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The Queer God

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Abstract

This thesis explores the impact of dance/movement therapy practices on the embodied healing experience of Black queer and LGBTQIA++ - identified people to heal from religious and spiritual trauma. Currently, there is limited research dedicated to the understanding of Blackness, queerness, and spirituality and the unique perspective dance/movement offers in combatting oppressive systems of religious trauma. Research is needed that acknowledges and amplifies the ways Black queer people have adapted, survived, and thrived. This literature review provides a discussion of historical contexts at the intersections of Blackness, queerness, and spirituality to engender a remembering, reclaiming, and reimagining of Black queer divinity through embodied healing and dance/movement therapeutic practices. Common themes are summarized noting the impact and use of African spiritual practices toward developing dance/movement therapy theoretical frameworks which aid the healing process of Black queer people from the effects of white supremacy, oppression, and religious trauma.

Keywords: African-American, queer, spirituality, religious trauma, dance therapy

The Queer God

Expressive Arts Therapies (EAT) have the capacity to serve a crucial function in allowing Black queer, same-gender-loving, gender non-conforming, and trans folx to navigate complex traumas, both historical and generational, surrounding racism, spiritual abuse, and gender norms. More specifically, Dance/Movement Therapy (DMT) provides room for Black queer/trans persons to move beyond gender roles and access their own sense of queer divinity on their unique and collective healing journey(s), however, first there must be an uprooting of the practice's centering of white oppressive religious systems. To begin to unpack the literature, I want to provide context to my positionalities, understanding they are molded by my social conditioning as a Black queer man navigating a world shaped by a larger system of decontextualized power and privilege. I, in no way, intend to be the sole voice to the lived experiences of Black queer folx and hope the audience takes this work as a sliver of cosmic truth i.e., this is my truth revealed through sharing of my embodied experience holding my perspective on these themes in connection to my blackness, healing, and spiritual journey toward liberation. The literary review interwoven with my embodied experience serves as a source of performative research, an act that Joseph Beam describes as one "of self-creation and survival through affirmation" while recognizing "the importance of knowing the work of those who have gone before" (Melton, 2020). This truth is shared in the hopes that those whose experience(s) mirror my own in blackness and queerness can see this as a guiding lamp.

This work is for the Black queer/trans people who sought and seek a full reflection of the complex sharp-edged and delicate parts of themselves in the world. This is for those of us who grew up in-between worlds, creating imagined realities where somewhere, somehow every fiber of our being could be loved and not compartmentalized to be swallowed whole by our blackness

in a need to be accepted by our own. This is for the Black queer/trans people who questioned a god they were conditioned to believe would not love all of them. This is for those of us who despite being condemned when we swayed, pranced, flicked, spoke vibrantly, had a switch in our hips, folded into and out of ourselves while singing boldly to the sky, stomping our feet into the ground we still held hope that something or someone on the other side would hear the echoes of our cries. I recognize the role of this work in academia but more importantly, it serves to reach beyond those barriers and speak to the communities where my spirit is nurtured and held wholly in safety. As Solange eloquently notes in her 2016 album *A Seat at the Table*, “...this shit is for us” (Knowles, 2016).

I want to explicitly acknowledge my power, access to, and experience of privilege as a cis-able-bodied, college-educated, middle-class man which has allotted me access to the mental, emotional, and social space to heal. I hold the weight of this power and privilege in this literary review with the hope it will amplify what I understand is my duty to my people to be a conduit between realities, as I exist in the in-between (Lockett 2020). I did not always have the opportunity to embody my blackness, queerness, and spiritual self – each of these at some point in my healing journey was a polarity to the other. The work to embody remembering, reclaiming, and reimagining my Black/queer/spiritual self was brutal...at times self-destructive, and ugly.

Growing up on the southside of Chicago in Englewood, to honor my blackness I had to deny my queerness in community, specifically at church, which was my world. My blackness, queerness, and spirituality constantly felt at odds with each other, never quite balanced or in alignment. As I continued to seek confirmation in Christian doctrine driven by the Black church – I found myself believing I was possessed by a demonic spirit that led me to homosexual desires. This was amplified by my boyhood constantly being deconstructed and rebuilt on ideals

of what a Black man should be as I felt I existed in all the ways one *should* not. However, it was primarily in movement, during liturgical dance (and drill team) performances, where I felt I was able to commune with God/Spirit and obtain a glimpse of what it felt to exist as whole.

I tried praying it away
lying face down at the altar
crying to my god
this God
for acceptance
for love
for healing
for deliverance...
Met with silence every single time
No...
response
to the guilt, to shame, to dissonance,
Only embodied hatred.
My cries pouring into a void
a lake to the sea of emptiness

I traversed these waters for most of my childhood into early adulthood guarded by walls of perfectionism and high performance. I moved to San Francisco, post college, with the dream of finally stepping into my queerness and in doing so I chose to forsake my spiritual identity, due to religious harm, and disengage from my blackness in pursuit of romantic relationships. I sought the “other,” any partner who was not Black made me better, gave me access to the pinnacle of

what it meant to be gay. My spiritual self sought to feel the void of the voice of God who always seemed to be out of reach of my call, so I engulfed myself in every pleasure I was denied leading to exploring everything to cope without coping as I flexed my “inflatable muscles” to protect me from articulating my trauma of internalized religious abuse and toxic masculinity (Brown-Venning, 2022). I still hold an immense amount of rage for my inner child, and younger selves, who were seeking a reflection of love. Rage rooted in understanding somehow, I found my way toward loving myself while recognizing there are so many that do not get the chance. Therefore, I will continue to do the work of etching healing spaces into the weighted cement of religious trauma.

It is primarily due to religious trauma driven by white supremacy that culturally Black queer people have created their own unique ways to navigate the world that trace back to their ancestral roots and those ever-evolving paths to their roots should be honored. To unpack the larger essence of Black queer divinity there is a need to understand the role white supremacy plays in how the community seeks reflection of itself in the world currently while holding space for the "ambivalent relationship" of embodied ancestral wisdom prior to colonialism. The insidious magnitude of colonialism's living legacy of white supremacy on the erasure of Black narratives, specifically through the power of colonial Christian doctrine across the globe, must be considered when equipping Black queer people with the tools to remember, reclaim and reimagine our histories and futures. This is one of the many reasons why my personal narrative is interwoven into this literary review. As a result, I will examine the experience of Black queer people and the intersectional roles racism, spiritual abuse, and gender norms play in contributing to a remembering, reclaiming, and reimagining of our divinity. This critical literary review will

amplify the transhistorical narratives of Black queerness throughout the diaspora and the capacity of ritualized movement to foster healing and connection to the divine.

I will conduct a review of the role dance/movement therapy can play in the healing process of Black queer people at the intersections of Blackness, spirituality, and queerness.

The literary review will be accompanied by autoethnographic movement practices to offer a space for my in-depth healing and transformation to be centered. My theoretical approach will center cultural healing practices grounded in Black queerness throughout the African diaspora and analyze the relationship to the western theoretical approach of DMT's impact on healing religious trauma. Specifically, I will align to Black Liberatory Praxis centering African spiritual practice rooted in the concept of Sankofa and Black Feminist/Queer Theory. My dance/movement therapy framework will mirror and amplify the principles in the work of Herald-Marshall and Rivera's Embodied Resilience Framework: self-body, collective, socio-political, and spiritual power (2019). I will be exploring definitions of Blackness, queerness, and spirituality interconnected with the above-mentioned frameworks. The work will serve as a link between the transhistorical and future narratives of Blackness, queerness, and spirituality navigating the central themes of dance/movement therapy within/outside the white-patriarchal lens of oppressive religious ideologies. I will document the work through a series of inter/intrapersonal multi-modal arts-based dialogues between the text and my lived experience including kinesthetic journaling and processing, bibliotherapeutic practice, embodied listening, and multimodal arts-based visuals.

I begin my literature review by building on the legacy of a former Lesley University student, Gabriela Núñez -Santiago, who passionately shared sentiments, that even to the point leading up to this thesis, I felt isolated throughout my time in graduate school. Witnessing a

student speak so boldly about the cross-cultural and shared experience of being in the world of expressive-arts therapies, including DMT, I immediately identified with her work. I saw myself mirrored in the struggle to start and sustain the process of this thesis, as a space where I need to prove myself, my academic work, validate my lived experience by aligning it to white theoretical DMT frameworks as I continued to "absorb information that would help me become a better therapist," where my "...research papers were directed at white practitioners who are interested in learning how to best serve a group of others." (2018, p. 7).

This led to continuing the work of Núñez-Santiago with my own declarations. I implore white practitioners and those who do not exist at the intersections of Black and queer to read, sit with, and use this free emotional, mental, and spiritual labor of love to act in eradicating white supremacy, systemic and embodied, while moving toward anti-colonial practices: to yield space, access, and power. These opening words of my literature review are for you. I recognize that my program is shaped to speak to those at (or who aim to align to) the center so therefore my thesis will have to address you. This section is it. This is all you get. I want to formally state you do not have permission to cite, source, or leverage this work, beyond this introductory literature review in your scholastic work or practice. I need white non-Black practitioners aligned to anti-Blackness and homophobic ideologies to recognize that you will never do "enough". Your sorry – It's not enough. Your institutions adding a couple of resources by Black queer and Indigenous scholars or implementing hollow diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice (DEIJ) principles – It's not enough. Every day, the work you do to dismantle white-colonial religious structures should feel like an everlasting first step. Until you feel the weight of exhaustion in your fight against anti-Blackness and the oppressive systems that uphold religious trauma and then *choose* to push beyond that point with every fiber of your being – It will never be enough. The time of

leveraging Black voices, thought, and embodied knowledge without proper compensation and citation of the seed, is up. As Nuñez declares, "I want a field that takes responsibility for its well-intended violence, erasure, and theft. I want leaders to understand that well intentions often give birth to harm" (2018, p. 3). This is in honor of my/our labor, my/our ancestors, my/our elders, mentors, and academic lineage.

This work is not for the white gaze, white clinician/practitioner, and/or white institution(s) or non-Black people who experience marginalization and choose to align to white supremacy when it benefits them. This literature review is not here to be appropriated into an ill-fitted course curriculum. I have witnessed far too much of this atrocity throughout my academic career, and retribution and reclamation are due. If you do not meet at the intersections of Black and queer and you are met with challenges, I implore you to sit with what makes you uncomfortable and more importantly transmute that energy into action to uproot white patriarchal belief systems which perpetuate harm. Yes, this process may be uncomfortable, retching in moments, and yet it's not even a glimpse of the lived experience of Black queer people.

My literary review stands in direct protest to white-supremacy structures that serve as the foundation of harmful religious doctrine. Recognizing this doctrine feeds directly into the spirit of white academic institutions, specifically their power to weigh what can be considered feasible scholarship and therapeutic practice. This literature review stands to illuminate a practice that should be leveraged across all academic institutions, especially rooted in the expressive-arts therapies that claim to educate from multi-cultural, social justice-oriented, and equitable frameworks.

Redefining on my/our terms

I use the term queer to be expansive across LGBTQIAA+ identified folx which includes but is not limited to trans, gay, lesbian, same-gender-loving (SGL), gender non-conforming (GNC). I understand each of these terms are constructs of western language and in no way are the summation of the lived experiences of Black queer people, but rather serve as an access point. The terms "gay" and "lesbian" are often attributed to white cis-able-bodied persons which leads to the erasure of the Black queer experience.

In the process of dreaming up new therapeutic healing spaces for Black queer/trans people, one must begin with redefining some important terms. In defining dance/movement therapy, its lineage is traced to the launch of western psychiatric medicinal technologies. White-cis-heteronormative therapeutic technologies continue to be weaponized against the bodies existing at the intersections of Black and queer. In 2021 the American Psychological Association issued a resolution regarding its "promoting, perpetuating, and failing to challenge racism, racial discrimination, and human hierarchy in the U.S." (APA, 2021). This perpetuation seeped into the fabric of the creation of the American Dance Therapy Association whose founders mirrored the "white male leadership, many of whom contributed to scientific inquiry and methods that perpetuated systemic racial oppression, including promoting the ideas of early 20th-century eugenics" (2021) by their historical exclamation as pioneers within the field of DMT, centering Marian Chace (Nichols, 2019). I will combat these ideals by recognizing Black Americans, specifically enslaved African-Americans, used dance as a therapeutic art form at the center of their healing ritual and religious practices before the western institutionalization of DMT as a field of practice. Black people specifically used therapeutic circle spaces, known as "ring shouts," documented as early as 1651 (Hazzard-Donald, 2011).

Hence, I will elevate the use of the phrase healing ritual dance, or ritual for short interchangeably with dance/movement therapy when speaking to the Black queer experience. The use of the term healing/ritual instead of therapy invites all aspects of a person's identity: the relationship to past, present, and future selves. Ritual holds space to examine inter/intrapersonal and metaphysical relationships impacting Black queer/trans experience by simultaneously deconstructing and amplifying the practice of therapy. In Some's analysis of ritual, he offers insightful criticisms of westernized approaches to therapy and healing with a core critique being the absent use of ritual in the therapeutic space. I want to amplify this difficulty by responding to the weight of the oppressive system of religious trauma intersecting with capitalism will always inform any westernized therapeutic approach for Black queer clients because that oppression is its foundation i.e., mental healthcare is inaccessible for those existing as the most marginalized in society serving as violence. As Somé states, "ritual is not compatible with the rapid rhythm that industrialism has injected into life" (1997, p. 19), and the work of Danielle Drake expands on this by noting, "rituals connect directly to spiritual creativity in their use of creative elements such as music, literature, storytelling, culinary arts, dance/movement, and other practices for the purpose of connecting with a transcendent Other, including God, ancestors, and the cosmos" (Drake, p. 30).

Danielle Drake's *Spiritual Creativity Among African Americans* (2017) offers definitions of key terms and profound insight into the uniqueness of African - American spirituality as creative practice. Drake expands the reader's understanding of ritual as spaces "...in the African American community marked by expressive call-and-response practices, charismatic relationality between church leaders and participants, and the incorporation of music, dance/movement, literature, and stylized oration toward transcendent spiritual experience"

(2017). I will speak to the work of E. Patrick Johnson later in the literary review, who has a similar definition when speaking to Black queer ritual spaces which allow for the reimagining of therapy for Black/queer clients through the act of embodied prayer space to incite action and practice. Drake also offers insight on the principle of Sankofa, stating “it represents the importance of reaching back into the past to retrieve what was lost and bring it forward for current generations,” noting its importance specifically for Black people navigating their therapeutic journey toward the African-centered spiritual self (Deterville 2016). The principle of Sankofa makes way for Black/queer people to rebuild the connections to their divinity while being violently “thrust into a cultural world that does not acknowledge or celebrate important aspects of their cultural intelligences, philosophical ideologies, relational practices, creativity, expression, presentation, and so forth” (Harris 1998 p. 14).

This is key to acknowledge, especially when we think of westernized therapeutic frameworks which often fail to hold space for anything beyond the “here and now” or the wider spectrum of the individual’s chronological lifespan (childhood, adolescence, adulthood, late adulthood). Drake introduces the reader to Afri-cultural coping, which although aligns with cognitive and emotional therapeutic strategies, Afri-cultural coping moves beyond basic centered DMT movement frameworks, such as Laban Movement Analysis, by recognizing spiritual-centered, collective ritual-centered coping (Drake, 2019, p. 30) as core components in African – American healing practices.

I needed to open this literary review by remembering, reclaiming, and reimagining my DMT graduate education, which fell short in constructing the necessary ties, or any at all, to the lived experiences of Black queer and trans people. DMT learning, theoretical, and embodied processes, as they stand today, often being a vehicle perpetuating the very religious harm rooted

in white-body supremacy (Menakem 2017) its work vows to be an imminent resource in abolishing. This work is what led me and a colleague, Black Pruitt (they/them) to our independent embodied-research practice amplifying the principle of Sankofa described above. Our longing to see ourselves reflected in the world, and more immediately our justified rage fueled by a desire to see our reflection in the graduate studies and curricula on campus is what birthed *The Queer God* (2020) – rooted in Sankofa ideology to remember, reclaim, and reimagine what healing looks like for Black queer/trans folx. This evolving framework will ultimately serve as the base for my current insights regarding the spheres of Blackness, spirituality, and queerness.

Blackness

Black is (re)defined, (re)dissected, (re)demolished, and (re)built infinitely through time. No one definition can singularly encompass all that is Black understanding that Black holds many truths and myths simultaneously. I define Black as someone who traces their indigenous lineage to Africa and is connected throughout the diaspora. In parallel, I realize Black can also become synonymous with American Descendants of Slaves, abbreviated “ADOS” (ADOS Foundation, 2021). The social, political, geological, and ethnographical locations play an important role in how Blackness and queerness are defined across the diaspora. I want to leverage my research as a passageway between my experience as a Black queer ADOS and the historical and cultural experience of queerness throughout the African diaspora. As Gill states, "Black queerness is an epistemic location - a location in perpetual flux, a location that resembles the sea perhaps as closely as it resembles the diaspora... Blackness and queerness hold within and share between them a fundamentally ambivalent relationship to the interrelated tropes of sameness and difference" (2012, pg. 33).

Remembering

The work of Dunning begins to unravel Black nationalism and its relationship to patriarchal white masculinity and how the two are inseparable. Dunning provides unique insight into the power and impact of relationships noting, "relationships are not fractured by difference but are productively bound by it" (2009, p. 54). I would argue that Dunning's use of "productively bound" to describe interpersonal connections provides room to reimagine the impact racism, spiritual abuse, and gender norms can have on Black queer people and more importantly returns the power to those victimized by white patriarchal supremacy. As we continue to explore the multidimensional facets of ritual, we can uncover its offering to marginalized communities as ritual can ground the practice from the cultural and social experiences of the clients as opposed to DMT historically and currently being sanctioned through the lens of the white body. There are historical imprints that must be considered where the Black queer body exists within the microcosm (Black church) and macrocosm (white-patriarchal dominant society) concurrently. Dunning discusses the effects of lynching the black body, "Lynching is a sexual and racial crime, perpetuated on black (usually male) bodies and frequently including mutilation. It is a denegation conflation of desire and national anxiety, sparked by the threat of a competing masculinity" (2009, p. 58). I believe lynching lives in the black body through epigenetics and therapists must recognize how often it was/is rooted in religious superiority leading to body-based remembered religious trauma (Menakem 2017). In having therapeutic discussions with Black queer and trans clients, it's important to acknowledge the act of lynching as one of the many links to black masculinity – Its encounters with homophobia within the Black community, its need to validate itself against whiteness in the larger social context, all while pushing against barriers in the work to reclaim autonomy.

It's the embodied confrontation I have with Black masculinity in my queer existence, which led me to examine the health disparities Black gay and SGL men experience. Powel et al elicit profound insight into the gaps in access to healing for Black and Indigenous men that must be unpacked before there are adequate means to develop embodied practices that aid the therapeutic space. The report focuses on first laying out disparities along four lines: trauma, substance abuse, depression, and violence. We must consider "the multiple social roles they [men of color] negotiate as they move through life or occupy different stages of normative development" (Powell et al., 2018). Within DMT there is an even larger gap in considerations for Black and Latinx men due to the number of accessible therapists that mirror the demographic. According to the American Dance Therapy Association poll, seventy-five percent of dance/movement therapists identify as white, from which one can infer the field's academic research aligns with the white-cis-heteronormative demographic. Powel et al. outline some of the necessary steps therapists must take in fostering healing spaces for men of color and sexual minority men. There is a need for further clinical research exploring means to address disparities Black queer and SGL men face regarding "understand[ing] and appreciate[ing] the role of masculinity beliefs and norms on health behavior and outcomes" (Powell et. al 2018, p. 11) and the duality of the masculine experience: including the impact of toxic masculine behavioral traits, how masculinity can play a role in the resilience and survival of racial/ethnic minority boys and men, and approaches that move beyond the general mentorship/role model mechanism but explore avenues to create "social capital critical to accessing networks" (Powell et. al., 2018, p. 66).

Reclaiming

In the Anthology, *The Black Body* edited by Meri Nana-Ama Danquah, Jordan wonderfully articulates the connection of the black male heart to music through narrative. The author explores the black man's emotional experience and connection with song using Lenny Williams' "Cause I Love You". The author examines how through the artist's vocal arrangement including the compilation of lyrics, moans, and emotion the exact experience of the Black man's heart is embodied. He explicates that Williams' singing and emotional tone "calls for an art that is more vulnerable than we're allowed to show downtown or in the gym or in the boardroom or in bed is evident" (Danquah, 2009, pg. 132).

It is reiterated that men do not have many avenues to express themselves, often even within intimate spaces. I would argue there is consistent disengagement from the black male body and its totality of experience. "A black man in touch with the complexities of his heart... the world calls for this level of self-awareness...but in the chest of a black man, it carries with it the misinterpretation of a man who is either threatening or crazy... a glimpse at what a man with heart can endure and what a man with heart will inevitably face" (Danquah, 2009, p. 128). The work speaks to how we can examine the power of music in the healing of Black queer people. Although Jordan's story identifies as a cishet, the writing unpacks the need to continue delving into how DMT can best serve all its clients. There is an obligation to examine the complexities of the black queer experience, especially when we consider the levels of neglect the community has faced over the year within the therapeutic space. This work amplifies the valuable role of music as a significant access point for Black people in relationship to healing understanding it's one of the key areas of expression within white-patriarchal systems where they are given space to exist fully.

Reimagining

The Anthology presented by Sharrell D. Lockett is groundbreaking in holding space for reclamation while forging a foundation of reimagining Black futures through various literary works in which the authors think critically of the impact of African-American Arts anchoring in "activism, aesthetics, and futurity" (2020). I will explore various chapters throughout this literature review as they unpack unique ways healing manifests within Black identity and culture. In "Designing our Freedom" the author Byrd explores fashion as a point or system of liberation for Black people, a source of protection, as a barrier. In the Black queer subculture, ballroom, high fashion, music, dance, competition, and community become a gateway toward liberatory practices (Lane 2016). Byrd mentions how Black people leverage fashion as "the canon of self-liberation by considering activism for Black life in fashion in an effort to challenge...the ways in which fashion can be read as a site in which the politics of liberation can also take form" (Byrd 2020, p. 38). I can recall attending my first ever ball just last year in New York City, I witnessed firsthand how ballroom weaponizes fashion as a tool to dismantle white-cis-patriarchal structures.

Situating Black Situating Queer folds the mapped geographies of Blackness and Queerness onto each other. The author, Gill, provides insight into why we define Blackness and queerness in the ways we do and offers to push those defined limitations through the embodied experiential interactions between the two. I agree with Gill's acknowledgment that Blackness can become synonymous with African American or ADOS. He speaks to the work of Tinsley, who poses the question, "What would it mean for both queer and African diaspora studies to take seriously the possibility that, as forcefully as the Atlantic and the Caribbean flow together, so too do the turbulent fluidity of Blackness and queerness?" (2012 p. 33) This is one of the questions at the center of my research practice. I recognize that both of my experiences as Black and queer

dramatically inform how I shape the world around me. Tinsley's use of two bodies of water that enslaved ancestors traversed and where many of their spirits rest invoke the remembering that the two have never been separated - they flow into and out of each other in turbulent ways, "spreading outward, running through bays, while remaining heavy, stinging, a force against our hands" This force ignites our passion, culture, and healing even amid religious oppression. The infinite ways of existing at the intersection of Black, queer/trans, and spiritual fuel that force which connects us to Spirit for our stories and embodied experiences to become "transcontinental, transnational, translocal, transcommunal or even transitional" (2012 p. 33)

Queerness

The Human Rights Campaign defines queer as "a spectrum of identities and orientations that are counter to mainstream. Queer is often used as a catchall..."(2021). However, I challenge HRC's definition because it neglects the nuance of whiteness being the center of what is considered mainstream so what do we make of us who align to Black queer identity? Where are we placed when our lives, needs, and experiences are consistently pushing against the dominant systems perpetuated by white-cis-patriarchal narratives; narratives that shape the story of gender, sexuality, and queerness. People are entitled to identify as they choose and many factors may contribute to their unique identification including, but not limited to, generational, socio-cultural, and geographical locators. All these locators are primarily governed by able-bodied gender norms passed down through white colonial religious doctrine.

Remember

To remember queerness, we must remember who we are, and one remembers who they are by knowing what, who, and where they come from. We are of the Akan, Ambo, Amhara, Anyi/Anyin, Bafia, Bagishu/Bageshu, Bala, Bambala, Bamhara, Bangla, Dagaari, Dahomey,

Duala, Eritrean, Fanti, Gangelia, Gikuyu, Gisu, Hausa, Herero, Ila, Iteso, Kongo, Konso, Krongo, Kru, Lango, Maale, Maragoli, Meru, Mesakin, Mombasa, Mossi, Mpondo, Naman, Nandi, Ndemu, Nuer, Nyakyusa, Nyoro, Nzema, Ondonga, Pangwe, Rwana, Tsonga, Umbundu, Wawihe, Wawihe, Wolof, Xun, Yaka, Yoruba, Zande, Zulu. These ethnonyms are languages that speak to Black queerness, acknowledge our existence boldly and hold us in community and in light (Murray & Roscoe 2021). As Conner notes in his work *Men-Women, Gatekeepers and Fairy Mounds*, Black queer people including “androgynous, homoerotically inclined or bisexual individuals serve their communities as threshold guardians and guides,” (2000, p. 71) i.e., are acknowledged as gatekeepers between our world and the spirit world (p. 71). Conner acknowledges the work of Malidoma Some who speaks to his shock when witnessing western culture and its treatment of queer people in society, “Why is it that, everywhere else in the world, gay people are a blessing, and in the modern world they are a curse?” (1993). Somé understands the concept of modernity is framed by white religious ideology, as Christianity was the machine that ripped through the indigenous world. In our ancestral roots, in our blood, and in our bones, Black queer people are remembered and revered as one of the key connections to Spirit, vibrating at a higher state of consciousness and awareness (Conner, 2000).

Reclaim

To reclaim queerness, Black queer people must reclaim pleasure. We must reclaim the erotic in every sense of the word (Lorde 1978). I make this statement in opposition to the very surface level of pleasure we witness at the white-washed pride parades or on the dancefloors of the predominantly white gay neighborhoods throughout the U.S. These places are the commercialized versions of pleasure with white patriarchy painted in rainbow hues to promote equality if it does not disturb white-body supremacy (Menakem, 2017). These “places” are not

safe spaces for Black queer folx, which make it difficult to serve as a welcoming community that leads to liberatory pleasure. Adrienne Marie Brown's anthology *Pleasure Activism* does the work of assembling self-exploration, relationship, and expression to move us toward true reclamation of pleasure at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and politics. Through this process of reclaiming our queer identity which is suppressed by colonial-Christian religious trauma's work of disembodiment i.e., separate the flesh from the spirit and the spirit from the mind, we step into the fullness of our being (Lorde 1978). As Audre Lorde notes in *Uses of the Erotic*, "once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of." (1978, p. 6).

When one lives a life of negotiating who and what they are with the world around them constantly, it can be extremely exhausting. Black queer people stand at the intersections of racism, homophobia, and religious trauma and abuse *always* being tasked with compromise i.e., what behaviors may or may not be accepted and/or what parts of their identity may present themselves fully under the imminent threat of violence, this labor and consistent compromise depletes the spirit (Brown 2019). The act of intentionally engaging in pleasure despite religious trauma, and white-cis patriarchal norms as a Black person is inherently queer – as it will always be juxtaposed to the oppressive nature of ensuring we are disconnected from our bodies. Through Black queer/trans people reclaiming our agency over our bodies and what pleasures make it up, "pleasure generated through our own power," becomes something that will "resonate as far into the future as possible" (Brown 2019, p. 100). To arrive at the space where our pleasure generates revival, we have to begin to see the sex we have, the gender we choose (or choose not) to align with, the love we desire as not "abnormal or subpar" to the cis-

heteronormative center but the bar for it to strive toward because what better love to be an example than one that seeks its own mirror in the world (Brown 2019).

Reimagine

Luckett's works ground the reader in Sankofa principles by projecting us into an Afro-futuristic liberated world with Amber Johnson's insights, who explores the embodied wisdom held within the Black trans experience as a mirror of Afrofuturism (2020 p.15). Johnson examines how transness represents the incarnation of Afrofuturism while unpacking the impact of hyperinvisibility and canonical prejudice on one's desire to be mirrored within the world, noting "Black gyrls, womyn, and bois carry the weight of the world's oppression in our skin, hair, breath, and gait. Our mere existence is an act of invisible labor in a world that treats us as hyperinvisible- where the stereotypes attached to our bodies are so powerful that they inform how others treat us" (2020 p. 15). In speaking about the trans experience regarding hyperinvisibility, Johnson stimulates dialogue on its impact within the Black queer community holistically. The histories, stories, futures of Black queer folx are made invisible and exist without consistent reflection causing a double consciousness as we move through space(s) as the bodies of Black queer people are marked "absent and present simultaneously" (2020, p. 15) which leads to us being perceived as without emotional or physical needs unless it is in the capacity of service to and for the fantasies of the dominant culture. The trans body only being of value when it can be used for the fetishized obscured fantasy before being discarded, amplified by the Black trans women that have been murdered at the hands of a partner due to hyper invisibility (2020). As a result, Johnson explains the mere act of Black trans people existing is a "futuristic and critical performance of embodied social identity that creates strategic space of transformation" (2020, p. 20).

Spirituality

Drake defines spirituality as, “A process involving the unfolding of mystery through harmonious interconnectedness that springs from inner strength” (2019, p. 7) In DeFrantz, anthology *Black Performance Theory*, Carl Paris echoes Drake and Yvonne Daniel with a similar perspective when describing spirit as, “embodied knowledge and contributes to and underlies meaning on deeply metaphysical, cognitive, and somatic planes” in his work titled *Reading Spirit and the Dancing Body in the Choreography of Ronald K. Brown and Reggie Wilson* (2014, p. 100)

I use spirituality in this literary review to hold space for those that may find their way back to their divinity through Christianity – this was not the case for me, however, interestingly enough I still engage in those cultural-religious forms through gospel music, liturgical dance, leveraging the Bible as manifestation tool in my ancestral veneration practice acknowledging the difficulty of separating my spirituality from Black Christian religious practices. There is the complexity that exists because the Black church is one the main sources of religious trauma for me, while it also holds privilege in serving as my access point to Spirit, as other religious practices of Black people across the diaspora were and still are demonized including Islam, Ifa, Hoodoo... it’s a peculiar space to exist in and move through.

Remember

Falcao dos Santos utilizes Afro-Brazilian traditions to explore healing rituals through dance. There is a particular interest in this source due to its proposal of using dance outside the confines of central DMT frameworks to analyze and educate individuals about their body and their artistic experience through a multicultural lens. There is a focus on the rhythm of the Bata Drum. The work is written in the context of use by art educators however I believe many of the principles

can be explored within therapeutic ritual space for Black queer clients, "The analysis we are proposing - that of introduction the individual's tradition as a multicultural aesthetic re-creation in dance-art-education - points to the possibility of an education a [therapeutic] practice focused on cultivating diversity." (2017 p 24). The author's discussion around the necessity of rhythms to connect us to the black body and the black healing experience is a highlight for me. "Dance... is a means of transformation for man. A way to activate in him the germinal cell of the spirit or drive his development leading him from an inferior state to a more lucid state... learning is remembering, remembering is learning," with a Sankofa aligned understanding that, "those who recall clearly and deeply unveil what was covered up with their own soul" (2017 p. 72). This uncovering happens when Black queer people become aware of our ancestral embodied wisdom and align to serve, understand, and examine the Black queer body through artistic and ritual mediums that speak to its cultural context.

Reclaim

I came across Douglass' work almost 4 years ago. The title called out to me, considering I grew up listening to pastors speak about sexuality, specifically homosexuality often during the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" repeal. Douglass' writing was published when I was nine years old, and I believe her womanist perspective and its alignment to Black feminist theory, under the umbrella of Black liberatory frameworks, offers fresh insights even today. Douglass defines sexuality as "a sign, a symbol, and a means of our call to communication and communion," while holding space to unpack its mysteries as, "our need to reach out to embrace others both physically and spiritually... [sexuality] is who we are as body-selves who experience the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion - human and divine." (1999, p. 6). What Douglass holds room for is for sexuality to not be reduced to transactional experience, but

instead, it is central to how we find ourselves in community. This is a piece of communion Black queer people are often stripped from or told to repress this form of communication with ourselves, others, and Spirit. We see this in how ADOS were victims of rape, buck-breaking, and lynching. Through violence in the name of religion and leveraging a book beyond their native tongue - enslaved people were able to look to the contradictions within the bible and find some space to cope i.e., be forced through brutal violence into belief and practice that the mind, body/flesh, and spirit must be separated if one was to survive. Douglass states, "the bible became a 'world' into which African Americans could retreat, a 'world' they could identify with, draw strength from, and in fact manipulate for self-affirmation" (1999, p. 89).

Douglass cites that homosexuality was a practice of communion long before colonization's oppression through Christianity, "Modern anthropological evidence suggests the existence of homosexuality in virtually all human cultures, including those of Africa," with several scholars reporting "...various sexual practices and family structures in black cultures." while offering examples such as, "Portuguese sources indicate that homosexuality was common among the people of Angola... Members of Nubian and Zulu cultures were known to assume alternative gender roles, women taking on important duties and men engaging in transvestite homosexuality... [and] homosexuality was practiced by adolescents in Dahomey, and that some same-sex pairing persisted for life." (1999, p. 98). Douglass speaks to the spheres of Blackness and queerness being a part of our ancestral lineage which makes room for reclamation. In order for us as individuals and the collective to move toward embodied liberation, Douglass states we have to see homophobia as antithetical to Black existence (1999, p.107), as homophobia is driven by fear, understanding that it is "the fear of homosexuality perpetuated by the church is related to a generalized fear of sexuality... the freedom to choose sexual partners was one of the

most powerful distinctions between the condition of slavery and the post-emancipation status of African Americans" (1999, p. 89). In order for Black queer people to stand in the reclamation of our spirituality, we must recognize that our queerness is inherently divine and that it is through our body-selves that a reflection of God is manifested in the world around us for "the body can be a vehicle for divine presence and the means by which human beings can communicate agape [love]...the physicality of sexuality, that which signals the potential for one to be authentically human and hence to reflect the image of God in the world." (Douglass 1999, p. 116).

Reimagine

The process to reimagine Black queer spirituality first requires excavation. Like any vessel, it must be emptied before it can be poured into again. For many queer people, religious trauma fills us to the brim with ideologies, thoughts, feelings, and ways of being that are secular to our core existence as gatekeepers. It is when we are (re)conditioned to entrust our embodied ancestral wisdom, a pearl of wisdom informed by and welcoming the *flesh*: for the flesh is how Spirit moves from "place to space" (Johnson, 1998, p. 400). E. Lynn Johnson introduces us to the concept in his work *Feeling Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African-American Gay Community*. In just the opening, Johnson confirms what I discovered almost twenty years later on the dancefloors of San Francisco's Castro district – Spirit is with and of me when I move under the sound of bass. It felt familiar because it reminded me of being in church whenever I ministered through liturgical dance. When I moved it began to shake up what had settled all those years growing up in the Black church, breaking the cemented rhetoric that God could never love me. Johnson recounts a similar experience while at a D.C. queer club in the '90s where the house music takes over, under the call and response of the DJ, who acts as the preacher, leading Black bodies into queer ecstasy summoned his own embodied

remembrance of being in a southern Baptist church, noting “body and soul coalesced – flesh and spirit were wed” (1998, p. 410).

It is in the power of pleasurable movement(s) that we get to reimagine our GOD - on a communal, geographical, and ancestral level. I finally am living in a time where I commune Spirit that sees, acknowledges, and honors the rage of my inner child and will move mountains to help them/us feel whole. Spiritual practice not rooted in a religion that conditions children to believe they need to “exorcise” their queerness to not be seen as an abomination in the eyes of God (Johnson, 1998). Now, I commune with Spirit in a way that affirms my capacity to conjure the life I want with my words and actions. Like Johnson, I see spirit as “theory in flesh” emboldened by every piece of Black queer existence, “...our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings... the conjoining of the physical realities of being black and gay with those of being Christian,” (1998, p. 410) or (dis)connected with any religious practice. A key aspect that Johnson brings to the forefront, like others in this literary review, is the important role of performance in Spirit manifesting for Black people, specifically Black queer people, by grounding his writing in the performance “space” of the night club which makes communion with Spirit possible (1998).

Embodied Expressive Conversation (Discussion)

Hazard leads us into a space of recognizing how African-American ancestors practiced the work of embodied healing rituals and communion with Spirit during one of the most tumultuous historical times in modern living, enslavement. She takes the reader on a journey to remember our African spiritual practices, specifically Hoodoo, and the importance of the "ring shout", how it came into being on plantations, and recognizing the impact it plays in all American Dance formations (2011). She defines the ring shout as a "counter-clockwise, sacred

circle dance that appears to have been done universally among African-American bondsmen, and later among freedmen... with a system of gesture, spirit possession, individualized sacred dancing and specific music, particularly vocal shouting" (2011, p. 196). I would like to call the use of the term system to the forefront, as it combats the ideology that Black spiritual practices, such as Hoodoo, which according to plantation owners were not organized and were solely frantic and primal. Hazzard notes, "the shout ritual was the arena in which the motor muscle memory of African movement could be learned, sustain, relexified, and reborn eventually a secular dance forms" (Hazzard, 2011, p. 199). If African-American dance formations are the foundation of the formation of American dance, one can infer that those same dance formations are the foundation of the colonized dance/movement therapy techniques and practices.

We can expand this notion to Hoodoo, through the ring shout, and other native spiritual practices being the key to combat religious trauma enacted through Christian doctrine leveraged as a primary tool of enslavement, thus acting as a form of therapy to enslaved people. The healing and therapeutic practice of the ring shout is grounded in what Hazzard describes as, the "African Religion Complex" (2011, p. 199) which contains eight traits that were seen across varying ethnic groups with some key components being spirit possession, ancestor reverence, divination, and naturopathic medicine. This religious complex continues to manifest through Black performance theory and healing practices throughout history crafted by Pearl Primus, Katherine Dunham, and more recently Brenda Dixon-Gottschild.

I believe Black queer/trans folx and our mere existence embody African religious complexities as we (re)morph binary constructs making every element of our worlds an "aesthetic manifestation" (Johnson, p. 20) of infinite liberating possibilities. I want to make the connection between these aesthetic manifestations to those that occur in healing ritual

ceremonies related to African traditional practices. Daniel explains in *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* how initiates of a particular gender identity existing on the binary can invoke and embody orixas, orixas, orichas based on the practice they are initiated within, and it is not in alignment with their assigned gender (2005). In these spaces, the possessed individuals embody the characteristics, or rather display through movement, the characteristics of the spirit/s (2005). The noted African traditional practices of ritual performance hold space for reclamation of DMT in working with Black queer/trans clients. By making the connection between multimodal expressive-arts practices including dance/movement, art, music, and drama/performance which occur during ritual performance, one can witness the artistic manifestation of transness through spiritual embodiment outside of binaries. Subsequently, Black queer and trans folx can feel empowered to reclaim their histories and reimagine their futures through an Afrofuturistic lens.

The work of Johnson in Lockett's anthology leaves room for the "spheres of identity," Blackness, queerness, and spirituality, to converge toward embodied liberation by recognizing and reimagining *movements* place in our movement toward liberation and an anti-colonial world (2020). Similar to Rivera's work of pinpointing the role and use of DMT for the self-body, collective, socio-political, and spiritual power of Black queer existence in moving toward healing religious trauma from a transhistorical lens (2019). Johnson exemplifies this in *Dancing for Justice Philadelphia*, which takes an account of what happens when movement is placed at the center of protest. The author recounts the heightened protests of Johnson in the city of Philadelphia which leads the community to host a march where the participants can "physicalize their emotions" (2020, p 203). The author links African diasporic movement practices as a space of remembering how we have and must fight for our liberation. There is no liberation without

movement. The author recounts their own embodied experience from the protest organizers who using simplified choreographies under a rhythm constructed a bridge between the murder of police brutality victims and movement/gestures performed during protest such as "Hands up, don't shoot" (in which both hands are placed upright, with elbows bent - fingers spread, to denote a space of surrender, vulnerability). Black people carry the embodied knowledge that any sudden movement can lead to the immediate ending of their life. Johnson recounts, "The hands up don't shoot gesture was a jarring experience for me. I was acutely aware of my rotator cuff muscles in my shoulders tending and starting to burn from fatigue, yet I was reticent to put my arms down even for a second. This pain meant I was alive". She goes on to mention, "touching and holding different parts on my body took on different meanings each time we performed... I was affirming my corneal self, my existence, my humanity. At other times I was addressing where the stories of Mike Brown, Eric Garner, and so many others lingered in my body, where the narratives of oppression dwelled. My shoulders, my chest, the back of my neck, my stomach, with my hands I mapped the rage, confusion, fear, and sorrow" (Luckett 2020, p. 206).

In the author's recount, I felt mirrored in both my movement and healing practices. My body as the site of protest. Throughout 2020 I took to Instagram with a creative project, 31 Moments with Movement (Simpson, 2020). Initially, the work was grounded in getting me back in my creative practice. As I continued to witness the state-sanctioned murders of Black beings, I had no option but to turn to my body. It became the site of gratitude and anger, a space of remembering, and a site of a liberated future. I danced until I could embody the feeling of "I Can't Breathe", driven by exhaustion and the need to share, hold, and transcend our communal pain while creating room for hope.

Conclusion

As I continue my journey toward becoming a DMT practitioner with a desire to do this work in community with Black queer and trans folx—our movement is *always* saying something and speaking to our way of being/existing. I’m continually left to question the detrimental impact of any western DMT framework or therapeutic space that does not reflect the embodied experiences of Black queer and trans clients because the therapists do not mirror, align, or have embodied awareness of the clients’ core identity markers i.e. cultural, and social formations, community, gender/sexual identity, etc. There must be intention/purpose, a connection to meaning-making, which I feel most historical westernized DMT frameworks considerably lack, as they still uphold white-colonial-capitalistic modes of healing by perpetuating religious trauma, how can it be healing at all? As Hyacinthe describes in Lockett’s anthology,

“The survival of children who are both queerly and racially identified is nothing short of staggering. The obstacles and assaults that pressure and fracture such young lives are as brutally physical as a police billy club or the fists of a homophobic thug and as insidiously disembodied as homophobic rhetoric in a rap song... I understand the strategies and rituals that allow survival in such hostile cultural waters” (2020, p. 116)

The rituals described are what I believe DMT, as it stands today is ill-equipped to provide in the healing spaces for Black queer and trans folx. Understanding this, it is through the reclamation of our own cultural and spiritual practices, including African traditional religions (ATRs) that we can remember, reclaim, and reimagine what healing looks like for us, through us. As a result, I make the following declarations (Núñez - Santiago, 2018):

1. Dance/movement therapy is rooted in Indigenous healing practices and the ways in which Black queer/trans people communicated on the physical and spiritual plane since the dawn of time.

2. The term "dance/movement therapy" is the western colonization of healing and spiritual practices/systems that were once demonized, specifically when we speak to Black/African-American queer experiences across the diaspora.
3. The term "dance/movement therapy" does not encompass the magnitude and impact of what happens when Black queer/trans people move with intention, connected power, and alignment to their innate godlikeness and divinity.
4. There is power in the reclamation of dance/movement (and all other expressive arts) therapies and healing practices that are innate to Black and Indigenous cultural practices.
5. There is power in understanding that I have practiced dance/movement therapy as a healing and survival mechanism before whiteness and the systems we operate in tried to claim it as their own.
6. Dance/movement therapy and practices are grounded in our, Black and Indigenous, ancestral lineage. As the scholar Malidoma Some mentions in his 1993 interview with M.E.N's magazine, Black queer/trans people are gatekeepers (Hoff, 1993).

I hope this work will continue to make way for unique perspectives regarding dance/movement theoretical frameworks so Black and Indigenous academics no longer must bear the burden to teach ourselves, non-Black peers and professors, who are complacent in dismantling white supremacy in the classroom. I hope my findings will amplify the voices and spaces for Black/queer rising practitioners to see themselves reflected in the curriculums and the number of institutions that promote our erasure by diluting our native healing practices leading to feelings of isolation and neglect. (Núñez -Santiago, 2018). I hope my findings will be a match to burn the gates of academia which prohibit Black and queer folx access to become licensed

dance/movement therapists. Most importantly, I hope my findings will inspire further research regarding the effectiveness of dance/movement therapy and other art forms utilized in the therapeutic space to aid Black queer people of all gender and sexual identities in healing from religious/spiritual trauma in their journey toward divine liberation.

I know these things from an embodied wisdom gained from my journey through religious and spiritual abuse. Since childhood, I have leveraged ethnographic and embodied healing practices through dance; I have felt Spirit in my core. I have used the ritual of dance, to simultaneously break and build embodied pathways toward healing from religious trauma (Bruno 2021). What happened over time is the capacity to put words to the “feeling” of healing. Much of my time was/still is spent searching for the words, the language helping me/us remember, what my/our bodies already know...

WE ARE QUEER GODS.

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have
been established for the above degree.

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