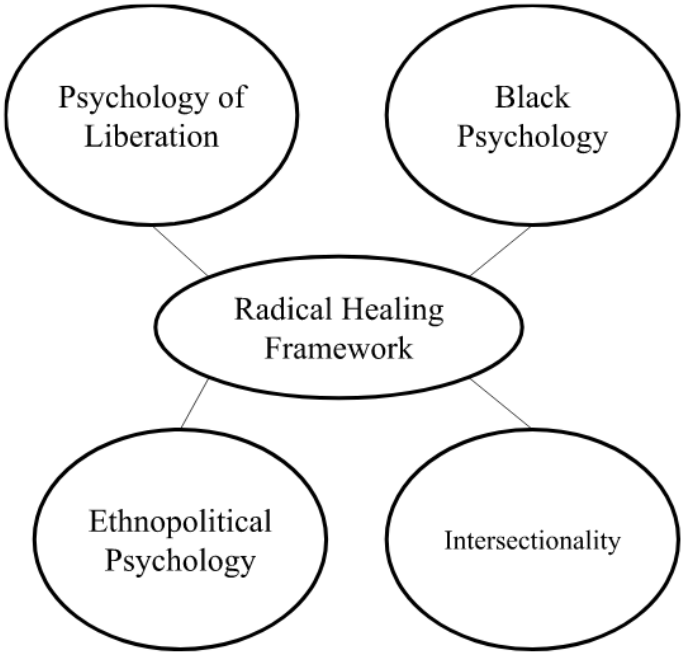
The radical healing framework stems from the work of Ginwright (2010), who initially articulates the idea of radical healing as the process of helping young people of color build the capacity to act upon and within oppressive environmental factors to create the social worlds they desire. Originally centered in civic engagement, Ginwright sees radical healing as an opportunity to shift mindsets from "problem focus" to "possibility focus" – by acknowledging the trauma that exists because of power, racism, and oppression embedded within society and then responding to this trauma in ways that contribute to improved collective well-being (Ginwright, 2010). That said, radical healing positions individuals to interrogate systemic oppression and contribute to (1) personal and collective healing in opposition to systemic oppression and (2) the manifestation of hope, optimism, and vision toward the creation of justice (Ginwright, 2010).

French and colleagues (2020) build upon Ginwright's (2010) definition of radical healing to create a more psychologically centered framework that combines Ginwright's definition of radical healing with the psychology of liberation, Black psychology, ethnopolitical psychology, and intersectionality (Figure 2.1). First, the psychology of liberation refers to recognizing the importance of striving for justice to liberate the oppressed. At its core, the psychology of liberation emphasizes identifying ways for individuals to thrive in the wake of trauma and inhumanity. In this sense, one does not ignore the trauma around them, but instead emphasizes moments of thriving despite this trauma and ultimately, navigating a path to healing from said trauma. Second, Black psychology refers to resistance to Eurocentric assumptions and norms that impact the psychology field and serve as a detriment to the lives and well-being of Black communities. Eurocentric psychology lacks a grounding in the cultural and ethnic authenticity of Black people, making it an inadequate tool and perspective to engage when supporting Black

communities. As an alternative, Black psychology emphasizes the understanding that if people of African descent are to be fully liberated, psychological and healing approaches must keep the unique needs and cultural experiences of the Black community at its core.

Figure 2.1

Four Waves of Psychology that Informs the Radical Healing Framework



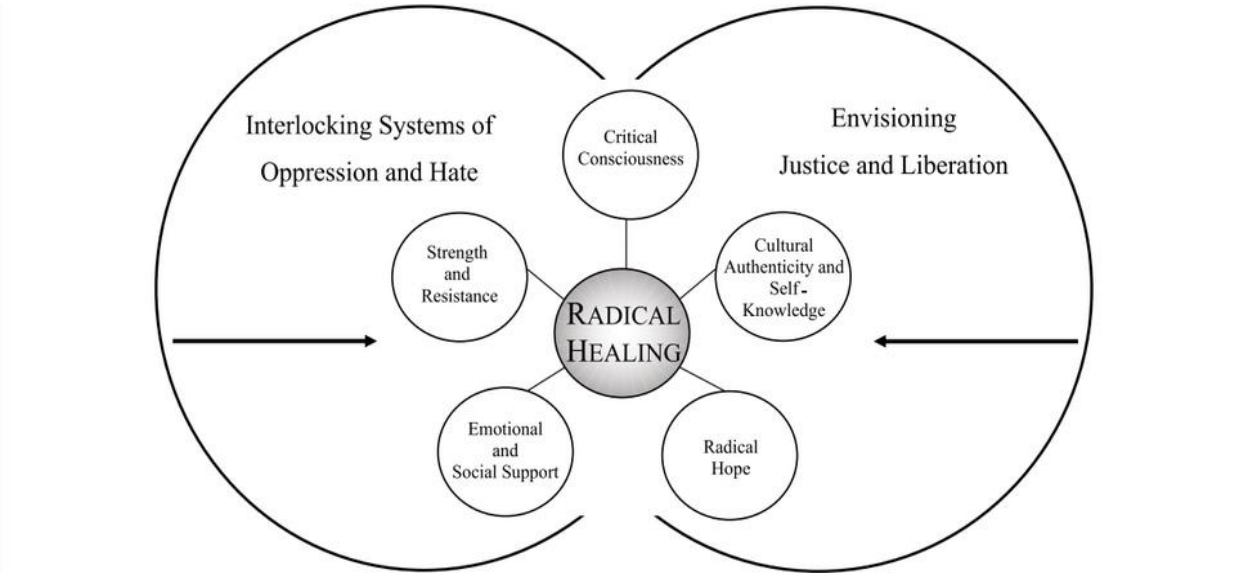
Third, ethnopolitical psychology focuses on liberation and healing from systemic racial oppression, colonization, and cultural imperialism through "the development of critical consciousness and sociopolitical action." Simply put, ethnopolitical psychology approaches healing oppressed communities by acknowledging and resisting the systems of oppression inflicting trauma upon marginalized communities. Lastly, intersectionality focuses on acknowledging how multiple forms of oppression intersect in the lives of people with multiple marginalized identities and create interlocking forms of oppression and inequality that go unseen and unaddressed (Crenshaw, 1991). When used within radical healing, intersectionality is a

critical lens to move analysis beyond a singular view of one marginalized identity to a more nuanced understanding of intersectional oppression.

Altogether, these four theories serve as the underpinnings of this psychologically-centered radical healing framework, focusing on acknowledging and resisting oppression, taking multi-systemic approaches to wellness, and building the capacity to reimagine the possibilities of freedom. In addition to these underpinning theories, French and colleagues' RHF comprises five components (Figure 2.2) that build upon existing theories that hold social action, traditional cultural healing methods, ancestral wisdom, and the voices and strengths of people of color at its core. These components include the following: (1) critical consciousness, (2) radical hope, (3) cultural authenticity and self-knowledge, (4) strength and resistance, and (5) emotional and social support.

Figure 2.2

The Psychological Framework of Radical Healing (French et al., 2020)



First, *critical consciousness* is the key component of this radical healing framework. It refers to one's ability to reflect on the realities of the sociopolitical world and interrogate the

manifestation of the existing power relations. Engaging in critical consciousness encourages one to (1) analyze historical and structural factors contributing to oppression and equity, (2) establish confidence in their ability to facilitate sociopolitical change, and (3) commit to action to reduce oppression. Next, *radical hope* refers to reimagining future and present possibilities for the greater good and the benefit of human existence. In this sense, hope is essential to the framework as it gives way to developing one's agency and belief that they can contribute to improving human existence in the face of oppression.

Third, the *cultural authenticity and self-knowledge* component emphasize the resistance of colonized knowledge and practices and honoring ancestral ways of knowing and doing. In addition, this component also emphasizes the importance of honoring individual and cultural authenticity. Fourth, the *strength and resistance* component underlines the commitment to living joy-filled lives despite the oppressive environments one may have to navigate. Lastly, *emotional and social support,* also called collectivism, emphasizes the importance of connecting to one's cultural community and the power of connection and belonging to an individual's ethnic group.

Together, these five components center on cultural and ancestral ways of being and knowing and social justice as critical healing elements for communities of color (French et al., 2020). Furthermore, this perspective of radical healing "includes both acknowledgment of and active resistance from oppression, as well as a vision of possibilities for freedom and wellness." For this study, the radical healing framework will foreground Blackness in exploring the racialized experiences that influence the lives of Black QT collegians. Still, in its infancy, no higher education literature has used this model empirically (as a whole and its components).

Quare Theory

Emerging from Johnson's (2005) description of his grandmother's "thick, black, southern dialect" and how she pronounces queer as "quare," quare theory is a conceptualization similar to intersectionality. Intersectionality refers to a critical analysis of the intersection of multiple marginalized identities and how their intersection creates unique experiences for those with them within the context of systemic oppression (Crenshaw, 1991). While similar to intersectionality, quare theory differs as it specifically conceptualizes the experiences of queer people of color and the interconnection of social identities such as race, sexual orientation, and gender. Moreover, theorists employing quare epistemologies also seek to examine the strategies queer people of color use to resist oppressive systems and structures (Coleman & Means, 2022; Johnson, 2005).

Quare theory is an alternative to queer theory, which is limiting and fails to incorporate the experiences unique to queer people of color (Johnson, 2005). In their critique of queer theory as a suitable lens in scholarship, Johnson states:

> Beyond queer theory's failure to focus on materiality, it also has failed to acknowledge consistently and critically the intellectual, aesthetic, and political contributions of nonwhite, non-middle class gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgendered [*sic*] people in the struggle against homophobia and oppression, Moreover, even when white queer theorists acknowledge these contributions, rarely do they self-consciously and overtly reflect on the ways in which their own whiteness informs their own critical queer position. (p. 130)

In response, quare theory destabilizes the racial privilege of whiteness embedded within queer theory and emphasizes the lived experiences of queer individuals of color that is often overlooked and pushed to the margins (Eguchi et al., 2014; Johnson, 2005). Additionally, quare

theory rejects the idea that one can understand class, gender, race, sexual orientation, and other social identities as separate identities (Johnson, 2005; Means, 2017), aligning with aspects of Crenshaws' (1991) conceptualization of intersectionality. Taken together, quare theory focuses on making sense of how the multiplicity of race, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities create a social world for queer people of color. It also plays a role in their construction of knowledge and capacities to resist oppressive systems and assists with conceptualizing experiences unique to queer people of color (Coleman & Means, 2022; Eguchi et al., 2014; Johnson, 2005).

Quare theory has seen increased usage in education research, particularly in the exploration of experiences unique to queer and trans people of color (QTPOC) in higher education (Duran & Garcia, 2021; Jourian & McCloud, 2020; Means, 2017; Means & Jaeger, 2013; 2015; Means et al., 2017; Mobley Jr. et al., 2020). For example, quare theory is used by Means and colleagues (2017) to reflect on their lives as Black gay male doctoral students and the success (e.g., living in authenticity, community, kinship, mentorship) and challenges (e.g., politics of passing and masculinity; deficit messaging about identities) they experienced during their doctoral journeys. From an identity development perspective, Jourian and McCloud (202) use quare theory to examine Black trans masculine college students' understanding of Black masculinity as they engage in Black and queer spaces. For my study, quare theory will be used to foreground Black queer and trans lived experiences within the concept of radical healing.

Employing a Quared, Radical Healing Perspective

At its core, the RFH foregrounds liberatory action and Black cultural understandings in its approach to emancipating communities of color from oppression by emphasizing healing and the reimagination of more ideal worlds (French et al., 2020). In alignment with this study, the

RHF helps to explore how Black QT college students engage in radical healing and resist the interlocking systems of oppression (e.g., anti-Blackness, transphobia, homophobia) that influence campus and socio-political practices. Furthermore, employing the RFH encourages participants in this study to reflect on their experience as Black QT individuals and discuss the ways individual care, collectivism, honoring cultural ways of being, and resistance have aided them in their capacities to live joy-filled lives. However, while the radical healing framework does incorporate an emphasis on Black psychology and intersectionality broadly, it does not specifically acknowledge the experiences of Black QT people. Quare theory, then, complements the RHF by centering gender and sexuality-related experiences that shape the lives of Black QT people. Together, concepts and constructs of both perspectives will play a large role in constructing and implementing this study's data collection and analysis phases.

Racialized Trauma and Violence on Predominantly White Campuses

On PWI campuses, Black students are amongst the most marginalized groups and the most disadvantaged due to the culture of racism and anti-Blackness prevalent in these spaces (Baber, 2012; George Mwangi et al., 2018; Hurtado et al., 2007; Patton, 2016). Instances of racism and anti-Blackness often show up as discrimination, exclusion, and harassment at PWIs. For example, Black students at PWIs are prone to receive messages that they are inferior or do not belong in collegiate spaces, in addition to verbal and visual expressions in the form of racist slurs and the defacement of cultural spaces and figures on campus (Powell et al., 2020). Other instances appear as racial microaggressions, which are defined as brief, subtle, and common instances of hostile and denigrating messages towards people of marginalized racial/ethnic groups in the form of verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities (Givens, 2016; Nadal et al., 2014; Sue et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2008).

Campus environments that foster anti-Black instances and interactions often leave Black students feeling devalued, excluded, and disengaged in and out of the classroom (Dancy et al., 2018; George Mwangi et al., 2018; Williams, 2019) and can negatively impact their sense of belonging, self-perception, and mental health (Mushonga, 2020; Nadal et al., 2014; Powell et al., 2020). Additionally, institutional and structural factors at PWIs further impact the experiences of Black students. For example, structures such as buildings, statues, and other historical monuments that are embedded in racism, named after white supremacists, and were constructed by enslaved populations celebrate the racist and anti-Black history of the US and can be a painful reminder for the Black students (Patton, 2016; Powell et al., 2020; Smith, 2009). Furthermore, the low Black representation amongst faculty, staff, and peers at PWIs can also impact how students see themselves in predominantly white academic spaces and their ability to find adequate support on college campuses (Basile & Black, 2019).

Black College Student Mental Health and Well-Being

Accompanying research on Black college students and their experiences with hostile campus environments has been the continued growth of scholarship on Black students' mental health and well-being and the factors that hinder it. A large portion of this scholarship analyzes the impacts of Black students' experiences with racism and anti-Blackness, in addition to the decreased psychological state and racial battle fatigue[7] that result from those occurrences (Corbin et al., 2018; Masuda et al., 2012; McClain et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2016). For example, Black college women in Corbin and colleagues' (2018) study, Black college women engaged in

[7] Racial battle fatigue refers to the "psychosocial-physiological impacts of racist micro- and macro-aggressions on racially marginalized targets" and prevalent for Black students enduring hostile environments PWIs are prone to foster (Corbin et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2016).

counterstorying to reflect on the misogynoir-influenced[8] psychological tensions, silencing, and racial battle fatigue they experienced as students at PWIs. As a result, themes of enduring tropes often placed on Black women (e.g., the Angry Black Woman), experiencing microaggressions from peers and faculty, and having to remain "strong" and "resilient" amid these environments stuck out. Black male students on white campuses presented similar experiences of racial battle fatigue due to stereotyping and microaggressions from police, peers, faculty, and staff in Smith and colleagues' (2016) study. Here, participants reflect on the hypervisibility and hyper surveillance they experienced on and off campus, being met with stereotypes (e.g., perceived as being criminals, unintelligent, college athletes), and being expected to fill the role of spokesperson for Black experiences in class.

Having to engage with hostile environments like the ones presented in the mentioned articles (Corbin et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2016) places Black students at an increased risk of experiencing an overall decrease in mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety, lower self-esteem) (Lipson et al., 2018; Masuda et al., 2012; McClain et al., 2016; Nadal et al., 2014; Sellers et al., 2011). Moreover, studies also suggest that Black college students are less likely to seek out and receive mental health support to cope with and heal from these hostile learning environments due to a history of medical harm and mistreatment for decades (Busby et al., 2021; Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Pugh et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2019).

Black Joy and Black Identity Affirmation

In response to scholarship highlighting the impact of hostile campus experiences on Black students' psychological well-being, scholars have begun to discuss existing factors,

[8] Misogynoir refers to the specific form of anti-Black, racialized, and sexist violence enacted upon Black women (Bailey, 2008; 2021).

practices, and aspects of life that contribute to positive mental health (PMH) (Keyes, 2013; Mushonga, 2020; Mushonga & Henneberger, 2020; Peoples et al., 2022). Positive mental health (PMH) refers to one's ability to realize their own potential, cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to one's own community (World Health Organization, 2014, as cited in Mushonga, 2020). Furthermore, Mushonga (2020) posits the following about PMH:

> By focusing on PMH exclusively on Black students, a more accurate depiction of their mental health status can be captured to improve their overall well-being and academic success which aids in shrinking the education and health disparities between Black and White students. (p. 2)

To Mushonga (2020), including PMH in the conversation on Black student mental health emphasizes the range of experiences Black college students can have in relation to their mental health and "aids in establishing campus settings that are conducive to their academic success and overall well-being" (p. 9).

In alignment with this push, Mushonga and Henneberger's (2020) study on the PMH of Black traditional and nontraditional college students addresses the psychosocial factors contributing to the positive mental health and well-being of Black college students at PWIs and HBCUs. In their results, the researchers determined that spirituality, self-esteem, and racial identity were associated with the positive mental health of both Black traditional and nontraditional college students. The only difference was that social support was essential for traditional students, but not as much for nontraditional Black students. Further, the researchers also found that Black students at HBCUs had higher racial centrality, defined as the degree to which an individual consistently defines themselves by their race, compared to their Black peers

at PWIs. This increased racial centrality makes sense as Black students at HBCUs can be in a community of Black peers, staff, and faculty where their Blackness is consistently affirmed and supported. In a world where Black existence is constantly under attack and diminished by anti-Black rhetoric and ideology, being in a community, such as an HBCU campus, does wonders for Black students, operating as spaces where Black existence is affirmed and celebrated.

Moreover, the concept of joy, particularly how it is understood and cultivated by Black individuals, is emerging as an essential realm of research. This research has emphasized these populations finding joy in authenticity and self-expression and being in an affinity-centered community (Bryant-Davis & Moore-Lobban, 2020; Mitchell, 2022; Tichavakunda, 2021; 2022). An example of this emphasis of Black joy scholarship is Tichavakunda's (2021; 2022) explorations of how Black college students at historically white institutions (HWIs) understood and cultivated the concept of Black joy. Participants emphasized understanding Black joy as the state of being (e.g., being their authentic Black selves and overcoming adversity), as achievement (e.g., recognizing and celebrating individual and collective academic achievement), as a collective feeling (e.g., being in community with other Black people, partying), and engagement in Black organizations and campus spaces (e.g., Black Cultural Center. Black Student Union, Black Greek Letter Organizations).

Black Spaces and Black Identity Affirmation

When discussing spaces that prioritize Blackness and effectively support Black students in their pursuit of a college degree, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCU) continue to stand tall as exemplars in educating Black college students and producing Black college graduates since their inception in 1837 (Albritton, 2012; Arroyo & Gasman, 2014; Mobley Jr., 2022; Johnson; 2019; Strayhorn, 2019). Since their inception, HBCUs have been committed to

the uplift, empowerment, and advancement of Black people, while also fostering spaces that prioritize and affirm Blackness as students matriculate through their doors (Albritton, 2012). Mobley Jr. (2022) further asserts HBCUs' impact and importance, stating:

> HBCUs have been highly lauded for their ability to provide Black students across the diaspora with culturally engaging academic and social environments. They have and still do serve as the premier educational spaces that afford and inculcate nurturing, familial, and supportive environments that engender Black student success.

Here, Mobley Jr. emphasizes the prioritization of Black history, culture, and experiences at the core of HBCUs' mission, in addition to the nurturing, familial, and supportive natures they foster for Black college students. Moreover, scholarship related to HBCU student experiences has highlighted specific aspects of college that further support Mobley Jr.'s assertion. In particular, scholars have highlighted factors such as having a wealth of Black faculty and staff that center Black experiences (Williams et al., 2021), being in academic settings where they are no longer one of few Black students in a classroom (Johnson, 2017; 2019), learning in culturally affirming classroom environments (Jett, 2011), and engaging in Black-centered co-curricular experiences (Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002; Smith, 2018) that have a monumental impact on Black students' college experiences.

In response to the hostile campus environments Black college students often experience on PWI campuses on the basis of race, the establishment of Black culture centers (BCCs) has historically served as a safe and welcoming space for Black college students (Patton, 2006a; 2006b; 2010 Sanders, 2016). Since their emergence in response to the Black Student Movement of the 1960s, BCCs continuously served as spaces for Black students to feel at home and experience identity affirmation while navigating PWIs (Patton, 2006b; 2010). Patton (2006b)

highlights the ways BCCs achieve this as Black participants in their study reflected on BCCs playing an integral role in helping them get acclimated to the first year of college, helping them network and establish a Black community on campus, supporting their growth in knowledge about Black identity, and ultimately, helping them feel like they mattered and belonged on campus.

Experiences of Queer and Trans College Students

Research on the experiences of queer and trans (QT) college students has broadly highlighted the ways college campuses operate as oppressive systems and uphold cultures of heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia that adversely impact QT students' experiences (McGuire et al., 2017). For example, literature shows that QT students are more likely to experience discrimination and various forms of harassment (e.g., physical assault, sexual assault) on their campuses, experience high rates of isolation, have more difficulty building positive relationships, and have lower overall academic performance and engagement than their non-LGBTQ+ peers (Evans et al., 2017; Garvey et al., 2017; Garvey et al., 2018; Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011). Moreover, LGBTQ+ students in Evans and colleagues' (2017) study highlight instances of discrimination and isolation from their heterosexual peers and, sometimes, their fellow QT peers. For example, instances of discrimination and isolation from their heterosexual peers often appeared when participants expressed interest in religious organizations, fraternities, and sororities, all of which were deemed to be predominantly made up of straight-identifying individuals. Interestingly, participants also reported instances of discrimination and isolation by fellow LGBTQ+ peers on campus due to their resistance to engaging in community norms enforced by their peers, such as not being "gay enough" or "too gay", resulting in further feelings

of rejection and participants perceiving the on-campus LGBTQ+ community as divided and discriminatory (Evans et al., 2017).

For transgender and gender-diverse students specifically, research shows that experiences of harassment, discrimination, isolation, and, sometimes, assault on campus are more prevalent when compared to their cisgender peers (Farmer et al., 2019; Griner et al., 2020; Pryor, 2015). For example, transgender and gender-expansive (TGE) students attending women's colleges and universities largely express moments of being surveilled, judged, and harassed by peers and administrators because of the ways they express their gender (Farmer et al., 2019). Moreover, TGE students who identified as men or presented themselves in a more masculine way recount experiencing harsher discrimination under the guise of men being viewed as "dangerous, aggressive, threatening, powerful, and invasive". Furthermore, transgender students in Griner and colleagues' (2020) study on transgender students' experiences with victimization largely report higher rates of victimization than their cisgender peers. In this study, forms of victimization included, but were not limited to, emotional abuse from partners, physical assault, sexual assault, and verbal threats.

Within QT college student research has also been a growing focus on identity disclosure, particularly the ways student experiences and perceptions can influence a student's level of "outness" or willingness to disclose their queer and/or trans identity (Garvey & Rankin, 2015b; Garvey et al., 2019). For example, in Garvey and Rankin's (2015b) study on the relationship between campus experiences and levels of identity disclosure of trans and queer students revealed that cisgender, queer women were more likely to be out and open with their identities than their cisgender queer male and trans-spectrum peers. Additionally, this study also revealed that trans students had more negative perceptions of campus climate, classroom climate, and

campus inclusivity in comparison to their cisgender, queer peers. In relation to classroom-specific experiences and literature related to academic success, research asserts that classroom spaces tend to be perceived as less inviting for students within the QT community (Garvey et al., 2018; Garvey & Inkelesas, 2012; Garvey & Rankin, 2015a; Pryor et al., 2015). Garvey and Rankin's (2015a) study on LGBTQ+ students' perceptions of classroom climate revealed that gender-conforming students (those whose gender identities aligned with their sex assigned at birth) had more positive perceptions of classroom climate than their gender-non-conforming peers. In addition, results from this study also illuminate the relationship between high levels of identity disclosure and negative perceptions of classroom climate, whereas students who report being more out and open with their LGBTQ+ identities perceive the classroom as less accepting when compared to their peers who have not disclosed their identities. Lastly, this study also revealed that negative perceptions of the classroom climate are tied to a less-inclusive curriculum and on-campus support.

Further, participants in Pryor's (2015) study on transgender students' classroom experiences reflected on the range of emotions around the comfort and nervousness they felt from classroom to classroom. For some, the subject of the class or size of class were major factors to consider as students grappled with the decision of whether they should authentically express themselves or not. Participants also largely reflect on sour experiences with instructors, with some instructors refusing to use the pronouns that align with their students' gender identity, using negative language to refer to trans individuals, or failing to correct peers that make transphobic remarks in the classroom. In addition, Garvey and colleagues (2018) explored the

relationship between queer-spectrum[9] students' perceptions of their campus' climate and queer-spectrum students' academic success (defined as the likelihood of a student remaining at their institution). Accordingly, queer-spectrum students who had more positive perceptions of their institutional actions regarding campus climate and perceived their campus climate as "warm" rated their academic success higher.

QT College Student Mental Health and Well-being

Like research on Black college student mental health, literature on the mental health of queer and trans college students continues to emerge as scholars emphasize the need for more exploration of the psychological effects of navigating anti-QT educational environments. Overall, QT college students have an increased likelihood of reporting poorer mental health and wellbeing, specifically anxiety, depression, and stress than their non-QT peers due to the hostile campus environments they may navigate (Oswalt & Lederer, 2017; Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011; Woodford et al., 2014; 2018a; 2018b). In their analysis of student responses in the 2009 American College Health Association - National College Health Assessment[10] (ACHA-NCHA), Oswalt and Wyatt (2011) determined that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and unsure students report higher levels of mental health issues than their heterosexual peers, in addition to higher rates being diagnosed for anxiety, depression, and panic attacks. A further comparison within this group also indicates even higher levels of mental health disparities for students identifying as bisexual than their gay, lesbian, and unsure peers. With consideration to their impact on academic performance, within-group differences also exist, with more gay and lesbian students

[9] Queer-spectrum is used by authors (Garvey et al., 2018) to honor the evolving natures and non-normativity of sexual identities that are not heterosexual.

[10] The American College Health Association - National College Health Assessment (ACHA-NCHA) is conducted every fall and spring at postsecondary institutions across North America to examine the mental health conditions of college students.

reporting discrimination as having a negative impact on academic performance. In contrast, bisexual students reported lower grades on exams and projects and overall course grades than gay, lesbian, and unsure participants.

Using the same ACHA-NCHA survey, Oswalt and Lederer (2017) examined the responses of 1143 transgender college students to explore the relationship between mental health conditions and gender identity. As a result of this analysis, the authors determined that transgender-identifying students had a significantly greater risk of mental conditions (e.g., anxiety and depression) than their cisgender peers. However, what is not discussed in this study is if there are significant differences in groups within the larger transgender college student community (i.e., differences by race, gender identity, rurality, and institution type).

In an analysis of policy and practice specifically, Woodford and colleagues (2018) conducted a quantitative analysis that explored the relationship between pro-LGBTQ+ campus policies and resources and cisgender, LGBQ+ students' experiences with heterosexist discrimination, psychological distress, and self-acceptance. Their findings, which stem from an analysis of 268 student responses across 58 institutions, indicate that there is a positive association between the presence of pro-LGBTQ+ policies, practices, and resources (e.g., courses on LGBTQ+ topics, anti-discrimination policies, number of LGBTQ+ student organizations) and lowered rates of reported heterosexism, lower rates of psychological distress, and greater rates of self-acceptance. In other words, students report an overall higher level of well-being when their institution creates a pro-LGBTQ environment.

In addressing QT collegians' campus experiences and the psychological effects that result from these experiences, scholars have emphasized the prevalence of homophobia, transphobia, cis heteronormativity, and cisgenderism that has, and still, existed on campus and influenced

campus practice and policy. Although society and higher education have *appeared* to improve when it comes to creating more queer- and trans-inclusive environments, recent scholarship suggests that there is much room for growth. Furthermore, these studies also emphasize the importance of paying closer attention to the unique experiences of communities within the larger QT community, such as trans, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, and other gender diverse students, who tend to experience more hostile experiences than their cisgender, queer peers. Lastly, this scholarship underscores the importance of having pro-QT policies, practices, and resources on campus and the need for more as higher education continues to strive to be more inclusive of QT collegians.

Queer and Trans Kinship, Thriving, and Identity Affirmation

As literature pertaining to QT student experiences continue to grow, scholars have started to carve out a branch of scholarship that focuses on the strategies and efforts in place for QT students to combat the cultures of heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia that permeate college campuses. For example, QT scholarship has emphasized the importance of QT-affirming campus practices and policies that provide space for QT students to be supported and feel like they belong on their campus (Hill et al., 2021; Renn, 2022). Centering their research in Tuck's (2009) call for desire-based[11] research, Hill and colleagues (2021) interview LGBTQ+ college students to understand how LGBTQ+ students succeed and thrive in college. In this study, students reflect on the impact of having their LGBTQ+ identities supported and affirmed at their institution by peers, faculty, and staff across campus. Further, involvement in LGBTQ+

[11] Desire-based research is coined by Tuck (2009) as a call for social science research to shift away from research that solely focuses on the negative or damaging experiences of marginalized communities. At its core, desire-based research also celebrates survival, resistance, and the positive experiences of marginalized communities.

organizations and spaces on campus and engaging in LGBTQ+-specific curriculum provided students with moments of joy, validation, and connection to the things they care about the most.

A specific example of a QT affirming practice has been the growth of LGBTQ+ centers that continue to emerge on campuses. Like Black Cultural Centers on PWI campuses, LGBTQ+ centers are often seen as a space of safety and support for QT students, allowing them to be in community with people they share, support, and celebrate their queer and trans identities (Fine, 2012; Pryor, 2018; Self & Hudson, 2015). A critique, however, has been the possibility of LGBTQ+ centers at PWIs being largely white and rarely creating space for the needs of queer and trans students of color (Blockett, 2017; Pryor, 2018). In contrast, HBCUs have recently begun to establish LGBTQ resources on their campuses, directly addressing and prioritizing the support and needs of Black QT students on their campuses (Lenning, 2017; Mobley Jr. & Johnson, 2015).

In addition to QT-affirming practice and policy, a chunk of this literature has explored the experiences of transgender and gender diverse students, particularly their resistance of cisnormativity in these environments (Nicolazzo, 2016; 2017; Nicolazzo et al., 2017). For example, Nicolazzo's (2016) study on the ways transgender students navigate college environments that are heavily structured in a gender binary highlights resilience, resistance, and kinship[12] as vital to their success as students. With special attention to community, students referenced the importance of kinship networks in multiple forms (e.g., virtually, existing physically, on and off-campus, trans-only, open to non-trans people) and how essential they were

[12] Kinship networks are defined in this study (Nicolazzo, 2016) as a close-group of like-minded peers who: recognize and honor gender identities, provide refuge from the realities of gender binary discourse and heterogenderism on campus, and potential sites of resistance against systemic genderism if necessary.

to cultivating connection and feeling seen as they navigated hostile learning environments (on and off-campus). Furthering the concept of kinship networks, Nicolazzo and colleagues (2017) explore the types of kinship trans students engaged in, while also emphasizing the importance of kinship as a factor that enhances a sense of belonging and student success. In response, students reflected on three domains of that were key to their success on campus: material (or physical), virtual, and affective, which refers to the domain (overlapping material and virtual) where a full breadth of emotions (e.g., joy, frustration, annoyances) could be expressed.

Experiences of Black Queer and Trans College Students

Within the last few decades, scholarship has taken a much-needed intersectional approach that accounts for the ways race and racialized experiences (within the context of systemic racism) create experiences unique to queer and trans people of color that are not mentioned in broader queer and trans scholarship. For Black QT people specifically, growing research has started to articulate the challenges they endure while holding multiple marginalized identities (Black, queer, and/or trans) and navigating collegiate spaces (Blockett, 2017; Coleman et al., 2020; Goode-Cross & Good, 2008; 2009; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011; Hutchings, 2023; Jourian & McCloud, 2020; Leyva et al., 2022; McGuire et al., 2017; Means, 2017; Means et al., 2013; 2015; Mobley Jr. & Johnson, 2019; Mobley Jr. et al., 2021; Nicolazzo, 2016a; Patton et al., 2020; Simms et al., 2023). While this surge in Black QT research is acknowledged, most of this research in and outside of education focuses on the experiences of Black queer men (Mosley et al., 2021). In recent years, however, we have begun to see more social science research that emphasizes the experiences of Black lesbian, trans, and gender-nonconforming people, with significant growth happening in the realm of education research (Coleman et al., 2020; Jourian & McCloud, 2020: Nicolazzo, 2016; Simms et al., 2023).

Black QT Experiences on PWI Campuses

At predominantly white institutions (PWIs), Black QT collegians often report navigating the combination of racism, anti-Blackness, homophobia, and transphobia on their campuses (Blockett, 2017; Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Leyva et al., 2022; Nicolazzo, 2016a; Strayhorn & Mullins, 2012). For instance, participants in Nicolazzo's (2016) ethnographic study reflect on this tension of being both Black and non-binary, highlighting the struggles of navigating Black and white-dominated QT campus spaces, respectively. Specifically, participants recount instances of having to choose one identity over the other in certain moments – e.g., limiting conversations, references to, and expression of their Black identity in white-dominated QT spaces, while also limiting their transness and queerness in Black campus spaces due to both affinity spaces not being the most inclusive on their full Black and non-binary selves. Likewise, in their exploration of the ways African American gay and bisexual men manage their racial and sexual identities at PWIs, Goode-Cross and Good (2009) bring attention to the discrimination and stereotyping they experience. Here, participants recount unsatisfying experiences with the larger White LGBTQ+ population and feelings of isolation due to their White counterparts' inability to understand the intersecting experiences associated with their race and sexual orientation. Similarly, participants in Blockett's ethnographic study (2017) further reflect on the large presence of racism and anti-Blackness in white-dominated LGBT spaces on campus. Specifically, participants (all Black queer men) reflect on feelings of isolation as a result of not feeling seen or included in QT spaces on and off campus and thus, prompting them to establish their own spaces.

Taking a narrower approach to exploring interactions with specific aspects of campus life, scholars have also explored Black QT students' engagement with specific campus spaces,

such as residential life and classroom experiences (Leyva et al., 2022; Strayhorn & Mullins, 2012). For example, in Strayhorn and Mullins' (2012) study on Black gay male undergraduates in campus residence halls, participants highlighted their experiences with racism by their White counterparts in residence halls, with most of those instances involving their roommate as the perpetrator. These frequent instances of racism, both covert and overt, include, but were not limited to, overhearing racist remarks and encountering racist graffiti in their place of residence. In addition to their residence hall experiences, participants reported tensions and unsatisfying experiences with their White QT counterparts in various campus capacities. Similarly, Leyva and colleagues' (2022) study on the experiences of Black queer students in STEM emphasizes feelings of invisibility and tensions with peers due to the overwhelming presence of whiteness and cis-heteronormativity common in STEM programs at PWIs. As STEM students, participants recount their experiences navigating white and cis-heteronormative ideologies present within and outside of STEM and their struggles, finding community and solidarity with Black, QT, and STEM communities individually.

Whether it be in the classroom, residence halls, QT spaces, or the campus at large, scholars have well-documented the struggle Black QT students endure as they navigate predominantly white campuses. In contrast, Black QT students attending historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) recount a completely different experience. In the section that follows, I provide an overview of Black QT recounting moments where their Blackness is affirmed, but their queerness and transness are viewed negatively on HBCU campuses.

Black QT Experiences on HBCU Campuses

As Black QT collegians endure racism and anti-Blackness in white-dominated QT spaces, they are also likely to navigate cultures of heterosexism, homophobia, heteronormativity,

transphobia, disapproval, and lack of acceptance within their own Black communities (Baunach et al., 2009; Grant, 2016; Mobley Jr. & Johnson, 2015; 2019; Mobley Jr. & Hall, 2020; Patton et al., 2020; Patton & Simmons, 2008). Due to these negative experiences, Black QT students often have difficulty finding community and solace within Black student communities (Bowleg, 2013). In line with research that emphasizes exploring differing experiences within identity groups, scholars are urging HBCU administrators and stakeholders to uphold intersectionality as a lens to make HBCU campuses more inclusive for Black QT students (Johnson, 2021; Mobley Jr. & Johnson, 2019; Patton et al., 2020). For example, Patton and colleagues (2020) drew attention to the experiences of Black LGBQ students at HBCUs navigating environments that affirm their racial identity, but do not readily accept or support their sexual orientation identities. Participants in this study emphasized the joys of being Black, attending HBCUs, and the impact these experiences had on their Black identity affirmation. In contrast, they also reflected on negative experiences they encountered with peers, institutional leaders, and alums who were not accepting of their sexual orientations.

Similarly, Patton and Simmons' (2008) phenomenological study on the experiences of Black lesbian students at an HBCU explores the experiences of participants juggling three oppressed identities at their institution - being Black, women, and lesbian. In their recounts, participants shared instances of having to tone down the expression of their sexuality in specific spaces (e.g., with family, during job interviews) and endure hostile campus environments when their sexuality is expressed. For masculine presenting students in this study, conforming to gender norms, such as wearing a skirt, and being disrespected by their male peers because of their masculine presence, were also highlighted as common issues associated with being Black lesbian students on an HBCU campus. Aligning with the "appropriateness" of attire, Mobley Jr.

and Johnson (2019) explore and interrogate discourse regarding Morehouse College's "appropriate attire policy." Using critical discourse analysis, the authors examined media coverage and reactions regarding Morehouse's, an all-male HBCU in Atlanta, Georgia, attire policy and its exclusion of gay and gender-nonconforming students at HBCUs. In their analysis, Mobley Jr. and Johnson draw attention to the overwhelming presence of homophobia, transphobia, patriarchal gender roles, and fear of femininity within the institution's Black and Black gay communities.

The studies above highlight the struggles unique to Black QT collegians navigating multiple marginalized identities within collegiate spaces. Whether they attended an HBCU or PWI, research shows that Black QT students are prone to experiencing hostile environments that are not accepting of their whole selves and their identities, let alone their outward celebration and expression of these identities. Specifically, a common theme in these articles is participants highlighting the struggles of not being Black enough for Black spaces (due to their queer and trans identity) or not queer or trans enough for larger queer and trans communities (due to their Blackness and the overwhelming presence of whiteness in queer and trans communities particularly at PWIs). These studies also allude to the ways these environments diminish the sense of community, belonging, and support for Black QT students and their feelings of isolation, experiences with harassment, and the constant struggle of having to tone down their sexuality and/or gender expression to appease the masses.

Communal and Worldmaking Experiences for Black QT Students

Like Black and QT populations, scholars have also documented the impact of Black QT people being in Black QT communities and their ability to foster spaces where identities are affirmed and people can live in authenticity (Bowleg, 2013; Goode-Cross & Good, 2008; Simms

et al., 2023). In response to their unsatisfying experiences with their non-Black QT peers on campus, Black QT individuals have to be meticulous in creating their own supportive communities. To establish support on their campuses, Black QT collegians often default to cultivating communities of support, and/or leaning on the support of supportive campus administrators and faculty as resources (Blockett, 2017; 2018; Blockett & Renn, 2021; Goode-Cross & Good, 2008; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011; Hutchings, 2023; Simms et al., 2023).

In line with the establishment of safe spaces for Black QT college students, Blockett and Renn (2021) push forward the concept of queer of color worldmaking. Stemming from Munoz's (1999) assertion queer worldmaking, Blockett and Renn offer queer or color worldmaking as an epistemological, discursive, and political tool to deconstruct and resist heterosexual and white-dominated worldviews and spaces. That said, a queer or color worldmaking approach encourages the production of cultural spaces that create space for queer and trans people of color (QTPOC) to disidentify from dominant culture and societal ideologies, live in authenticity, and thrive. Within a higher education context, studies have begun to recount moments of Black QT collegians enacting concepts of queer or color worldmaking (Blockett, 2017; 2018; Simms et al. 2023). For example, Blockett's (2017) critical ethnographic study on Black queer male students recounts experiences of independently seeking, building, and sustaining safe spaces without resources or assistance from the larger campus community. In the wake of experiences with homophobia, heterosexism, racism, and homonormativity on their campus, students were able to resist these ideologies through worldmaking and the establishment of peer support and kinship.

In their narrative inquiry, Simms and colleagues (2023) focus on the process of identity negotiation for trans students of color (TSOC) in higher education and their abilities to foster community virtually. While not solely specific to only Black trans students, participants in this

study recount using the internet to explore notions of self and find the community they lacked on their college campuses. Through a virtual space, TSOC could restructure their on-campus environments and create spaces of comfort as they resisted the presence of white supremacy and transphobia. While not specific to higher education, participants in Bowleg's study (2013) bring attention to what they considered to be the benefits of being Black, gay, and bisexual men. Participants in this study mentioned increased awareness due to the prejudice and discrimination they experienced because of their identities. As a result, participants grew psychologically and had a deeper introspection about life, their identities, and social justice efforts. Participants in this study also spoke about having the freedom to navigate life without the expectations of meeting societal norms, such as abiding by gender roles and meeting heteronormative expectations (e.g., getting married to a woman, having a family, etc.).

In addition to affinity groups, studies have also highlighted Black QT students' reflections on being supported by those they may not share their Black QT identities with (Goode-Cross and Good, 2008; Hutchings, 2023). For example, participants that identified as African-American men who have sex with men (AAMSM) in Goode-Cross and Good's (2008) study reflected on the impact of having honest, supportive, and nonjudgmental friends at their PWI campus. Whether these relationships were with heterosexual or fellow nonheterosexual African American peers, participants emphasized the importance of establishing friendships with those they perceived to be the most supportive of their sexual orientation. Here, participants reflected on the benefits of relationships where they felt safe to be who they were, did not have to worry about hiding their actions or words, and were free to speak about personal experiences without the fear of shame or judgment.

Similarly, Black gay, bisexual, and queer men (BGBQM) in Hutchings's (2023) phenomenological study reflect on the nuanced ways they experienced belonging when participating in men of color mentorship programs. In a podcast focus group setting, participants reflect on varying experiences of showing up as both Black and queer. While the overwhelming consensus among the group was having Blackness and Black maleness prioritized and celebrated, differences in experiences centered on their sexuality differed. Specifically, some students felt that queer identities were included and supported in these spaces, while others recounted experiences of having their queer identities only tolerated in these spaces instead of completely included and supported.

Altogether, the literature on the experiences of Black QT collegians and their capacity to construct safe spaces as resistance to the hostile campus environments influenced by societal norms and assaults on their race, gender identities, and sexualities. Mirroring the communities fostered by ballroom culture (Blockett & Renn, 2022; Mobley Jr. & Hutchings, 2021; Reid, 2022), the literature above highlights the ways Black QT students construct spaces of kinship, authenticity, and safety from the hostile environments around them. Whether they exist on campus (Blockett, 2017) or virtually (Simms et al., 2023), identity-centered groups and allies are vital to the daily life and success of Black QT collegians as they construct or find ways to live "freely" despite the anti-Black and anti-LGBTQ+ environments they navigate on and off campus.

Black QT Resistance and Liberation

For Black QT individuals, a common thread of research has highlighted Black QT individuals' ability to push back on dominant ideologies and construct worlds where their identities and existence are not seen negatively or despairingly, but treasured and celebrated

(Boatwright, 2019; Jourian & McCloud, 2020; Means, 2017; Mobley Jr. et al., 2021; Taylor et al., in press). Jourian and McCloud (2020) explored the gendered and racialized realities of Black trans-masculine college students as they made sense of Black masculinity at the intersection of their gender and race. Participant stories revealed how Whiteness, colonialism, racism, anti-Blackness, and misogynoir shaped their experiences, in addition to their ability to reconstruct their understandings of their Black masculine identities through the resistance of these oppressive social factors. From a spiritual lens, Means (2017) highlights how some Black queer male collegians resisted the hostility within Christian spaces. These methods of resistance include interrogating oppressive and homophobic messages, questioning spiritual texts, shifting to atheism, embracing messages of love and acceptance, and manifesting relationships with higher power not filtered through others or spiritual text (Means, 2017).

Existing outside of the higher education context, Black QT resistance has also begun to be explored at the K-12 level. With attention to digital spaces, Boatwright (2019) highlights the power of storytelling in their overview of a collaborative visual project that illuminated the critical consciousness of Black queer youth as culture producers. With the help of Black queer students, the author reflects on the creation of their Flux Zine, a collection of images and stories about what it meant to be Black and queer in the form of a digital magazine. Specifically, the Flux Zine project creatively highlighted themes of power, life, death, community, political integrity, and wellness while simultaneously creating space for the creators to build agency, explore identity, and hone critical thinking skills. Moreover, Black QT activism has also been a well-documented form of resistance, with education-specific scholarship exploring the topic still in its infancy (Mobley Jr. et al., 2021; Pender et al., 2018; Self & Hall, 2021).

From a historical lens, Black QT figures have been celebrated as critical to the advancement and emancipation of Black, QT, and Black QT bodies, despite how much society tries to erase their efforts from the history books (e.g., Marsha P. Johnson and the Stonewall Riots, Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement) (Kiesling, 2017). In the present day, activism is still an active and integral part of Black, QT, and Black QT resistance, with Black QT individuals remaining at the forefront of these efforts (i.e., Black queer women being the founders of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag). While in its infancy, scholarship emphasizing Black QT activism within the educational context is emerging and emphasizes its magnitude in the advancement of change in academic settings. In an overview of Black QT activism at HBCUs, Mobley Jr. and colleagues (2021) recount multiple forms of college student activism over the last 30 years that led to major progress in policy and practice at individual HBCU campuses. For example, in response to harassment and physical attacks targeting trans students at Spelman College (an all-women HBCU located in Atlanta, Georgia) after their decision to admit trans women, trans students organized and protested on Spelman's campus, prompting significant changes in Spelman's curriculum (e.g., the establishment of an endowed chair in queer studies) (see, Smith, 2018). In addition, Black QT students at Morehouse College (an all-male HBCU located in Atlanta, Georgia) engaged in silent and digital protest as a response to a Morehouse student being sexually assaulted on campus, Morehouse's lack of effort to support the student, and overall erasure of Black queer and trans bodies and well-being (Mobley Jr. et al., 2021).

Chapter Summary

When considered together, a common theme across these articles is one's capacity to construct and make meaning of their own identities in spaces that deemed them as unfit was

crucial to their livelihood on and off campus. When navigating hostile environments, such as education, church, and the sociopolitical world at large, Black, QT, and Black QT collegians received messaging that their lives were seen outside the "standard way of living", which is rooted in white patriarchal, cis-heteronormative values, perspectives, and beliefs that don't work for minoritized populations. In addition, some studies recount moments of verbal and physical assault and victimization by peers, faculty, and staff. Particularly for Black and QT populations, these moments have led to psychological distress and decreased mental health for Black and QT college students. Another theme of this chapter is the emergence of research that focus on positive mental health, joy, and the factors that contribute to these experiences for Black and QT students. Instead of succumbing to these narratives or to the barriers presented before them, individuals in these studies pushed back and found the beauty in their identities, authentic living, and understanding of what it meant to be themselves. Some students even leveraged their voices, presence, and roles on campus to invoke change and improvement in campus practice and policy. However, explorations of the ways Black QT students engage in these joyous experiences are lacking. Furthermore, most of the literature on Black QT collegians focuses on the experiences of Black queer men, with limited attention being paid to Black queer women, trans, and gender-diverse students. In the next section, Chapter 3, I provide an in-depth description of the research design I used for data collection and the analytic strategies I used to analyze data.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to center the lived experiences of Black QT collegians, the factors that impede Black QT collegians' well-being and ability to “live freely” in our educational spaces, and the ways Black QT collegians experience joy. By utilizing a quare, radical healing theoretical approach, this study explores Black QT collegians’ unique experiences, on and off-campus, at the intersection of their race, gender, and/or sexuality, and the impact these experiences have on their well-being. In addition, this approach also serves as a guide to further explore manifestations of healing, liberation, and joy that may be associated with Black QT students despite the negative experiences they may endure as college students. Therefore, the major and overarching research question guiding this study is: *How do Black queer and trans college students experience radical healing amid the collegiate and socio-political environments they navigate?* Accompanying the overarching research question are the following sub-research questions:

1. How do Black QT collegians make sense of their racialized, queered, and/or gendered realities?
2. How do Black QT collegians describe the impact their campus and socio-political environments have on their well-being?
3. How do Black QT collegians make sense of and experience joy?

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the methodological approach I took to explore my research questions, the research design I implemented to collect my data, the participant recruitment process, and the steps I took to analyze my data. To conclude this chapter, I provide my researcher positionality to depict my approach to doing this research, in addition to the ways I account for trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Qualitative Approach

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach guided this study's research design. Phenomenology is a qualitative research methodology focusing on lived and first-person experiences with the phenomenon of interest (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018; van Manen, 2016). From a phenomenological standpoint, the word phenomenon (or phenomena) refers to the ways individuals find themselves "being in relation to the world through our day-to-day living" (van Manen, 2016, p. 20). In this sense, exploring the "world" includes interacting with *others*, such as a college student's interaction with their professors or peers. In addition, exploring the "world" also includes examining one's engagement with an activity or experience (e.g., college, a song, an emotion, a medical condition, or a television show). To further ground this assertion, van Manen (2016) states that as we engage in phenomenological research, "we are not trying to get inside other people's minds. Rather, we are trying to contemplate the various ways things manifest and appear in and through our being in the world." (p. 23).

Another core component of phenomenological research is the assumption that individuals share some essence of lived experiences around a specific phenomenon (van Manen, 2016). As a result, phenomenological research aims to better understand those shared conscious experiences related to the phenomenon of interest and seeks to answer the question, "What do all participants have in common?" For this study, the phenomena of interest include exploring how Black QT engage in radical healing, make sense of their racialized, queered, and/or gendered realities on and off campus, and experience joy.

Doing Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research

Hermeneutic phenomenology is the specific type of phenomenology I used to guide this study. Originated by Martin Heidegger, hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes the importance

of the researcher's prior experiences and perceptions of the phenomenon of interest throughout the study (Dibley et al., 2020). In Heidegger's approach, one's biases and pre-understandings of the phenomena do not exist outside the research process. Instead, the researcher's biases, assumptions, and knowledge are essential to the research process and therefore made explicit and embedded throughout the interpretive process (Dibley et al., 2020; Mobley Jr., 2019; Peoples, 2021). Smith (2018) further asserts Heidegger's approach by stating:

> For Heidegger, we and our activities are always "in the world", our being is being-in-the-world, so we do not study our activities by bracketing the world, rather we interpret our activities and the meaning things have for us by looking to our contextual relations to things in the world. (p. 18)

Dibley and colleagues (2020) also suggest that the researcher themselves "is a means to enact the interpretation of the meaning of lived experiences. As self-interpreting beings, we have our own horizon of understanding (Gadamer, 20223: 302) that comes from our past experiences, our social, historical, and disciplinary perspectives" (pp.115-116). Simply put, a hermeneutic approach to phenomenological research places immense value on the researcher's assumptions, biases, and pre-understandings and experiences with the topic at hand as they engage in the research process. Thus, the researcher's reflexivity of prior knowledge and biases is vital to interpreting and understanding this phenomenon of interest (Peoples, 2021).

Sampling Strategies and Participant Recruitment

Several strategies were used to select participants for this study, including purposeful, criterion, and snowball sampling strategies (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018). Purposeful sampling is a process of intentionally selecting individuals and sites for a study because of their ability to inform the research question and the overall goals of a study (Privitera & Ahlgrim-

Delzell, 2018). Criterion sampling is used to recruit participants that fit the study's predetermined benchmarks relevant to the aims of the study. In addition to criterion sampling, I utilized snowball sampling, which involves asking participants to share information about the study with their peers and networks who would be eligible to participate (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2018).

For this study, eligible participants had to (1) self-identify as Black, African American, of African descent, or belonging to the African diaspora, (2) self-identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, (3) be at least 18 years old, and (4) currently be enrolled as an undergraduate college student at a four-year institution in North Carolina. An additional, overarching criterion for this study will be a participant's willingness to reflect on racialized, queered, and gendered experiences in relation to acknowledging the presence of trauma and oppression in society and engaging in moments of healing, liberation, and joy.

To acknowledge the possibility of different experiences between US-born, Black immigrant students and multiracial Black collegians, the specification of "Black" refers to participants who self-identify as Black, African American, of African descent, or belonging to the African diaspora. Additionally, "QT" or "queer and/or trans" includes any participant whose sexual orientation and/or gender identity fits within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, questioning, and additional sexual and gender identities (LGBTQ+) umbrella. This includes participants who identify with a sexual orientation that is not heterosexual (i.e., gay, bisexual, lesbian) or participants who identify as transgender or a gender that does not conform to the traditional binary of gender (i.e., nonbinary, gender non-conforming, gender fluid).

A digital flyer (see Appendix K) outlining this study's goals and participant eligibility criteria were created to recruit participants. This flyer included a QR and link that takes those

interested in participating in the study to a Qualtrics form to collect their demographic information. This flyer was also shared with colleagues across social media, online group messages, and emailed to higher education practitioners and college faculty who work directly with Black, QT, and Black QT college student populations at four-year institutions located in North Carolina.

Data Collection

Participants who met this study's eligibility criteria were asked to complete two forms: (1) a demographic questionnaire and (2) a photo submission guidelines and consent form (see Table 3.1). The demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A) requests demographic information of each participant (e.g., race, ethnicity, year classification, gender, sexuality) and the pseudonym they wanted to use in this study to keep their identity confidential throughout this study. After each participant completed the demographic questionnaire and consent form, I coordinated a 10–15-minute introductory meeting via Zoom for us to meet, start to develop rapport, discuss the research project in its entirety, and answer any questions the participant may have. Given the nature of the topic and the potential vulnerability and hesitancy that comes with being a Black QT individual speaking on Black QT lived experiences, I felt that an introductory meeting would be essential before engaging in the full research process.

Once the introductory meeting was completed, participants were asked to engage in a photovoice activity. The photo submission guidelines and consent form (see Appendix B) outlined the process of photovoice, photo submission guidelines, prompts that guided participants as they provided photos for photo-elicitation interviews, and a statement of consent that requested their consent before participating in the study and requested their permission to use submitted photos to disseminate my findings. Altogether, I received a total of 86 photos from

participants, which were organized into individual participant folders via Google Drive in preparation for our interviews.

Table 3.1

Data Collection Strategies

Data Collection Strategy	Estimated Length of Time	Brief Description
Online Demographic Questionnaire	10 - 15 minutes to complete	Participants completed a brief Qualtrics questionnaire to collective demographic data that confirms eligibility for study participation and data to be used to develop participant profiles.
Online Photo Submission Form	10 - 15 minutes	Participants completed a brief Google Form that prompts them with prompts to guide their photo taking and submission process. The form also provided participants with the researcher's intended usage of their photographs.
Round 1 of 1:1 Interviews	60 minutes	Semi-structured interview (conducted via Zoom) about the phenomenon of interest.
Round 2 of 1:1 Interviews	60 minutes	Semi-structured interview (conducted via Zoom) about the phenomenon of interest.
Focus Groups	60 minutes	Semi-structured focus group (conducted via Zoom) about the phenomenon of interest. Participation in the focus groups were optional.
Member Checking	45-60 minutes	Each participant was invited to review the transcripts of their interviews. Participants were asked to review the documents and suggest any changes they wished to be made before I disseminated my findings.

Photovoice & Photo-Elicitation Interviews

To conduct this study, participants engaged in photovoice to visually reflect on their experiences and well-being as Black QT college students. Photovoice is a qualitative research method that invites participants to use photography to visually represent the topic of interest (Latz, 2017; Wang, 1999). In this method, researchers begin by recruiting participants and educating them about the topic, the photo-taking process, and any guiding prompts that will guide their photo-taking process. Then, participants are expected to submit photos that align with

these guiding prompts, which they and the researcher will discuss in later interviews. In these interviews, commonly referred to as photo-elicitation interviews, the researchers guide the participants through an interpretive process where submitted photos are discussed and used to "elicit responses and excavate memories of the participants" (Latz, 2017, p. 75). Put simply, the researcher and participant discuss each photo, its meaning, and its alignment with its respective prompt. These interpretations and photos are then reviewed, analyzed, and disseminated in the data analysis process.

Photovoice allows the participants to take a more active role in the research process and generalization of the data collected. Historically, researchers have used photovoice to highlight the stories and experiences of marginalized communities, primarily communities whose voices are not heard and silenced by those in power (Latz, 2017). Further, using a photovoice approach aims to break down power dynamics that may exist between researcher and participant by enabling participants to document the parts of their lives that are most salient to them. To this perspective, Latz adds, "this process decentralizes the role of the researcher and honors the authenticity of participants' vantage points" (p. 43).

A core component of photovoice is its ability to invoke critical consciousness, reflection, and empowerment for those that engage in its process. With reference to Freire's notion of empowerment education, Latz situates photovoice within Wallerstein and Berstein's (1995) conceptualization of the process - a process that creates space for individuals ``... to identify their problems, critically assess the social and historical roots of problems, to envision a healthier society, and to develop strategies to overcome obstacles in achieving their goals" (p. 380). As a result, individuals develop critical consciousness, which refers to "a belief in one's ability to affect [their] personal and societal worlds" (Latz, p. 44). That said, photovoice's focus on critical

consciousness, reflection, and empowerment aligns well with the radical healing framework's focus on (1) acknowledging the existence of interlocking systems of oppression within our socio-political worlds and (2) leveraging that acknowledgment to envision possibilities of hope, freedom, wellness, and justice.

Photovoice and photo-elicitation interviews have increased usage in higher education research over the last two decades (Bowers et al., 2020; Duran, 2019; Kortegast et al., 2020; McGowan, 2016; 2017; Means, 2017; Means & Jaeger, 2013; 2015). In these studies, participants that share at least one of these identities (i.e., Black, queer, trans) have been empowered to share their experiences to identify, represent, and enhance their community within a collegiate context. However, while related research using these methods continues to grow, only a few of these articles have employed photovoice and photo-elicitation interviews to explore Black QT college student life specifically (Means, 2017; Means & Jaeger, 2013; 2015).

Participants participated in two semi-structured photo-elicitation interviews that lasted approximately 60 minutes each. During these interviews, participants were asked questions related to the intersection of their identities and their psychological well-being, with some of the questions referencing the photos students submitted before their interview. Upon completing both interviews, participants were asked to participate in focus group interviews to round out the research experience.

Focus Group Interviews

Focus groups serve as an extension to the interview method, where instead of an interview occurring between the researcher and one participant, a focus group gives way to a group discussion among participants, with the researcher as a facilitator (Gundumogulat, 2020). Like interviews, the goal of focus groups is for participants to share their knowledge about a

specific subject matter with each other. Moreover, using focus groups as a research method promotes rich interaction and dialogue as participants engage with each other and provide a space for participants to validate the experiences being shared in the space.

Drawing inspiration from sista circles (Johnson, 2015) and sharing circles (Lavallée, 2009), focus groups for this study served as an opportunity for my participants to engage in communal reflection and support when sharing their stories and experiences. Specifically, these focus groups provided a space where participants were empowered to share their experiences as Black queer and trans students, support and validate each other, and reflect on their experiences engaging in this research process. A unique feature of both sista circles and sharing circles is the inclusion of the "researcher" as a participant. While the researcher does facilitate the conversation, the researcher also participates in the dialogue shared in the designated space. That said, an adapted version of a focus group discussion was employed, where I, the facilitator, also engaged in a discussion about existing as Black QT individuals.

Before their usage in the one-on-one and focus group interviews, interview and focus group questions were shared with colleagues to evaluate the strength of the questions and ensure appropriate coverage of key concepts related to the study's focus. Interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom, and audio from the interviews will be transcribed using Otter.ai, an online transcription editing software. To ensure the transcripts' clarity, accuracy, and correctness, I engaged in multiple listening sessions using the Otter.ai software, allowing me to read, hear, and edit transcripts simultaneously. Prior to beginning my data analysis process, I organized photographs submitted by the participant, researcher memos, and transcribed interviews (one-on-one and focus groups) into the Google Drive folders of their respective participants. In addition, I engage in member checking to provide an opportunity for my participants to review the

transcripts of their interviews and ensure they were okay with what could be presented in the dissemination of my findings.

Researcher Positionality

I identify as a Black queer, cisgender man committed to supporting and studying the experiences of the Black queer and trans community. That said, it is imperative for me to acknowledge my role as both an "insider" and "outsider" as I embarked on this work. As someone who shares these identities, actively supports Black queer and trans students, actively engages in community with Black queer and trans people, and would meet the eligibility criteria for this study, I was aware of the opportunity for this study to present some advantages around language, safety, and comfortability among participants, and the ability to relate to participants' shared experiences as it began. However, I also recognized how this insider status came with some preconceived notions and ideas about what experiences my participants would share in their narratives based on my personal experiences and experiences shared in other mediums (e.g., scholarly articles, personal communication, and media). In line with hermeneutic phenomenology, I welcomed these perspectives as I approach this study as they guide the design of this study and my interpretation of these shared experiences.

Accompanying this insider status is an outsider perspective of experiences that may differ from my own or what I am knowledgeable about. Hence, I acknowledged and recognized the possibility of contextual factors such as, but not limited to, age, gender identity, environment, upbringing, and institutional experience, that differ from my own experiences and could emerge throughout this study. For example, I have some experiences of navigating college as a Black and openly queer man. However, that experience, and therefore knowledge, is limited to my experience of only attending PWIs throughout my educational journey and not be "open" with

my sexuality until my junior year of college. That said, I have no experience being a Black QT student at an HBCU or MSI, which, based on literature and experiences shared by peers, has distinct differences when compared to being Black and QT at a PWI. A similar mindset can also be applied to gender identity, as I identify as a cisgender man and recognize the differing experiences that could be shared throughout this study, specifically from cisgender women, transgender students, and nonbinary and gender nonconforming students. To account for both outsider status, I consulted often with peers (e.g., friends, content experts) that research and/or live these experiences. Furthermore, I utilized clear and thick descriptions of student narratives to honor their voices and the experiences they share with me (Chapter 4).

My educational background in public health and health promotion, past experiences as a higher education professional (e.g., particularly in academic advising), and my interest in research on the mental health and well-being of marginalized communities further promoted my interest in this topic As someone who continues to advise and mentor college students, a discussion on their wellness is always at the forefront. In these conversations, particularly with Black queer and trans students, I can reflect on multiple instances where students recount hostile experiences with peers, faculty, and staff resulting from their attitudes and intolerance towards Black and LGBTQ+ communities. A further point of discussion has been how these instances impact their psychological well-being, in addition to the stressors and demands that come with being college students. While students share that they have sought help from mental health and higher education professionals on their campuses, they have also mentioned those professionals lacking understanding and adequate skills to support them. While scholars have done a fair job of sharing the hostile experiences, a focus on the well-being of these instances, particularly within an intersectional lens, is nonexistent.

I approached this research using two philosophical perspectives: (1) transformative and (2) social constructivist. A transformative worldview includes a focus on addressing the social issues and systems of oppression directly impacting the lives of their participants and advancing knowledge to improve their lives (Mertens, 2009). In response to participants sharing their experiences, my goal is to leverage their voices in ways that help to dismantle barriers that restrict Black QT communities from having an enriching and meaningful experience on our campuses. In addition, researchers who take a social constructivist view focus on understanding the social and historical contexts that shape the lived experiences of their participants (Mertens, 2009). An additional aspect of a social constructivist approach is the emphasis on how the researcher's background and knowledge shape their interpretation of their research, much like the core component of hermeneutic phenomenology. With a social constructivist perspective in mind, my study was an opportunity to create space for the voices and experiences of Black QT collegians to shine as they reflected on their lived experiences within a specific sociopolitical context.

Overall, my research agenda aims to bridge the gap between marginalized communities and those who have the power to invoke change, promote cultural shifts, and rectify existing oppressive environments. That said, I hope this research contributes to a necessary sector of scholarship and prioritizes more conversations about Black queer and trans student well-being. In addition, I view my research from a lens of advocacy to amplify the voices and experiences of communities that have been and continue to be marginalized in higher education and the larger society. As participants share their stories, my goal is to allow space for their experiences to emerge and contribute to a better understanding of how Black QT collegians hold struggle and possibility together and live in moments of joy despite the oppressive environments they may

have to navigate. I hope this research will contribute to the sharing of more positive narratives and experiences of those within this community. As mentioned before, stories about joy and positive well-being for Black, QT, and Black QT individuals are scarce in literature and forms of media. By illuminating these experiences, I aim to resist the tragically Black and queer notions placed upon my community and give way for opportunities to amplify the voices of a community of people who are often silenced and spoken of in a degrading or despaired way.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study involved my analysis of one-on-one and focus group interview transcripts that were constructed through my conversation with this study's participants, in addition to photos submitted by participants. Altogether, 20 transcripts (18 one-on-one interviews and two focus group interviews) and 86 photos were analyzed for this study. Throughout this study's data collection and analysis processes, I engaged in a process known as preliminary jottings to help me make a note of thoughts, ideas, questions, or preliminary conclusions that emerged as I interviewed participants. Saldaña (2021) defines preliminary jottings as the process of making notes of, or jotting down, preliminary words or phrases as codes for notes, interview transcripts, documents, photos, and other forms of data. Furthermore, Saldaña asserts that jottings "…do not have to be accurate or final at this point, just ideas for analytic consideration while the study progresses." (p. 31)

In lieu of only writing notes for my analytic memos, I also created voice memos as an auditory alternative. Specifically, I audio-recorded multiple voice memos on my phone that included reflections on the stories I heard in my interviews, some preliminary themes I heard emerging across interviews, and reflections I had as I cleaned and analyzed my transcripts. Altogether, I recorded over 40 minutes of voice memos, which were great reference points to

assist me as I completed my data analysis and finalized the themes from this study. Together, written and auditory memos were helpful in the latter stages of data analysis to help me remember thoughts I had during the data collection and analysis stages of the research process. In the sections that follow, I provide an in-depth overview of my analytic strategy. To begin, I discuss the hermeneutic phenomenology's role in this analysis process and proceed to highlight the strategies I utilized to code and analyze my textual and visual data.

Enacting a Hermeneutic Interpretive Approach

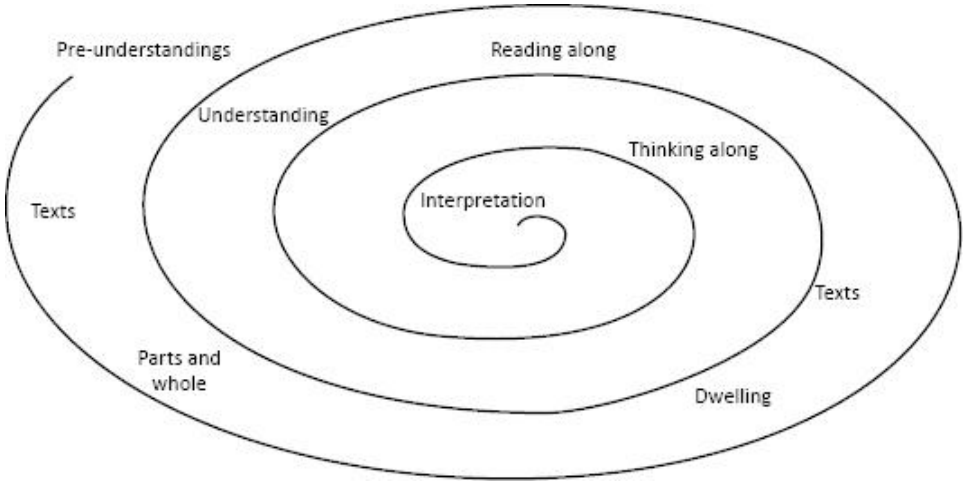
Dibley and colleagues (2020) refer to the interpretation process of hermeneutic phenomenology as an "ongoing, non-linear, circular and iterative process, going from the parts to the whole and back again in a rigorous, circular process of questioning, writing, and thinking" (p.118). Dibley and colleagues (2020) present this process as distinct phases that the researcher cycles through, non-linearly, as they interpret and make sense of the stories shared about the data they have. In addition, this process is circular and reflexive, allowing space for themes to emerge and for the researcher to re-read data for a deeper interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Here, the researcher engages in a constant comparison of participant experiences as they analyze them. In addition, the researcher also goes back and forth between their prior biases and the experiences shared by participants as they gain a full understanding of the phenomenon of interest. As a whole, this analytic strategy is also referred to as the hermeneutic circle (Figure 3.1).

In the first phase of the cycle, "meditative thinking," the researcher reads and codes through each interview transcript, interprets the stories being told within each transcript and notes any emotions they experience as they engage in this process. As the researcher engages with their participants' stories, they "dwell on" or sit with their data to ponder, wonder, and ask

internal questions about the meaning of the stories we read and what matters most. As the researcher goes back and forth between re-reading, thinking about, and dwelling on their data, the researcher allows the overarching meaning of the stories to "bubble up", allowing for the emergence of themes that connect participant stories to one another and tell a bigger story.

Figure 3.1.

The hermeneutic circle (Dibley et al., 2020)



Analysis of Textual Data

In this section, I will provide an in-depth overview of the process I used to analyze my textual data. Textual data, in this sense, consists of collected data that exists in the form of text. These data sources included photo elicitation interview transcripts (which includes participant's interpretation of their submitted photographs) and transcripts from the focus groups. Here, I merge aspects of traditional qualitative coding methods and hermeneutic interpretative strategies to provide an in-depth overview of my analytic strategy.

Naïve Reading and Open Coding

I began my data analysis by reading each transcript in its entirety without doing any coding to grasp meaning of the whole text and allowing the text to "speak" to me. This process is also referred to as a naïve reading, which is an integral first step of data analysis strategies

guided by a hermeneutic phenomenological design (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). Next, each transcript went through a round of open coding. Open coding, also known as initial or free coding, refers to the process of the researcher reviewing and becoming familiar with their data (Saldaña, 2021). Moreover, open coding provides a "starting point" for researchers to begin seeing the directions their study can take them analytically, in addition to any overarching themes that may exist across transcripts. Remaining in line with hermeneutic data analysis strategies, I also noted my reactions to what participants mentioned during our interviews and began to make a note of early patterns forming across each transcript (Peoples, 2019).

Structural Analysis and Descriptive Coding

Next, I began engaging in a structural analysis of each transcript, which involves the process of dividing each transcript into individual meaning units (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). These meaning units can vary in size (from part of a sentence to a group of sentences) to convey a specific understanding, or multiple understandings, about what is being shared in a specific section of the text. Upon being divided into meaning units, the data is then condensed into concise words or phrases that describe the meaning unit. This process draws similarities to descriptive coding, which is the process of summarizing qualitative data by assigning codes or labels to segments of data (Saldaña, 2021). After condensing the meaning units, I began to compare them in order to find the similarities and differences that were present across all the data. In addition to this constant comparison, preliminary themes began to emerge, or "bubble up". Remaining in line with the hermeneutic circle, I continued to read and re-read full interview transcripts as I allowed these preliminary themes to emerge, making constant comparisons between the individual meaning units (the parts) and the emerging themes (the whole).

Comprehensive Understanding and Focused Coding

To construct main themes and subthemes, I engaged in focused coding. Focused coding refers to the process of categorizing the coded data thematically or conceptually by looking for the most frequent or significant initial codes (Saldaña, 2021, p. 303). Additionally, this process also allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the major themes across the data, and in turn, the phenomena of interest. Thinking with hermeneutics in mind, the goal of this stage is to also gain a comprehensive understanding of the data being shared. Comprehensive understanding is the process of summarizing and synthesizing themes and sub-themes in relation to the research questions, the context of the study, and the phenomenon of interest (Lindseth & Norberg, 2004). As I did this, I reflected on all themes and sub-themes that have emerged while also reflecting on my own pre-understandings about the phenomenon of interest and how these understandings (my own and those shared by my participants) created a new understanding about the phenomena of interest. I also incorporated my recorded voice memos and researcher notes to aid me in solidifying my themes.

Analysis of Visual Data

Visual data for this study consisted of any photo participants submitted in response to the guiding prompts presented for their photovoice activity. Participants submitted a variety of photos, ranging from original photos created by the participants to photos found online. Upon submission, photos were organized into participants' designated folders and referenced during photo-elicitation interviews. In addition to analyzing transcripts of participant stories as they discussed their photos, I also reviewed each photo, making note of my feelings and reactions to what the photo conveyed and, collectively, seeing how themes from the textual data were illuminated and connected with depicted visually.

Benefit of a Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach

As mentioned earlier, hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes embedding the researcher's pre-understandings about the research topic throughout the research process in lieu of bracketing them from the research process, which is common in other forms of qualitative research (Dibley et al., 2020; Peoples, 2021). As a result, my pre-understandings about Black queer and trans existence, within and outside of a postsecondary context and largely based on my personal experiences, gave me some advantages as I engaged in this research study. Perhaps the most impactful benefit of this approach was how my identity as a Black queer man and consistent engagement with people in the Black QT community provided me with knowledge of certain cultural references unique to those in the Black QT community. Some of these references include, but are not limited to, the use of Black queer vernacular and terminology common to the Black QT community used by participants, in addition to nods toward specific life experiences such as knowledge about elements of ballroom culture, experiences celebrating Black queer and trans history and existence, and feelings about identity disclosure and expression. All of this proved to be a major benefit and helped me make sense of the stories being shared, pull of key concepts that were vital to the Black QT college experience, and see when and where themes emerged across them.

Ethical Considerations

As I prepared to begin my study, it was important for me, as the researcher, to be mindful of ethical concerns that may arise as I conduct my study. One of the first concerns that came to mind is protecting participants' identities since they will be sharing personal information via my questionnaires, the interviews, and the photos they submit. Due to the subject of this study, it was also imperative for me to be mindful of how I protect the participants' gender identities and/or

sexual orientations and acknowledge the fact that some participants may be disclosing their identities for the first time.

To account for ethical concerns and protect participants from any harm or identity disclosure, I gained approval from North Carolina State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before I began my study. Additionally, data was stored on a password-protected computer that was only used by the researcher in a secure location. Furthermore, I requested participants' consent three times to ensure I had the participants' permission to proceed with my study, report their stories, and use their photos: (1) once in the demographic questionnaire, (2) once in the photo submission form, and (2) verbally before conducting the actual interview. When requesting consent, I made sure to explain the purpose of the study and my intentions for using their narrative and visual data (e.g., dissemination through publication and presentations). Lastly, participants were prompted to refrain from submitting photographs of other people not participating in this study. In case participants did share these photos, I plan to cross the third parties out of the photos, blur third parties' faces and other identifiable things in the photos or describe the photo instead of sharing the actual photo in future dissemination of this research.

To account for validity, I used a combination of three strategies throughout my study: (1) triangulation, (2) member checking, and (3) reflexivity. First, triangulation is a process that involves the researcher using multiple data sources in tandem when interpreting data. For this study, triangulation was enacted using five data sources: a demographic questionnaire, transcripts from one-on-one and focus group interviews, the researcher notes from the interviews, photos provided by the participants, and voice memos I recorded to make note thoughts that were occurring throughout the data collection and analysis phases on the research process. To complete member checking, I shared interview transcripts with participants to ensure

I accurately portrayed the stories and concepts they intended to convey. Lastly, engaging in reflexivity refers to the process of the researcher acknowledging the biases, values, and experiences they may bring to a study. In alignment with hermeneutic phenomenology, embedding these preconceived ideas and perspectives about this topic throughout this research process is necessary (Dibley et al., 2020, pp. 142 -145). To account for my potential bias, I engaged in the reflexivity process by developing voice memos throughout the duration of the data collection and analysis process to note any biases that appeared throughout the study, in addition to any new ideas and themes that were emerging about the phenomenon of interest.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I provided an in-depth overview of my methodological approach to conducting this study. I engaged in hermeneutic phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of Black QT collegians. Furthermore, participants utilized photovoice as a tool to visually convey their lived experiences and engaged in photo elicitation interviews to provide narratives about the submitted photos. Focus groups were also conducted to conclude the data collection process to further expound of lived experiences as Black QT students and create a communal space centered in support, healing, and joy. To close out this chapter, I included an overview of my approach to data analysis, in addition to my positionality as a researcher engaging in this work.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and understand the experiences and well-being of Black queer and trans (QT) college students, particularly how (1) made sense of their racial, sexualized, and/or gendered lives, (2) the impacts their collegiate environments had on their psychological well-being, and (3) the ways they experienced and made sense of joy as Black QT college students. The overarching research question guiding this study is: *How do Black queer and trans college students experience radical healing amid the collegiate and socio-political environments they navigate?* In addition to this overarching research question, three sub-research questions also guided this study – (1) How do Black QT collegians make sense of their racialized, queered, and/or gendered realities?, (2) How do Black QT collegians describe the impact their campus and socio-political environments have on their well-being?, and (3) How do Black QT collegians make sense of and experience joy?

By engaging in a photovoice activity, two photo-elicitation interviews, and one, optional, focus group (six of the nine participated), participants reflected on a range of experiences comprising of it meant to be Black and queer and/or trans individuals on campus and within the broader society. To guide this study, two theoretical frameworks were employed: the radical healing framework (RHF) and quare theory. Together, a quared, radical healing perspective allows me to explore the full breadth of experiences for Black QT college students – the negative and the positive – and how these experiences impacted their psychological well-being. In addition, these theoretical approaches guided the development of the photovoice activity prompts, interview and focus group questions, and the overarching data analysis process. Throughout this chapter, I discuss experiences shared by the participants and findings that emerged from the research study. To begin, I provide an overview of the study's participants,

with crucial details about each of them and a snapshot of the stories they shared in the interviews and focus groups. Next, I provide an overview of the themes that emerged from this study, accompanied by quotes from the participants. To conclude this chapter, I provide a high-level overview of the themes and findings that emerged from my analysis of stories shared during photo-elicitation interviews and focus group interviews.

Overview of Participants

Altogether, nine participants representing five different four-year institutions in North Carolina participated in this research study (See Table 4.1 for the full demographic information). All participants were current students between the ages of 19 to 23 and represented various racial and ethnic backgrounds, in addition to a range of sexual orientations and gender identities. In addition, participants reflected a range of institutional types throughout the state of North Carolina. Specifically, four students were enrolled at PWIs, four were enrolled at minority-serving institutions (MSIs), and one student was enrolled at a historically Black college or university (HBCU). In the section that follows, I provide profiles for each participant to give more context about their identities and lived experiences.

Ashley's (she/they) passion for community, organizational activism, and the uplift of Black queer and trans people shone beautifully throughout our interviews. As such, Ashley was known to be actively involved as a student leader who constantly advocated for her Black QT peers on campus. In moments when she was not using her voice as a platform for her peers, she was known to open her home to friends and newcomers every Sunday for a night of fellowship, food, and games. In our interviews, Ashley often talked about her experience growing up with very religious and homophobic parents, growing into her own understanding of spirituality, and her love for Black women authors, such as Alice Walker and bell hooks.

Table 4.1

Participant Demographic Table

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Ethnicity	Sexual Orientation	Gender	Pronouns	Institution Type
Ashley	20	Black	African American/ Descendent of Enslaved Africans	Queer, Bisexual, & Demisexual	Cisgender Woman	She/They	MSI
James	22	Black	African American	Gay	Cisgender Man	He/Him/ His	PWI
Jasmine	21	Creole, Mestizo, & White	Caribbean American	Bisexual	No label	She/They	PWI
Leila	22	Black	Nigerian & Antiguan	Heterosexual	Transgender Woman/ Femme	She/Her/ Hers	HBCU
Musa	22	Black	African American	Gay	Gender non-conforming/ Nonbinary	They/ Them	PWI
Octavia	23	Black	African American	Bisexual	Cisgender Woman	She/Her/ H	MSI
Radish	19	Black	Black American	Queer	Transgender Man/ Nonbinary	He/ Him	PWI
Sea	20	Black/ Mixed	Black American & German	Gay	Demiboy	He/They	MSI
Sol	20	Black/ Afro-Latinx	Honduran, Afro-Cuban, Nicaraguan, & African American	Lesbian	Genderqueer	She/He	MSI

James' (he/his/his) love for others and spreading his joy to those in his community was a major point of emphasis in our conversations. Throughout our interviews, James often emphasized the beauty of navigating life as a Black gay man who taps into his masculinity and femininity at any moment as he expresses himself. James possessed an admirable sense of confidence in and love for himself that was apparent as he spoke about living life as his most authentic, delicate, but also strong, self. For James, his community was essential to his college experience and life overall. Whether it be his core friend group, friends from his men of color support program, or his fraternity brothers, James often referenced their impact on his life, the love and support they showed him, and the ways he has been able to do life with them over time.

Jasmine's (she/they) recount of living as a Black QT person was a unique one. Instead of viewing their identities at the intersection, Jasmine viewed them in their own compartmentalized states, each having their own unique story about Jasmine's journey to love and celebrate them. For example, my conversations with Jasmine taught me how much her hair meant to her and how she expressed herself. Seeing Black women wear their natural hair "big", was admirable to Jasmine. To her, wearing their hair in this form resisted the status quo and challenged society's standards of what women's hair should look like, especially within a professional setting. Since being in college, Jasmine has begun to wear her hair as such and feels best when she does. In addition to hair, "gender-bending" with attire was something Jasmine loved and admired about being queer and is something they have leaned into more since being in college.

Leila (she/her/hers) is actively engaged in the uplift and celebration of Black trans figures – of past, present, and future. In our conversation, she often cited Black trans icons, such as Marsha P. Johnson, as those who have laid the foundation for trans people to exist in joy and freedom. In our conversations, Leila often referenced the joy they experienced reading and

learning more about Black transness, Black trans feminism, queer linguistics, and related topics while in college. For them, reading and learning about Black trans people of the past and how they shaped society made them feel seen and validated. In other parts of our conversation, I learned more about her experiences of being a trans athlete and the ways she continues to advocate for trans joy and participation in sports.

Musa (they/them) had a beautiful spirit, with a burning passion to advocate for the lives of those who shared their identities, but also those who did not but experienced the weight of oppression by the white, cisheteropatriarchal society we live in. A common thread that showed up across Musa's stories was their navigation of what it means to be nonbinary in this society. In multiple responses, Musa reflected on recently coming to terms with their gender identity, the fears and stress of navigating society and those that are resistant to anything outside the gender binary, and their ongoing journey of becoming more open with how they express this aspect of their existence. Doing drag was also a huge component of Musa's life and had a dynamic impact on their love of self and self-expression.

For **Octavia (she/her/hers)**, being Black and queer were, in her words, "a vibe" – with both experiences embodying beauty in her eyes. In her conversations, Octavia often reflected on her reactions to the harmful statements her family, family of friends, and peers would say about being queer. Some examples of this include her being sexualized or being told that she's selfish for being bisexual. In addition, Octavia also reflects a lot on the dichotomy of being othered in Black spaces for being queer and in overwhelmingly white spaces for being Black. Regardless, however, being a Black queer person was something Octavia took immense joy and pride in.

Radish (he/him) is a Black trans man with a gigantic love for music and is passionate about creating worlds that disrupt the status quo and systems that continue to oppress and restrict

the lives of Black queer and trans individuals. For Radish, DJing and sharing music with their friends and others they met was a huge source of joy for them! In their stories, Radish recounts the bittersweetness of living life as a Black trans man. While they did experience a lot of resistance from parents, ex-intimate partners, and old friends as they began to truly understand what it meant to be trans, the friends they made in college have served as a beacon of light for them in their time of identity exploration and affirmation. When they are not discussing or playing music, Radish and their friends are often together, discussing ways to abolish oppressive systems and dreaming of new realities where queer and trans people of color can live in freedom and authenticity.

In our conversations, **Sea (he/they)** spoke highly about the spaces their institution offered, which played a role in Sea's ability to find community on campus and feeling supported as a Black queer student. In addition to these narratives, Sea also recounts moments of distress and fear that manifest as they engage with peers and attempt to express themselves in a manner that affirms their identities. Like some of students in this study, drawing also played key role in how Sea currently expresses themselves – whether that be something they drew or a drawing someone else gifted them. As they look ahead, is adamant about taking this expression and authenticity to new heights as they continue to explore and express the intersection of their race, gender, and sexuality.

For **Sol (she/he)**, being an Afro-Latinx, genderqueer person brought a lot of challenges and feelings of isolation – mainly due to the resistance, homophobia, and transphobia from their family and the difficulty they experienced trying to find people in their world with their identities. Throughout Sol's reflections, they mentioned moments of trying to find community and often leaning on online communities, their partner, and those within their major (Women's,

Gender, and Sexuality) as the community they desired. In addition, Sol emphasized the benefit of being away from home, which allowed them to live authentically and further explore and affirm their identity as a genderqueer person.

Presentation of Findings

For this study, findings emerged from multiple stages of data collection and analysis procedures. Data collection included photos submitted by participants in the photovoice activity completed prior to the participants' first interviews, data from two photo-elicitation interviews with all nine participants, and data from two focus groups with six of the nine participants. Altogether, 86 photos, 18 photo-elicitation interview transcripts, and two focus group transcripts were analyzed for this study.

Table 4.2

Summary of themes and sub-themes

Themes	**Subthemes**	**Sub-Research Question Alignment**
Navigating Hostile and Isolating Experiences	● Existing as One of Few ● Negative Interactions with Peers ● Living in Fear ● Lack of Familial Support ● Campus Deficiencies ● *Disappointing Counseling Services* ● Impact on Well-Being	SRQ1, SRQ2
Identity Exploration and Navigation	● College as an Avenue for Identity Exploration and Affirmation ● Beauty in the Experience ● My Existence is Resistance	SRQ1, SRQ2
Joy Starts with Me	● Joy in Identity Affirmation and Empowerment ● Joy in Creative Expression	SRQ1, SRQ3
Spaces of Affirmation, Validation, and Solace	● Chosen Family, Kinship, and Community ● Classroom Environments as Learning and Identity-Affirming Spaces ● Affirming Co-Curricular Spaces	SRQ1, SRQ3

Four overarching themes emerged, with multiple subthemes (14 altogether) and one sub-subtheme emerging within the overarching themes. All themes and subthemes can be found in Table 4.2, along with the sub-research questions they are connected to. The first theme, *Navigating Hostile and Isolating Experiences,* emerged as participants reflected on some of the barriers and hostile experiences they encountered as they navigated life as Black queer and trans college students on and off campus. In addition, participants shared the ways these negative instances made them feel, along with the impact they had on their well-being. The second theme, *Identity Exploration and Navigation*, refers to participants' stories about living authentically and the ways they expressed their as they navigated life as Black queer and trans college students. In addition to living authentically, participants also reflected on the ways they resisted whiteness, cisheteronormativity, and other forms of systemic pressures and oppression that tried to restrict or diminish their existence. The third theme, *Joy Starts with Me*, highlights the ways participants experienced joy as Black queer and trans college students, both on and off-campus. In addition, this theme also encapsulates a common thread of creativity being at the center of participants' joy, in addition to methods and approaches they utilized to prioritize their well-being and care for themselves. Lastly, the fourth theme, *Spaces of Affirmation, Validation, and Solace*, focuses on the spaces, material and virtual, that affirmed their identities, comforted them, and brought them joy. In the sections that follow, I provide an in-depth analysis of each theme and sub-theme, along with selected quotes that coincide with the designated theme. I will also share some of the photos submitted by participants with their associated quote.

Theme 1- Navigating Hostile and Isolating Experiences

This theme highlights the negative and hostile experiences participants shared their experiences as Black queer and trans students at their institution and within the larger society.

Participants spoke about being one of few, or the only, Black queer and/or trans person on their campus and how isolating this experience was. As a result of these isolating experiences, participants often felt sad, lonely, depressed, etc., trying to navigate cisheteronormativity or whiteness that was present on their campuses. Furthermore, many participants reflected on familial upbringings and the lack of support they experienced from peers, their institutions, and family members. In addition to being one of few or the only Black QT person on their campus, participants also provided insight about the lack of resources available to them on campus, in addition to barriers that were present from a campus policy and practice standpoint. Lastly, participants reflected on the impact these negative experiences had on their well-being.

Existing as One of Few

One of the most common themes across the participant interviews was their existence as one of the few people on their campus that shared their identities as Black queer and/or trans individuals. For many, being able to be in community with other Black queer and/or trans individuals was a rarity. As a result, some participants reflected on the isolation they experienced being one of few on their campus, in addition to having to seek community off campus. When reflecting on their experiences as a college student living at the intersection of their race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, Sol states:

> So like, for the most part, I think, growing up as a Black and queer person, I felt very isolated in my identity. And a lot of times I didn't even get representation of people that looked like me. And it made me feel like an outsider. I was constantly in my own head, thinking about, like, what other people might think of me. And just the issues that I experienced as a queer person, and how that, I guess, overlaps with issues that I've experienced as a Black person…. I identify as an Afro-Latinx person. And I think that

that's already something that I feel kind of isolated in, in my experience, because I've never really meet too many people here, like me, in this state. Then when you add being queer on top of that. It's something that I feel like, I'm alone in that experience. And I am constantly trying to find other people like me. And it seems like the only space that I can really find community with people who are similar to me is online, which is comforting to know that there are people who are like me out there, but then it's kind of like, I'm online, and I'm seeing this community, and then I get offline. And then I realized, you know, it's not really all there. And I have to go and seek that out for myself. And then they're, like, things about my race that influence how I'm perceived in terms of sexuality.

Figure 4.1

Feelings of Isolation

Similarly, Leila also reflects on the difficulty that comes with sharing her experience as a Black trans woman. In particular, she emphasizes how isolating that experience is as one of few Black trans women on their campus and not having many friends that understand her full experience:

…. and to me, stranded kind of relates to lost or loneliness in a way. So, in my experience at my HBCU, apart from the other Black trans woman, my friend, like I didn't know any other trans individuals, Black trans individuals at school…. But yeah, I just felt kind of

> like just alone. And I feel like sometimes I can relate to my cisgender peers, even though we're both a woman and we're both Black. Her being cis and me being trans, obviously, there are things that I go through that she wouldn't understand and hasn't experienced, and vice versa…. it can feel kind of isolating.

Just as Sol and Leila reflected on the difficulties of (1) being one of few people with their identities on campus and (2) having difficulty finding people that share and understand their lived experiences, Sea further emphasizes how hard it is for them to exist as a Black queer person as they navigate queer and Black spaces, respectively. Here, Sea says:

> It's hard, like sometimes being Black, and gay. And just like we're in general, it's hard. Because it's like the queer people on campus, it's hard to relate to them sometimes. And then it's like the Black people on campus, like, it's hard to relate to them. Because, like, you just don't get the queer experience. And then the queer people, they just, you just don't get the Black experience. And it's hard to find people who can relate to both. And who understands both. But when I do meet people like that, I feel like I have an easier time just letting my guard down, because they can really relate. Like they actually get it. I think overall, just being Black and queer, it's hard sometimes. Because sometimes it's just... loneliness is like a huge factor. Because a lot of people just don't get it.

While Sea has been able to find peers that relate to the broader queer and Black communities in some ways, they struggled to find people who live at and/or understand the intersection of being Black and queer, thus contributing to their feelings of loneliness on their campus.

Negative Interactions with Peers

In addition to experiences of loneliness and isolation being shared across participants, some students take it a step further to highlight the negative experiences they had on their

campuses. As Radish reflects on coming out as trans, he shares that the friends he had prior to this moment started treating him differently and eventually began to exclude him after he came out to them.

> And even just in my own experiences with, like, Black cishet people I like, or Black, just Black people in general, but who aren't trans. I remember I had some friends. Like these Black girls that I was friends with before I came out as trans. And, like, once I came out, like, the energy just completely shifted. Like, I don't know what that was. I don't know. Like, they never explained it, but it was just like, they just started treating me really differently and really weird, once I came out as trans. And like, they did a lot to exclude me and not talk to me. And I think just like in general just not like that. And then, like in general, just kind of like pretended that they liked the identity, the name I was using. Like, they didn't really make any actual effort to respect it.

When discussing the larger Black community on their campus, Radish goes on to state their experiences with instances of transphobia and homophobia from their peers.

> And like, they're just like experiences that they don't know, they can, like, connect on and then like, they're just generally like, homophobic and transphobic. And it just feels like it's really isolating, trying to like, make moves or like be a part of these communities when they just like simply just don't understand. It's really like, the Black people on campus are never gonna see me as a man. Or treat me in such a way.

Octavia furthers this point as she reflects on being ostracized as a queer person within the Black community and being seen as “different”.

> Yeah, um, you know, like I said earlier, you know, you have to deal with the perceptions that you get on a regular basis being Black. But then within our own community, you

> know, the perception of being queer, or even different, that makes you an individual within our community. Sometimes it's hard.

In addition to discussing the dynamics of being judged by the Black community because of her queer community, Octavia also reflects on her feelings about the white QT students on her campus and their lack of care or concern for Black QT individuals or experiences.

> …. And so, you know, that's the thing to within the LGBT community, there's a hierarchy. You know, you know, especially, you know, the white gay men have, like, you know, or just white LGBT people, have the upper hand when it comes to that type of thing. So, like, you know, you have these white women who are part of the LGBT community, you even have the grad students working there, that's part of the LGBT community. But a lot of them are white, and they never come to anything that we, you know, invite them to, when it comes to Black issues. Or addressing things that are intersectional between Black queer people. So that's really what's kind of going on at [my university]. So, it's kind of, it's kind of hard.

Living in Fear

Because of the negative experiences commonly shared by Black QT individuals, whether experienced personally or secondhand through a peer or media, it is common for Black QT people to experience some form of fear as they navigate their day-to-day lives. Multiple participants express these fears as they reflect on various aspects of their day-to-day lives and the implications being Black and queer and/or trans may have on them. As Sea talks about navigating campus, he shares multiple instances of feeling apprehensive when being around Black, cishet men. In one case, he reflects on a past class experience where he heard Black cishet men making comments about potential harm to a future gay son.

> And in one of my classes, it was like a pretty small class. But I guess there were some people in front of me. And it was four Black men. And one of them was basically saying how if they had a gay son, they would beat the gay out of him. And I think this always kind of stuck with me because it just paints the picture of how I feel in terms of, like, being in Black cishet[13] spaces, where it's like, I feel kind of like unsafe, mainly because I don't really know if my safety is kind of like compromised in a way.

Because of this experience, Sea often feels unsafe when engaging or even being near Black cishet men, despite sharing some identities. Radish furthers this point as he reflects on having to constantly consider the risks of dressing in a way that is gender-affirming in public.

> Another thing. Like, whether or not I desire to pass is because then I have to work to appear more manly, or more masculine in the eyes of other people. And even that's a thing about safety, because it's just like, I could try that. But then, like, if I'm clocked, it could be a dangerous situation. Or I could, like, maintain, I guess, like, in a period where I'm like, "Okay, we'll be perceived as a woman", but then that sucks. That's awful. So, it's a very, like, exhausting experience. Because, like, I always feel like I have to be on edge about certain things that, like, cis people just don't have to think about that.

Here, Radish discusses the internal debate of desiring to dress more "masculine" and feel affirmed in their identities, but being risk of being put into a dangerous situation if "clocked[14]". On the other hand, there is option of dressing and appearing more "feminine", but at the expense of not feeling like their true self as a result. Radish pushes this point forward by stating:

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[13] Cishet is short for "cisheterosexual", which refers to an individual who is cisgender and heterosexual.

[14] Clocked is defined as one being noticed or outed as being trans another individual. Being clocked could have some harmful implications, such verbal or physical assaults.

> …. I have the benefit, perception-wise, it is like, a lot more socially acceptable to be perceived as, a tomboy, or like a stud. And so, like, that is like a safe place that I can like, maneuver into if, like, if I'm expressing myself masculinely, but that is not like, like, it's not like something I want to share. There's a safety net there. I have very mixed feelings on being perceived as a tomboy or stud. But like, I have to acknowledge that there is a place of safety in doing that. And so, I don't know that, like, I feel that it is, honestly, I feel that it is like a lot safer for me to like, dress more masculine, and like, I don't know, like, accentuate that on campus.

Like Radish, Musa also reflects on their fear of being seen in public dressed in any way that is not masculine despite normally being perceived as masculine presenting. In addition to dress, Musa also reflects on still having some apprehension on telling people what pronouns they need to use when being addressed.

> I'm masc presenting, of course. And, like, I struggle every day with the fact that I identify as non-binary. And I would like to appear more traditionally non-binary. But it's so hard for me to do that because of the fear of what are people gonna say. Am I gonna get stared at me I'm gonna get, like, shit for trying to dress how I want? And like, even recently, the question has been like, oh, I'm about to go into the professional world. Well, I want to dress not traditionally masculine. And how do I do that? How do I navigate a space where men dress like men and women dress like women, or dress how they think they should be perceived based off of their gender? And how do I break that rule and still be comfortable? And I don't know the answer to that. And I'm still terribly uncomfortable with telling people, “Oh, I use they/them pronouns. Please use that.” So on and so forth.

> And it's really hard to navigate that, especially when I'm not very good at the conversation of telling people, "Oh, these are my pronouns please use them."

Lack of Familial Support

Another subtheme to emerge from this study was the lack of support participants were experiencing from their family members. Whether it was directed toward them, or their romantic partner, Sol, Radish, and Musa all discuss discontent with their family and the way to talk about the queer and trans community. Sol and Radish both reflect on their parents making transphobic remarks about the trans community broadly. For Sol, this transphobia has kept them from introducing their trans partner to their parents.

> For example, my mother will say stuff that I consider to be really transphobic. And she doesn't really think anything about it because she separates herself from trans women…. I remember sitting down and having like a three-hour-long conversation with her because she, on top of just not respecting trans people in general, doesn't respect my partner, which is caused a lot of problems in my relationship. They've never met before for that reason; she's just never been respectful of that. So, then it really requires me to have to sit down and have the patience to talk to her about stuff like that. Because not only is this just affecting how she treats people around her, but it's affecting my personal life as well. And also, can affect the life of her own children.

Radish, on the other hand, has introduced their partner, a trans woman, to their family. However, doing so has led to their family making negative comments about their partner.

> Like earlier this year, my family was just like… it was like too much transphobia to handle. And I remember, like, they would say things about, like, my partner [trans

> woman], like, assuming that she was, like, grooming me, in their eyes. They were saying she was pretending to be a woman because it's like a sex thing. And I'm just like, it's not.

While Sol and Radish both discussed sharing their, or their partners', identities with their family members, Musa has not shared anything about being gay or nonbinary identities with their parents because they know their parent sees those identities as taboo.

> Um, I feel like, I can't really tell, like, my family members. I can't tell my family members that I'm gay because that's very much so like, a taboo. I can't tell my family members that I'm non-binary because it's also something that's taboo, and they don't understand.

Campus Deficiencies

As expected, participants had a lot of critiques for their institutions, particularly the ways they lacked in support for their Black queer and trans college students. A common theme that stood out among most of the participants was the institution's lack of accounting for the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality when establishing sources of support. While some institutions had "quality" sources of support for Black students and QT students, respectively, participants drew attention to the struggles of trying to navigate these separate spaces as Black QT people. Sol reflects on this with their critique on their institution's willingness to celebrate Blackness, gender, and sexuality separately.

> I think, like, the school does a good job of acknowledging that there are so many different types of people here. But I think that a lot of times, we look at these things separately…. And I think a similar thing can be said about Black History Month, or when you talk about queerness, those things, a lot of times, tend to be separate. L ike when we talk about both of those things, they're never like in the lens of Black queerness, or Black

> transness. If we're talking about queer identities, or we're having an event about queer identities, we're never really talking about like, Black, queer and trans people, or issues that might affect them. And I think that that doesn't really help with everything that's going on in terms of people feeling uncomfortable talking about race, because we do have our moments where we talk about race. But again, we don't talk about what that looks like when we talk about Black queer people. And what queerness looks like when we're talking about Black queer people.

In addition to their campus failing to actively celebrate the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality, Sol also shares their frustration with the whitewashing of organizations that are meant to be for queer and trans students of color.

> They [LGBTQ+ student group] claim to be a group specifically for people of color, or LGBTQ+ people of color. And that group is the longest-lasting LGBTQ+ group at the school because all the other groups basically were whitewashed, and they were made to basically only cater to white, queer people. I'm not going to say that this group was also whitewashed, [but] I do feel like there's a lot of white people in that group.

Another common theme that emerged was institutions' failure to create inclusive housing opportunities for their queer and trans students. For example, Leila discusses the institutional barriers they have experienced that have prevented them from living on campus and rooming with someone that they felt most comfortable with. Leila states:

> …. in my experience, for my housing, I had to be housed either in my own room or, if I did have a roommate, I had to be another trans woman. Or a room with a guy. Like it was my only option. And I know there was another trans person at school. I think they were

> also a trans woman. But they were only here for a very short amount of time. But for their housing, they had to room on the male side.

While participants gave light to campus practices and policies that created barriers for them, Ashley raised concerns about their campus' physical space. While their institution did create a designated space on campus for queer and trans college students, Ashley felt like more could be done by the institution.

> I don't know, we could do a lot better. Like, I know that it's not a priority for them. I know that they have it [money]…. But at an institution like this, we can do way better. Like they could fund the offices more. They could give us more freedom and more ways to actually engage with the Black and queer students on campus. So, we have the spaces, but our [designated lounge space], which is like another kind of space for queer and trans students that exists on campus. It's in the basement of some old building. Like, nobody wants to go into the basement. And the workers and stuff, that they try to make it cute, whatever. But it's like, who wants to walk in this little hallway that's like, old?

As she continues to discuss this designated space, Ashley then goes on to share their concerns about the gender-affirming restrooms in this space.

> Even the gender-affirming bathrooms. They're like, rundown. I don't use them because I'm not trans. But I have a friend who's trans and was complaining about them. And like, there was one time I needed to go to the bathroom, and they were like, oh, you can use the one out here. And it was like, toilet paper everywhere. It was a mess. But the other bathrooms are clean all the time or, you know, are kept up to par. So, it's just like, we have the spaces. But are they really shown, like value and appreciation? No. And I'm like, this is how they view the students. Like we aren't we're here. You know, we have the

> numbers. We're one of the most diverse schools in the system. But the appreciation is not there.

Disappointing Counseling Services

Some participants also discussed their discontent with the counseling and wellness services offered on their campus. While Musa did try to utilize the counseling services, they left feeling disappointed and felt like they were not taken seriously by the counseling staff. While reflecting on this experience, they state:

> …. the counseling center is a poor excuse for mental health resources. And I know it's not the counselor's fault. It's the university's fault. And I will call them out on it. Because having been there before, having said certain things that I think should have been taken more seriously by people that I talked to there was, and then not taking the things I said seriously enough, a problem. And I get it; they were overworked and understaffed. And again, is the university's fault. And I will 100% say that with my full chest.

Ashley also shares her frustrations with offerings at her institution. Although their institution did have group counseling opportunities for Black women, Ashley was displeased by the level of Christianity embedded in the experience.

> Well, the on-campus one... it is as much as it can be because it's Black women. It's not Black queer women. And at times, it can be very Christian-based. And that is really frustrating because I'm not Christian, but I grew up with parent pastors. I have a lot of church trauma. But most of the group is Christian. So, you know, I don't want to stop their shine when they're kind of going off on little tangents. I kind of just be like, okay, you know, I'm gonna take what I can and leave the rest. So, it's kind of one of those spaces where it's like, I don't feel like as a whole person, I can show up. But it does

> scratch the itch for, you know, getting connection with Black women on campus and that kind of stuff.

In addition to these experiences, there were other mentions of knowing counseling services existed on their campuses but not feeling comfortable with sharing their experiences with people who either did not share their identities or were affirming their identities. In response, off-campus support was the next best option for those who continued to pursue counseling.

Impact on Well-Being

In addition to the negative experiences and fears participants shared (at their institution and within the broader society), lack of familial support, and the minimal effort their institutions provided to support Black QT college students, they also spoke about the impact these instances had on their mental health and well-being. For many, instances of stress, anxiety, depression, being tired, feeling isolated and alone, hopelessness, and other responses were mentioned. For example, Radish provided a photo of a trauma bingo card that included barriers and hostile incidents that trans individuals often experience (Figure 4.2), resulting in a lot of deep-rooted trauma for trans individuals.

Figure 4.2

Trauma Bingo

To accompany their photo, Radish states:

> … I think this bingo card kind of, in a really weird way, goes over just in general, what it feels like… feeling like you'll never heal. Feeling like you want to leave your life behind and just run. I think those are a lot of things that we all feel especially just like being trans and not being at a point in our transition where we feel happy and with our bodies, too.

In this sense, Radish speaks on feeling hopeless about living life as a Black, trans man, with the thought they may never heal from the ongoing trauma they continue to experience as they continue to mature. Musa shares similar sentiments of hopelessness as they reflect on being Black, gay, and nonbinary in college (Figure 4.3). As they discussed what it was like to hold these identities and navigate college, they mentioned:

> I was going through a lot of feeling like I was sitting in a room that was on fire, and just having to be like, this is normal. This is fine. So, everybody's like, "Oh, college is hard.

> College is this. College is that". Like, I get that, but it shouldn't be fine. It shouldn't be normal. It shouldn't be as bad as I felt it was, in my experience. Like a lot of what I experienced concerning gender expression and sexuality. It felt as though, like I said, sitting in a room that was on fire and just being in the camp of "Oh, this is fine. It'll blow over, it'll stop burning". When in reality, it didn't. I really felt lost, confused, upset.

Figure 4.3

Sitting in a Room on Fire

Similarly, Ashley also reflects on the stressors related to being a Black queer college student. As someone who moved out of her parents' home at an early age due to their parents' homophobia, Ashley has had to financially support themselves, in addition to balancing the demands of being a college student. When reflecting on the state of their well-being as a student, Ashley says the following:

> Stressed. Overwhelmed. It's definitely causing more harm than good. And it sucks because I love learning. And I love being in these spaces, where I can, like, learn and challenge what I think and have these conversations and like, really get down to it. But oftentimes, I'm so stressed out about other things, whether it's bills, or trying to handle the jobs. I'm working three jobs. Like I don't really get a chance to always sit there and

> truly engage because I'm so stressed out about trying to survive and do the bare minimum.

Lastly, James spoke about their experiences with depression and their efforts in trying to cope and take care of himself. For him, painting was an outlet. However, painting was only so helpful and eventually proved to be ineffective the more time went on.

> Um, so last year's depression wave, I got back into art because I haven't painted, like, heavily painted in a couple of years. So, during my depression, I had pulled away. I had already started isolating myself, I felt really bad…. It was really dark time. So, I was like to make everybody like get off my back. I was like, I'm just painting everybody. Like, just let me be. I'm being artistic. This is my element. I produced six paintings, which got a lot of recognition. People were like oh my, "God, those are like really beautiful." And I'm like, "Yeah, that's what I've been doing, guys. I've been great." And then I finally came to be true to myself because, like the friend group was also falling apart at the time, and with me being depressed and not being there. Things were just going crazy. And so, it got to a point where painting was no longer working.

Altogether, participants collectively recount undesirable experiences as they navigate society as a Black QT college campus, while also juggling the demands of being college students. Among these experiences were instances of being one of few people with their identities on their campuses, having strained relationships, or no relationships at all, with unsupportive family members, living in fear of being harmed or ridiculed, or having a campus that does little to show them that they belong or are supported. Thus, these examples reveal some of the implications associated with trying to exist in a white, cisheteropatriarchal world as Black QT individuals, in addition to how these instances could lead to a decline in their well-being.

Theme 2 - Identity Exploration and Navigation

Another common theme that emerged from participants' reflections on living authentically and existing in the world as Black queer and trans individuals. Participants reflected on how being in college and away from home was a crucial opportunity for them to explore their identities (specifically gender and sexual orientation) without being under the watch, scrutiny, and judgment of their family members. In addition, participants also spoke about the ways they engaged in resistance to the societal standards and pressures that were in place and directly targeted their race, gender, and sexuality.

College as an Avenue for Identity Exploration and Affirmation

For most participants, being away from home and their families and attending college was crucial to exploring their gender and sexual orientation authentically and experiencing some peace while doing so. For example, Sol discusses the positives of not living at home and having access to resources to affirm their gender identity.

> …. I have the time to actually go and seek out resources that I need. So, like voice affirming care, I guess, like trying to change the tone of my voice, because that's something that I felt like, has always made me dysphoric. But I couldn't get access to stuff like that. Because like living in my household, my parents are transphobic. And I don't necessarily feel safe seeking out those accommodations or resources. So now that I'm on college campus, I can do that more easily.

For Sol, being able to escape the transphobia and scrutiny of their parents was vital for them as they sought to affirm their gender identity.

While many participants did share that their family's lack of support was a reason, they did not explore their gender and sexuality until they started attending college, others shared

experiences of recently coming to terms with how they identified in gender and sexual orientation. While some participants grew up in environments where they were able to explore their identities earlier in life, most of the participants either experienced resistance from family and peers or decided to conceal their true gender identity and sexuality altogether for most of their childhood. For some, the latter part of high school or even their freshman year of college was the first time they were able to outwardly explore and express their gender identity and sexuality. Musa reflects on this concept as they discuss when they began to really understand what it meant to be nonbinary.

> I think I first came to grips with it [being nonbinary] I think, right before I went into freshman year of college. That is kind of when I discovered my nonbinary-ness, and was thinking along the lines of I would like to discover that part of my identity. And what does that mean to me? How does that present in me? What am I, and am I not comfortable with doing and presenting?

Similarly, Radish recounts the moment they realized they were trans, some of the negative responses he received from friends and family, and their response to the feelings they had as they were understanding what it meant to be a trans man.

> …. I realized I was trans in November of last year [their freshmen year]. And so, through that time, I've just like, been through a lot. Like I lost like, a bunch of friends. I had to like to leave home. I like, got on T[15]. I like, was going through like every like, gender

[15] "T" is an abbreviation for Testosterone Hormone Therapy (or Masculinizing Hormone Therapy), a process typically used by transgender men and nonbinary people to produce physical changes in the body that are caused by male hormones during puberty. This hormone therapy helps better align the body with a person's gender identity. This act is actively done by taking doses of testosterone, whether through an injection, oral capsule, or a gel or patch applied to the skin (Mayo Clinic, 2023).

> thing at once…. there was like a level of like gender something happening. Like since like early high school…. But then, like once, I really realized I was like a transgender person. I don't know, it kind of just like kicked off like a series of just like, a lot of a roller coaster of emotions. And so, dealing with like everything relating to my gender and presenting the way I want and feeling gender dysphoria and all those things on top of like, I have to manage school. I have to manage my job because I'm working too.

Radish continues their reflection as he highlights the impact meeting his partner had on him and his understanding on what it meant to be a trans man.

> And so, when I got to college, I met my partner. And she's a trans woman. And I think that's when I was like, okay, so this is what I'm experiencing. Like, this is what I feel like. Because I don't know, I felt like a level of it was the fact that I was, like, dating a cishet dude for three years, and I didn't have the opportunity to explore, but I think like when I met my partner, like she gave me the space to like, actually understand my masculinity and understand, like, my manhood…. And I've been able to, like, just be in spaces where like, me being manly and me looking manly is like a normal thing. And I don't feel like pressure to be like, feminine. And so, I don't know, I feel like I've had like a lot of conversations and actually, like, give myself space to like, think more about like, what my gender means and what that is. And like, what does being like a Black man specifically, like, what does that mean for me? And so, I don't know, that has been a very interesting experience. Because then I'm, like, still, like medically transitioning, and I'm having all these thoughts about what it means to be a Black man.

Beauty in the Experience

Although participants lament on the isolation, negative moments, and decline in well-being they experienced as Black QT college students, many of them also made sure to emphasize the beauty associated with identities. For James, the Black QT community is a positive and resilient community that emphasizes joy and authenticity. Specifically, James says:

> I guess one thing about Black queer people, nothing really holds us down for too long. But I feel like we are a very bright and positive community. We're going to have our fun. We're gonna show who we really are. We're also free to express ourselves. I think I got this from Instagram. It was a long time ago, where it's "I'm not sure how, but I will". Like the actual embodiment of resilience, whereas like you're gonna bounce back. We're not sure how it's gonna happen. But somehow, someway, we're gonna get from back from point A to point B, back to point A, because we're good. We're gonna get back there when be happy. Be ourselves. Be joyous. We're not gonna be held down for too long.

For Jasmine, being able to express themselves as someone who does not conform to one gender was something they loved about being queer. As they referenced a photo (Figure 4.4) of a gender-nonconforming animated character drawn by their sibling, Jasmine states:

> I feel like a big part of queer culture is gender-bending, and just like caring less about the expectations for how you should present, like, based on what your gender is. So, this is a kind of gender non-conforming character that my sibling drew… After I came out, I definitely, like, changed the way I presented because it felt really freeing actually, because it's like, I don't know, I don't know something about it was just like, I felt like I felt less pressure to fit in the box that you know, this is the way that women dress. This is the way I want to present.

Figure 4.4

Drawn Gender-bending Character

Being able to gender bend and not restrict themselves to one gender, particularly in the way they dressed, was freeing for Jasmine. Ashley also discusses aspects of freedom, in addition to beauty and creativity, as they excitingly reflect on existing at the intersection of their Blackness and queerness.

> Like, it is such a beautiful thing to be both Black and queer simply because it's like, within queerness, I mean, like, there's so much creativity and so much freedom to explore and like play around with different things. I mean, it's always saying like, "Fuck the binary." Like we're gonna do what we want and it's gonna be dope as hell. And then to be Black on top of that, like, I mean, we are- what is it? It's like we're the most imitated. I can't even think of it, but it's just like, we are so creative, and to me, you even see it now with, like, acrylic nails or bamboo hoops or, you know, things that were once considered ghetto, they're now in and now fashion.

Ashley continues to talk about the beauty of being Black and queer by referring to the work of author and activist, Alice Walker, who also identifies as a Black queer woman and is a figure Ashley looks up to and often references in their day-to-day living.

> …. I think of the quote about womanism from Alice Walker. So, she says like, "Womanist is to feminist as lavender is to purple". And I think that is like, the perfect like, sense of like, being queer. Yeah, being queer is one thing, and being Black is one thing, but it's like being queer and Black. It's such a deep and like thought provoking experience. And it just has so much richness almost to it.

My Existence is Resistance

For many participants, being Black and queer and/or trans also embodied an active resistance to the white, cisheteropatriarchal society we live in today and the ideals, laws, and hostile acts that have continuously created barriers and harmed members of the Black QT community. For many participants, active resistance was not just participating in protests. Instead, simply being a Black QT person was resistance enough; as Ashley states, "…. the fact that we exist, like that, is resistance." Radish furthers this point by speaking on the realities of being trans in this world.

> …. a lot of what being trans is, is so much of like suffering. Because it just like, just like sucks being trans. People act weird towards you. You're watching your rights getting taken away. There are things that I have to think about when I travel and when I go places that cis people just simply do not have to think about. It's bad. But also, I remember how miserable I was when I was a woman. It was horrible. And I don't know, I feel like there should be more joy in like being trans. And I feel like this meme accentuates that. Because, like I said, being trans, yourself is resistance on its own.

In this sense, Radish brings attention to the political warfare being inflicted upon the trans community with the enactment of laws and societal norms that restrict their livelihoods and abilities to live authentically without fear or harm. As a result, Radish sees living as a trans individual as an exact resistance to these laws and norms.

For Sea, his engagement in resistance shows up in how he expresses himself in public. Below, Sea highlights his resistance to society as an ongoing process that he is still learning and becoming more comfortable with.

> I guess for me just being more I guess another form of resistance is just being more open and how I express myself. And it's gonna be like more through fashion or just the way I talk in public because sometimes when I am talking or if I am with a crowd of people, I'll like to adjust the way I speak to kind of fit a more heteronormative kind of society. Like to sort of fit, I guess, the view, like the vibe, instead of trying like to fit into the vibe just being myself, and if the people I'm trying to try to fit in don't like the way I am. That's their problem, you know? Yeah. So, I'm still kind of trying to learn that and just trying to just be more honest. And also, with, like, my fashion, like, not being afraid to be bold and doing things that just because, you know, a man might not wear this doesn't mean that I can't wear this.

For Sea, the way they dress in public is something they want to explore more, particularly being bolder and caring less about how he'll be perceived in what he wears. Musa expresses similar sentiments by reflecting on a moment when they did dress the way they wanted, in addition to how this moment made them feel.

> Um, yeah, this Halloween party. I wasn't in drag, but I was dressing how I wanted. And like, yeah. And I feel more comfortable when I wear clothing that is like gendered both

> ways or like in the middle. And it makes me it definitely makes me feel more comfortable in myself. But I feel as though the only way I'm going to completely feel like myself is if I just resist the status quo and resist society's expectations of me as a masc-presenting individual by wearing what I want, when I want, however I want.

Although many participants recounted the woes of having to navigate hostile moments, loneliness, fear, and barriers placed before them by peers, family, and society, many participants also reflected on the aspects of Black QT livingness that meant the most to them. While moments of despair continued to exist, participants were able to find the beauty of their experiences, find ways to affirm themselves, and their identities, and live authentic lives that pushed back against the status quo. While these experiences were new for some, participants also expressed eagerness to continue stepping out of their shells and living the lives they dream of.

Theme 3 - Joy Starts with Me

As discussed in Chapter 1, this study's concept of joy is being referenced as coexisting alongside struggle and the hostile experiences Black QT college students may experience. Moreover, reflections of joy for this study are more than just moments of happiness. Instead, joy is conceptualized as a state of being where participants feel like the best versions of themselves and experience a deeper connection to the identities they hold, which helps them thrive, survive, and live "freely" in spite of the violence commonly experienced by this community. While participants discussed instances of feeling isolated, having to deal with moments of hostility from peers, family, and their institution, and a decline in their well-being, they also reflected on the multitude of ways they were able to still experience and find joy. As such, participants' understanding of and experiences with joy ranged from acknowledging Black QT history to creative expression to outward expression and affirmation. In addition, joy occurred both on and

off campus and were primarily dependent on students and their willingness to search for and establish opportunities to experience joy. Moreover, participant reflections insinuate that institutions rarely curate campus environments that are positive or joyous for Black queer and trans college students despite their claim to create these experiences for their students.

Joy in Identity Affirmation and Empowerment

As participants shared their understandings of and experiences with joy, multiple participants made references to moments that affirmed and empowered them. In reflecting on their understanding of joy, Leila begins by paying homage to the work trans activists, such as Marsha P. Johnson, of the past put into establishing the joy she gets to experience today. While referencing a mural she found of Marsha P. Johnson (Figure 4.5), Leila shares:

> I think that to Black, queer, and trans people, a lot of our joy and the culture that we have, has been made possible by a lot of like our trans foremothers and trans forefathers. People who have, like, come before us and help to establish the way, the basic foundation for how trans and queer people are viewed in society. And I think that a lot of the trans and queer community can take joy from kind of like those who have come before us. And either reading about literature that highlights trans activists, queer activists, maybe like in the 1960s….When I think of trans or queer, I think of the paths and the futures that trans and queer activists have kind of crafted for us, and the ways in which we're able to take those futures and kind of like propel them forward and take what we've learned from these past activists and implement them into our daily lives, implement them into our current advocacy, around trans and queerness.

Figure 4.5

Mural of Marsha P. Johnson

Later, Leila provides an example of the joy she experienced at a trans prom that was organized and held at the Capitol in Washington, DC (Figure 4.6).

> I mean, I was just at an event with so many other trans people. And with so much joy, there. I have that community as well. I think I use it as like, just a reminder that, okay, like, again, if the community isn't here, I have all this community elsewhere. And then I think just being in that moment was really, um, it was really dope. And just like seeing so many to queer people, we're just having fun. And especially, there are a lot of kids, a lot of kids. And just them being in that space. The bravery that they displayed. To be able to come out be themselves without any really like fear, necessarily. And just like to see queer youth celebrate each other. I mean, I would have never imagined having a trans prom, even when I came out as trans. Like, I didn't really know any other trans individuals. And so, like to see this next, I guess, I won't say the next generation, but I might be part of it, but like seeing these new kids come and like seeing the community

that they have around them and having them being able to witness that. And they came from like all over all all across the country. And like for them to know that that the trans community isn't so far from them. It really put, like happiness in my heart.

Figure 4.6

Poster from Trans Prom, stating "Celebrate Trans Joy"

For Leila, joy was experienced in a community of young trans people being able to organize and celebrate their existence. For Radish, joy manifested as they affirmed their gender through using T (also known as testosterone hormone therapy). Here, Radish found joy in the idea of who they were in the moment and who they were becoming as they continued to affirm their identity as a Black trans man.

Yes, this was, um, I had ordered like a pack of needles for my injections. And I thought this picture was just like, Yeah, this is like queer and trans joy. Because it's like a little money spread. But it's like the T needles. Like is, that is joy for me like that. Like, just like the act of, like, giving myself T. Like, that is like, so much happiness for me there because I'm just like, affirming myself. And I'm like, getting closer to, like the person that I see myself being like, in the future. And so, I don't know like that. That is joy.

Like Leila and Radish, joy for Ashely showed up as experiences that further affirmed her in her identities. In particular, singer, Janelle Monae's latest album, *The Age of Pleasure,* and the music video for their lead single, "Lipstick Lover", was the embodiment of Black lesbian representation and empowerment for Ashley (Figure 4.7). In response to her photo that references both the album and music video, she states:

> So, this is Janelle Monae's *Age of Pleasure.* Her newest album. And I just love it. Like, I'm like, It embodies everything that I said before. Yeah, it's like the video; I don't know if you've seen "Lipstick Lover," but that video was *excited scream*; it was so good! I feel like you almost never see Black like queer, like lesbian representation. And that was gay as hell. And I loved it. It wasn't in a way where, you know, we get almost like over-sexualized and hyper-sexualized in a way that's more lustful and like greed, and it's, and it's just so like, yucky. But this was so beautiful and empowering…. it's just so freeing. It's like I don't care what people say. People are gonna say what they say regardless. So, I'm gonna show up as myself. All of myself. And you can take it or leave it, and the girls that get it, get it. And the girls that don't, don't.

Figure 4.7

Cover for Janelle Monae's album, "The Age of Pleasure"

Joy In Creative Expression

As participants reflected on ways they experience joy, creative expression was a common thread seen across multiple reflections. Whether that be performing in drag, drawing, or expressing oneself through their music, multiple participants discussed the freedom they felt as they engaged in their activities. For Sea, visual art and songwriting were ways they experienced joy (Figure 4.8).

> So, I have an art wall. It's basically what I call an art wall. Where I have some artwork that I drew as well as some artwork that I received from other people. And I mainly have this up here because I feel like this embodies the expression of not just like me, but as well as like other Black, queer, or just queer individuals. It's kind of like, just nice because it's, for me, it just reminds me to always like, be creative and be expressive through different art forms, whether that's like making music or songwriting or like drawing. It's kind of a great motivation for me to just always be focused on expression. Because some of the artwork was made by me, but some of the artwork I know, like some of the people who made the artwork, such as the one in the top left. It was supposed to be a picture by me, but a Black queer person drew that for me. And I also have the "born to sparkle" that was given to me by my queer supervisor. But yeah, so I just, it just kind of reminds me that queerness, well, creativity and queerness are in conjunction with each other.

Figure 4.8

Sea's Art Wall

Like Sea, music was also integral to Radish's joy and livingness. Instead of songwriting, however, being able to share music through DJing (disc jockeying) was where Radish experienced the most joy. In reference to a photo (Figure 4.8) of their controller[16], Radish excitingly shares:

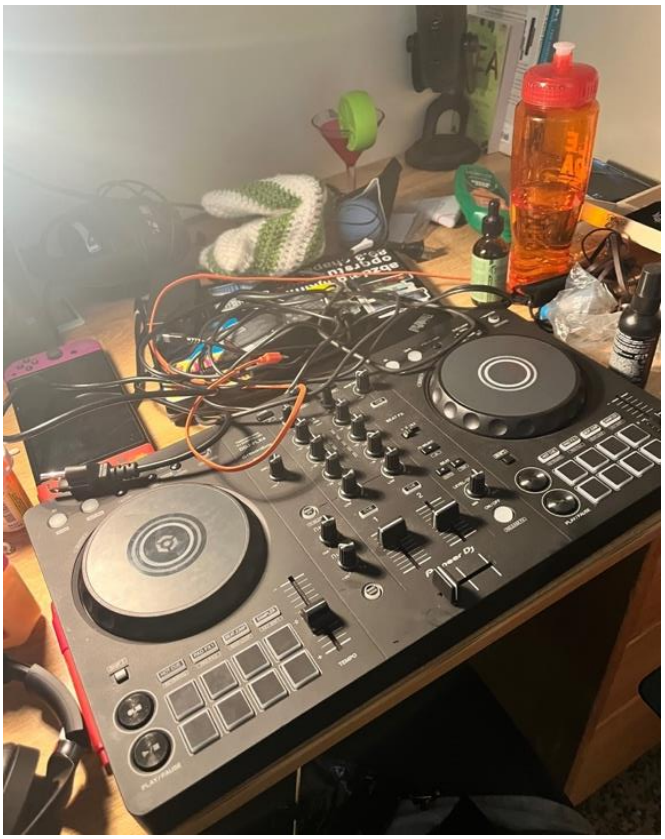
> That's my controller! That's my baby. And I think, oh my god, I think taking a picture of the desk really accentuates it because there's like a bunch of cords everywhere. There's my computer. There's my switch. These are the technologies that are the most important things to me. These are, like, technologies that I've like, been able to connect with people, in some form, like to some to some degree. And so, this is like a very, very like, integral. I mean, I told you DJing is very, very important to my identity. And that's very central and a lot of, like, the joy that I experienced. And so, this was like a picture that I wanted

[16] A controller is a device used by DJs to help them mix music.

to share. Because it's so cute. And like, I felt like the with the mic in the back, like all the cords all over the place. This is like a DJ's desk. *laughs*

Figure 4.9

Radish's DJ Desk



As Radish continues, he also reflects on the joy he has when he and his friends are all together to play music and host raves.

All of my friends. A lot of us are all DJs. So, we can literally, like, set up our stuff, bring a generator, and we have the rave right there. And that in itself is like, our culture. That is like how we are able to build community also, because we bring people into our spaces when we share the music and have these events and parties and stuff. And so, these events that are like, highly connected to music, like beyond just parties, but like, even if the music is just there, like, it stands for, like, I think for me, self-indulgence, self-

> satisfaction. Like, just like genuinely liking what you're doing, and doing things that like, like you'd like just for the sake of doing things that feel good.

Musa, on the other hand, recounts the joy and freedom they experience while doing drag. As they reflect on a picture of them performing drag, they share:

> And when I do drag, I feel very, like at first, I'm, like, jittery and nervous, but then when I get out there, it's kind of like, I just feel kind of free, and kind of, like, uninhibited and like, I feel like myself. And I feel like I can do whatever I want to. I can present however I want to. I can perform however I want to. And it's like the people who were there, they came to support me, and they came to watch drag. So, like, I can feel comfortable in the fact that I'm doing something that they don't do. Even if my makeup is shitty, and I don't know how to do it, right. I'm still trying, I'm still exploring the world of doing makeup and trying to be like, a drag queen. So, like, what's not to be like joyful about in that experience?

Here, Musa describes doing drag as an opportunity for them to be their authentic selves. Although they are fairly new to drag and are still exploring the aspects associated with it, Musa finds so much joy in the experience. Moreover, Musa continues to highlight their love for drag by and pays homage to those who created this form of art.

> …. Black people created a drag as a form of protest and like as a way to express ourselves. And I felt so happy when I got out there in my drag. And I was just dancing and living my best life…. And I'm glad that although Black people had to struggle for this and struggle to make it culture. Some of the most beautiful art forms have come from struggle, and drag was one of them. And I just feel so happy that I get to be a part of a community that has something that can help anyone who's queer, feel at home and feel as

> though they have a space to exist. And when I found that space, I was like, I feel so happy because I can get out here. I can dance. And I can just do whatever I want. And be happy doing it. So yeah, I found a lot of joy in doing drag and being a drag queen. And so that is like, where I find the most joy.

Theme 4 - Spaces of Affirmation, Validation and Solace

This final theme focuses on spaces that affirmed participants, contributed to the healing of participants, and were sources of joy for participants. For one, participants reflected on the community and kinship they established on- and off-campus. In addition, some participants reflected on how specific college courses and professors contributed to the participants feeling seen and affirmed in their identities. Lastly, participants discussed co-curricular spaces on campus they found and utilized to feel affirmed as a student on their campus.

Chosen Family, Kinship, and Community

The company participants chose to keep played a huge role in their college experiences. In addition to Radish's previous mentions of their partner and core group of friends being their source of community and support (Theme 2), he also reflects on the impact online communities have had on their journey of living as a Black trans man.

> I think online, like using online communities, online resources, is something that's, like, necessary for me just because I am, like, the only Black trans man at least on campus that I know of. So, I don't know, I feel like going on, and even then, like the other Black trans man, I know, is literally in [a nearby city]. So, it's just like, I have to find the resources for me specifically, like as a transgender man online. And so, like, Reddit, Discord, servers, those kinds of things that have like other trans men, or like, at least, like trans men of color in it is very, very helpful. And there was, like, a short period of time where I

> was part of a Discord server for Black trans men. And that server is gone now. But for a while, it was just like, I felt like really like affirmed to be around like a bunch of like other just like Black trans men, because they're just like, I just don't know, that many. And they were like, all Black trans men at different points of their transition. Some were further along; some were a little bit younger. And so, it was just like really cool to like, see that and know that like, okay, like, I'll be fine. Because some of them are like 30-40 And they're like, you'll be fine. And I'm like, "Okay, I know I'll be good." And so that that those are like some like online communities at definitely something that I feel like I just kind of need, just based off of where I am right now. Like physically.

In this sense, having a space online for him to be comforted and affirmed in their existence as a Black trans man was crucial for Radish as he continued to understand the intersections of his identities. For Sea, on the other hand, having another Black queer friend they readily had access to in person helped to minimize the loneliness they were experiencing as a Black queer person.

> And for me, when I look at this photo, it just kind of reminds me of the community I have. And just knowing that even though it may feel like I am alone, and I do often struggle with loneliness and feeling like people just don't understand, like, what it's like to be Black and queer, just knowing that there are people that are in my life who are Black and queer and who can understand what I'm going through. Especially like my friend in the photo, like she's bisexual and she's Black. And she's also a woman. It's just nice for me to have people who understand what it's like to have intersectional identities.

Much like Radish and Sea, James also reflected on the importance of their community. For James, community was seen as a space of solace that had significant and positive implications on his well-being. In response to a picture (Figure 4.10) of a moment shared by his friends, he

expresses his view of community, particularly in moments when he is not feeling like his best self.

> I like this picture because it's called "meet me here" and I think your community and support should meet you where you're at. I think it's very important in our community where it's like, we expect people to like, travel high and low this and that. And I'm like, some people don't have the abilities, the resources, or like the energy at the time to, like, come there. So, like, support always comes to meet you. Or it's like, “Hey, meet me here. Here's where I'm at in life. This is where we are.” So that's why I chose this picture. Because just like a very simple pic of like, my close community support. For me, I will meet you where you are. But I also love to like have people meet me where I'm at. Where it's either meet me where I'm at mentally, physically, emotionally, like, “Hey, I'm at a two today. So, let's start there. Let's ease into things because we're not feeling 100% at all.”

Figure 4.10

Meet Me Here

Classroom Environments as Learning and Identity-Affirming Spaces

As students reflected on campus spaces and resources that were supportive, the classroom emerged as one of the spaces where students felt seen the most. For some students, the classroom served two roles: for learning and for one to feel affirmed and validated in their experiences. Leila and Ashley, for example, each reflected class experiences they felt was an integral and joyous part of their college experience, in addition to being an avenue for them to learn more about themselves and their identities.

Originally being someone who hated reading before attending college, being a Women and Gender Studies majors fostered opportunities for Leila see the value literature, particularly those that focuses on topics such as gender studies, queer theory, etc. In addition, Leila also reflects on the impact of a having a queer linguistics course in college. Here, she states:

> In high school, I was like, really anti-reading, I did not like reading. I thought it was so boring. I did not like reading at all. But I think specifically when I was taking more of my women and gender studies courses, those courses are very, like literature heavy, like, you have to read a lot in those courses. And I think through those courses, and through reading so much, I realized, like, how much richness there is in literature, and how much you can learn and gain from reading. So, I'm actually, like, right across from a little library of books that I got. They mainly relate to gender studies, queer theory, feminism, things like that…. Like our professor will come in, and she'll bring books, if you ever like, it was on a book shopping spree, um, to the library or whatever at a bookstore. And she'll come in and bring the books that she's bought, and like, show us showcase them. And she has, she got a few on like trans studies, transgender history…. that makes me feel seen because I feel like I'm within my Woman and Gender Studies courses. I haven't

> seen a lot of like transness in those courses. Queerness if that. So, having that class and having the professor be queer, having the literature we're reading, be queer, having like, the word the language we're using in the class, be queer. And all of that is makes me feel really seen.

Leila recounts experiencing a shift in her feelings about reading as she was able to have her classes serve as a space for her to learn more about her identity as a Black trans woman. While many of her classes did not spend a lot of time discussing trans and queer topics, this queer linguistics class did. Similarly, Ashley reflects on her experiences in a class where she, like Leila, was able to feel seen in her coursework.

> …. I do want to shine a light on a class called African Women Spirituality. Oh my god, if I can take that class forever, I would take it again and again. It is the most beautiful class I've ever taken. My professor is a Black queer woman and she's also a reverend. I love that class so much. …. I feel like in that space, that is like the where I feel seen and heard. But outside of that on campus, like definitely a sense of feeling forgotten and feeling like... not only forgotten but it's more of just like, I won't say oppressed, but it's like deliberately like we do not want you here like.

Here, Ashley continues to describe her class experience by highlighting elements of womanism and being introduced to other Black women (queer and non-queer) who write about the Black woman experience.

> …. we talk about womanism and the tenets of womanism and all that kind of stuff. And I love Alice Walker. I haven't read much of her work, but we're reading in the book right here; it's not written by her. It's written by Stacey and Floyd Thomas; it's called Deeper Shades of Purple. And it's a book that kind of, like, quotes are working like a lot of work

> of other womanists…. But she's [the professor] introduced me to so much, a lot of Alice Walker's work. Even more of Audre Lorde's work, Dr. Mitzi Smith, and all these other like Black woman who are queer, who like, well, because not all of them are queer…. and so being able to be in a space, like an academic setting, where we are, like, talking about these things that have so much to do with being a Black woman and the experience of that has been, like, the most probably affirming thing I've ever experienced within an institution.

Affirming Co-Curricular Spaces

In addition to the classroom serving as a source of validation and identity affirmation, participants also discuss their engagement with co-curricular spaces that provided similar experiences with validation, affirmation, and support. For Sol, their involvement in their Women's, Gender, and Sexuality club and the designated club for queer and trans students of color on their campus helped them find community and be in the presence of students that shared their experiences, which was something they desired.

> A lot of times, I found community going to group events. We have a [Women's, Gender, and Sexuality] Club…. Or you can go to like [LGBTQ+ student organization], which is the POC group for LGBTQ+ people. They basically do similar things…. Stuff like that allows me to find other people like me on campus.

Jasmine had a similar desire to find community and make friends on their campus, but often ran into difficulties making that happen. However, their decision to start making more frequent trips to their campus' Black Cultural Center created opportunities to find that community they had been longing for. Here, Jasmine states:

> I would say actually the [Black Cultural Center] because for a long time, I struggled with like making friends and I was really lonely for a long time. But then I went there and like everybody's friendly, and everybody's antisocial everywhere else on campus. So that was really nice…. I really needed a community, and it gave me that.

In a similar fashion, Leila describes their involvement with her campus' LGBTQ+ center and the positive impact it has had on their college experience. In describing the LGBTQ+ center, Leila says:

> So, at [my institution], we have [LGBTQ+ Center]. So, I will say that center makes me feel pretty safe. Like just knowing that the majority of the people in that center are queer people, or they're trans, or they're non-binary, or queer in sexuality. And, not saying like, obviously, like, honestly, anything can happen. But I think the chances of something bad happening are very minimal. And I think within those spaces was really good. Like, once you get to the [LGBTQ+ Center], everyone, like celebrates each other. Regardless of being queer or not, like, majority of the time, we're celebrating each other's queerness, or transness. So, I think having my transness and queerness being celebrated in a space that is so queer. And like on the windows, they have flags that each gender identity or sexuality. I think that also makes me feel really seen and safe at the same time.

While other campus spaces could present barriers for queer and trans students, this LGBTQ+ center was one space Leila was confident that their identities would be celebrated and where she could be safe on her campus. Overall, this theme encapsulates the many ways participants were able to find a variety of spaces on and off campus that made them feel seen, affirmed, and cared for on and off campus. Much like Theme 3, the experiences shared here highlight the importance

of these spaces and how essential they are to the college and overall experience for Black QT college students.

Chapter Summary

This chapter included an overview of the overarching themes that emerged as the participants of this study reflected on their lived experiences as Black QT college students. As a result, the following themes emerged: *Navigating Hostile and Isolating Experiences, Identity Exploration and Navigation, Joy Starts with Me,* and *Spaces of Affirmation, Validation, and Solace.* Overall, these themes and the experiences shared respond to the sub-research questions guiding this study and illuminate the ways students made sense of their realities as Black QT college students, the impact their experiences have on their overall well-being, and the ways they make sense and experience joy. In the next section, Chapter 5, I discuss my themes' connections to existing literature (i.e., the way this study supports, challenges, or extends literature) and share implications of this study for future research, practice, and practice that focus on the well-being and livelihoods of Black QT college students.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

This study utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, photovoice, and photo-elicitation interviews to explore the lived experiences of Black queer and trans college students, their well-being, and the ways they make sense of and experience joy. In response, the themes that emerge from this study highlight various aspects of Black queer and trans college student existence – both negative *AND* positive – thus, providing a more comprehensive and expansive understanding of their experiences. In the final chapter of this study, I provide overarching lessons, takeaways, and implications for education and wellness-related research, practice, and policy. To close this chapter, I discuss the limitations and delimitations of this study and provide a brief conclusion.

Discussion of Findings

The overarching research question guiding this study is: *How do Black queer and trans college students experience radical healing amid the collegiate and socio-political environments they navigate?* Findings from this study highlighted the range of experiences Black QT college students have on and off campus and how these experiences impact their overall well-being. Overall, participant reflections on their lived experiences highlight their ability to live in joy, resist societal norms, and create the social worlds they desired despite any of the anti-Black and anti-QT experiences and messages they had to endure from day to day from peers, their institutions, family members, or the broader society. Findings from this study also emphasize universities' minimal role in establishing moments where students experienced joy and thrived, often placing the onus on the students to find their own sources of peace, support, and solace on college campuses. In the sections that I follow, I weave together existing literature and key

elements from this study's findings to situate two significant takeaways readers should know about Black QT college student realities.

Takeaway One: Institutions are Sites of Struggle for Black QT Students

Findings from this study, specifically in Theme 1 (*Navigating Hostile and Isolating Experiences*), brought attention to the hostile and negative experiences Black QT college students may experience as they navigate higher education. Much like the Black QT college student experiences shared in existing literature (Blockett, 2017; Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Hutchings, 2023; Nicolazzo, 2016), participants reflected on their experiences of having to (1) navigate their institution as one of few people or as the only person that holds the intersection of their identities, (2) endure hostile experiences with campus peers fueled by intolerance towards the Black, queer, and trans communities, and (3) live in fear of harm that could occur as a result of people's intolerance or hostility towards those that hold their identities.

Regardless of institution type, there was a common thread of students having to navigate communities that were intolerable of their full existence. Students often mentioned the struggles they experienced when engaging with Black students that were often anti-queer and trans, and white queer and trans students that were often failed to recognize the racialized experiences of queer and trans people of color, let alone Black queer and trans people specifically (Blockett, 2017; Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Nicolazzo, 2016). Octavia, for example, emphasizes this dichotomy as she reflects on being judged by the larger Black community while simultaneously witnessing her white queer and trans express a lack of concern about Black QT people's existence and their racialized experiences. Musa, James, Sea, Sol, and Radish all speak on similar experiences, aligning with current literature on Black queer males (Blockett, 2017; Hutchings, 2023) and Black non-binary people's experiences at PWIs (Nicolazzo, 2016).

However, Leila, who attended an HBCU, did not reflect on this dichotomy due to the racial makeup of their campus and the minimal interaction she had with the few white peers that were on her campus. Yet, having to endure instances of transphobia within a majority Black campus community was true for her as well, further supporting existing research about the experiences of Black queer and trans students at HBCUs (Mobley & Johnson, 2019). For Octavia, Sol, Sea, and Ashley, on the other hand, their experiences extend this realm of literature by situating them within the context of MSIs that are not HBCUs[17]. In contrast, Octavia and Ashley's experiences add to the limited literature focusing on the experiences of Black queer women in higher education, particularly those that do not attend HBCUs.

Students across all three institution types represented in this study (HBCU, MSI, and PWI) largely professed negative feelings about their campuses' failure to support Black QT college students adequately. In addition to negative peer interactions, participants also discussed their dissatisfaction with specific aspects of campus – specifically campus practice and offerings (inadequate LGBTQ+ campus spaces; lack of funding for affinity and wellness centers) and policy (e.g., restrictive housing policies). To the students, these shortcomings sent messages that their institutions did not care about them or were not equipped to support them and their needs effectively. Theme 4 (*Spaces of Affirmation, Validation, and Solace*) encapsulates participants' reflections on the spaces where they felt most affirmed and supported.

Although limited, some participants discussed taking college courses and being in majors that regularly centered their identities (Ashley, Leila, Sea) and leveraging smaller spaces, such as affinity student groups and centers (Jasmine, James), to find some sense of refuge, support, and

[17] I denote this to make the distinction between HBCU and MSI experiences. While HBCUs are technically MSIs by definition, their history, existence, impact, and campus experience are too unique to be lumped into the designation of an MSI.

solace on a campus that may not have been inclusive of their race, gender, and/or sexuality. However, students who frequented these smaller entities of the campus structure often stated that these curricular and co-curricular spaces were limited in their offerings, underfunded, whitewashed, or being managed by staff who were overworked and underpaid, adding another critique about such spaces to academic literature. As such, these reflections indicate that while institutions have made strides in establishing spaces that include and support Black QT college students, there were still many opportunities for growth before these students felt fully supported and safe on their campuses.

As a result of students speaking about their experiences, it was apparent that they were juggling multiple struggles at once – specifically, the ongoing academic demands of being a college student, navigating hostile campus and off-campus environments, having difficulty establishing friend groups on campus, and, for some, having family that was not in support of their gender and sexuality. Unfortunately, the result of balancing these struggles presented negative impacts on students' well-being in the form of stress, instances of hopelessness, anxiety and fear about potential harm, feelings of loneliness, and bouts of depression.

Takeaway Two: The Importance of Joy, Thriving, and Identity Affirmation for Black QT Students

The second takeaway from this study amplifies the positive ways participants talked about what it meant for them to be Black and queer and/or trans individuals, experience joy, and thrive in this world. Overall, students expressed that living at the intersection of their identities was a beautiful experience, specifically an experience that defied societal norms and ideals about how these individuals should show up in the world (Bowleg, 2013; Means, 2017).

Although this study sought to explore how students experienced joy on and off campus, their narratives clearly articulate that their institutions had minimal impact on establishing a college environment that contributed to them thriving and experiencing joy. While the first lesson of this section discussed some favorable aspects of campus, it also underscores that institutions have significant work to do to be more inclusive of Black QT college students. As such, this study further supports existing literature that accentuates the necessity for Black QT college students having to be meticulous in finding and constructing their own joy on and off campus (Blockett, 2017; Bradley, 2020; Nicolazzo, 2016; Simms et al., 2023).

Most participants expressed that joy for them was being able to live authentically and tap into aspects of their identities they were never afforded the opportunity to engage earlier in life. For some, leaving their homes to attend college provided participants with avenues and opportunities to fully explore and, in some ways, express their identities and actively resist and push back against society's intolerance of their existence. While their institutions did not necessarily create spaces for this exploration and expression, not being under the gaze of family members who were intolerant of queer and trans existence had positive implications for many of these students.

For Jasmine, Musa, and Sea, for example, being able to dress in ways that resisted the gendered binary was an aspect of queerness they reveled in. These opportunities to "gender-bend" and embrace the fluidity of dress (Egner & Maloney, 2016) created space for them to feel comfortable in attire that aligned best with their gender identity and how they wanted to express it (Adomaitis et al., 2024; Ashton, 2019). For Leila and Radish, taking ownership in defining what it meant for them to be trans was affirming and powerful. While Leila initially contended with the option of going through gender-affirming surgery, she later decided that this procedure

was not necessary for her to affirm her womanhood. For Radish, beginning their treatments with testosterone hormone therapy was affirming for them as they sought to engage in a bodily transformation that aligned with the way they wanted to show up in this world. While these two examples present opposite ends of the body-affirming spectrum, they both emphasize that Leila's and Radish's transness was not dependent on other people's perceptions of what their transness should look like and was valid regardless of the methods they took to affirm it (Ashton, 2019; Cantalano, 2015; Jourian & McCloud, 2020). Altogether, these examples of gender-bending, affirming one's gender, and the outward expression of gender highlight moments of participants finding ways to affirm their existence and thrive as their full, authentic selves.

Furthermore, joy for participants manifested in a myriad of ways. In Theme 3 (*Joy Starts With Me*), some participants discussed joy showing up in experiences that affirmed and empowered them, while others discussed joy manifesting via creative mediums. For Ashley and Leila, joy occurred as they saw representation and engaged in experiences that allowed them to witness their identities being celebrated. For Ashley, that joy manifested in her engagement with music and videography that celebrated Black lesbians, bodies of all sizes, and Black queer love. For Leila, joy manifested when she attended a large-scale prom for trans teens and young adults. With creativity in mind, Musa performing drag was an ode to Black queer and trans history and ballroom culture. At the same time, Radish's DJing was an opportunity to pay homage to Black music and share his knowledge of music with anyone attending a rave they were playing at.

Theme 4 (*Spaces of Affirmation, Validation, and Solace*) highlighted another core aspect of Black QT existence – community and kinship. Consistent with current literature on the importance of community and kinship for Black, QT, and Black QT college students (Blockett, 2017; 2018; Blockett & Renn, 2021; Goode-Cross & Good, 2008; Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011;

Hutchings, 2023; Nicolazzo, 2016; 2017; Simms et al., 2021), participants highlighted the necessity of having a chosen family supporting them along their life journey. For some students, like Ashley, James, Musa, and Radish, community was established on campus with individuals they felt a sense of safety and support with, regardless of whether they shared all their identities or not. As such, this chosen family operated as a space of solace and healing in opposition to the hostile environments they endured on and off campus. However, for Radish, community also manifested itself virtually (Simms et al., 2023) as they reflected on the positive impact of being a part of an online space (via Discord) curated for Black trans men. Not only was this space a much-needed community, but it also brought a sense of calmness and confirmation in knowing that the Black trans experience would improve as they matured and continued to navigate life.

Theoretical Implications

The lived experiences recounted by Black queer and trans college students provide implications for both theoretical frameworks used to guide this study's research design – the radical healing framework (RHF) and quare theory. These frameworks helped me develop data collection protocols (e.g., interviews, focus groups, and photovoice) for this study and support codebook development for data analysis. In the sections to follow, I explain the ways participants' lived experiences support both frameworks.

Radical Healing Framework

The radical healing framework (RHF) (French, 2020) is a psychology-centered framework built upon the groundwork of Ginwright (2010), who refers to radical healing as the process of helping young people of color build the capacity to act upon and within oppressive environmental factors to create the social worlds they desire. By embedding that definition within principles of psychology, liberation, Blackness, ethnopolitics, and intersectionality, the

RHF is composed of five components: (1) critical consciousness, (2) radical hope, (3) cultural authenticity and self-knowledge, (4) strength and resistance, and (5) emotional and social support. Altogether, these five frameworks lean into cultural and ancestral ways of being and knowing and social justice to acknowledge and resist oppression and envision future possibilities of freedom and wellness.

When situated within this framework, participant stories aligned with each of the framework's components as they expressed their abilities to acknowledge the reality of living in a world that does not value their existence, build community, uphold the cultural ideals of Black, queer, and trans communities, actively resist harmful societal norms, and create worlds of joy, thriving, and possibility on and off campus. For starters, all participants discussed an example, or examples, of existing in isolation, their experiences with violence, harm, and exclusion within institutional, societal, and familial contexts, and acknowledged the root cause of these feelings and hostile actions (critical consciousness). For example, Ashley, Sol, Musa, and Radish all reflected on the implications of having family members who were not supportive of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation, and this impact on their well-being, college experiences, and the way they interacted with their family (Theme 1).

In addition, participants also emphasized the beauty of being Black, queer, and trans. They accentuated how these aspects of their identities gave way for them to resist harmful societal norms and ideals and live authentic lives. To many participants, their mere existence was a direct and ongoing act of resistance to anti-Black and anti-QT norms and ideals that would, otherwise, restrict their experiences and prevent them from living authentically. Moreover, participants' experiences also showcase how joy manifested in their lives – e.g., via dress, in

community with others, through artistic expression, and in the classroom (strength and resistance).

While participants spoke about their current realities, some also make references to their futures and excitement for what was on the horizon for lives for them and their communities (radical hope). For example, Leila's attendance at the trans prom in Washington, D.C. (Theme 3) was more than just a joyous experience for them in the moment. It was also a snapshot of what the future of trans could look like when trans existence is celebrated. Similarly, radical hope also manifested in Radish's recount of the Black trans-man Discord they were engaged in. While it served as a community for him in the moment, this virtual space also gave Radish hope for what a positive and affirming future could look like for them as a Black trans man. Lastly, participant stories conveyed the importance of having a community of support (emotional and social support) while highlighting the various ways their community could look (e.g., virtual, shared identities, those that did not have shared identities).

Altogether, the findings of this study validate the usage of the RHF to understand the lived experiences and well-being of Black QT college students and how they experience joy. In addition, this study confirms Back QT college students' engagement with radical healing as an act (Ginwright, 2010) and the ways this concept enhanced their lives as they contended with the socio-political violence inflicted upon them on and off campus.

Quare Theory

Quare theory (Johnson, 2005) is a theoretical conceptualization of lived experiences of queer people of color. Drawing similarities to intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991), quare theory focuses on the specific intersection of race, gender, and sexuality with special attention on (1) how this intersection of identities creates unique worlds for queer people of color and (2) the

ways queer people of color resist oppressive structures and systems (Coleman & Means, 2022; Johnson, 2005). Within this study, quare theory served as a theoretical underpinning and complement to the RHF. While the RHF builds on elements of intersectionality, a specific focus on queer and trans existence was not prominent. Quare theory helped to ground these identities within the study further, helping me to effectively study and understand how the intersection of their identities informed their lived experiences and identity development and exploration.

Throughout this study, participants often referenced the difficulties of trying to find and connect with individuals who shared and or could empathize with living at the intersection of their identities on their college campuses (Theme 1). For example, Sol and Sea both reflected on the difficulty they experienced trying to find people on their campus who shared and understood their experiences. These difficulties were further amplified by the challenges they experienced while navigating Black and QT communities that were intolerant towards queer and trans existence within Black spaces and Black existence within broader queer and trans spaces. Despite these experiences, and as previously stated, participants still saw beauty in their experiences, insisted on living lives of authenticity, and resisted societal ideals as they leveraged their time away from home to explore and express their identities in the ways that brought them the most joy and contentment – e.g., through dress and fashion, by referencing the work and impact of Black queer and trans historical figures, being in supportive community (Themes 2 & 4). Moreover, participants were also able to create the worlds they desired through community, expressions of joy, and engaging experiences that affirmed their identities and existence. (Themes 3 & 4)

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations refer to occurrences or potential weaknesses of a study's design that emerged and were out of the researcher's control (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). One limitation of this study was barriers that put constraints on an already strict dissertation study timeline. One factor was the number of "scammers" that completed my initial demographic questionnaire but ended up not being able to participate in my study because they entered false demographic information (e.g., institution, gender, sexuality) in the demographic questionnaire and failed to confirm this demographic information when we met in our initial 1:1 meeting. Because of this mishap, I had to take additional steps to adapt my study and ensure that "real" students, specifically those whose identities matched what they submitted in the demographic questionnaire, could participate. Between enduring a couple of weeks of false submissions, consulting with my chair and committee members, and going through the amendment process with IRB, data collection for my study was "stalled" for approximately three weeks. As a result of having to push back the data collection stage, this study ended up conflicting with a conference that I attended, Thanksgiving break, and the beginning of the participants' final exams, which created more barriers as I tried to schedule interviews with participants.

Another limitation of the study was the lack of representation across different institution types. For this study, all institutions represented were public, and only one institution was an HBCU. Although I wanted this study to include representation of various institution types, this study severely lacked the experiences of Black QT college students at private institutions and the multiple HBCUs and other MSIs in North Carolina. While I did email approximately 125 higher education professionals, or gatekeepers, in various roles across multiple North Carolina institutions, I ended up with limited student response and institutional representation, as some

participants attended the same institutions. While I cannot pinpoint the exact reason or reasons for this limited response, some possible reasons can be attributed to my recruitment email being overlooked or missed by the gatekeepers, gatekeepers having a lack of interest in or being biased about the topic, or a lack of interest from students wanting to engage in the study upon learning about it.

Delimitations refer to specific choices made by the researcher that set boundaries or limits to the study (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). These boundaries are made to ensure the study is not impossible to complete. One delimitation was restricting this study to only undergraduate students and not including graduate students. Although graduate students could have provided experiences similar to or different from my participants, I wanted this study to focus on the unique experiences of being an undergraduate student navigating college. Another delimitation for this study was conducting all interviews and focus groups via Zoom. The original plan for this study was to conduct all interviews and focus groups in person. However, after thinking through the logistics of (1) finding a safe and secure meeting spot for me and the participants and (2) ensuring participants had transportation to and from a meeting location, I felt it was best to complete all interviews virtually to make the process more accessible for participants and efficient for me and this study's timeline.

Implications and Future Directions for Research

Although this study presents new ideas and insights about Black queer and trans college students, there is still a wealth of research that can be done to take an expansive approach to understanding the lived experiences of Black queer and trans individuals, in addition to other historically marginalized and excluded communities in higher education. Moreover, there are

various aspects of the Black QT experience that I did not cover in this study that can be adapted for future inquiries on this population.

More Research That Includes a Focus on Health and Well-being

Studies exploring the concepts of health and well-being for Black QT individuals could be expanded to other aspects of higher education. While this study focused specifically on undergraduate students, ranging from ages 19-23, one could wonder what these experiences could look like for older individuals, particularly Black queer and trans graduate students or college professionals (faculty and staff). A significant theme for participants in this study was the freedom of being away from home for the first time brought them. For most participants, this time away from home was an opportunity for them to finally explore their identities and live authentically as young adults without being scrutinized by their families. For graduate students and educators, future research could explore their health and well-being as those who may be older, may have had longer life experiences, and may be further removed from the guise of their family. Research about Black queer and trans graduate students is limited (Blockett, 2018; Denise, 2017; Hall & Hutchings, 2022; Means et al., 2017), with little focus on health and well-being or the experiences of non-Black queer men. Moreover, while research focusing on the experiences of Black QT educators in the postsecondary context does exist (Hill, 2017; Mobley et al., 2020; Taylor et al., 2023; Whooper, 2022), it is also limited in quantity and within the scope of health and well-being.

In addition to graduate students and campus employees, the experiences and well-being of queer and trans student-athletes and students studying abroad could be another sector of research ripe for exploration. While these experiences did not fit within the overarching themes of this study, two participants in this study did reflect on their experiences within these contexts.

For example, one participant mentioned having to conceal their gender and sexuality while studying abroad out of fear of the implications that may occur if they shared these identities with residents of the location they were studying. For them, having to navigate a new country with different cultural norms and a harsher view of LGBTQ+ existence than the US forced them to contend with where and when they could present themselves authentically without harm while abroad. Research on the experiences of Black (Hall, 2023) and queer and trans (Bingham, 2023; Michl, 2023) college students studying abroad is relatively new in higher education scholarship, but has seen a steady increase year after year. However, future research could contribute to the expansion of these emerging sectors of research by continuing to explore various aspects of being Black and abroad, queer or trans and abroad, or create an entirely new vein of research that explores the experiences of being abroad as a college student living at the intersection of being Black and queer and/or trans. Additionally, the second participant mentioned their past experiences of being trans and a former student-athlete and the scrutiny they faced when they were actively participating in sports. While media and academic literature about trans inclusivity in K-12 sports continue to grow at a rapid rate, these discussions are limited but continue to emerge on a collegiate level (Klein et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2023; Senefeld et al., 2021). As conversations continue to grow around queer and trans experiences in collegiate sports, future research could include a focus on race, which is currently scarce, and explore Black QT students' navigation of collegiate sports environments.

More Research About Individuals in the Wellness Professions

A goal of this study is to share the findings of this research with those who support college students from a well-being focus, such as therapists and wellness coaches, etc. However, the stories shared in this study highlight some deficiencies in the wellness offerings on college

campuses, such as a lack of knowledge and cultural competence when talking about and supporting Black QT experiences. That said, future research studies could explore the ways these professionals support, or do not support, Black QT students, the ways wellness professionals are trained, or not trained, on Black, queer, and trans experiences, barriers that could prevent Black QT students from utilizing their services, and their needs as professionals when it comes to being skilled and able effectively support Black QT college students in their roles. Moreover, while a study like this could have significant implications for college campuses, the knowledge gained from studies in this realm could also be significant for wellness and health organizations and organizations not affiliated with any institution, but still engage with and support Black QT individuals in their work.

More Research about Joy and Thriving

I also urge researchers to continue developing more research that explores joy within various higher education contexts. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, exploring the experiences historically marginalized and excluded communities have with joy is something that continues to grow within higher education research. This study will be among the first to explore this phenomenon with Black QT college students. However, this concept of joy needs to be expanded to other communities whose experiences with joy have yet to be explored in research. While this approach provides a more expansive look at the lived experiences of these communities, this study also taught me about the value of designing a research study that empowers research participants to talk about their positive experiences and how they experienced joy was a healing experience for them. Throughout this research study, multiple participants expressed their excitement to talk about joy as something that led them to this research opportunity, in addition to their gratitude to have a space to talk about more than just the negative and possibly traumatic

experiences they or their community may encounter. Moreover, participants mentioned that engaging in this research experience was healing and affirming and encouraged them to seek opportunities to live and express themselves more authentically going forward, which could result in a significantly positive impact on their well-being.

Looking ahead, I urge researchers to consider the implications of conversations that focus on joy, a sense of self, and the positive experiences individuals have on and off campus. While research about barriers and negative experiences is valuable and still needed within higher education scholarship, I think researchers should also consider the impact of research that solely focuses on "despaired" instances of one's life, especially topics that may require participants to relive traumatic moments. I think this approach could do wonders for young adults as they continue to develop and understand themselves, their identities, and their lives as adults and provide examples of how they live in joy, thrive, and maintain positive well-being. As scholars like Gayles (2023) continue to push for the humanization of higher education, I believe focusing on the humanization of the research process and our research participants is vital to this shift in how we design research projects moving forward.

Research Exploring Socio-political Differences by Geographic Location

Another recommendation for future research would be to replicate aspects of this study to learn more about the experiences of Black queer and trans college students in different geographic locations of the United States, with their political and sociocultural differences in mind. A limitation of this study is that it was restricted to only students attending an institution in North Carolina. While North Carolina, as of now, has not presented any college-specific laws that would establish restrictions to curriculum and funding for campus spaces and resources that focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, states like Texas, Florida, Oklahoma, and Utah have

either enacted or introduce these types of laws and bills for public institutions (Martinez-Alvarado & Perez, 2023; Russell-Brown, 2022). Black QT students attending institutions in states whose political leaders uphold anti-Black and anti-QT ideals are at risk of attending institutions that do not have spaces in place to support, validate, and celebrate their identities and existence. Future research could explore the implications these types of environments have on Black QT college students' well-being compared to states or regions that have resisted pushing these types of laws into action.

Recommendations for New Methodological Approaches

Using a phenomenological approach to explore the well-being of Black QT college students provided one approach to better understanding their lived experiences. However, this study's topic has the potential to be expanded in various ways as the experiences of Black QT college students continue to be explored within higher education scholarship. From a qualitative approach, elements of this study could be adapted as a case study where researchers could explore the ways different institutions, academic departments, and/or student support offices and centers support Black QT college students. Doing so could be an opportunity to learn about various ways Black QT students are supported and serve as an opportunity to engage with students and the faculty and staff that support them. In addition, a quantitative approach could also be utilized to explore this concept with more students across multiple measures (e.g., wellness, academic performance, belongingness) or across specific time periods with a longitudinal study. More specifically, a quantitative approach could be used to compare various groups within the larger Black QT college student community, such as, but not limited to, age, geographic location, gender identity, major, etc.

Implications for Practice and Policy

A common theme that emerged in this research's findings was the desire for spaces that catered to the intersecting experiences of being Black and queer and/or trans. While all the institutions represented in this study had offices that catered to the needs of Black and LGBTQ+ students, respectively, some students in this study often expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of recognition or celebration of the unique experiences the intersection of these identity groups created. That said, institution leaders should be mindful of the within-group identities within the Black and LGBTQ+ identity umbrellas. For example, Black History Month celebrations on college campuses should also embed celebrations of Black QT existence and the impact Black QT individuals had and continue to have on the advancement of the Black community. Similarly, celebrations like Pride Month and LGBT History Month should also honor and celebrate Black QT existence and impact within the larger LGBTQ+ community.

Furthermore, it is also vital for institutions to adjust their budgets to provide adequate funding for efforts to support spaces that support, validate, and affirm Black and LGBTQ+ students. When participants discussed their interactions with these staff members and these campus spaces, they made it clear that they were aware of the financial disparities that happen on college campuses. Namely, they knew that institutions had money to place toward constructing buildings and funding other initiatives on campus while leaving offices and programs focused on supporting marginalized student groups were forced to work with limited financial support to fund their events, resources, and payrolls of their staff. That said, if institutions are going to highlight their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion and supporting historically excluded communities, there needs to be more efforts to better support these spaces financially

so they can hire more staff, provide more resources and support, and enhance the impact they are making on the lives of marginalized student communities.

Another recommendation for institutional leaders would be to expand the health and wellness-focused campus offerings (counseling and non-counseling based). For some participants, counseling services at their institutions were inadequate or inaccessible due to a myriad of reasons (e.g., understaffed counseling centers, counselors not being affirming of their race, gender, and sexuality, counseling support being limited to a certain number of sessions, or simply no interest in utilizing counseling as a resource altogether). In addition, some participants also mentioned having to take the initiative to find their own resources to support them from a well-being standpoint, such as seeking off-campus support or using online resources. While every student may not need the same resources or see some resources as an unviable option, institutions should make better efforts to provide a range of wellness-centered resources accessible to students and minimize any barriers that may push students to seek expensive resources or no support at all.

For example, one participant mentioned that their institution provides students with a free premium subscription to Headspace, an online mindfulness and meditation tool. For students who may not be interested or in need of counseling support, providing affordable or free resources, like Headspace, could be a great help to students. Some other recommendations include ample funding to adequately fund more positions within counseling and wellness centers, hiring counseling and wellness staff that are affirming for Black queer and trans college students, and training current staff to be more affirming of Black queer and trans experiences. Furthermore, it is also recommended that professionals that work in these wellness spaces center joy in these conversations with students about effects ways to take care of themselves, affirm

themselves, and sustain their joy as they navigate socio-political and collegiate environments that are hostile and unsupportive.

One suggestion would be to establish partnerships between wellness professionals and those whose roles and physical campus spaces are designed to support and affirm students from marginalized communities (e.g., Black cultural centers, LGBTQ+ centers, multicultural centers, etc.). These collaborations could be an opportunity for wellness support to be embedded in these spaces that already serve as a space for support, healing, and refuge for student groups not adequately support on campus. As a result, campus wellness offerings would not be limited to just one location or office and, instead, be embedded in multiple locations across campus, thus making their offerings more accessible.

Multiple participants recount their experiences taking college courses or being in a major that focused on various aspects of their identities (e.g., Ashley taking an African Woman Spirituality course, Leila taking a Queer Linguistics course, Sea and Sol majoring in Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies). As participants reflected on their experiences in these spaces, they also discussed how much these curricular offerings made them feel seen and affirmed in their identities despite being at an institution that fails to affirm, support, and validate them. One recommendation for institutions would be to support the development of similar courses and make them readily available to students interested in taking them. In addition, institutions should also be mindful of the identities of the professors teaching those classes and the impact these identities can have on the students taking these courses. For Ashley, seeing a Black queer women teacher teach her African Woman Spirituality course was a bonus to this validating experience. That said, as more of these classes are developed, the identities of those leading these classes are extremely important and should be in direct alignment with the course content. This not only

contributes to students feeling seen and validated, such as Ashley's experience, but also contributes to the diversification of those in institutional teaching roles.

Finally, this study presents multiple recommendations to address campus and statewide policy. First, institutional leaders should prioritize removing existing policies on their campuses that create barriers for queer and trans students. A common occurrence that emerged among the participants was barriers to inclusive housing offerings for students, particularly trans students. For example, Leila mentions that her institution would not allow her to room with a cisgender woman. Instead, she had to either have her own room, a room with another trans woman, or a room with a man. Woodford and colleagues (2018) suggest that a positive relationship exists between student well-being and the onset of pro-LGBTQ+ campus policies. Going forward, institutions should assess their current policies and eliminate any that create barriers and restrictions for Black QT students to live freely. By eliminating harmful policies, institutions can create campus environments that contribute to students experiencing positive well-being while enrolled. On the state level, institutional leaders should also consider the impact of bills that target specific marginalized identity groups students and university resources and personnel put in place to support them. In particular, leaders should use their platforms and influence to voice their discontent with of the bills and laws that have been enacted or introduced that directly target and seek to restrict the lives of Black and LGBTQ+ students, those students live at the intersection of these identity groups, and the faculty and staff that seek to support them.

Conclusion

This study places great emphasis on the lived experiences of Black queer and trans college students, with a focus on their psychological well-being and experiences with joy. Their reflections present an expansive few of these experiences, particularly how they hold struggle

and possibility together and still create the worlds they desire and live authentically despite navigating spaces (on and off campus) that try to diminish their existence.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire (via Qualtrics)

Title of Study: An Exploration of Black Queer and Trans College Student Well-being and Joy
IRB Protocol: 26098
Principal Investigator(s): Dion Harry (dharry@ncsu.edu); Dr. Joy Gaston Gayles (jggayles@ncsu.edu)

Introduction & Purpose of Inquiry
The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences and well-being of Black queer and trans college students, in addition to the ways they make sense of and experience joy. Throughout this study, we will discuss participants' experiences as Black queer and/or trans persons and the impact their collegiate experience may have (or have had) on their well-being, mental health, and overall student experience.

Outline of Research Project
I am looking for participants who are currently enrolled at a 4-year institution in North Carolina, are at least 18 years old, identify as Black or of the African diaspora, and identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. If you agree to participate, this study involves the following phases: a one-on-one introductory meeting via Zoom (approx. 15 minutes), two one-on-one interviews (approx. 60 minutes each), and OPTIONAL participation in a focus group (approx. 60 min). All interviews and focus groups will be done virtually and audio or video recorded for transcription purposes. If you do not feel comfortable being recorded, you cannot participate in this study. Additionally, you will be asked to review preliminary interpretations of your shared experiences before they are shared publicly.

A core part of this study is using photos to help convey these experiences. You will be asked to submit photos that will be discussed during the interviews. These photos should not be of you, but should be a representation of you and your experiences. These photos will be submitted before interviews and referenced throughout this study. In addition, these photos could also be used in presentations and journal articles as I present my findings. Therefore, please submit photos you are okay with being shared. If you are not comfortable with me sharing any photos you provide, you cannot participate in the study.

Compensation
As a token of appreciation, participants who complete all parts of the research process will receive a $50 gift card. Participants who only participate in the two one-on-one interviews (and not the focus group) will receive a $40 gift card. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can choose not to participate in the study or stop participating at any time by letting me know via email or during an interview. Please note that if you decide to no longer participate before completing both interviews, you will not be compensated.

Statement of Confidentiality
Your participation in this demographic survey and interviews will remain confidential. If you participate in the focus group, we will ask everyone in the group to keep what's said during our

discussion private. However, we cannot guarantee the confidentiality of your participation or responses. Responses will be compiled, analyzed, and reviewed by the researcher before dissemination to the public.

While we may share quotes or information you've shared, we will do our best to remove information from any responses that increase the risk of re-identification (e.g., name, institution). However, someone who knows you well could recognize you from your responses if you share something unique about yourself. You will be given an opportunity to review the information we would like to share about you and let us know if there's something you don't want shared. General information about lived experiences may be shared with institutional leaders and practitioners across campuses to invoke campus change for Black queer and trans students at attend their institutions.

All data will be stored in a password-protected NC State University Google Drive to ensure data security. Recordings will only be shared for transcription purposes and will be deleted at the end of the project. All participants will be asked to select a pseudonym that will be used in place of their real names in my reports. The information you share in the screening form that follows will be used to determine eligibility for the study, to collect demographics that will be associated with participant responses, and to schedule interviews. Identifiable information (e.g., name and email address) will only be used for communication purposes and to connect your activities together, but will not be shared with others.

If you choose to withdraw your consent and stop participating in this research, you can expect that the researcher will redact your information from their data set, securely destroy your data, and prevent future uses of your information for research purposes wherever possible.

Under State Law (7B-301a), I have an obligation to report known or reasonably suspected abuse or neglect of a child/student confidential, including but not limited to physical, sexual, emotional abuse or neglect. If any member of the study team has or is given such information, they are required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

If you have any questions about the study, please get in touch with Dion Harry via email (dharry@ncsu.edu). In addition, if you have questions about your rights as a participant or are concerned with your treatment throughout the research process, please contact the NC State University IRB Director at IRB- Director@ncsu.edu, 919-515-8754, or fill out this confidential form online. Please reference study number 26098 when contacting anyone about this project.

Page 1

Participants in this study will need to be able to reflect on racialized, queered, and gendered experiences, how these experiences have impacted your well-being, and how you may make sense of and experience joy.

These conversations could be triggering and may cause you to reflect on moments of trauma, harm, and psychological distress. Would you be able to discuss these topics throughout the duration of this study?

- Yes
- No

(If the respondent selects no, the survey will end here, and the respondent will be taken to the "End of Survey Page". If the respondent selects yes, the survey will proceed to the next page.)

Page 2 - Screening Survey

Please complete the demographic questionnaire that follows. Upon meeting the eligibility criteria, you may be contacted by Dion Harry (the researcher) about moving forward with the interview process. Depending on the volume of interest, I may not be able to include everyone who wants to participate. If you are not chosen to participate in this study, your personal information will be destroyed to maintain confidentiality and protect your identity.

Your involvement in this research project could require 3 to 5 hours of your time altogether.

This research project will occur in two phases. Phase one will include a required one-on-one introduction meeting (via Zoom – approximately 10-15 minutes) and two one-on-one interviews (via Zoom - approximately 60 minutes each).

Phase two includes an optional focus group (via Zoom - approximately 60 minutes) to be conducted with interested participants after the interviews are done. Locations of interviews and focus groups will be determined based on the participants' locations.

- Yes
- No

(If the respondent selects no, the survey will end here, and the respondent will be taken to the "End of Survey Page". If the respondent selects yes, the survey will proceed to the next page.)

Are you willing to participate in phase one of this study? This includes the introduction meeting and two interviews.

- Yes
- No

(If the respondent selects no, the survey will end here, and the respondent will be taken to the "End of Survey Page". If the respondent selects yes, the survey will proceed to the next page.)

Do you have an interest in participating in the focus group once you're done with your interviews? Please note that this is optional. You will be contacted about scheduling this once one-on-one interviews are done.

- Yes
- No

Do you consent to participating in this study?

- Yes

- No

(If the respondent selects no, the survey will end here, and the respondent will be taken to the "End of Survey Page". If the respondent selects yes, the survey will proceed to the next page.)

Page 3

Name:

Age:

Please enter your institutional email address. Email will be the main form of communication throughout the duration of this study:

Full Name of Current Institution:

Current Classification (by credit hour)
- Freshman (0 - 29 credit hours)
- Sophomore (30 - 59 credit hours)
- Junior (60 - 91 credit hours)
- Senior (92+ credit hours)
- Already Graduated

Anticipated Graduation Year:

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Major/Discipline of Study:

In the space below, please describe how you define your racial identity/ies:

In the space below, please describe how you define your ethnic identity/ies (*Ethnicity refers to the shared cultural characteristics such as language, ancestry, practices, and beliefs (e.g., African American, Nigerian, Jamaican, etc.*):

In the space below, please describe how you define your sexuality/sexual orientation (*Examples include, but are not limited to gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, demisexual, pansexual, etc.)*:

In the space below, please describe how you define your gender identity (*Examples include, but are not limited to nonbinary, cisgender woman, trans man, agender, etc.)*:

In the space below, please enter your preferred pronouns:

To maintain confidentiality throughout this study and the write-up of its findings, you are encouraged to select a pseudonym for the duration of your study. Please enter the pseudonym you would like to be referred to for this study: _____

Do you have any questions or concerns regarding the focus of this study? Leave blank if not.

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A huge part of this study will include discussions about joy and how Black queer and trans college students experience joy. To get that conversation started, please reflect on what joy means and looks like to you.

Page 6 – End of Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete this demographic questionnaire! As a reminder - if you are not chosen to participate in this study, your personal information will be destroyed immediately to maintain confidentiality and protect your identity.

If you are chosen to participate in this study, you will be contacted soon. Please email dharry@ncsu.edu if you have any questions or concerns.

Appendix B

Photo Release & Submission Form (via Google Forms)

To accompany the interview questions for this study, photos will be used to further narrate the stories shared by participants. Photovoice is a method of qualitative research where participants are asked to submit photos of things that represent a certain experience or topic related to the research in relation to the provided prompts. After the photos are submitted, the researcher and the participant discuss the photos together, so the researcher fully understands the pictures and intent behind the photo. (adapted from NC State IRB Protocol for Human Subjects and Photovoice).

Guidelines:

1. Be as creative as you like.
2. Your photos must not include anything illegal.
3. Participants can submit photos of objects, buildings, places, paintings and other forms of artwork and media, etc.
4. Please try to refrain from submitting photos of yourself or others you know personally. However, if submitted, faces and any identifiable features will also be blurred prior to the sharing of photos to maintain confidentiality.
5. Submitted photos can be original content from the participant or from an image database (ex. Google images, Flickr).
6. Pictures from social media, such as Twitter posts, are acceptable since they are considered public data. Identifiable information from these posts will be redacted.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Dion Harry via email at dharry@ncsu.edu.

Name:

CONSENT NOTICE

By clicking yes, I give Dion Harry permission to use and publish my photos developed during this study. They are free to use the photographs for presentations and publications about this study (in alignment with the aforementioned guidelines).

Photovoice Prompts

Please read each prompt provided below and submit photos that you believe best fit as a response.

Submit 1-2 photos that convey what it means to be Black and queer and/or trans in this world.

Submit 1-2 photos that you feel best represent your wellbeing/mental health during your time at your institution.

Submit 1-2 photos that convey Black queer and trans resistance in your eyes (whether you engage in it or not).

Submit 1-2 photos that represent Black queer/trans culture and expression means to you (and how you may engage in it)

Submit 1-2 photos of what community and support looks like to you.

Submit 1-2 photos that convey the joy(s) of being a Black queer/trans person in society.

Appendix C

Email Invitation to Higher Ed & Student Affairs Professionals

Good Morning!

My name is Dion Harry, and I am a doctoral candidate at North Carolina State University under the supervision of Dr. Joy Gaston Gayles. The purpose of this study is to explore and understand the lived experiences and well-being of Black queer and trans college students, in addition to the ways they make sense of and experience joy. This study will be used to satisfy my dissertation and graduation requirements. **Participants who complete this study will receive $40 - $50 in the form of a gift card.**

I am sending this email in hopes of obtaining your assistance in finding participants to meet the needs of this study. To meet the eligibility requirements for this study, participants must meet the following criteria…

1. Identify as Black, African American, of African descent, or belonging to the African diaspora.
2. Identify as queer and/or trans.
3. Currently enrolled as an undergraduate student at a 4-year institution in North Carolina.
4. At least 18 years of age

Participants will be asked to participate in a 1:1 introductory meeting (approx. 15 minutes), two one-on-one interviews (approx. 60 minutes each), and OPTIONAL participation in a focus group (approx. 60 min). These will all be conducted virtually via Zoom.

To sign up for this study, interested participants must first complete this demographic questionnaire and consent form, **http://bit.ly/Blackqtjoystudy**, which will also be used to verify criteria eligibility.

Feel free to also share the attached flyer with your students and those within your networks. If you have any questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me via email (dharry@ncsu.edu).

Thank you for your assistance!

Dion T. Harry, M.Ed.
Ph.D. Candidate, North Carolina State University

Appendix D

Email Communication to Prospective Participants (completed demographic questionnaire)

Hello,

Thank you for completing the demographic questionnaire for the Black Queer and Trans College Student Well-being and Joy study! I am excited about the opportunity to meet and chat with you as you engage in this research study!

The first phase of this study will be to have a conversation with me via Zoom. This conversation should take approximately 10-15 minutes and will be an opportunity for us to build rapport, for me to give more in-depth details about the research study in its entirety, and for you to ask any questions you may have about the study. At the end of this conversation, we will schedule your first interview, and you will be instructed to complete a Photo Release & Submission Form.

As a reminder, a central part of this research study is having participants submit photos that align with the prompts provided by the researcher. Please click here (https://calendly.com/dharry/blackqtwellbeing) to schedule our 10–15-minute conversation. A calendar and Zoom link will be provided after scheduling this conversation.

Please reach out if you have any questions about the process!

Thanks!

Dion T. Harry, M.Ed.
Ph.D. Candidate, North Carolina State University

Appendix E

Email to Participant Confirming First Interview

Hi (insert name)!

This email is a confirmation for our first interview on **XX/XX/XX at XX:XX am/pm.** As a reminder, this interview will be conducted via Zoom. The zoom link for your interview is (**insert link)**. Please try to log on approximately five minutes before your interview if possible.

Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions or have any issues with the Zoom link!

I look forward to chatting with you soon!

Thanks!

Dion T. Harry, M.Ed.
Ph.D. Candidate, North Carolina State University

Appendix F

Email to Participant Confirming Second Interview

Hi (insert name)!

This email is a confirmation for our second interview on **XX/XX/XX at XX:XX am/pm.** As a reminder, this interview will be conducted via Zoom. The zoom link for your interview is (**insert link)**. Please try to log on approximately five minutes before your interview if possible.

Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions or have any issues with the Zoom link!

I look forward to chatting with you soon!

Thanks!

Dion T. Harry, M.Ed.
Ph.D. Candidate, North Carolina State University

Appendix G

Email to All Participants Confirming Focus Group

Hello!

This email is a confirmation for our focus group session on **XX/XX/XX at XX:XX am/pm.** As a reminder, this focus group will be conducted via Zoom. The zoom link for this session is (**insert link)**. Please try to log on approximately five minutes before your interview if possible.

Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions or have any issues with the Zoom link!

I look forward to chatting with you soon!

Thanks!

Dion T. Harry, M.Ed.
Ph.D. Candidate, North Carolina State University

Appendix H

Protocol for Interview 1

Memo to Participant

starts recording

Good morning/afternoon and thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences and wellbeing of Black queer and trans students. Throughout this interview, I will be asking you questions related to your experiences and how you reflect on factors impacting your psychological well-being.

This conversation will be video, and audio recorded. However, I will be the only one with access to the information shared today. Additionally, pseudonyms will be used in place of any identifying information (names, offices, buildings, etc.) in the transcript and written findings. The pseudonym you indicated in the questionnaire you completed prior to this interview will also be used throughout the data analysis and dissemination process.

Throughout our conversation, I will take brief notes and may ask you follow-up questions. Additionally, I ask that you be as descriptive as possible and share as many details as you can related to the topics we discuss. Please keep in mind that you may choose not to answer any of the questions and may stop participating at any time.

Do I have your consent to conduct this interview and have it audio recorded for the purposes of this assignment?

Can you confirm the pseudonym you'd like for me to use during this interview? Do you have any questions before we begin?

[Answers questions]

***** Questions bolded and highlighted in yellow correspond to photo submission prompts**

INTRODUCTION QUESTIONS

- Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? Interests?
- What sparked your interest in participating in this study?
- What comes to mind when you hear the word wellness?

CORE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Photo Prompt - Photos that convey what it means to be Black and queer and/or trans in this world.

- Tell me what's going on in this picture.
- Why did you choose it for this prompt?

- How do you express the intersection of your race, gender, and/or sexual orientation?

- Do you often think about how your race and [insert gender and/or sexuality] may be perceived by others? Together and separately.
    - **[If yes]** What are those thoughts?

- Are there times when you feel the need to conceal or hide your sexuality and/or gender identity?
    - **[If yes]** What factors impact that decision? How do you feel as a result?
    - **[If no]** Has this always been the case? If not, what aspects of life have contributed to feeling free to express yourself authentically?

- Have you seen or noticed a difference in how you or those with your identities are treated in comparison to your Black, cis-heterosexual peers? What about your White queer and trans peers?
    - **[If yes]** If so, how?

- What are some stereotypes associated with Black and [insert gender and/or sexuality]?
    - How have you personally resisted, challenged, and/or pushed back against them?

Photo Prompt - Photos that you feel best represent your wellbeing/mental health during your time at your institution.

- Tell me what's going on in this picture.
- Why did you choose it for this prompt?
- **[If participants mention moments of psychological distress]** What steps do you take/have you taken to respond to, combat, or cope with these experiences?
    - If you are not taking steps, why not?

Photo Prompt - Photos of what community and support looks like to you.

- Tell me what's going on in this picture.
- Why did you choose it for this prompt?

- Tell me more about your community and sources of support.
    - How have you built it if it didn't already exist?
    - **[If participant references negative experiences earlier in the interview]** How has your community and sources of support helped you in these negative experiences?

- How supportive and inclusive would you say your campus is/was for people with your identities?

- Would you consider your campus community safe for those with your identities?
    - Why or why not?
    - **[If not safe]** How could this be improved? What suggestions would you give administrators?

FINAL/CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

- How have you felt talking about these topics?

- Is there anything else related to this topic that you would like to add that you didn't share earlier?

Thank you for participating in the first phase of this research study! I will now drop a link to a calendar of my availability, which will allow you to select a time for us to meet for your second interview. I will also stop recording.

Appendix I

Protocol for Interview 2

Memo to Participant

starts recording

Good morning/afternoon and thank you for agreeing to participate in the second phase of this research project. As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences and well-being of Black queer and trans college students.

Like last time, this conversation will be video, and audio recorded. I will be the only one with access to the information shared today. Additionally, pseudonyms will be used in place of any identifying information (names, offices, buildings, etc.) in the transcript and written findings. The pseudonym you indicated in the questionnaire you completed prior to this interview will also be used throughout the data analysis and dissemination process.

Throughout our conversation, I will take brief notes and may ask you follow-up questions. Additionally, I ask that you be as descriptive as possible and share as many details as you can related to the topics we discuss. Please keep in mind that you may choose not to answer any of the questions and may stop participating at any time.

Do I have your consent to conduct this interview and have it audio recorded for the purposes of this assignment?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

[Answers questions]

***** Questions bolded and highlighted in yellow correspond to photo submission prompts**

INTRODUCTION QUESTIONS

- How have you been since the last time we chatted?
- Have you been reflecting on the topics we discussed last time? If so, what has come up?

CORE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Photo Prompt - Photos that represent what Black queer/trans culture and expression means to you.

- Tell me what's going on in this picture.
- Why did you choose it for this prompt?

- If you can recall, tell me about the first time you began to make sense of your identities.
    - When did this happen? How did you feel? How has life been since this moment?

- Talk to me about what your experience has been like negotiating the intersection of your identities.
    - Feel free to share any positive moments and/or challenges.
    - Does this differ when you're on campus vs. when you're not?

Photo Prompt - Photos that convey Black queer and trans resistance in your eyes.

- Tell me what's going on in this picture.
- Why did you choose it for this prompt?

- In our last conversation, we discussed stereotypes associated with your identities and your reactions to them. How have you personally resisted, challenged, and/or pushed back against them?

Photo Prompt - photos that convey the joy(s) of being a Black queer/trans person in society.

- Tell me what's going on in this picture.
- Why did you choose it for this prompt?
- Is this something you readily engage in?
    - If so, how? If not, why not?

- Are there aspects of your college experience specifically that has brought you joy?

- Think of a world where Black queer and trans people can live freely and authentically. What does that look like to you?

Final/Concluding Questions

- How have you felt talking about these topics?

- Is there anything else related to this topic that you would like to add that you didn't share earlier?

Appendix J

Protocol for Focus Group

Memo to Participant

Good afternoon, and thank you for taking the time to participate in today's focus group! In curating this space, my intention is to (1) provide an opportunity for you all to reflect more on your experiences as Black queer and/or trans college students and (2) provide a space of community, support, and authenticity. Before we begin, I would like to set a few ground rules to ensure we are fostering a space of respect, support, and empowerment.

First, I would like to invite everyone to be respectful of everyone's lived experiences and opinions as you all share. While I can't guarantee the confidentiality of what's said due to the group nature of this discussion, I would also like to ask that you all keep conversations, names, and identities shared within the space confidential to protect the identities of those participating in this space. Lastly, I ask that you all approach this space as an informal and laid-back environment where you can be your authentic selves validated, supported, and celebrated!

Does anyone have any questions before we begin?

answers questions

Do I have your consent to audio record our conversation for the purposes of this study?

I will start recording now.

starts recording

Introduction

- As we dive in, I would love for everyone here to introduce themselves! Please share your pseudonym, pronouns, and the name of a Black queer and/or icon or figure you love, adore, are inspired by, and/or look up to.
    - Why did you choose that person?
    - Are there characteristics about them you resonate with?

Questions

- Radical healing refers to acknowledging systems of oppression and hate in our socio-political worlds and creating the worlds we desire despite the oppressive environments they may navigate.
    - Is this something you resonate with?
        - If so, how?
        - If not, why not?

- Using one word, describe how you view being Black queer and/or trans within this society.
    - Why did you choose that word?

    - Is there anything about Black queer and trans existence that you'd change?

- What elements of your college experience and environment contribute to you feeling…
    - … Seen?
    - … Safe?
    - … Like you're thriving?

- What do you want the world to know about you and the Black queer and trans community?

- What does Black queer and trans existence look like for you in the future? On and off campus.

- Reflect back to our first interview, to know.
    - What have you all learned about yourselves throughout this research experience?
    - What are you taking away from this research experience?

Closing

Thank you all for engaging in these questions and this space! I will now open the floor for people to share any final reflections about the subject at hand.

Appendix K

Flyer (to be circulated via email and social media)