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# Spirituality & Wellness in the Black LGBTQIA+ Experience: A Literature Review

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Spirituality & Wellness in the Black LGBTQIA+ Experience: A Literature Review

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**Abstract**

This literature review explores the intersections of race, sexuality, spirituality, and wellness. The findings highlight the complex trauma caused by both racialized and religious violence and how they have historically impacted the lives of Black LGBTQIA+ people today. The research offers evidence for the benefit and efficacy of implementing traditional Afrodiasporic spirituality into expressive arts therapeutic treatment, particularly for Black LGBTQIA+ people and communities. This research also suggests the necessity for actively and effectively dismantling Western psychological frameworks and approaches that have been historically harmful towards Black and LGBTQIA+ people in order to pave pathways towards collective healing and liberation.

*Keywords: LGBTQIA+, Afrodiasporic, religion, spirituality, wellness, religious abuse, religious trauma, anti-colonial*

*Author Identity Statement: The author identifies as an Afro-indigenous, genderqueer person born within the United States.*

Spirituality & Wellness in the Black LGBTQIA+ Experience: A Literature Review

## Introduction

As I write this thesis, I am weeping. My ancestors are weeping. The pain of having to condense centuries of racialized and religious violence into twenty-five pages feels unjust. Inadequate. As a Black and genderqueer artist and healer, I feel I will spend a lifetime writing and rewriting this paper, learning, and relearning and re-membering this history, all in an attempt to do right by everyone for whom this thesis is intended to serve, in an attempt to rectify and heal all that continues to be harmed, abused, and relegated to the shadows of society. Although this research focuses specifically on the Black LGBTQIA+ experience, all that we must learn from the historical struggles of those who identify as Black and queer/transgender are universal. For "there is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (Lorde, 1984, p. 134). The acknowledgment of this history and these specific experiences are ultimately essential to all our healing, transformation, and liberation. I intend to honor the Spirit in this process: that which is carried through my ancestral lineage and all that has led to the very writing of this thesis. I offer gratitude and cultivate this knowledge honoring the deep and righteous rage of all who came before me and all who will come after.

For some, religion and spirituality can be a source of hope and healing. For others, they can be a source of deep pain and psychological distress. Despite varied definitions and experiences with religion and spirituality, negativity and violence towards non-normative genders and sexualities within religion is pervasive. The harm inflicted upon people who identify as LGBTQIA+ causes damage to spiritual and sexual identity alongside other religious trauma (Super & Jacobson 2011). "LGBTQIA+" can be understood as an acronym inclusive and indicative of a spectrum of non-normative genders and sexualities including, but not limited to,

lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual. The homophobic, transphobic, anti-queer violence, and harm that LGBTQIA+ people often face at the hands of religious and spiritual communities can be best defined as religious abuse (Super & Jacobson 2011).

According to Super and Jacobson (2011), "religious abuse occurs when a set of religious rules and doctrine are misused in a way to harm LGBT individuals" (p. 181). Religious abuse and its resulting trauma can impact anyone but has particular implications for LGBTQIA+ people and communities. When compounded by anti-Black racism and other forms of oppression, it becomes nearly impossible for Black people living at the intersections of queerness and trans-ness to find safe spaces to practice spirituality, heal, or even exist safely as they are.

These issues have been faced by LGBTQIA+ people across the African diaspora for centuries, tracing back to European colonization and the transatlantic slave trade.

> Notwithstanding the cessation of the transatlantic slave trade in the 19th century and the end of "classical" colonization in African and Caribbean nations in the last century, racialized violence persists and continues to adversely impact the lives of African-descended people throughout the world. (Nicolas & Thompson, 2019, p. 587)

The relentless impact of colonization, racialized violence, and other forms of oppression on the health and wellness of people of African descent across generations can be considered "intergenerational" trauma. Goodman defined transgenerational trauma (also called intergenerational, multigenerational, or historical trauma) as "a disbursement of trauma from one generation to another" (as cited in Campbell, 2019, p. 215). When considering the intergenerational oppression experienced by Black communities across the diaspora, we are faced with a history of violence and complex trauma leading to a plethora of physical, spiritual, and mental health issues. According to Dr. Joy DeGruy, this kind of trauma also results in a

particular set of symptoms and behaviors pointing to what she considers Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS). Dr. DeGruy's theory and conceptualization of the magnitude of violence and trauma experienced by enslaved Africans at the hands of white supremacy provided groundbreaking insight into the healing needs of Black communities today.

Considering DeGruy's theory, when closely observing the varying dimensions of violence inflicted upon enslaved Africans, one must consider the ways that religion and spirituality were weaponized as forms of domination as well. While DeGruy briefly mentioned spiritual implications of such violence, she did not go in-depth in ways that could fully support the purpose of this research. Not only was religious abuse a major tool of reinforcing white supremacy throughout colonization and enslavement, but it also forced the separation between African people, Indigenous people, and their cultural beliefs, customs, and traditions. This separation from cultural roots further aided in the agenda of white domination, with traditional African and Indigenous practices concurrently being deemed evil, forbidden, and taboo.

Coinciding with the erasure and subjugation of traditional African spiritual practices and culture are the ways that traditional African ways of life were also demonized and dehumanized. Christianity and Catholicism have historically been weaponized by Europeans to justify the cruelty of forced labor, violence, and subjugation. Yet, despite the brutality experienced historically and holistically, African descendants across the globe are known culturally to rely on spirituality to cope with oppression in order to foster hope and resilience (Mitchem, 2007; Young, 2007; Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2013). While this poses assumed contradictions for those identifying as LGBTQIA+, it also underlines the complexities and nuanced possibilities for addressing wellness issues with Black LGBTQIA+ people and communities, especially those living with religious trauma.

This literature review uses traditional African philosophy and anti-colonial theoretical frameworks to analyze and develop culturally relevant therapeutic interventions for Black LGBTQIA+ people and communities. Afrodiasporic cultural concepts of religion, spirituality, and wellness, alongside frameworks typically used in clinical expressive arts therapy praxis are employed in this research. Intersectionality is a critical concept used to bring attention to the ways that history, politics, spirituality, and mental health intersect and to highlight the specific experiences and healing needs of Black LGBTQIA+ people and communities. Taking on an anti-colonial approach, this research also seeks to reveal the ways in which healing and wellness practices have been colonized and co-opted by clinical mental health institutions. I do this while simultaneously amplifying and centering those most impacted by colonization and systemic oppression. To do so, frameworks that take on an anti-oppression focus are best suited for this research.

The research method for this literature review consisted of finding and analyzing texts that offer relevant insight into the intersections of race, sexuality, religion, spirituality, and wellness. In addition to utilizing traditional scholarly sources to gather necessary research, the analysis is also informed by texts of various genre from poetry to folklore to historical research written by Black and queer artists, scholars, and authors. Considering the importance of non-scholarly texts for this research was critical to forming an anti-colonial analysis. The search terms used included those related to sexuality, religion, spirituality, mental health/wellness, and race. This thesis specifically explores the breadth of traditional Afrodiasporic spiritual practices and the overarching Afrocentric cultural values that connect them all. Although there is limited clinical research that includes these cultural terms and concepts, I present them as a means of grounding and informing my analysis. I did not find research that explores all the intersections

present in this topic. The articles reviewed were selected for having included at least three of the key terms related to sexuality, religion, spirituality, mental health/wellness, and race.

## Literature Review

**Theoretical Orientations**

This literature review explores the ways that traditional Afrodiasporic spiritual praxis may be integrated or compared with clinical mental health and expressive arts therapy praxis in terms of effectively serving Black LGBTQIA+ people. In order to examine Black LGBTQIA+ mental health and Afrodiasporic spirituality within an expressive arts therapeutic context, the research takes an anti-colonial approach to mental health in which those cultural values are centralized. In turn, this research is rooted in an Afrocentric worldview intended to ground and support other anti-colonial and anti-oppression frameworks, such as liberation and holistic psychology. Each of these frameworks emphasize the importance of intersectionality. Intersectionality is a Black feminist term coined by Kimberlee Crenshaw (1991), "framing the various interactions of race and gender in the context of violence against women of color" (p. 12). Use of the term has since expanded to encompass marginalized people living with the compounding impacts of systems of oppression, including but not limited to classism, ableism, ageism, and heterosexism.

*African Cognitive Orientations*

*Sankofa* is a West African symbol and philosophy representing the importance of honoring the past. "Sankofa comes from the Akan communication system and means to return and fetch it. Sankofa is symbolized as a bird with the head turned backward but walking forward" (Drake, 2019, p. 14). This traditionally African concept and value is central to the analysis of the research presented here due to its emphasis on the connection between the past,

present, and future. The historical context from which this topic arises is as important as the

present-day issues that it wishes to address. This, as well as understanding the

interconnectedness of all aspects of life are what ground my analysis. Other concepts involving

interconnectedness are that of the *ubuntu* philosophy. *Ubuntu* is a Bantu word often translated as

"I am because we are," (Drake, 2019, p. 67). When considering the history of colonization, for

example, and its complex and intergenerational impacts on African descendants across the globe,

traditional African philosophy recognizes the ways in which all our fates are bound up in one

another. Another traditionally African holistic value is *ntu*. Drake (2019) wrote:

> The evolution of the Afrocentric perspective began with the philosophy of *Ntu*. The term
>
> *Ntu* (pronounced "in-too") is a Bantu (central African) concept that describes a universal,
>
> unifying force that affects all aspects of existence and is the basic essence that unifies the
>
> universe and the force in which Being and beings coalesce (Phillips, 1990, p. 5).

These values and perspectives are essential to the analysis provided in this thesis, as well as for

providing a culturally relevant context for the analysis.

### *Anti-colonial Orientations*

Supporting these African-centered concepts and frameworks are two anti-colonial and

anti-oppression frameworks drawn specifically from clinical mental health research and practice:

liberation and holistic psychology. Liberation psychology focuses on trauma and mental health

in relation to systems of oppression. Liberation psychology draws from various theoretical and

political frameworks, including womanism/Black feminism and queer theory (Comas-Díaz &

Rivera, 2020). As mentioned above, intersectionality is a key concept in Black feminist theory

(Crenshaw, 1991). In cultivating effective interventions for those who identify as both Black and

LGBTQIA+, among other identities and lived experiences, intersectionality offers a framework

for understanding the ways in which power, privilege, and oppression show up in the lives of people living at those intersections. "Positionality, a feminist and queer concept, refers to how our social intersecting identities and social positions influence the understanding of our realities...Liberation psychology offers methods for dismantling white, elitist, cisheteronormative ways of healing, living and being" (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020, p. 285-286). Liberation psychology uplifts and centers lived experiences, cultural values, and historical memory and trauma towards social action, healing, and liberation. Additionally, "contrary to dominant psychology's lack of focus on spirituality, liberation psychology emphasizes spirituality in social justice action" (Comas-Díaz & Rivera, 2020, p. 289).

Liberation psychology, with its grounding in womanism and queer theory, provides a lens through which Eurocentric and cis-heteronormative ideologies concerning race, gender, and sexuality are disengaged. This makes way for dismantling "common-sense" hegemonic notions and approaches to treatment with those who identify as Black and LGBTQIA+ while also challenging the ways that the violence of white cis-heteronormativity shows up systematically within mental health institutions, scholarship, and services. Researchers and practitioners have begun challenging the efficacy of individualized therapy, recognizing the mental health institution's failure to address larger social issues and contexts (Afuape, 2011). Afuape asserted that "liberation psychology tends to encourage radical forms of community psychology, in which the creation of a just society is the ultimate goal, rather than a focus on what happens within the confines of the therapy relationship" (2011, p. 11). Liberation psychology is valuable to the analysis provided given that this research seeks to employ spiritual frameworks and modalities, as well as holistic and intersectional lenses that can align with traditional African cultural values.

In addition to liberation psychology, holistic psychology works well as a complementary framework to African-centered values and concepts. Holistic psychology involves a focus on the impact of trauma and oppression on one's whole self (mind, body, and spirit) rather than solely one's psychological or cognitive functioning (Moodley, 2005). These concepts align with traditional African concepts of *ntu*, *ubuntu,* and *sankofa*, in which all things are interconnected, and memory is understood to not just live in the brain but in the body and spirit as well. This includes traumatic memory and the ways that it manifests biologically, psychologically, and spiritually. Holistic and liberation psychology work well together given that they both provide an understanding of oneself through a collective and holistic lens. Again, these are intended to be complementary to the traditional African frameworks presented prior. According to Moodley (2005), "psychology has yet to formally address the integration of holistic healing in practice, education, and research. As a result, the students and therapists who share an integrative approach to healing are left at the margin and find themselves grappling with important issues around scope of practice and supervision" (p. 259). This further reinforces the intended use of a holistic theoretical orientation in this research as it seeks to offer anti-colonial and anti-oppressive interpretations of the literature and approaches to treatment.

**Defining Religion and Spirituality**

To provide an effective analysis of research and clinical treatment pertaining to religion and spirituality, it is important to first define and contextualize the terms in relation to Black LGBTQIA+ people and communities. This section offers definitions for religion and spirituality as found within clinical research, as well as within the historical context of the Afrodiasporic experience. Additionally, there is focus on defining and contextualizing religious abuse and trauma, specifically concerning the experiences of Black LGBTQIA+ people and communities.

*Religion and Spirituality in Clinical Research*

Research shows that religion and spirituality are often understood to be interconnected yet contrasting concepts. According to Stone (2013) researchers suggest that "both spirituality and religion involve the search for the sacred and noted that most people describe themselves as both religious and spiritual" (p. 324). Religion can be defined as "communal, objective experiences that focus on the sacred and include institutional or denominational aspects" (Wood & Conley, 2013, p. 96). Spirituality, on the other hand, is often conceptualized as an individual experience of and with matters of the divine (Stone, 2013). According to their research, Super and Jacobson (2011) suggested that:

> Spirituality is an individualized belief in a higher power and a connection to the spiritual soul that resonates within the self. Further, spirituality is described as a sense of the sacred and divine…Alternatively, religion is an institutionalized system, originated and organized by people, containing a set of rules or dogmas referring to a fundamental belief system, and involves the formal observance of the beliefs through attendance or membership in a religion or faith-based organization (Boyd-Franklin, 2010, p. 183).

The key delineation between religion and spirituality offered by clinical researchers is that spirituality is attributed to an internal and individual process while religion can be understood as institutionally and systemically organized (Stone, 2013; Super & Jacobson, 2011; Wood & Conley, 2013). Yet, Wood and Conley (2013) suggested that despite their differences, "religion and spirituality are not necessarily mutually exclusive concepts" (p. 96). In this research, research and treatment possibilities pertaining to both religion and spirituality are explored through Afrodiasporic cultural perspectives. Furthermore, these conceptualizations are used to inform my literature review and analysis.

*Religion, Spirituality, and Wellness Across the African Diaspora*

With the intention of this research being to review literature to explore culturally relevant interventions available for Black LGBTQIA+ people and communities, it is first important to define Afrodiasporic cultural conceptualizations of religion, spirituality, and wellness. Unlike some Eurocentric or Western ideology, research, and practice, traditionally African conceptualizations of spirituality and religion do not hold them in contrast, nor is there a separation between spirituality and one's lived human experience. Rather, spirituality or "spirit" is understood as a part of everyday life and religion provides community, ritual, and other established cultural pathways of connection to self, community, and Spirit (Some, 1999; Mitchem, 2007; Drake, 2019). This research provides historical context for the role that religion and spirituality have played in the lives of Black people globally and historically. I do this to explore the concepts of *sankofa*, *ubuntu* and *ntu* in depth in order to then lay the groundwork for understanding the wellness needs of Black LGBTQIA+ people and communities, as well as culturally relevant treatments and interventions.

Pointing back to Afrodiasporic conceptualizations of holism, "the African sees [their] world where every action is understood in terms of collective effort; everything is shared collectively in the process of life and change" (Fu-Kiau, 1991, p. 46). These concepts stand in opposition to Western traditions and ideologies that enforce a separation between the psychological and spiritual, or otherwise mind, body, and spirit (much in the ways that colonization forced the separation of African and Indigenous people from their homeland and native cultures.) African cultures define spirituality through the belief that "spiritual values and meanings are reflected in the body itself…The body signals something about the spiritual life, encompassing the personal, familial, and communal in the present moment. More than that, the

body connects the person to the ancestors…" (Mitchem, 2007, p. 35). African traditions also recognize the individual as one with nature, and nature one with spirit, lending to a cyclical relationship as opposed to the hierarchical power dynamics found within Western religious doctrine and practice.

Traditionally African conceptualizations of illness and wellness, therefore, are not only understood through one's individual experiences, but within the context of their community and environment as well. Mitchem (2007) wrote that "this sense of unity of person and community is reflected in the concept of human being, particularly noted in the ways body and spirit are understood as related and unified. In this view, the human person is not a divided body and soul" (p. 36). This means that when addressing the mental health of people within the African diaspora, it is imperative to consider individual as well as environmental and systemic influences. For Black people, this also includes interrogating the impacts of imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchy on mental health, as well as physical and spiritual health (hooks, 2006).

While religion and spirituality in the traditionally African perspective are considered natural ways of life intended to support individual and collective wellness, they are also considered valuable tools for resistance and resilience (Young, 2007; Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2013). In "Spirit-based Healing in the Black Diaspora," Moodley (2013) wrote that "since the dawn of time Indigenous, cultural, folk, and traditional healing practices have been a part of health and mental healthcare, as humans found ways to alleviate or tolerate pain and suffering using the knowledge, resources and skills they possessed at the time" (p.4). To further investigate the mental health needs of Black LGBTQIA+ people, it is necessary to understand the history and intersections of racialized and religious violence against people of African

descent and those who identify as LGBTQIA+. Following a review of research providing this historical context, I will review current clinical and academic research available pertaining to spiritual healing traditions across the African diaspora, as well as clinical research regarding religious abuse and trauma.

**A History of Racialized and Religious Violence**

Prior to Joy DeGruy's (2005) groundbreaking research regarding post-traumatic slave syndrome (PTSS), very few researchers investigated the present-day impact of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade on the mental health of African descendants. DeGruy (2005) defined PTSS as "a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma resulting from centuries of slavery and continues to experience oppression and institutionalized racism today" (p. 121). Although DeGruy's (2005) research is specific to African Americans and the intergenerational consequences of American chattel slavery, the struggles of Africans across the diaspora and their intersections are evident through her extensive inquiry and much other research that has followed.

For example, Nicholas and Thompson (2019) wrote about colonialism and racialized violence and the similar ways in which African descendants in America and Haiti have been historically impacted. The authors defined "racialized violence" as "a phenomenon that not only results in harming and ending Black lives but also obstructs the liberation and psychological well-being of Black people around the world" (Nicholas & Thompson, 2019, p. 587). The research done by DeGruy (2005), and Nicholas and Thompson (2019) show that the legacy of colonialism and slavery spans beyond the 400 years that the global trade and enforced free labor of Africans remained intact.

Throughout the transatlantic slave trade, power was obtained and maintained by European colonizers through physical as well as ideological and religious force. "Slavery reflects an ideological engagement that relies on the religious, economic, political, and philosophical sanction of the society that supports it" (Young, 2007, p. 13). Christianity provided the ideological crux through which colonialism, white supremacy, and European dominance were enforced. In "Mojo Workin': the Old African Hoodoo System," Katrina Hazzard-Donald (2013) wrote: "the dual notions of Christianizing and civilizing "African savages" complemented each other; in some instances, the two processes, generally accompanied by colonialism, were one and the same" (p. 20). This meant that, despite the well-known physical violence and brutality of enforced labor, colonizers also took psychological as well as spiritual measures towards ensuring dominance and maintaining power. Furthermore, this indicates that the mental health needs of African descendants must be understood through a psychospiritual lens as well as psychosocial.

Nicholas and Thompson (2019) asserted that the effects of this magnitude of subjugation remains potent and omnipresent even today, yet has become less overt and more covertly integrated into society:

> Racialized violence manifests into nuanced forms over time, whereby the brute, physical violence that occurs through state-sanctioned means is mostly targeted toward the urban poor and where the structural forms of the phenomenon unfold into everyday "ways of being," like microaggressions. (p. 592)

This means that colonization, racialized violence, and the resulting trauma remain pervasive forces within our personal lives, intimate relationships, communities, and governing systems today (Campbell, 2019). There are major overall health implications for Black people as a result of enduring and living through such trauma over and beyond the span of four centuries.

According to Nicholas and Thompson (2019), "meta-analytic results have shown that race is associated with adverse health issues and, specifically, that findings perceived discrimination is associated with poorer reports of health" (p. 590).

The intention of this section was to offer a historical context for intergenerational trauma and the ways in which it shows up amongst Black LGBTQIA+ people and communities to assess their potential mental health needs. Much of the research presented offers insight into the lasting impacts of colonial violence and white supremacy in the lives of African descendants. However, none of this research specifically addresses racialized and religious violence and the ways in which Black LGBTQIA+ people are impacted in particular. The following section provides insight into clinical research as it pertains to religious abuse and trauma in the LGBTQIA+ experience.

**Religious Abuse and Trauma**

In "Thou Shalt Not: Treating Religious Trauma and Spiritual Harm with Combined Therapy," Stone (2013) made the argument that the pervasiveness of religious harm and abuse needs more attention and seeks to address the lack of research and treatment options available for healing religious trauma. "Because religion is a highly charged topic for many people, addressing religious harm can be challenging for both the therapist and the client" (Stone, 2013, p. 336). This may account for the lack of research surrounding the topic and the avoidance of spiritual approaches and modalities within clinical treatment. Furthermore, this supports the previous conclusion that there is more research needed that investigates religious trauma within the historical context of racialized violence by way of colonialism. Stone (2013) made the strong argument that with the pervasive nature of religious ideology within our society's structure, it is imperative that we take spiritual wellness more into consideration.

Stone (2013) defined religious trauma as "pervasive psychological damage resulting from religious messages, beliefs, and experiences" (p. 324). The research also states that religious trauma accrues overtime "through long-term exposure to messages that undermine mental health" (Stone, 2013, p. 325). Furthermore, researchers have compared the effects of religious trauma to that of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Stone, 2013).

Super and Jacobson (2011) provided an extensive definition of religious abuse and its implications for those identifying as LGBTQIA+:

...when the individual encounters condemnation, rejection, or guilt the person may develop psychological distress regarding their religious beliefs or about their spirituality. Furthermore, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals often experience this rejection and judgment, also referred to as religious abuse…Rix (2010) explained that religious abuse occurs when a set of religious rules and doctrine are misused in a way to harm LGBT individuals. Religious abuse damages LGBT individuals' spirituality, creating incongruence and cognitive dissonance related to religious and sexual identities (p. 181).

When considering that religious coercion was a major tool of colonialism and enslavement of African people, this research exposes the various parallels between religious and racialized violence in terms of their impact on the lives of Black LGBTQIA+ people. This research also provides further evidence for the brutality that colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade placed upon the bodies, psyches, and spirits of Black people. The following excerpt, when also seen through a racialized lens, details the specific impacts of this level of violence.

Religious abuse occurs when a religious or spiritual leader uses coercion, manipulation, and threats to gain control over an LGBT individual and force the leader's values on

another...The effects of religious abuse on an LGBT individual often include shame,

guilt, and poor self-esteem...this abuse also affects the development of individuals in their

spiritual domain (Super & Jacobson, 2011, p. 194).

According to Winell (2012), such relegation can be understood to cause "difficulties in the

interpersonal, emotional, and cognitive realms," (as cited in Stone, 2013, p. 324) with trauma

responses so severe as to be compared to post traumatic stress disorder (Stone, 2013). Both Stone

(2013) and Super and Jacobson (2011) provided insight into the ways that religious abuse and

trauma are pervasive while providing evidence for the ways in which LGBTQIA+ people are

impacted. However, they fail to offer insights into other possible intersections of identity that

may inform a broader understanding of religious trauma and the role it plays among individuals

within a larger sociocultural context. When accounting for the roles that intergenerational

racialized violence and religious abuse play in the present-day experiences of Black LGBTQIA+

people, the necessity of cultivating culturally relevant therapeutic interventions becomes evident.

Despite limited clinical research that delves into how religious abuse and trauma

specifically impact Black LGBTQIA+ people and communities, Walker and Longmire-Avital

(2013) offered research that provides insight into the ways that spiritual interventions may

support resilience in Black lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals. "For Black lesbian, gay, and

bisexual (LGB) individuals, their lives at the margins of racial and sexual discrimination may be

considered adverse because they may have experienced multiple negative life events due to

social injustice regarding race and sexuality (Luthar et al., 2000 as cited in Walker & Longmire-

Avital, 2013, p. 1723). In their findings, Walker and Longmire-Avital (2013) were able to

identify the nuances with which Black LGB individuals engage in religious and spiritual practice

despite the prevalence of "homonegativity" in religious spaces. The authors found that "use of

religion as a coping tool is a common practice in the Black community," even for those who identify as queer and/or trans (Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2013, p. 1727).

Much of this research provides insight into the traumatic implications of religious abuse and how religious trauma impacts those who identify as LGBTQIA+. However, research pertaining specifically to the intersections of race and sexuality in terms of religious abuse is sparse. While the study conducted by Walker and Longmire-Avital (2013) fills a gap in research concerning Black LGBTQIA+ communities and their complex experiences with spirituality, it still fails to recognize the historical and intergenerational aspects of religious and spiritual abuse within communities across the African diaspora. Additionally, trans and gender non-conforming people were not included or specifically reported on in this study. When considering the depth of religious abuse and coercion endured by enslaved Africans during the transatlantic slave trade, deep and complex intergenerational trauma within the experiences of those who identify as both Black and LGBTQIA+ become evident.

According to the research presented thus far, much of the plight faced by Black LGBTQIA+ people is rooted in identity: the ability to reconcile spiritual and sexual identities alongside dismantling internalized anti-blackness and religious shame (Super & Jacobson, 2011; Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2013). Through an intersectional historical context that offers perspective into the ways that both racialized and religious violence have historically impacted this community, this research also offers possibilities for religion and spirituality to provide culturally relevant pathways towards healing for Black LGBTQIA+ people and communities. The following section explores the ways in which spiritual practices can and have been culturally connected to healing and creativity throughout Black LGBTQIA+ history. Moreover, this literature review elucidates the ways in which Afrodiasporic religious and spiritual practices

emerged particularly in response to colonial violence, racialized violence, and religious abuse.

The analysis presented is intended to support the development of anti-colonial, liberatory,

holistic, and culturally-informed interventions for Black LGBTQIA+ people and communities.

**Healing, Resistance, and Wellness Across the African Diaspora**

Campbell (2019) highlighted within DeGruy's research that:

> Religion and spirituality played a crucial role in the survival of African slaves and their
>
> descendants...DeGruy suggests that spiritual connectedness is a way that African
>
> Americans have healed in the short-term sense in conjunction with the spirit of kinship,
>
> community and interconnectedness and are teachable practices to pass down to children
>
> or future generations. (p. 223)

Spiritual practice provides a sense of hope and empowerment for people of African descent as

they continue to endure the harsh realities of systemic violence and oppression. Enslaved

Africans throughout the European colonies adapted to their environment in creative ways, such

as disguising traditional spiritual practices through syncretism to maintain a sense of identity and

connection to their native African roots (Mitchem, 2007; Hazzard-Donald, 2013; Young, 2007).

Despite claims that the violence of enslavement caused ties to traditional African culture to be

decimated, researchers like Mitchem (2007) argued that "the connections to African ideas were

not eliminated but provided a framework for survival and success" (p. 37). The retention of these

cultural views and practices caused a plethora of religions to emerge across the Atlantic.

Hazzard-Donald (2013) wrote:

> The syncretic strategy of identifying African divinities with Catholic saints would both
>
> protect, stabilize, and expand African religion while allowing it to sustain its own
>
> existence under enslavement. The major pockets of African religious expression, in Haiti,

the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad, Jamaica, and the United

States black belt South, were drawn both directly and indirectly from numerous and

diverse African cultures, including but not limited to Igbo, Mandingo, Bambara, Kongo,

Yoruba, Fon, and Ashanti sources and would yield syncretized religious expressions such

as Vodun, Santeria, Lucumi, Candomble. GaGa, Shango Baptist, Palo Mayombe (Palo

Monte), Obeah and Hoodoo. (p. 30)

Young (2007) wrote that enslaved Africans "called upon, remembered, and engaged Africa as

part of the critically important work of cultural resistance" (p. 6). This cultural cross-over proved

significant to the survival of African descendants at the time, empowering them against the

physical, psychological, and spiritual violence they endured. "That religion and culture served as

a salve for the wounds inflicted by slavery and functioned as a sword for battling the ideological

framework upon which justifications of slavery rested, promises to expand our understanding of

the potency of religion and culture" (Young, 2007, p. 12).

Much of traditional African spiritual practice consists of dance, music, and other forms of

creative expression. Mitchem (2007) described the folk practices of enslaved Africans as "the

creatively developed range of activities and ideas that aim to balance and renew life" (p. 11).

According to Hazzard-Donald, such creativity was carried with African descendants into the

New World, reminiscent of life in West Africa where there exists "no separation between

artisanship, artistic creation and religious observance" (p. 22). Having drawn these practices

from sophisticated African philosophies, cosmologies, and organized practices, this evidences

the healing components of creativity and spirituality, and the ways in which both have supported

the survival and self-determination of Black people. Therefore, it becomes clear that when

working with people across the African diaspora, creative expression is essential to developing

culturally relevant healing interventions for the treatment of trauma and cultivation of holistic wellness.

The following studies examine the use of expressive arts healing modalities drawing directly from traditional African healing and spiritual practices. The research provides evidence for the efficacy of expressive arts interventions that are derived from cultural practices of the African diaspora. Furthermore, the analysis provided is intended to be made applicable towards anti-colonial, liberatory, holistic and culturally relevant treatment and interventions for Black LGBTQIA+ people and communities.

**Culturally Relevant Treatment in Expressive Arts Therapy**

Africans and African descendants have understood and practiced the healing power of creativity long before Western psychology was willing to recognize it. "Unfortunately, Western psychological models have failed to understand and include African descendants' histories, culture, values, and beliefs in the formulation of psychological assessments and mental health treatment" (Rivera et al., 2019, p.1). Despite this, current research and therapeutic praxis seeks to incorporate more creative and holistic approaches to healing. "Womanists have demonstrated creativity as a form of healing, resistance, and problem solving throughout the history of Africans in America. They have used creativity in protests and rebellion, political mobilization, business, industry, and artistic expression" (Drake-Burnette et al., 2016, p. 176). Modern medicine and mental health are now shifting to more culturally competent forms of counseling, with many drawing from Black and Indigenous cultural practices that have been around for centuries (Moodley et al., 2008; Gamby et al. 2021). In, "Womanism, Creativity, and Resistance: Making A Way Out Of "No Way," Drake-Burnette et al. (2016) wrote:

In mediating the various levels of community and environment, creativity, and arts-based

practices (e.g., ritual, drum rhythms, oral tradition, storytelling, singing and chanting,

breath, dance and movement, circle-based communion) were woven together with herbal

medicine (known also as root working) and meditative/contemplative practice to secure

the health and well-being of the community. (p. 177)

In this research, womanism is provided as a framework for encompassing the mental health

benefits of creative expression and the ways in which it shows up in the lives of Black people by

"(a) providing opportunities to explore identity, (b) creating healthy and effective responses to

trauma and oppression, (c) accessing multiple methods of communicating, and (d) providing

alternative platforms for resistance and social action" (Drake-Burnette et al., 2016 p. 184).

Creative expression in Afrodiasporic culture is a tool for exploring and addressing the needs of

both an individual and the community at large. Therefore, the use of Indigenous African healing

practices allows for transformation to occur both individually and systemically. Through

storytelling, movement, music and other forms of art, the history and integrity of a people can be

preserved while addressing pertinent health needs and issues.

Monteiro and Wall (2011) researched the therapeutic value of ritual movement through

traditional African spirituality. Their findings exemplify creativity as a conduit for spiritual

practice and healing within communities of the African diaspora. "The symbolic and meaning-

making dimensions of African centered healing practices, in conjunction with spiritual

transformation and the availability of sacred space, allow for individuals and groups to become

equipped with the restorative properties necessary for optimal healing to occur" (Monteiro &

Wall, 2011, p. 238). Within ritual spaces, "individuals are offered a sense of mastery over

overwhelming emotions and stimuli, which, in turn, promotes resiliency and an ability to address

and work through traumatic stimuli or crises" (Monteiro & Wall, 2011, p. 240). The benefits of spiritual and creative expression according to research from Rivera et al. (2019) reported that:

> An exploration of the mind-body-spirit dynamic using Afro-Caribbean dance principles can foster in the mind the determination to fight and liberate the self, physically activate, claim, and re-occupy the body, and reconnect with spirit through the connection with ancestral embodied knowledge and values for strength and guidance. These principles can help clients embody personal and collective power, strength, resilience, and work towards the healing of intergenerational trauma. (p. 2)

As the field continues developing, current expressive arts research has advocated for more anti-colonial approaches that address the historical, systemic, interpersonal, individual, and ideological harms of anti-Black violence and oppression. More specifically, the research presented has demonstrated how traditional African practices, which are rooted in resistance and resilience, allow for all aspects of one's social ecology to be addressed within the therapeutic space, relationship, and journey. While research around the therapeutic use of African spirituality continues to be developed, there is still much to investigate in terms of nuances within Black identity such as that of the queer and trans experience. Although Monteiro and Wall (2011) did not explicitly state the relevance of their research to those who identify as LGBTQIA+, the case study presented by Drake-Burnette et al. (2016), in which the client is a young bisexual Black woman, provided evidence for how these approaches may help address the healing needs of Black LGBTQIA+ people.

## Discussion

Research shows that not only does a spiritual approach to mental health align with traditionally African cultural values, but it also provides a pathway for addressing and

dismantling the intergenerational impacts of racialized and religious violence. Furthermore, cultural practices of the African diaspora would be able to seamlessly translate into clinical practice given that many of the traditional practices have already been appropriated and integrated into therapeutic frameworks and approaches, such as those referred to today as expressive arts therapy, liberation psychology, and holistic psychology.

Despite the ways that this literature review attempted to address spirituality and wellness in the Black LGBTQIA+ experience, I was unable to find a substantial amount of research pertaining to this topic. Much of what has been presented has been collaged to come to a sound conclusion about the mental health needs of Black LGBTQIA+ and to develop insight towards culturally-informed approaches to treatment. Based on the research available, the subjugation of those identifying as Black and LGBTQIA+ is a multi-layered and intergenerational concern that has a negative holistic impact. This reflects the colonial and white supremacist structures upon which the field of psychology stands. The research reviewed demonstrates the various ways that healing through creative expression is a centuries-old practice within Afrodiasporic and Indigenous cultures and thus also exposes the hypocrisy of inclusion efforts within the field. When the voices and experiences of those most impacted by oppression are centered, only then will we begin to approach liberation. Western psychologists have yet to acknowledge that the recent shift towards more holistic practices derive from traditionally African and Indigenous cultural practices, nor have they put effort towards addressing the colonial violence by which these practices have been attained and appropriated. According to Gamby et al. (2021), the field of psychology has only in recent years begun naming its role in reproducing historically anti-Black violence and systemic harm. Gamby et al. (2021) discussed this in depth:

The spiritual and holistic wellness practices colonizers stripped from both Indigenous

Peoples and enslaved Africans have now been, centuries later, co-opted into a $20 billion

wellness industry in the United States (SRI International, 2010). Additionally, there has

been little to no acknowledgment of the harm caused by European settlers who stripped

these practices from African and Indigenous Peoples or of the contextual history of these

Indigenous/African traditions and wellness practices. (p. 223)

This erasure and subsequent violent appropriation of traditionally African and Indigenous

healing practices is imperative to be aware of as expressive arts practitioners. Not only does

awareness allow us to understand the present-day trauma within the lived experience of Black

LGBTQIA+ people, but it also highlights the history of colonized violence and the ways that

religious abuse and trauma show up in that history and in collective bodies and practices. This

makes way for African traditions to be honored in a way that may affirm Black LGBTQIA+

identity while also dismantling oppressive approaches to mental health.  "In essence, Indigenous

healing practices not only present us with an anti-Cartesian way of engaging with clients but also

establish a critical discourse of resistance to the neo-colonial attitudes prevalent in health care

practices" (Moodley, 2007, p. 155). Without acknowledgement for the ways that the field of

psychology has been particularly violent against Black and LGBTQIA+ people, in addition to the

ways that traditions from Afrodiasporic culture have been appropriated within the field, there can

be no true healing or liberation for anyone. The erasure of the Indigenous roots found in

expressive arts praxis needs to be paid attention to. Not only does this lack of acknowledgement

reinforce white supremacy in the field, but it also perpetuates the harm and trauma faced by

Black LGBTQIA+ people today.

Practitioners should consider that treatments for Black LGBTQIA+ people and communities are most effective when incorporating multimodal approaches that are culturally relevant. When neglecting to incorporate a culturally-informed lens in treatment, practitioners run the risk of perpetuating harmful systems of oppression in the therapeutic relationship. Failure to be aware of the historical oppression faced by Black and LGBTQIA+ people creates the risk of replicating historical harm and violence. Practitioners should ensure that they are well-informed and engage in consistent self-reflection and reflexivity to recognize the ways they may be both impacted by and complicit in systems of oppression. Practitioners should particularly be aware of intergenerational trauma and how that impacts their own lives and that of Black LGBTQIA+ clients.

Practitioners must be sensitive to the nuances of Black LGBQTIA+ identity and should not shy away from spiritual interventions despite Western-perceived tensions between sexuality and spirituality. A culturally informed expressive arts approach would consider the cultural and spiritual value of creative expression, which is demonstrated across the breadth of Afrodiasporic spiritual practices that exist in response to colonial violence and oppression. Considering that racialized and religious violence have historically impacted this community, Black practitioners may find it beneficial to allow the frameworks and practices within Afrodiasporic spiritual practices to guide interventions by engaging with them on their own. Non-Black practitioners may consider exploring local and community resources that Black LGBTQIA+ clients can be referred to. Additionally, communal, and holistic approaches to wellness must be implemented to honor and align with *sankofa, ubuntu, and ntu*; values that are traditionally and culturally generative for Black LGBTQIA+ people.

Future research should consider more in-depth nuances within LGBTQIA+ identity and experiences across the African diaspora. There also must be a systemic overhaul that allows for a complete dismantling of clinical mental health as we know it in ways that actively acknowledge and atone for historical colonial violence and authentically honor the traditions now appropriated within the field. More research holding Western psychology accountable for erasure and harm would pave pathways towards truly liberated approaches to wellness suitable for Black LGBTQIA+ people and communities.

## Conclusion

This literature review presents research pertaining to the intersections of race, sexuality, spirituality, and wellness. To assess and address the needs of Black LGBTQIA+ people in particular, this research also places expressive arts healing practice within cultural contexts, lending insight into the ways that Afrodiasporic spiritual practices have historically been cultivated and looked to for healing, resistance, and liberation amongst Black people. The implications of religious abuse have been investigated, both in terms of historical colonial violence as well as the ways in which LGBTQIA+ people are impacted. This research highlights the historical and complex trauma caused by historical racialized and religious violence within the lived experiences of Black LGBTQIA+ people today. The research ultimately offers evidence for the benefit and effectiveness of implementing traditional Afrodiasporic spirituality into expressive arts therapeutic treatment, particularly for Black LGBTQIA+ people and communities. Finally, this research suggests the necessity for actively and effectively dismantling Western psychological frameworks and approaches that have been historically harmful towards Black and LGBTQIA+ people in order to pave pathways towards collective healing and liberation.

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*THESIS APPROVAL FORM*

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