Music, Identity, & Authenticity: Reflecting the Narratives of Black Queer Men through Piano-Based Music Improvisation

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Abstract

This thesis is the dissemination of the findings of a research study exploring piano-based music improvisation and the lived experience of Black queer men. The overall aim was to explore how five Black queer men experience the intersections of their racial identity and sexuality in various social environments through piano-based music improvisation. This study grew out of my own experiences as a Black queer man and my ability or lack thereof to authentically express my racial identity and sexuality in specific social environments. Participants were chosen through convenience sampling and were prompted to engage in a series of piano improvisations, where they were asked to musically communicate how they experience their racial identity and sexuality within their biological family, friend group, and society. Data was collected through video recordings of the improvisations, written reflections to questions about the experience, and through transcriptions of the member checking discussions. Following each improvisation, participants were asked to reflect upon two questions regarding their process and experience during the improvisation. The recorded improvisations were then analyzed using Dr. Kenneth Bruscia's Improvisation Assessment Profiles (IAPs) and interpretations about the participants' experiences were made. Member checking was utilized to ensure an accurate representation of the participants' experiences. Themes of 1) prejudice, 2) sense of identity, 3) impacts of relationships, and 4) responses to trauma that emerged in the verbal data were discussed in the context of the individual and collective experiences of the participants with implications for the practice of music therapy.

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Introduction

Motivation for the Research

My motivation to engage in this research stems from my own experiences as a Black queer male. For a large portion of my life, the intersections of my racial and sexual identities have caused discomfort for me. Growing up in a Black community, I was taught early on what it meant to be a Black *man* and how I was expected to carry myself. Growing up in white America, I was made very aware of white people's perception of what it meant to be a *Black* man. None of these messages, implicit and explicit, touched on what it meant to be a gay Black man, because that intersection didn't seem to be acceptable. This influenced and still influences how I experience myself and my perception of how others experience and accept me. As a Black, gay, twenty-nine-year-old, cisgender male from the South, who comes from a middle-class family, I am a both a product of and a contradiction to the heteronormative and racial ideals and values that were and are imposed upon me. While openly naming these identities allows me a certain degree of freedom, the heteronormative white supremacist system in which I live impedes my sense of feeling perceived as good enough within my various systems.

Locating the intersections of my Black and gay identities has been and continues to be an ongoing reflexive process. For as long as I can remember, I have thought of these two identities as being unable to coexist and, as a result, I have often felt awkward in my interactions in different social groups; unsure of how to express my racial and sexual identities. How "well-spoken"[1] should I be in predominantly white spaces? Does my voice sound too effeminate in pre-dominantly Black spaces? Is my body language masculine enough in both white and Black

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[1] To white people, well-spoken refers the ability to clearly enunciate and articulate in a way that they view as correct and makes them feel comfortable. To Black people, to be referred to as well-spoken is a racial slur as it assumes that it's an anomaly (Nichelle, 2018).

spaces? This hyper-awareness of my own interwoven identity has at times impeded my ability to

authentically interact with folx[2]. I have become so fixated on how I'm performing my own

sociocultural identities that it interferes with how fully present I am with others. It begs the

question: How did I get this way? I can pinpoint interactions with my family. I remember being

asked repeatedly by grandparents if I had a girlfriend as if it were a requirement. Or being

questioned about my lack of interest in activities that were deemed masculine and redirected

away from things that were deemed feminine. Or witnessing society's lack of acceptance

towards Black people as seen in negative media depictions and the unjust police-related murders

of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Philando Castile, Ahmaud Arbery, Eric Garner, Trayvon

Martin, and countless Black trans women. Societally, my racial and sexual identities aren't given

the space to exist independently much less intersectionally. Receiving constant negative

messages about each, gradually taught me that finding acceptance would be nearly impossible.

On some level, I've had some awareness of the incongruences of the intersections of my

race and sexuality; however, it wasn't until I began my graduate studies at Slippery Rock

University, with its focus on sociocultural contexts and their relationship to music therapy, that I

began to explore the significance of my early experiences on my understanding of my

sociocultural identity. Taking a critical look at my race, sexuality, gender, and the values that

have helped to shape these identities has expanded the ways in which I understand myself in

relationship to the world around me and more specifically myself in relationship to clients, as a

music therapist. While delving into my own reflexive journey, I found myself simultaneously

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[2] Folx is a gender-neutral way to address a group of people. The "x" is to designate gender nonconformity, neutrality, and/or gender nonbinary sentiments. It is a way to replace folks with a word that invokes mental imagery and association with queer/trans people. The thought is that when we simply say "folks" people think of men and women, gender conforming people. In the case of folks, it's not the word itself that's gendered, but the thinking behind it that can be gendered and that's what is attempting to be changed. I use folx to acknowledge anyone I've engaged in music therapy with that may not ascribe to gendered qualifiers (Echo, 2018).

thinking about how music therapy could help Black queer men gain insight in how they express their race and sexuality within their various systems, and how improvisational music therapy could reveal these themes to music therapists working with Black queer men.

In the United States, the field of music therapy is situated within the patriarchal society, which upholds myths that situate white heteronormative cisgender men as superior to Black, queer men. As music therapists, it is imperative that we take time to listen to the narratives of Black queer folx and understand how hegemonic systems and structures affect how members of this minoritized group experience themselves. It is through this recognition that we can reshape our assumptions and behaviors, with the intention of working towards anti-oppressive practices.

Positioning

I am a Black, queer, cisgender, middle-class, non-disabled man and recognize that my identities, specifically my racial identity and sexuality, inevitably impacted the design, conduct, and interpretations of this research. Acknowledging and naming my identities feels important as it honors their complexities and recognizes that my understanding of my identities is relational and subject to expand upon interacting with others. As it pertains to my race and gender, my understanding of self, as a Black cisgender man, is contextualized within dominant patriarchal societal expectations that see me as bad and dangerous – only capable of engaging in criminal activity or athletic endeavors. Within the context of the Black community, my identity is contextualized by gender expectations and socialization, in which I am taught to embody heteromasculinity and emotional strength. It seemed to me that anything outside of the limits was deemed unacceptable. This contextualization conflicts with my queer identity and it's perceptions by dominant stakeholders. As a gay male, I'm looked at as sinner in the eyes of

Christian-based values that surrounded me and understood as being in direct opposition to society's definition of masculinity.

As a middle class, non-disabled, college educated, cisgender male, I hold privilege that allows me access to certain community resources, supports, and platforms. The ways in which I perform my gender gives me the ability to share information and take on positions of leadership, as they relate to queer studies, with minimal questioning from mainstream dominant voices. The support that I garner from these stakeholders would not be given as willingly to a nonbinary or trans person of color, or a cisgender woman of color, or a visibly disabled person of color, for example. Within the field of music therapy, which is predominantly made up of white cisgender women, it is important for me to recognize this privilege. Engaging in this queer and race-based research does not put me at risk in the same ways it would for someone of another marginalized identity, who systemically holds less power than me.

I started with a certain amount of unearned benefit and systemic encouragement to pursue my master's degree and carry out this study. Because of the convergence of my dominant identities (i.e., cisgender, male, middle-class, and non-disabled), I was able to seek higher education in the first place. While going through this research journey, I experienced several life changes, which might have prohibited me from finishing my thesis if my identity included certain other non-dominant identities. I am profoundly thankful for the assistance, supports, and resources that helped me to complete this study; however, I would be remiss not to recognize the disproportional levels of access to these opportunities for all persons.

Finally, I recognize the social locations that both the participants and I occupy and how these similarities and differences could have contributed to our varied ways of communicating and understanding. Throughout the study, I worked diligently to keep in mind the ways that my

worldview impacts my understandings.

Review of the Literature

According to the 2017 Gallup Daily Tracking survey, there are approximately 1 million LGBT Black adults living in the United States which makes up 4.6% of the total LGBT population. Of those 1 million individuals, 38% identify as male (Williams Institute, 2019a; Williams Institute, 2019b). Given a current population of 333.5 million people, this means that Black queer men, who reported as such through this poll, make up only about 0.1% of the US population.

Defining Terms

As there are sometimes different understandings of terms across contexts, I will start by defining some of the crucial concepts related to the stress of living as an individual who is a member of one or more marginalized or minoritized groups. For this research, I am largely relying on Oxford English Dictionaries' general definitions unless otherwise indicated:

Minority: A small group of people differing from the rest of the community in ethnic origin, religion, language, etc.

Minoritize (in dictionary.com): to make (a person or group) subordinate in status to a more dominant group or its members.

Marginalize: To force (an individual, minority group, etc.) to the periphery of a dominant social groups.

Intersectionality: The interconnected nature of social categorization such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

Stress: An adverse circumstance that disturbs, or is likely to disturb, the normal physiological or

psychological functioning of an individual; such circumstances collectively.

Minority stress: Stigma, prejudice, and discrimination create a hostile and stressful social

environment that causes mental health problems (Meyer, 2003, p.1).

These basic definitions (taken separately or collectively) demonstrate that the subject of

this study, the multiple minority, constitutes not only a different but also multifaceted

subordinate position within the dominant society. While these definitions demonstrate a clear

connection between stress, intersectionality, and minority status, the research literature indicates

some complexity regarding this connection.

Minority Stress

In a meta-analysis of research on the prevalence of mental disorders in queer folx, Ilan H.

Meyer (2003) demonstrates links between intersectional, minority identities and stress

experiences, and the resulting repercussions. Their article proposes a model of stress, coping, and

their impacts on mental health outcomes. The model considers the impact of a variety of broad

environmental characteristics, such as socioeconomic position, as well as an individual's

minority status, in this case, sexual orientation. Diaz et al. (2001) noted that these variables have

an impact on access to resources and effective coping techniques. In addition to general

pressures such as job loss, individuals who belong to minoritized groups face specific stressors

such as employment discrimination or violence, such as anti-gay violence. These encounters are

likely to result in hypervigilance, personal identification with minority status, or worse,

unfavorable self-perceptions, such as internalized homonegativity. Other research has found that

one's identity as a member of a minority group can also be a source of strength if it is linked to

chances for emotional support that might mitigate the effects of stress (Branscombe et al., 1999; Crocker & Major, 1989; Miller & Major, 2000).

If being a member of one minoritized group leads to minority stress and poorer health outcomes, it would seem logical that being a member of multiple minoritized groups, and experiencing higher levels of perceived prejudice, would compound one's experience of minority stress and poor health outcomes. Indeed, studies have shown this, including one that found greater levels of inflammatory biomarkers linked to chronic illnesses such as hypertension or cancer in African Americans or persons who had experienced higher levels of perceived prejudice (Stepanikova et al., 2017). Furthermore, Krieger et al. (2008) described the impact of cumulative health threats, which changes with the power of the afflicted population. Through online surveys within their cohort, Krieger et al. (2008) discovered that Black and Latino populations living below the poverty line are more likely to be exposed to occupational hazards (e.g., dust, fumes) and social hazards (e.g., racial discrimination, workplace maltreatment). These researchers discovered that exposure to the social hazard of sexual harassment was associated with elevated systolic blood pressure (SBP), and that elevated SBP was also associated with a reaction to unfair treatment. While there are limitations in Krieger et al.'s (2008) study, including a smaller than expected sample size, difficulty isolating the effect of exposure to a risk to blood pressure from physiological mechanisms, and, most notably, that sexual harassment was most prevalent among white women, a group expected to be less exposed to racial discrimination, their findings raise important concerns.

Merieish and Bradford (2014)'s recent work is thus noteworthy, given their emphasis on intersectionality when gathering data from surveys delivered to nearly 3000 people in the waiting area of a clinic for gender and sexual minorities. They discovered that sexual minority women of

color have greater drug misuse rates than heterosexual women of color or white sexual minorities after studying disparities between a heterosexual and gay sample and within sexual minority groups of a racially diverse sample (Merieish & Bradford, 2014). However, this study is constrained by the convenience of the sample, which may make generalization to other groups problematic.

Despite these studies' findings, the research does not consistently suggest a higher frequency of mental health issues or generally worse health outcomes among persons with intersecting minority identities, such as LGBTQ-POC. This discrepancy in data shows that other factors are at work, or, more intriguingly, may suggest that there are protective mechanisms or coping skills being enacted by members of several marginalized minority groups against psychological stress.

Stressors for Black Men

To be a Black man in the US means dealing with multiple levels of racial and gender profiling (for example, being arrested as a Black male, while doing personal shopping, or driving while Black) (Aymer, 2016; Hope et al., 2020). The proof is irrefutable that Black men face multiple and severe adversities in the US. Numerous studies in recent years have portrayed Black men as poor, abandoned, endangered, unseen, and/or in crisis (Hope et al., 2020; Teti et al., 2012).

Black men, especially young Black men, face the social, economic, and political realities that they do as a result of their marginalization in larger society (Aymer, 2016; Brooms & Perry, 2016; Hope et al., 2020; Teti et al., 2012; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Their bodies, movements, and modes of being are constantly scrutinized in US society. As a result of their lived experiences, Black men's self-concepts are formed, and their appearance in public spaces is

troublesome, as they are susceptible to stereotypes and profiling (Brooms & Perry, 2016). Their

Black maleness makes them vulnerable to the biases of the white gaze, its stereotypes, and

predispositions—a gaze that continually monitors their movements and (re)positions them as

targets (Brooms & Perry, 2016).

In comparison to men of other races and ethnic groups, Black men are overwhelmingly

represented among those who drop out of high school, are unemployed, are sick, or have been

imprisoned (Teti et al., 2012; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). In 2008, the overall

unemployment rate for Black men over the age of 20 was almost double that of white men in the

same age group (Teti et al., 2012). Additionally, between 2000 and 2008, Black men were 6.5

and 3.3 times as likely to be imprisoned as white men and men of other races and ethnicities,

respectively (Teti et al., 2012). The determinants of Black men's low socioeconomic and health

results are nuanced and are affected by a slew of sociocultural problems. These problems

include: poverty, interpersonal and cultural prejudice, as well as the way racism affects unequal

schooling, work, and prison policies, are all examples of sociocultural challenges that Black men

may face (Brooms & Perry, 2016; Teti et al., 2012).

According to Brooms & Perry (2016), Black maleness leaves Black males exceptional in

racialized institutions such as the criminal justice system and insignificant in other areas such as

schooling and the job market. This finding is consistent with a prior study that indicated that

Black men working in professional environments are at risk of racial microaggressions and

invisibility as a result of their white-collar status, which frequently entails enrollment or

employment in predominantly white institutions and businesses (Brooms & Perry, 2016). Along

with recognizing persistent and long-held negative stereotypes of Black males as being angry,

violent, and sexually aggressive, Black males are also disproportionately targets of violent

aggression and their lives are devalued. Because of this, Black males have developed tactics that they use to protect against racial profiling and stereotyping. Specifically, Black men have addressed their attempts to dress conservatively and perform in such a way that their tone of voice or physical stature do not project an intimidating or menacing image (Steele, 2010). Controversially, Cosby and Poussaint (2007) assert that Black males are responsible for their adverse circumstances. This kind of "respectability" politics is damaging to Black men. Despite Black men's efforts to earn respectability by the pursuit of mainstream ideals and societal conformity, their behavior and accomplishments are ignored, further highlighting their Black maleness. Given their recognition of the "angry Black male" stereotype, some Black men opt not to directly challenge anyone profiling them, but instead accept responsibility for the actions of the perpetrator by modifying themselves in order to present an alternative portrayal. This constant self-surveillance contributes to minority stress. In addition, Black men, contend with the Black tax (Henderson, 2002), the price one pays when the legitimacy of an entire population is questioned based on the behavior of a few. This Black tax thrusts Black people into the all-too-familiar position of racial spokesperson.

Stressors for Queer Folx

There is a considerable body of literature indicating a higher prevalence of depression, anxiety, substance use disorders, and even suicide among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people, especially among young people (Haas et al., 2011). In a 2019 national survey on LGBTQ youth mental health, conducted by the Trevor Project (n.d.), it was found that 31% of cisgender youth have considered suicide while 14% have attempted suicide. These numbers are significantly higher amongst transgender and non-binary youth, with 54% having considered suicide and 29% having attempted suicide. Less prevalent, but expanding, is research

literature on LGBTQ people of color and the unique issues they confront as a result of the

confluence of gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity. Living as a member of numerous

marginalized groups creates a dynamic and stressful emotional experience (Begeny & Huo,

2017; Brown et al., 2011; Choi et al., 2013) fueled by the systemic interaction of oppression,

dominance, and discrimination within a society. However, the literature to date is inconclusive

about the additive stress caused by membership in numerous minority groups, raising many

issues about possible protective mechanisms at work. The following is a summary of the

significant findings in this topic to date, as well as future directions.

Stressors for Black Queer Men

When thinking about the health and well-being of queer men and queer men of color,

there is a noticeable impact that can be traced back to standards of the dominant societal group.

Social stigma and stigma related stress can impact racial and sexual minorities in a variety of

areas such as well-being, physical health, job performance, academic performance, and relational

outcomes (Ayala et al., 2012; Balsam et al., 2011; Cochran, 2011; Cyrus, 2017; Frost, 2011;

Jackson et al., 2020). The level to which stigma related stress can affect a marginalized

individual is dependent on the individual's ability to cope with stigma and discrimination. Social

stigma, in addition to victimization and discrimination, is a risk factor for psychological distress,

indicating that gay men are more susceptible to early onset mental health disorders (Ayala et al.,

2012; Balsam et al., 2011; Cochran, 2011; Cyrus, 2017; Frost, 2011). Furthermore, Choi et al.

(2013) found that queer men of color's experiences of racism within the general community were

positively associated with anxiety symptoms. In addition, they found that perceived homophobia

among heterosexual friends was positively associated with depression and anxiety symptoms in

queer men of color. However, it was determined that while Black men do experience racism

within the gay community, their perceived racism within the gay community is not positively

associated with anxiety. Additionally, there was no correlation found between homophobia

within family systems and depression and anxiety symptoms in queer men of color.

Research has shown that Black queer men are at significantly higher risk to be subjected

to multiple forms of discrimination, including racism, homophobia, and HIV-status

discrimination (Ayala et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2011). Subjection to discrimination based on

race, sexual orientation, and HIV-status all make a significant, independent contribution to Black

queer men's risk for depression (Balsam et al., 2011; Bostwick et al., 2014; Brown et. al., 2011).

These experiences, in combination with financial hardship and lack of social support have been

shown to increase risky sexual behavior, substance abuse, suicidality (suicidal ideation and

suicidal attempts), and internalized oppression (racism and homophobia) (Ayala et al., 2012;

Balsam et al., 2011; Bostwick et al., 2014; Drazdowski et al., 2016).

For Black queer men and other queer men of color, the level of connectedness to their

specific racial and queer communities also plays a role in their overall health and wellbeing

(Barrett, & Pollack, 2005; Battle, & Harris, 2013; Begeny, & Huo, 2017; Donahue et al., 1993).

For example, when members of marginalized groups (i.e. racial/ethnic and sexual minorities)

feel a sense of value and belonging within their own groups it can be beneficial to their

emotional health; however, it can also be detrimental their mental health. As one feels valued

within their marginalized group and it strengthens their group identity, it can lead to more

frequent perceptions of discrimination outside of the group as one takes on the specific lens that

the individual begins to view their world in (Begeny, & Huo, 2017).

Considering experiences of queer men specifically, it is imperative to examine how the

intersection of masculinity and social class factors into a queer man's expression of his identity.

Though not specifically looking at race, Barrett & Pollack (2005) found that working-class queer men are less likely to describe themselves as gay and less likely to associate themselves with visible gay culture. The study suggests that masculinity standards related to social class may affect social engagemnet of working-class gay men. Social class factors such as level of education, disability, and income have an effect on whether men feel connected to the gay community, thus affecting their overall self-concept differentiation (SCD). SCD refers to an individual's tendency to view oneself as possessing different identity characteristics across different social roles or contexts. Individuals with a higher SCD show higher signs of distress and poor emotional adjustment. The lower an individual's SCD, the more likely they are to have a more integrated identity and sense of self across different various social contexts (Donahue et al., 1993).

Music Therapy Literature on Queer Issues

As it relates to the field of music therapy, there has been an increase of literature centered around the queer community. Overall, the music therapy literature has predominantly consisted of research that identifies the best music therapy practices for working with members of the LGBTQ community (Whitehead-Pleaux et al., 2012), assesses the attitudes and preparedness of music therapists and music therapy students as it concerns engaging in clinical work with the LGBT clients (Boggan et al., 2017;Whitehead-Pleaux et al., 2013; Wilson & Geist, 2017), and considers theoretical implications for working with queer inidividuals (Bain et al., 2016). More recently, the profession has begun disseminating research that reflects music therapy clinical work with queer individuals, specifically addressing issues surrounding gender (Gumble, 2019; Hardy & Monypenny, 2019; Scrine, 2019). However, none of this literature has looked at the specific intersections of sexuality, gender, and race. It should be noted that conversations

surrounding intersectionality are occurring within other creative arts therapy literature (Talwar, 2010; Trottier & Williams, 2019; Williams & Trottier, 2019), which only further supports the need for these discussions within music therapy.

Music Therapy Literature of Black Issues

Recently, within the last few years, the music therapy literature has seen the introduction of research that centers around Black voices and Black aesthetics (Norris, 2019; Thomas, 2019; Webb, 2019). Some of the literature centering Black voices critiques the profession of music therapy and the ways in which it upholds anti-Black and oppressive systems and parallels the systemic oppression that can be observed in the current western culture (Norris, 2020a; Norris, 2020b; Norris et al., 2021). In these articles and other Black-specific music therapy literature, the authors discuss how to disrupt and dismantle the oppressive systems that exist within music therapy in order to promote equity, healing, and affirmation for Black people (Leonard, 2020; Norris, 2020b; Norris et al., 2021; Thomas, 2021). None of these have specifically looked at the intersections of sexuality, gender, and race.

Music Therapy on Black Queer Issues

While there is emerging research that address sexuality, gender, and race separately, there is currently no music therapy literature that addresses the intersections of these identities. Furthermore, as logically follows, none of the literature examines the intersections of sexuality, gender, and race from a clinical perspective. This gap in the literature is glaring when examining issues that are specific to Black queer men. As the field continues to expand upon its knowledge of social justice issues, it is imperative that attention is paid to addressing intersectional issues such as race and sexuality, specifically as that intersects with anti-Black racism which permeates US society. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore how Black queer cisgender men

experience both their racial identity and sexuality in various social settings, as expressed through

music improvisation. A further aim of this research was to initiate a dialogue regarding ways in

which music therapy can serve as a way to explore the lived experiences of one's intersectional

identity in terms of sexuality, gender, and race. The research question was: Can music

improvisation accurately reflect how Black queer men experience their intersecting identities

within the social contexts of their families, friends, and the broader US society?

Method

Research Design

Ontology

According to Hiller (2016), objectivist research has long been regarded as superior in

music therapy and medicine due to its emphasis on objectivity, generalizations, regulated

conditions, and quantitative results. This resulted in a research hierarchy and the devaluation of

interpretive research methods. As it has matured, the music therapy field has incorporated

various research methodologies, such as grounded theory, phenomenology, and naturalistic

inquiry, which grow out of ontologies that assume that there is not a single Truth outside of our

interpretive frameworks. Unlike objectivist research, these methodologies both acknowledge and

center subjective experience. Despite the fact that the research hierarchy still exists, in music

therapy there is an increasingly realization of the value of various ontological perspectives and

that they lead to different epistemological assumptions, research questions, and research

methodologies.

Epistemology

This research most aligns with feminist epistemology, more specifically feminist

standpoint theory. Knowers within a broadly construed feminist epistemology are positioned in

explicit relationship to what is understood and to other knowers. The condition and experience of

the knower is reflected in what is known and how it is known. Feminist epistemology is

concerned with claims to knowledge. People can interpret the same object in different ways

depending on their position in relation to it. In feminist epistemology, there are general

understandings of what is meant by situated knowing. Situated knowledge is that which is gained

and produced from our lived experiences, from our particular sociocultural location (Rolvsjord &

Hadley, 2016). Feminists understand situated knowledge as comprising "(a) a concern with the

situated *knower,* (b) a concern with the relationship between the knower and the subject of study;

and (c) a concern with the social organization of knowledge production" (Rolvsjord & Hadley,

2016, p. 480). As such, what we know is influenced by our social location (i.e., gender, race,

sexual orientation, neurodivergency, religion, embodiment). These factors have an impact on the

way we know, reasoning expectations, our attitudes toward areas of knowledge based on our

understandings from our social location, and the legitimacy we give to the beliefs of others about

our experiences. Situated knowledges have an impact on how people evaluate whether

statements are meaningful or relevant (Anderson, 2020).

Underneath the umbrella of feminist epistemology, standpoint theory argues that the

perspectives of subjugated social groups have an epistemic advantage on politically disputed

issues relevant to their subjugation. According to traditional standpoint theory, the perspective of

the subjugated is superior (i) in revealing fundamental social regularities, (ii) in exposing social

relations as dependent and vulnerable to reform by concerted intervention, and (iii) in portraying

the social environment in relation to universal human interests. In comparison, dominant group

viewpoints reflect only the most superficial social regularities in relation to dominant group

interests, misrepresenting them as essential, normal, or universally beneficial (Anderson, 2020).

Standpoint theory strives to represent the universe from a socially situated epistemically advantageous viewpoint. A complete standpoint theory must specify the following:

- the advantaged perspective's social location,

- its scope: the subject matters on which it claims advantage,

- the aspect of the social location that generates epistemic advantage: for example, social role or subjective identity,

- the basis of its advantage: what justifies its claim to superiority,

- the type of epistemic superiority it claims (Anderson, 2020).

In this research, all of the participants and the researcher shared the standpoint of being Black queer men and as such have a perspective on the world that is informed by our shared social locations. This knowledge is valuable in music therapy given that most of our knowledge comes from a white cisheteronormative lens.

As a result of my own clinical practice and training, it is important to acknowledge that this research is influenced by both a systems and psychodynamic theoretical framework. My understanding of Black queer men is that we make meaning of our intersectional identities through our experiences within various social systems, including intrapersonal, micro, meso, exo, and macrosystems (Guy-Evans, 2020). Through a systems lens, people seek homeostasis within their social groups and systems. For individuals to achieve optimal wellness, systems must be created with the needs of all in mind and when issues arise it reflects breakdowns in systemic interactions rather than the deficiency of one individual (GoodTherapy, 2017).

Within a psychodynamic framework, wellness is achieved when there is balance within the structural dimensions of the psyche. These psychic structures function within layers of the self: the conscious, the pre-conscious, and the unconscious. Disruptions to wellness occur when a

person's repressed conflicts, unacknowledged aspects of self, and defense mechanisms are limiting a person's freedom (Hadley, 2001). To restore and maintain wellness, these unconscious conflicts must be brought into the conscious mind, explored, and resolved. One way to do this is through music improvisation.

While this research is not intended to be labeled as analytical music therapy, it does share Mary Priestley's understanding that improvised music is projective and can access the unconscious (Hadley, 2001). Priestley (1975) believed that an individual had the ability to express what she referred to as their "inner music," which is "the prevailing emotional climate behind the structure of one's thoughts" (p. 199). It is this understanding that influenced my decision to utilize music improvisation as the modality within this research.

Methodology

In narrative inquiry, stories are regarded as rich communications of human experiences (Hadley & Edwards, 2016). In this methodology, the focus is on examining how people and communities tell their stories and position their lives. The role of the researcher is to pay attention not only to the substance of the narrative, but also to how it is conveyed, as this can inform and change the interpretation depending on time, setting, and listener(s). The story's interpretation is often shaped by the audience (in this case the researcher), who interprets it based on their own cultural context. The narrative process is complex and has the potential to change the researcher, participants, and even the larger audience to whom the research is disseminated. When participants are invited to share their experiences, data gathered by narrative inquiry often includes conversation. This methodology uses a variety of analysis methods, but accounts are often read and reread to help the analyst develop a better understanding.

Rationale for Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry was chosen as the methodology for this research because of its focus on lived experience and constructed meanings (Hadley & Edwards, 2016). Though the participants in this study all identify as queer, Black, cisgender men, the ways in which they experience these identities are complex and nuanced in comparison to one another. Understanding each participant's past experiences, cultural location, personality, and relationship with those present within their various contexts is crucial in fully comprehending how they experience their intersecting identities of sexuality and race. Thus, this study requires an extensive analysis of the phenomena. Narrative inquiry was also chosen because of the opportunity to examine music improvisation as the main source of narrative material. Music serves as one of many ways in which stories are told (Hadley & Edwards, 2016). With this understanding, examining and understanding the music that reflects the stories of the participants creates opportunities to transform the researcher, participants, and readers. Within this framework, my aim was to provide a supportive and affirming space for participants to openly share their experiences through verbal dialogue and musical monologue, potentially gaining greater insight and healing.

Data Collection Procedures

Recruitment Procedures

A request for participants was sent to the "Black Music Therapists Network," and "Queer Exchange: Greater Triangle Area, North Carolina" Facebook groups as well as this researcher's personal Facebook page; additionally, participants were personally invited to the study based on recommendations from the researcher's colleagues and friends. Participants were purposively sampled from respondents with the following criteria in mind:

a.) The participant identifies as queer, Black, cisgender male.

b.) The participant resides in the U.S.

c.) The participant is over the age of 18

d.) The participant has access to virtual meeting platform, Zoom

e.) The participant has access to a piano/keyboard

It should be noted that criterion d. and e. were added, due to restrictions brought on by the

COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant Demographics

At first there were six participants, but the data from one of the participants was not

included in the data analysis phase. Due to the nature and aim of this research, the diversity of

the participant demographics was limited purposely. It was imperative that the participants'

gender, race, and sexuality were homogenous given the aim of the research to look at the

experiences of queer, Black, cisgender men. There was some diversity, although limited, in terms

of age, educational attainment, profession, and geographical location (see Table 1). Prior to

participating in the research, participants were asked to complete a demographic survey that

looked not only at their sociocultural locations, but also their experience and comfort level with

music improvisation (see Figures 1 & 2).

Table 1

Participants' Demographics

	Age	**Educational attainment**	**Profession**	**Geographic location**
Participant 1	32	Bachelor's degree	Elementary school teacher	North Carolina, USA
Participant 2	26	Bachelor's degree	Sound designer	Georgia, USA
Participant 3	48	Doctoral degree	College professor	South Carolina, USA

| Participant 4 | 30 | Master's degree | Marketing | North Carolina, USA |
| Participant 5 | 31 | Some college, no degree | Music director | California, USA |

Note. Participants' demographics. This table shows the demographic information of each participant and includes: age, education level, profession, and geographic location.

Figure 1

Participants' Piano Experience

Do you have prior experience with piano improvisation?
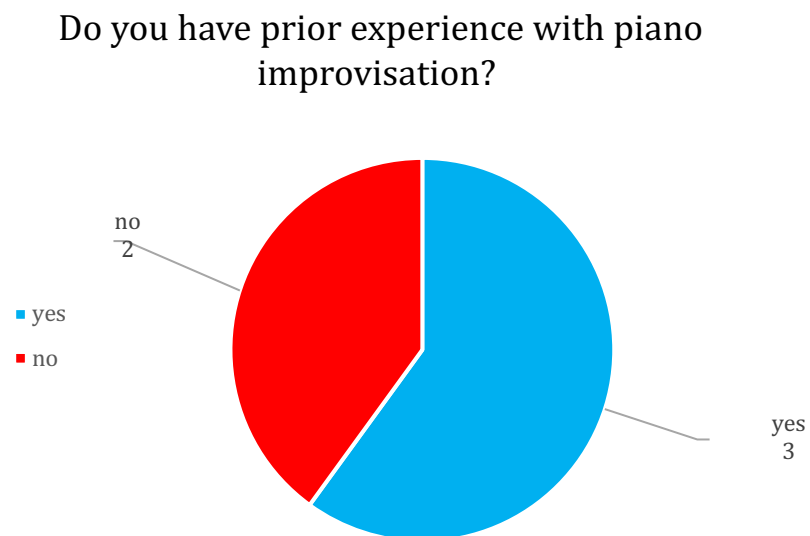
Note. This figure displays a percentage break down of the participants' prior experience with piano improvisation.

Figure 2

Participants' Comfort Levels

How would you describe your comfort level with piano improvisation?
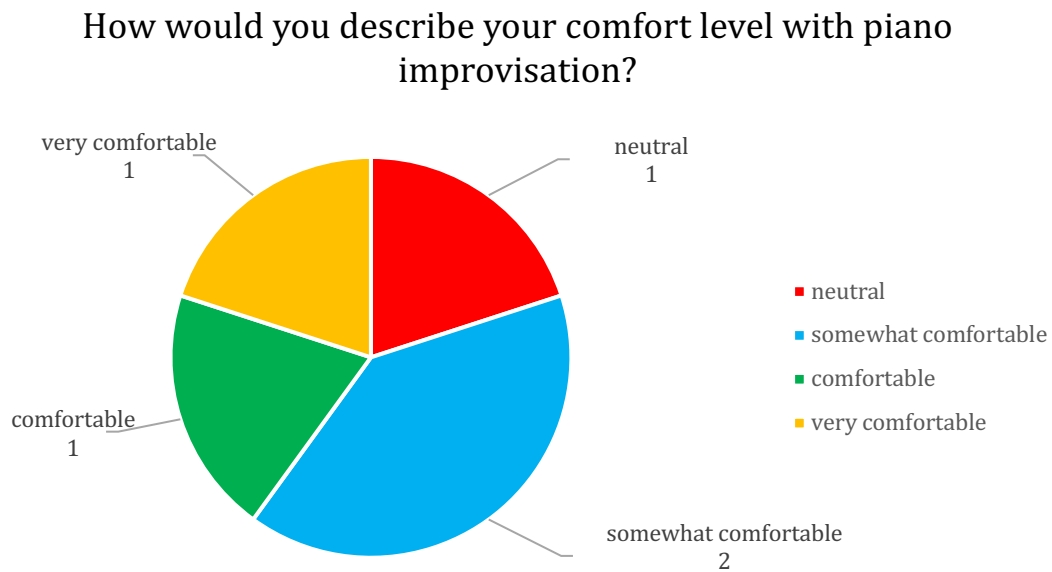
Note. This figure displays a percentage breakdown of the participants' comfort level with piano improvisation.

Data Gathering Procedures

Each participant met with the researcher individually on Zoom to complete their improvisations. Prior to each improvisation, the participants were asked to think about their racial identity and sexuality and how they experience the two within a given social context (i.e., family of origin, friends/chosen family, work environment, the state they currently live in, and the United States). I did not provide the participants with any theoretical framework for their improvisations. It was left intentionally broad with the hope of drawing on their individual lived experiences. After being given time to think about their experience within the given social context, participants were then invited to convey their experience for that social setting through

music improvisation using a self-provided keyboard. Once an improvisation was completed, the

participants were asked to answer the following two questions in written form:

1. In what ways did you represent racial identity and sexuality in your

   improvisation?

2. What were you aware of in terms of how you experience each of these aspects of

   your identity (race and sexuality) within your *(given social setting)*?

Participants then repeated this process four more times until there was an improvisation for each

of the predetermined social settings (i.e., family of origin, friends/chosen family, work

environment, the state they currently live in, and the United States). All Zoom meetings were

recorded, and each participant completed all five improvisations in one meeting. After

completing all their improvisations, participants were instructed to email the researcher their

written response to all the provided questions. The researcher did not look at these answers until

the follow-up interviews with each participant after analyzing the improvisations.

Data Analysis and Interpretation Procedures

After extracting and editing down the audio from the improvisation sessions, I completed

an initial listening of all 30 improvisations (initially there were six participants who completed

five improvisations each) and wrote down my initial thoughts and observations about each piece,

noting elements such a tempo, volume, time signature, as well as initial interpretations. Next, I

enlisted the help of Tatyana Martin, a Black queer music therapy colleague and member of my

graduate cohort. Together we listened to all the improvisations, and she provided me with her

initial observations and thoughts. Tatyana's observations were used to corroborate my own

findings and assess for potential biases.

It should be noted that the decision was made between myself and my thesis advisor to remove one of the participants from the study, due to his prior knowledge about the research, and my friendship with him. It was determined that these factors might create bias for both of us. The decision was also made to only analyze the "family of origin," "friend/chosen family," and "country" improvisations for the remaining participants. Of the five initial social settings, these three settings were the most varied from each other and were deemed the most crucial to examine.

Following consultation with my thesis advisor, I continued listening to the remaining 15 improvisations. While listening, I utilized Bruscia's Improvisation Assessment Profiles (IAPs) short form to analyze each improvisation and make note of all the musical elements of each piece. Gardstrom (2003), utilizing a similar research design, utilizes the IAPs to interpret the meaning of improvisations to both herself and the improvisors. She consults different profiles to describe the ways that the improvisors organized musical elements to communicate meaning on given themes. She also engaged in discussion with each improvisor post their improvisations.

During this stage of listening and analyzing, I enlisted the help of music educator, Alex Alberti to ensure that I was not overlooking any important musical or music theory elements. Alex's assistance also served to help minimize potential biases in my analyses. Once thorough analyses were completed, I took the subjective and objective data collected from each improvisation to form an interpretation. My interpretations, based on the musical data presented, reflected how I believed each participant experienced themselves as a Black queer man within each of the given social settings. I created a written record of my interpretations at the bottom of each IAP short form.

Interpretivist data analysis is cyclical and dynamic, shifting as the researchers' understandings develop and deepen (Creswell, 2014). Throughout the analysis process, I aimed to remain reflexive about how my own experiences and worldview shaped my reactions and interpretation of the data. Additionally, I had prolonged exposure to the data, listening and relistening to it until saturation occurred and themes felt finalized.

Strategies for Validation of the Data

Data obtained throughout the study was validated through six different methods. These methods included a) the post-improvisation reflections completed by the participants, b) post-improvisation session journaling completed by the researcher, c) enlisting the help of a music therapy colleague during the initial stage of music analysis, d) enlisting the help of a music education colleague during the subsequent music analysis phase, e) continual debriefing with my thesis advisor, and f) member checking.

Member Checking

Once the music was analyzed and interpretations were made, the participants each individually met with me to go over the findings from the improvisations. These meetings took place approximately six months after the improvisation sessions. Both the participant and I listened back to each of the participant's improvisations. Following the initial listen through of a given improvisation, I shared my interpretation of the improvisation and then myself and the participant read the participant's written response that coincided with the improvisation. This was the first time I was reading the participant's response. The participant and I then engaged in an open dialogue to discuss the accuracy of my interpretations. This process repeated itself until all improvisation were gone through.

Post-Improvisation Reflection Analysis

After the completion of the member checking sessions, I read through all of the post-improvisation reflections again several times in order to code them to discover what salient themes would emerge. This coding process was done in an attempt to gain a richer understanding of the data through a cross-case analysis. To begin the analysis process, the narrative responses were uploaded into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis and research software program. Data was then coded by selecting significant quotes and using a word or phrase to denote their meaning. As I continued reading the reflections and adding additional codes, I returned back to formerly coded data to integrate categories and search for the newly added codes. Eventually, I began to notice patterns within the data and codes merged into one another. Lastly, I consulted with my thesis advisor to consolidate codes into sub-themes and create overarching themes.

Ethical Considerations

This research topic had the potential to uncover trauma related to thinking about and musically recreating race and sexuality related experiences that participants have encountered throughout their various social interactions, which was outlined in the informed consent form. Following their improvisation session, each participant was provided the option to seek out therapeutic help, if needed. I explained that therapeutic referrals would be given upon request. No participants requested a referral for therapy.

In order to protect the identity of the participants, no identifying information was utilized when writing up the results and pseudonyms were implemented. To further ensure confidentiality, all Zoom video recordings were saved in a password-protected file on my computer. These recordings will be deleted two years following the completion of this study. To further protect each participants' identity, when analyzing the music, only the sound recording of

the zoom was shared with my advisor and a small group of peers who also participated in the data analysis to ensure greater validity and reliability.

Results

The purpose of this study was to examine how piano-based music improvisation can reflect the ways in which Black queer cisgender men experience the intersection of their racial identity and sexuality in various social settings. Participants engaged in five structured music improvisations, each representing different social settings (family, friends, work, society at the state level, society at the country level). Within each improvisation the participants were asked to channel and reflect upon their experiences within each social setting. Following each improvisation, the participants answered two questions that prompted them to reflect upon their feelings during the improvisations. Their responses addressed issues surrounding prejudice, identity performance, interpersonal relationships, and societal impact. Below you'll find my interpretations based the musical analyses and the themes uncovered from the participants' post-improvisation reflections for the improvisations on their experiences with family, friends, and in the US more generally.

Researcher's Interpretations

Family

Participant 1 "Jaleel". The use of an overall major tonality and functional harmony perhaps reflects that Jaleel's relationship with his family is generally stable. Throughout the piece there is use of space, as evidenced by open major chords and octave intervals, which could indicate that Jaleel shares commonalities with his family; however, there's still distance and space between them. Or perhaps that distance and space could be separate parts of himself. Perhaps the chromatic octave intervals represent tension between Jaleel's racial identity and

sexuality within his family. The descending block chords that shift tonalities may represent Jaleel questioning how he fits within his family; however, these chords resolve in a major chord at the end so perhaps Jaleel has since integrated his identity as a Black queer man in his family.

Participant 2 "Donovan". The repetitiveness of the arpeggiated accompaniment, descending bass line, chordal progression, and static volume creates a sense of routine and monotony. Perhaps Donovan feels as though he is stuck in a monotonous routine within his family. The general minor tonality utilized provides tonal stability, while also creating a sense of somberness. This may reflect both a sense of stability that Donovan feels within his family and a sense of sadness that he may experience. Perhaps Donovan is sad that he can't be his authentic self around his family. The use of m2's creates fleeting moments of tension. Perhaps this represents moments where Donovan has attempted to showcase his identities within his family, only to be met with discomfort. The piece is limited to the mid-range of the piano. Perhaps Donovan feels as though he ability to live authentically as a Black queer man is limited within his family.

Participant 3 "Tyrone". I would gesture that Tyrone's identity as a Black queer man within his family is complex, as evidenced by the varied time signatures, tonality shifts used throughout. I would guess that growing up, Tyrone was provided love and care from his family, as evidenced by the lullaby and goodnight motif used at the beginning, the opening major tonality, and opening tonal stability, but then perhaps as he started coming into his identity as queer there was some tension. This tension can be heard in the low bass note that interjects throughout the piece. Due to this tension, I think Tyrone tried to adapt and fit within the structure and limits that he felt was placed upon him, as evidenced by the use of the scale patterns that are utilized throughout. The middle of the piece utilizes upper register major chords that are then

interjected by a low bass note. This could mean that Tyrone began allowing himself to explore

his identities, which continued to create tension within his family. Currently, I would guess

Tyrone isolates his queer identity from his family and plays the structured role he feels he has to

around them, as evidenced by the minor tonality shift that concludes with a low bass note and is

followed by the return of the scale pattern.

Participant 4 "Daniel". The opening phrase of the piece centers around F major;

however, the last note of the phrase ends on a B natural. Given that the opening phrase is

ascending and ends on a non-chord tone, it gives the notion that something is being questioned.

Perhaps this reflects that Daniel may be questioning how his authentic self fits within his family.

Additionally, as the listener, I struggled determining whether the tonal center was F or C. Maybe

this parallels a struggle that Daniel is having, when it comes to his identity as a Black queer man

in his family. The use of repeated I-IV major triad chords may mean that Daniel is struggling to

make progress in his family and may constantly feel like he's repeating himself frequently. This

repetition may also mean that Daniel goes through the motions within his family, performing in a

way that is congruent with his family dynamic even though it may not represent who he feels he

is authentically.

Participant 5 "Deshaun". It feels as though Deshaun's experience of self, within his

family, is complicated, as evidenced by the use of the A Locrian mode throughout the piece.

Given that the opening piece opens with A4 and M6 intervals, I gesture that perhaps Deshaun

feels a sense of unease within his family. This feeling of unease/uncertainty is seen throughout

the piece through the use of the sustain pedal to create augmented, minor, diminished overtones.

The use of sustained notes in the left-hand accompaniment in conjunction with the upper register

legato melody, suggest aspects within Deshaun's experience of family that are both tender and

sad. The use of rubato and non-strict meter throughout create moments of tension and release; however, the resolutions are quickly followed by diminished and augmented chords. Perhaps this reflects how Deshaun experiences his identity within his family; constant moments of tension that never fully resolve in ways that feel positive.

Friends

Participant 1 "Jaleel". The opening major arpeggiated chords that span several octaves followed by blocked chords that emphasize a major tonality may reflect that Jaleel has had positive experiences within his friend group. The succession of M2, and M3 intervals, as well as the octave intervals that move chromatically, perhaps reflect that while his relationships are generally positive may have experienced moments discomfort of tension that center around his identity. This potential tension can be further explained by the descending chromatic chords that later follow. The ascending glissandi that emphasize major 7th chords may indicate that there's a sense of ease and tenderness in his relationship with his friends. Perhaps this ease means that he's comfortable with showing all aspects of his identity. The octave leaps used at the end that ascend, before dropping down to the low range of piano, may convey that there's high and lows within his friendships.

Participant 2 "Donovan". The piece's combination of the descending bass line, use of sustain pedal, the use of minor and majority tonalities, and melody create a feeling of tenderness. Perhaps Donovan has felt a sense of tenderness from his friends and generally feels supported. The piece uses major intervals, which may represent his racial identity and sexuality. Perhaps his identities are positively integrated into his friend group. While the first section of the piece is repetitive, the following sections break away from that repetitiveness melodically. Perhaps this

means that Donovan feels more comfortable exploring and expressing his identities with his

friends.

  Participant 3 "Tyrone". Tyrone's identities seem to be celebrated and uplifted by his

friends, as evidenced in the use of the ascending arpeggiated major chords. My guess is that he

generally feels supported by his friends, as reflected in major tonality and the functional

harmonic chords that accompany the melodic lines and the tonal grounding in D major

throughout the piece. The use of major 7th chords and dense homophonic texture creates a feeling

of tenderness and reflexivity. Perhaps Tyrone's friend group provides a tenderness that gives him

room to reflect on his identities authentically. The use of legato to connect notes throughout the

piece, perhaps indicates that Tyrone feels connected to his friends. I would gesture that Tyrone

may feel as though he has the freedom to express himself, as indicated by the fluid and

thoughtful nature of the musical transitions and the use of rubato, non-strict meter. There are

moments of tension and release that are created by the chromatic chord. This tension may reflect

that not all of Tyrone's friendships are perfect, despite the overall positive associations with his

friend group.

  Participant 4 "Daniel". Given that piece is in a major key utilizes that upper range of

the piano and has a general sense of meter, it may mean that Daniel's experience within his

friend group is generally positive and stable. The use of staccato throughout the piece creates a

feeling of playfulness. Perhaps Daniel is able to freely play and explore within the borders of his

identity, when around his friends. Daniel utilizes ascending and descending octave intervals

towards the end of the piece. This could reflect that there are shared commonalities amongst him

and his friends, which is further supported by the overall congruency and stability of the piece.

Participant 5 "Deshaun". The opening tempo and repeated driving dotted eighths notes lead me to believe that perhaps Deshaun's friendships are a driving force in his life. Major tonality of the piece suggests that Deshaun experiences of self has been generally positive. Perhaps Deshaun's friendships have changed over time, as represented by the change in tonal centers; however, it seems that he has generally felt supported, as evidenced by homophonic texture. I would gesture that the use of tension and delayed release heard throughout may represent conflicts that involve his identities and his friends. Though these moments of tension have occurred, and perhaps lingered, they eventually resolve. The ascending and descending arpeggiated and stepwise melodies and fast upward note flourishes may represent the journeys that have taken place within his friendships, with ascending flourishes representing the positive outcomes of said journeys. The fluctuation and fluidity with pulse and tempo could represent how he is able to fluidly maneuver within his identities when with his friends.

Society

Participant 1 "Jaleel". The use of descending chromatic chords that end with low bass notes convey a feeling of falling or sinking. Perhaps this means the Jaleel is sinking into feelings of stress and tension brought on by society. Low octave bass notes that contrast higher octave notes create a sense of unrest and unease. This could mean that Jaleel feels a sense of unease navigating society as a Black queer man. The overall piece generally utilizes the lower range of the piano, which makes the music feel weighted and heavy. Maybe Jaleel feels as though his experiences as a Black queer man in society come with a heavy weight that he feels he has to carry. There are moments where there is a contrast between piano ranges (upper range and lower range). Perhaps this is a representation of Jaleel vs. society, where society is conveyed through the lower range of the piano and Jaleel is represented through the higher range. These opposite

ends of the piano are never played together, which signifies to me that there's disintegration. Maybe Jaleel feels like his identity isn't able to be integrated into societal systems.

Participant 2 "Donovan". The use of cluster chords and unresolved suspensions create tension. Perhaps this means Donovan experiences tension within society. The repetitive nature of the 1+ 2 3 rhythm in the ascending arpeggiation creates this feeling of movement; however, it doesn't feel like the piece is going anywhere. Perhaps Donovan is moving through society, but not making any progress. The use of the sustain pedal with cluster chords create a series of overtones that sit on top of the piece almost like a fog. Perhaps Donovan feels lost in a haze within society.

Participant 3 "Tyrone". Tyrone's experience as a Black queer man in society seems to be one filled with conflict and sadness. This is perhaps reflected in the use of minor tonality times and cluster chords in both high and low registers of the piano. My guess is that Tyrone has experienced societal conflict in abrupt explicit ways and subtle implicit ways. Perhaps Tyrone is saddened by the way in which society has instilled fear and anxiety within the cultural circles that he inhabits. Musically these feelings of fear and anxiety are expressed in the use of ascending arpeggiated diminished chords, cluster chords, the low register tremolos and descending and ascending tritone, m6, and M6 intervals. Additionally, a sense of anxiety is reflected in the tempo fluctuations, where the increase and decrease in tempo is used to create tension. The piece has a thin monophonic texture throughout the middle of the piece, with moments were there's only a melody. Perhaps this reflects feelings of having no support from society when it comes to Tyrone's expression of his identities.

Participant 4 "Daniel". The use of low cluster bass notes played at a forte dynamic creates a muddied sound that overpowers the upper range tremolos. Perhaps Daniel feels

overpowered by society. I wonder if Daniel's existence as a Black queer man in combination

with his experience of society creates tension and instability, as evidenced by the lack of a tonal

center and tonal stability in the piece. The brief pauses within in the music seem to be used as a

way to get quick relief from the cacophony of sound. Maybe Daniel tries to find ways to get

relief from what he experiences within society.

Participant 5 "Deshaun". The low A bass note that starts and ends the piece and is

played throughout in contrast to majority of the piece, suggests that perhaps his experience of

self is filled with tension, instability, and conflict. This tension may be further explained through

the use of crescendos, sustain pedal, ascending chromatic runs and whole tone scales that create

build ups of tension. Maybe Deshaun feels a sense of sadness due to his experiences as a Black

queer male, as evidenced by the use of minor tonalities throughout in the melodies played in the

upper range of the piano. I would guess that perhaps the major tonality that is utilized towards

the end of the piece may represent some sense reprieve in Deshaun's experience of self within

society; however, the constant low A bass note that interjects leads me to believe that the

reprieve is short-lived and never fully experienced. Maybe the fluidity of the tempo, heavy use of

rubato, and constant shifts in phrasing, meter, and pulse represent Deshaun's constant need to

shift within his identities in order to survive within the context of society. The dichotomy

between the repeated low range bass notes being played in tandem with the upper range of the

piano, perhaps reflect the contrast between Deshaun's sense of self and society.

Participants' Responses to Researcher's Interpretations

During the member checking, participant's provided feedback on the researcher's

interpretations of the music. Across all the participants, there was a consensus that the

researcher's musical analysis and interpretations accurately reflected their lived experiences.

Below, you will find narrative passages (quotations) provided to reflect the responses from each participant.

Participant 1 "Jaleel"

Honestly. I'm just grateful…whether you knew it or not you're creating a space for authenticity for Black queer men to tell their stories, to feel it, to process it, and turn it into something tangible. There's not enough of that in the queer community or the Black community.

Participant 2 "Donovan"

…Again, you read it like a book. Honestly to the T – everything that I was feeling and the music that I was trying to portray with my emotions…that was wonderful. It [the improvisation process] made me realize that this [issues related to racial identity and sexuality] is something that I'm really ready to be more open to myself about.

Participant 3 "Tyrone"

It's interesting…I think you got it – I do…especially capturing the contrast and the purpose in the contrast. I think you're spot on.

Participant 4 "Daniel"

Seeing how much you pulled out…I don't even have the words…This is kind of mind blowing…I wasn't expecting it [the interpretations] to be as close or I was thinking that you would pull out things that I might definitely could see, but didn't necessarily think about as I was doing this…to see how your things lined up with what I was writing anyway and the other pieces…that was really cool.

It feels good. The idea that I can have thoughts and expressions or feelings, probably pretty subconscious most of the time, and then play or express those things, have an interpretation, have someone else come in and hear what came out and reach a super similar

conclusion – to me that's powerful…it kind of makes me feel a little bit more complete, or heard, or seen but in a different way.

Participant 5 "Deshaun"

It's just incredible. Everything. This entire project. Your takeaways and observations – analyzing what you've heard and like I said read me for filth 'cause you're just so incredible…that you're able to get that, which I think speaks to the shared experiences. It's just really incredible and I'm grateful for this whole situation.

Thematic Analysis of Post-Improvisation Narrative Reflections

Four themes with 10 sub-themes were revealed during data analysis. The four categorical themes included a) prejudice, b) sense of identity, c) impact of relationships, and d) responses to trauma. These perspectives were examined with consideration of each participant's cultural context.

In this section, each theme and corresponding sub-themes will be explicated, with narrative passages (quotations) provided to convey the richness of the findings. To ensure confidentiality, each participant has been assigned a number and efforts were made to exclude potentially identifying information without disrupting the essence of the data. Participants' identities were anonymous to one another, but were known by me. Quotes will be placed in quotation marks when within the text body and italicized when given their own paragraph for ease of reading.

Figure 3

Themes
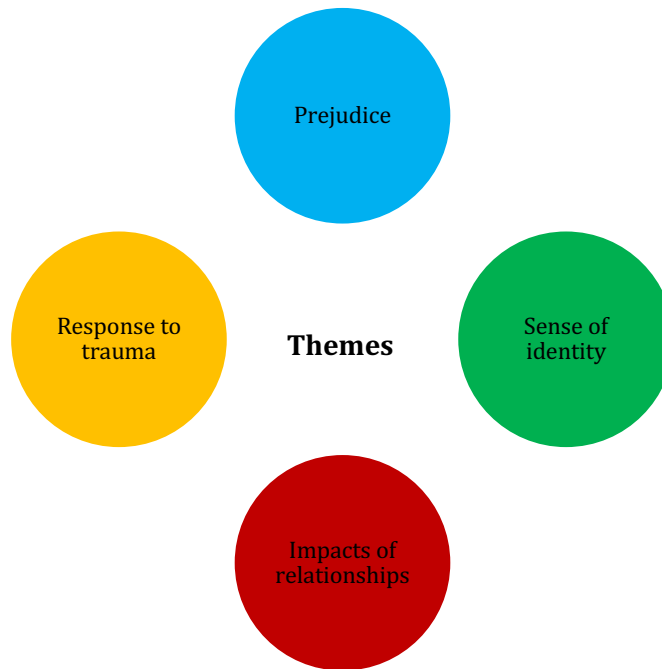
Note. This figure displays themes that emerged within the data and number of sub-themes associated with each, which were prejudice (3), sense of identity (2), impacts of relationships (2), and response to trauma (3).

Prejudice

This theme had 3 sub-themes which consisted of experiences of racism, homophobia, and gender-expectations.

Figure 4

Prejudice
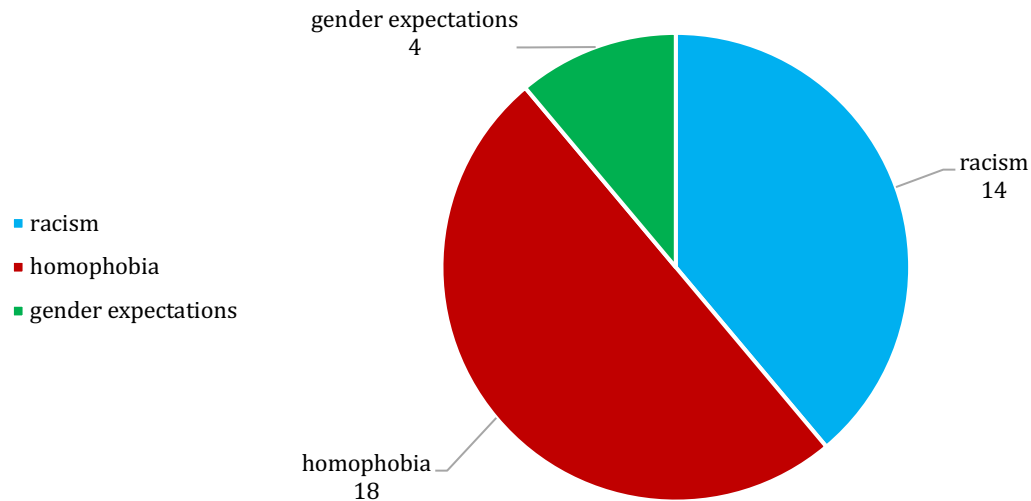
Note. This figure displays sub-themes and number of occurrences found in the category of

prejudice and includes the codes: racism (14), homophobia (18), and gender expectations (4).

Racism. Participants expressed the various forms of racism that they have encountered

throughout their lived experiences. All the participants acknowledged the occurrence of racism

on a societal level, pointing to issues like police brutality and the historical mistreatment of

Black people. They explained how the blatant expressions of racism that they have both endured

and witnessed have conveyed a message of how little their lives as Black men are valued.

Participant 5 described his observations of racism by stating:

Between seeing unarmed black women and men and especially Black trans women and Black

trans men [murdered]. We are just trying to get the world to accept us as people and show them

that our lives even matter.

Homophobia. Participants consistently acknowledged experiencing homophobia. It was

noted that instances of homophobia occurred within the participants' families of origin as well as

in larger societal spaces. Participants who mentioned experiencing homophobia within their families of origin shared that this form of homophobia was typically the result of a family member's religious views. Participant 2 recalled a memory where his family explicitly showed disdain for homosexuality. He stated:

I honestly don't know if my family will be ever ok with it. A memory I have is Thanksgiving, after the Obama administration was debating to make gay marriage legal in America. The discussion at the table was pretty wild and I honestly didn't speak up much. I think my accomplishments will allow them to see that God has always been with me even when I'm just being myself, a gay Black Man.

Gender Expectations. Two out of the five participants made mention of feeling pressured by family members to perform in stereotypically masculine ways. Participants shared that they naturally express themselves in ways that subvert the expectations of how a man should carry themselves. Participant 3 shared the effects that these gender norms had on his familial relationships, stating:

…a fractured childhood relationship with my stepdad and the fact that I thought he hated me because of my effeminate nature as a young boy…

Participant 5 expressed feeling hyper aware about the performance of his gender, stating:

I feel the need to be "strong and masculine" as one of the few men in the immediate family that is able bodied and in my current age bracket, but I am also naturally pretty "soft and feminine" (at least I self-identify that way) so while I don't cover it up, I feel the need to be aware of how I express myself at times.

Sense of Identity

This theme had 35 occurrences and includes codes in which participants reflect upon their identity, specifically their racial identity and sexuality. It includes sub-themes of living authentically, and constricted identities.

Figure 5

Sense of Identity
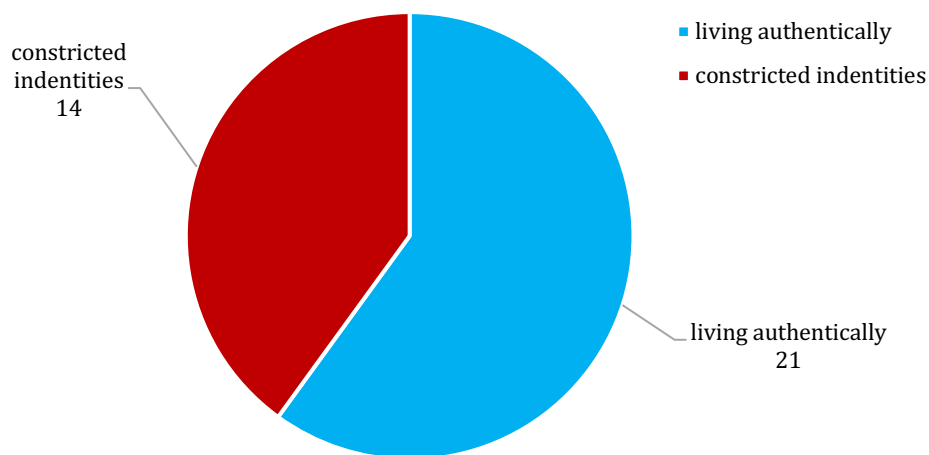
Note. This figure displays sub-themes and number of occurrences found in the category of sense of identity and includes codes: living authentically (21), and constricted identities (14).

Living Authentically. Participants discussed their ability to live authentically amongst those with whom they felt closest to. Unanimously, the participants noted that they are able to be themselves when engaging in their friend groups. Additionally, participants expressed the importance of these friend groups; providing a non-judgmental space to explore their identities. Participants made mention of seeing their racial identity and sexuality as intersectional as opposed to separate entities. Some participants mentioned that there is no one specific way in which they showcase their identities. In fact, they described the evolution of how they have

performed their identities over time, ultimately working towards finding what feels most authentic to them. Participant reflected this sentiment by stating:

I was just aware that I was different, but it didn't matter as much. I was encouraged to represent myself in various aspects of gender expression and authenticity…

Constricted Identities. Participants commented on experiences where their identities were not allowed to be expressed. The majority of the participants shared a common experience, where they are often reduced to one identity, usually their racial identity. There were several participants who admitted that they have struggled for many years to find their authentic selves and in some cases are still closeted from important people in their lives. Participant 1 described his experience of identity constriction, asserting:

People tend to have the mindset that you are Black and you don't want to add or you are not allowed to express yourself outside of just being Black because people judge you off of stereotypes or television depiction.

Impact of Relationships

This theme had 62 occurrences and includes codes in which participants reflect their interpersonal relationships as it relates to their experiences as Black queer men. The sub-themes were: positive experiences with loved ones (44), and seeking acceptance from loved ones (18).

Figure 6

Impact of Relationships

seeking acceptance
from loved ones
18

- positive experiences with loved ones
- seeking acceptance from loved ones

positive
experiences with
loved ones
44
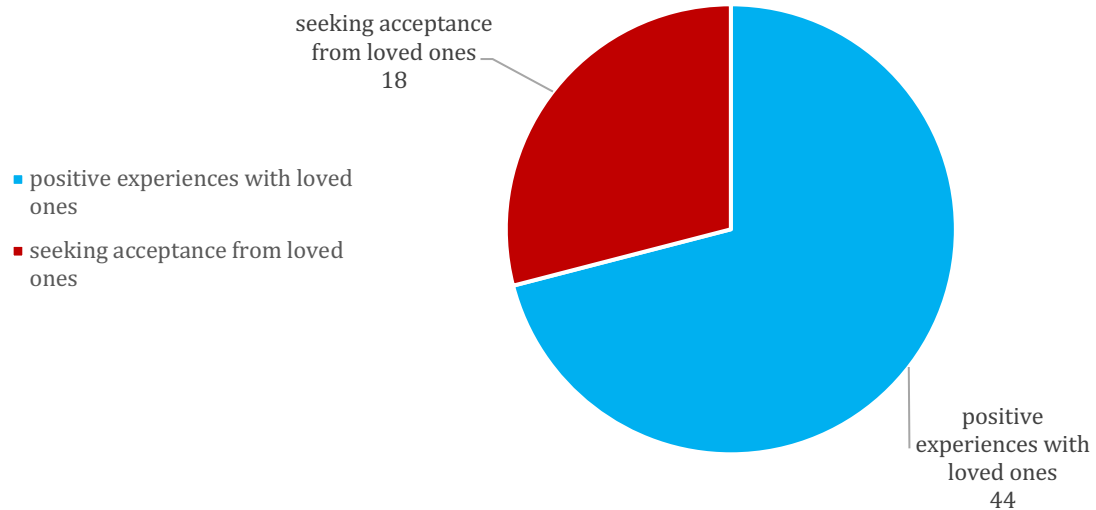
Note. This figure displays sub-themes and number of occurrences found in the category of

impact of relationships: positives experiences with loved ones (44), and seeking acceptance from

loved ones (18).

  Positive Experiences with Loved Ones. Participants stressed the importance of the

having close relationships with people who support and accept them. For all the participants,

these positive relationships exist within their friend groups. In fact, some of the participants

referred to their friends as "chosen family," emphasizing the amount of love and encouragement

that is received and how it has positively impacted their lives. Participant 5 asserted:

My friends make me so happy and give me all the love and encouragement that I need to make it

through life. They are so much like family it is crazy.

As mentioned earlier, in some cases these friend groups also are able to conceptualize the

participants' racial identity and sexuality as intersectional. Participant 4 described that his friend

group provides such an affirming space that he notices that the focus becomes more about

everyone's unique qualities instead of the identities that they hold. He shared:

I was thinking about the idea that I consider identities less when it comes to my friend groups

and focus more on the personalities and values that the folks bring. I know that race and

sexuality are important, but I feel like with my friends it doesn't matter as much.

Seeking Acceptance from Loved Ones. This sub-theme centered primarily around the

participants' family of origin. Participants described having complicated relationships with their

families surrounding their identity, specifically their queer identity. Many participants shared a

common experience of having family members who either don't accept their queerness or are

still working towards acceptance. Across the board, these relationships have resulted in feelings

of tension and frustration for the participants. Participant 4 shared his experience, stating:

I think that I was trying to represent that we were not in harmony and over time have grown to

be more in tune with each other…even though it took time.

Responses to Trauma

This theme had three sub-themes and 39 occurrences in which participants reflect upon

instances of and responses to trauma within their social settings. The sub-themes were: emotional

responses (18), resilient responses (4), and limitations and barriers (17).

Figure 7

Response to Trauma
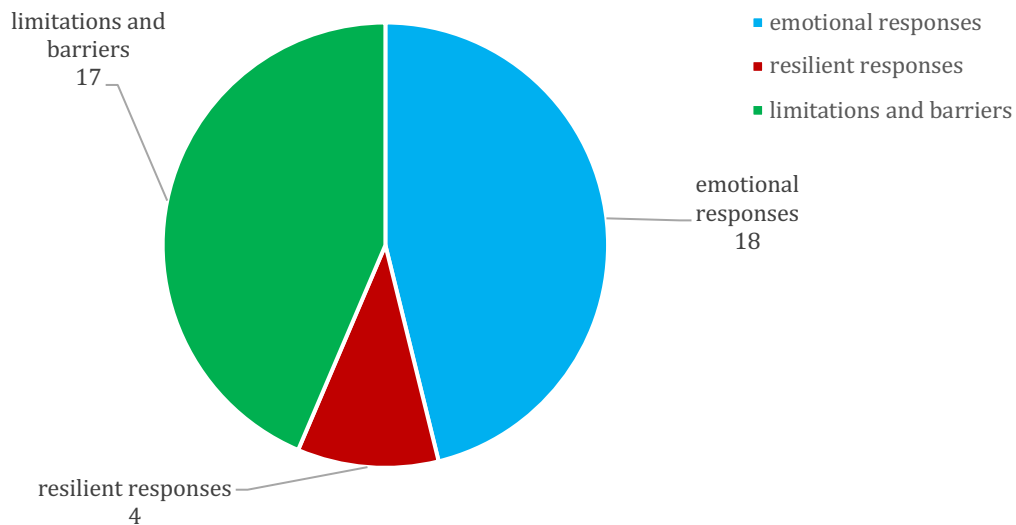
Note. This figure displays sub-themes and number of occurrences found in the category of responses to trauma and includes codes: emotional responses (18), resilient responses (4), and limitations and barriers (17).

Emotional Responses. Upon reflecting on their experiences, many participants expressed negative emotional responses to ways in which society has marginalized Black people and queer people, both within and outside of those intersections. Participants described feeling sadden by the increased murders of Black people, including Black cisgender people and Black trans women, by police over the last several years. Some participants noted struggling to find hope that society's attitudes towards Black and queer people will improve. Participant 5 wrote:

…there's so much sadness and there's a lot of unexpected turns. It feels, as a gay Black man in America, there are obstacles that are waiting for me at every turn (as there are for most everyone) that are designed to see my demise…Sometimes it is hard to get out of bed each day knowing that there is so much trouble and trauma awaiting me outside.

Participant 2; however, shared sentiments of hope surrounding the recent acts of violence against marginalized individuals, asserting:

I know this will sound crazy but especially after this summer I think the majority of people of this country can and will help the LGBT community in our country and I believe people are starting to be more open to the idea of being gay, trans and more. I do think we must keep pushing for Black Lives Matter and being accepting of black lives of the LGBT community…As long as we as a country grow over the bigotry and disinformation. I think this country can be great and free for everyone.

Resilient Responses. Although it may impede upon their ability to live authentically, some participants shared strategies that they have utilized in order to protect themselves from enduring further trauma. Some of the strategies included conforming to heteronormativity in order to blend in, remaining hyper vigilant in larger social spaces, and putting up emotional guards so as to preserve mental health. Participant 1 shared the following sentiment:

…I always have a small guard up. That sounds so sad and unfortunate, but it is truly for the protection of my own peace of mind and mental health.

Limitations and Barriers. Participants voiced concern over the systemic issues that have continuously sought to oppress them. Again, the participants brought up the various acts of violence being enacted upon marginalized communities. They specifically noted how the lack of control they have over the situation jeopardizes their physical, mental, and emotional safety. Some participants expressed that it feels as though any time they are able to move forward, there always seems to be a societal obstacle that gets in the way. Participants 1 shared the following:

Every time I feel like I have made some progress it feels like eventually I am back to square one which is also compounded with my queerness which is most often exiled in the Black community.

Participant 5 expressed a similar sentiment, stating:

Every time it feels like I find a groove or a safe haven, there is something else waiting to bring

about more difficulties.

Discussion

The present research study examined the experiences of Black queer men in the United

States through piano-based music improvisation. Questions presented to the participants

following the improvisation experience were designed to gain understanding of their emotions,

thoughts, sensations, memories, perceptions of cultural aesthetics, interpersonal dynamics,

intrapersonal dynamics, and societal experiences as expressed through the music. From the

results of this study, there are many common themes that emerged in the improvisations and in

the post-improvisation narrative responses. Each will be discussed below.

Themes in the Improvisations

Family

Across the improvisations, there was a clear sense of tonal stability. Most of the

participant's improvisations also played with elements of both major and minor tonalities, which

created a sense of duality within the music. According to Bruscia (1987), within a psychoanalytic

context, the tonal stability acts a grounding force for melody and harmony. It provides an

emotional center to contain and direct melodic and harmonic feelings and showcases the morals

values that exist within the self or internalized conscience. Furthermore, Bruscia (1987) asserts

that the participant's use of dual modalities and tones that fall outside of the respective scales

signifies that the feelings that exist within the melody are not grounded in just one specific

emotional context, but rather hold different emotional contexts.

In each improvisation there was a clear sense of tension – whether it be through the use of chromaticism, minor intervals, diminished and augmented chords, or low bass tones intentionally utilized to create a juxtaposition with the right hand. This use of tension reflects whether the participants' energy is stored in the past, flowing in the present, or blocked from the future. It informs when and how often peak experiences of emotional climaxes take place, and whether these experiences are experienced as constructive or destructive, catastrophic or triumphant (Bruscia, 1987).

Friends

The common thread across the improvisations was the use of the major tonality. Participants conveyed a message of positive relationship, through the use of major blocked chords, major intervals, ascending and descending arpeggiations, and glissandi. Additionally, some participants implemented the use of major 7th chords in slower passages to communicate a sense of tenderness in the music. The participant's use of harmony, as explained by Bruscia (1987), conveys consonance, integrates the feeling of the melody into an emotional context, and reveals attitudes or values related to what the melody is expressing which in this case is positive.

Across the 5 improvisations, 3 of the improvisations created moments of tension and release by minor and chromatic chords, which suggested that there are complexities within their relationships. As stated above, this aligns with Bruscia's notion that the use of non-chord tones reflects the presence of multiple emotional contexts. Lastly, participants employed octave intervals and leaps which express feelings of high and lows.

Society

Across the improvisations there was a recurring use of high and low tones being played together. Specifically, participants simultaneously played on opposite ends of the piano utilizing

techniques such as descending lines, tremolos and repeating ostinati to communicate tension, contrast, and separation within with the music. This is further explained by Bruscia's (1987) breakdown of texture in which he explains that overall texture and voice configuration can tell what the characters or parts of the music are doing in relationship to one another. The distance of the participants' hands, in combination with the differentiation of parts, both expresses inequality and competition between parts; thus, supporting feelings of tension and contrast. Additionally, the improvisations used the sustain pedal to further convey tension. Participants also employed cluster chords create moments of tension throughout the music. Tempo appeared to be an important element used in some of the improvisations. By playing with the tempo (increasing and decreasing), participants expressed unrest and instability. This sentiment is supported by Bruscia (1987), who suggests that pulse gives, security, stability, predictability, and a reassurance that instinctual forces or energy will not become overwhelming or disappear. Because of the push and pull of pulse within the improvisations, there is a lack of predictability and thus a lack of security and stability.

Relationship Across Improvisations

Much like the findings in the study by Gardstrom (2003), there were intermusical and intramusical overlaps throughout all improvisations. Across improvisations, tonal elements such as major and minor tonal centers, harmony, congruent and dissonant chordal structures, chromaticism, and intervallic leaps were salient in conveying meaning.

Themes from the Post Improvisation Narrative Responses

Within the narrative reflections, the themes that emerged included: prejudice, sense of identity, impact of relationships, and responses to trauma. These themes are consistent with the current literature.

Prejudice

All participants mentioned experiences of prejudice (racism and homophobia) in their narrative reflections. Each participant acknowledged instances of homophobia within their familial systems as well as on a societal level. Meanwhile, their experiences of racism primarily existed on a societal level. These experiences are consistent with literature that highlights racism and homophobia as prominent sources of stress for Black queer men (Choi et al., 2013; Cochran, 2001; Cyrus, 2017; Drazdowski et al., 2016; Frost, 2011; Ghabrial, 2017; Grantham & Biddle, 2014; Harris, 2009). As a result of the influx of police violence towards Black folx in America, during the time of both the improvisations and member checking sessions, participants shared deep emotions related to their personal experiences of racism and to their observations of racism towards other Black individuals. These sentiments align with those of the participants from Brooms and Perry's (2016) study.

Sense of Identity

As pointed out by Jackson et al. (2020) Black queer people experience rejection, religious persecution, and pressure to conform culturally normative gender norms within the Black community. Participants addressed these concerns during their dialogues with the researcher. Some of the participants highlighted the religious scrutiny they have experienced from family members and constraints these values have put on their ability fully showcase their identities as queer men. It should be noted that with time, many of the participants have seen some improvements within these familial relationships; however, no one expressed complete satisfaction with the current state of these relationships. Due to the Black community's historical connection to religion in the United States, Black queer men experience increased rates of identity conflict and often feel the need to pick one identity over the other (Jackson et al., 2020;

Walker, & Longmire-Avital, 2013). Through these piano improvisations and discussions, many of the participants discussed their active battle against this notion of having to pick between their racial identity and their sexuality. In fact, when discussing the positive nature of their relationships with friends and chosen family, the participants unanimously had an understanding that their identities cannot be separated. This directly coincides with Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality which states that one cannot simply overlook the discrimination experienced through the intersections of marginalized identities as there are distinct differences.

Impact of Relationships

Just as we recognize the intersecting relationships of race and sexuality, we also recognize the intersecting relationships of an individual's sense of identity and their interpersonal relationships. As mentioned above, the participants, shared experiences of negative and positive relationships and how those experiences have shaped their sense of self. Participants musically and verbally expressed joy for the relationships in their lives that allow them the freedom to navigate their identities. On the opposite side of the spectrum, participants communicated feelings of tension, disconnect from negative relationships. Within their respective microsystems and mesosystems, there were mentions of not feeling good enough as Black men and feeling as those their identity as Black men was diminished because of their identities. These messages of feeling less than are reflected in various literature related to the identity formation of Black queer people (Moore, 2010; Santos & VanDaalen, 2016; Seng et al., 2012)

Responses to Trauma

During the post member checking discussions, I was not surprised to hear the participants discuss the emotional hardships they have experienced within the last few years. Because this research was conducted during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, participants were

readily able to discuss the trauma that they have endured as a result of witnessing police brutality in the media and from their personal encounters of racism and homophobia. Through using music as the medium, participants were able to clearly express their discontent with the lack of sociocultural change. Through my discussions with the participants and shared lived experience, I was able to further understand their feelings. As these conversations continued, what I noticed was theme of resilience. Specifically, participants communicated coping skills they utilize in order to protect themselves from societal trauma. Research reflects that Black queer men engage in various coping skills in order to protect from discrimination (Brown et al., 2011; Meyer, 2010; Wilson et al., 2016).

Use of Bruscia's Improvisation Assessment Profiles

This research projected heavily utilized the IAPs, an assessment tool created by a white cis-man. I feel it is important to acknowledge this fact, given that this research centers around the experiences of Black queer men. While the IAPs provide a structure to examine and analyze music, they do not account for cultural aesthetics. Because of this, it became my ethical responsibility to consider the Black aesthetics of the participants' music and take them into consideration. It is the combination of Bruscia's IAPs and my lived experience and understanding of Black aesthetics that provided a well-rounded breadth of research.

Unexpected Outcomes

Outside of the major themes, an unexpected finding from the research was the impact of the research on the participants. Following the member checking, I asked the participants to describe their experience of improvising and having their improvisations interpreted. All the participants expressed feeling grateful for the opportunity and noted that the interpretations made them feel seen. Additionally, because the member checking sessions took place several months

after the improvisation sessions, the participants discussed the ways in which they changed

following the improvisations. Some of the participants stated that they could see growth within

themselves, with one participant sharing that he started seeing a therapist to discuss issues related

to his family and his sexuality. Overall, the participants found the improvisations and discussion

to be therapeutic for them and discuss topics that they normally don't have the opportunity to

talk about in their day-to-day lives.

Impact of Researcher and Participants' Shared Identities

As the researcher and as a someone who identifies as a Black queer man, I found

personal meaning from engaging in this research. While listening and interpreting the

improvisations, I found that I shared similar experiences to the participants and thus felt

understood by them. Even though the purpose of this research to was to find meaning in the

experiences of the participants through music, I found meaning in my own experiences through

the participants' music. Through the discussions, I found myself actively feeling connected with

each of the participants which allowed me to feel safe enough to authentically present my racial

identity and sexuality without fear of judgment or discrimination. This research proved to be a

mutually beneficial process for myself and the participants and allowed for collective growth.

It is important to acknowledge the impact that shared identities had in this research.

Because of my shared identity as a Black queer man, I was able to connect with the participants

in a way that allowed for mutual trust. To an extent, I understood the experiences that

participants shared with me and in some cases I had experienced some of the same conflicts

within my own social systems. During the member checking sessions, I remember feeling a

sense of ease in my conversations with each participant. At several points, it felt as though I were

talking to old friends that I had known for years. The level of comfort and authenticity

experienced between myself and the participants was one that I believe could only have existed

because of our shared identities. Through these conversations, the participants were able to

express their pain, sadness, and joy without inhibition because they knew that I understood them.

I, too, was able to share parts of my narrative with them because of this shared bond. Had I been

white and/or heterosexual, this trusting exchange of intimate information may not have occurred

and thus the outcomes of this research may not have been the same. Because of my identity, I

took special care to ensure that this research was designed with the participants in mind and

understood them as multifaceted individuals. This research was co-created and could not have

existed without our collective voices.

Limitations

Due to COVID-19 restrictions this research was conducted virtually in order to ensure the

safety of the participants and the researcher. Originally, this research was to have the researcher

and the participants meet in-person for the piano improvisations. Because the improvisations

were conducted virtually, this required each participant to have access to their own pianos thus

potentially limiting who could participate. Additionally, because each participant used their own

piano the research had no control over whether participants had access to the same piano

features.

The initial call for participants was put out on various Facebook groups, on my personal

Facebook account, and some participants were referred to me via my Facebook friends. Because

of this referral system, the majority of the participants were all around my age and lived in the

same state as me. This, plus the specificity of participant requirements (i.e., Black queer

cisgender men), resulted in a homogenous participant pool.

As it pertains to the music analysis, I believe that my choice to utilize Bruscia's IAPs is only way that the analysis could have been approached. Perhaps another way of approaching this research could have been to come to the music analysis being informed by scholars of Black music aesthetics. Due to my lived experience as a Black person, I have situated knowledge around Black musical aesthetics that influenced this research; however, taking a more intentional look at the Black aesthetics of the participants' improvisations may have resulted in a more well-rounded musical analysis that is not solely centered around western classical music.

While I think that coming from the same standpoint allowed me a certain perspective, it also left room for inherent biases and projections. I acknowledge that my own lived experience as a Black queer man impacted my interpretations of the participant's improvisation. While some people may perceive this as a limitation, I believe it added perspective to this research and truly embodied the idea of "for us by us". This begs the question - Could this research have been conducted by someone whose lived experiences are different from those of the participants?

Future Research

Future research could explore whether or not this research could be replicated by music therapists whose social locations differ from the participants to determine whether the same conclusions can be drawn or whether this type of research is most effective when the participants and music therapist share similar identities. Perhaps future research could compare interpretations of people of different sociocultural locations who analyzed the same set of improvisations. Within the context of analytical music therapy and family systems music therapy, research could be conducted to examine how to improve interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships related to racial identity and sexuality through improvisation. Lastly, it would be

interesting to expand this research to analyze the experiences of other minoritized individuals aside form just Black queer men.

Implications for Music Therapy Practice

Music improvisation can reflect how people, specifically minoritized people experience themselves within the world; it provides them space for self-expression and self-exploration. It is crucial for music therapy students and music therapists to gain a better understanding of the experiences of minoritized folx as these are often the individuals that we serve. The field of music therapy has a responsibility to understand the impacts of societal trauma and prejudice as they related to the specifics of intersecting identities such as race and sexuality. The narratives of Black queer men, like many other minoritized folx, have yet to be attended to by the music therapy profession, which is rooted in oppressive systems (Norris, 2020a; Norris, 2020b).

The use of music improvisation within sessions, as a means to understand the narratives of minoritized voices, may provide opportunities for rich meaningful experiences of expressing the intersections of one's racial identity and sexuality. Intentionally creating space for these voices to be heard broadens the possibilities for mutual growth between the client and the music therapist.

Finally, I assert that this research highlights the importance of diversifying the field of music therapy. Currently, the music therapy profession is comprised primarily of white cisgender, nondisabled, neurotypical, heterosexual women. This homogeneity is largely a result of the formal music training in western classical music that is needed to become a music therapist. While there are Black and non-Black people of color who possess strong musical skills, they are often denied access to music therapy programs because they don't have training that is rooted in white Eurocentric values. This form of gatekeeping contributes to the

professions lack of diversity and thus lack of research that centers the narratives of these voices.

It is my hope that this research, in combination with current and future research from non-

dominant perspectives, will encourage discourse around music therapy training.

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Appendix A

IAP Analysis of Improvisations
(Note: These improvisations can be heard online at https://bit.ly/3xICuwP)

Improvisers: Jaleel

Title: Family   Length: 0:53

Instrumentation: Piano

Overall Impressions (How does it feel emotionally/relationally?): Outward appearance of stability w/ moments of tension, Strong beginning that slowly unravels/comes undone

Form: Free form

Most Salient Elements: Tonal, Texture, Phrasing

Elements With Most Tension: Tonal

SECTION   1 (0:00 – 0:22)   2 (0:23 – 0:53)

Rhythmic Elements:
- There is no clear sense of meter/timing
- Rhythm and tempo are fluid not fixed

Timbre:
- Not salient
- Constant throughout

Volume:
- Overall volume is static
- Begins with more volume and reduces over time towards the end
- Volume matches the phrasing

Phrasing:
- Length of phrases is variable
- SECTION 2: Beginning imitates Section briefly and then devolves
- Phrasing elements are similar
  - Beginning of both sections started with big open chords before transition into descending harmonies/melodies

Texture:
- SECTION 1: Open chords; hands further apart
- SECTION 2: Chords are closer together, hands closer together
- Hands primarily in the middle range of the keyboard, but full of range of keyboard is explored
- Chordal harmony is the main focus on the piece, with brief melodic phrases

Tonal Elements:

- SECTION 1: Primarily major chords with brief tonal shift (two passing diminished chords) before returning back to major
- SECTION 2: Continues where Section 1 leaves off tonally, but then transitions from focusing on harmony to single melody
- SECTION 2: Two descending chromatic lines running parallel to one another, briefly lacking a tonal center
- Overall piece feels rooted in a tonal center
- SECTION 1: The melodic line ascends up the mid-range of the piano before a dropping down to low range

Any elements incongruent?

- SECTION 2: Notes are legato (connected), but tonally dissonant
- SECTION 2: Notes at the end regain stability and resolution

What is being communicated about their understanding as a Black queer male in their family? The use of an overall major tonality and functional harmony perhaps reflects that Jaleel's relationship with his family is generally stable. Throughout the piece there is use of space, as evidenced by open major chords and octaves intervals, which could indicate that Jaleel share commonalities with his family; however, there's still distance and space between them. Or perhaps that distance and space could be a separate of part of himself. Perhaps the chromatic octave intervals represent tension between Jaleel's racial identity and sexuality within his family. The descending block chords that shift tonalities may represent Jaleel questioning how he fits within his family; however, these chords resolve in a major chord at the end so perhaps Jaleel has since integrated his identity as a Black queer man in his family.

Improvisers: Jaleel

Title: Friends   Length: 0:57

Instrumentation: Piano

Overall Impressions (How does it feel emotionally/relationally?): Generally positive, multi-faceted/complex, combination of ease and tension, feeling somewhat dreamlike

Form: Free form

Most Salient Elements: Tonal, Texture

Elements with Most Tension: Phrasing, Tonal

SECTION   1 (0:00 – 0:16)   2 (0:17 – 0:43)   3 (0:44 – 0:57)

Rhythmic Elements:
- No clear sense of meter/timing
- Rhythm and tempo are fluid not fixed
- Aleatoric
- At times each section has brief moments of sticking to a structured tempo

Timbre:
- Constant throughout

Volume:
- Overall volume is static

Phrasing:
- Phrase lengths are variable
- SECTIONS 1 & 2: Utilize ornamental ascending glissandi/flourishes and blocked chords
- Transitions between SECTION 1 & SECTION 2 feels sudden and abrupt
- Transition from SECTION 1 to SECTION 2 marks a change in mood (joyful → tension/concern)

Texture:
- SECTION 1: Glissandi/flourishes utilize full range of the piano (start and end on same note)
- SECTION 1: Blocked chords are open
- SECTION 2: Only section to use descending lines in octaves
- SECTION 2: Open phrase utilizing close intervals (M2 and M3) followed by use of octaves (together and ascending)
- SECTION 3: Continued use of octaves
- Octaves salient throughout

Tonal Elements:
- Overall piece is stable, with moments of dissonance and instability that resolve back to triadic
- Overall emphasizes triads in several keys

- Tonal areas shift in quartal, quintal, and chromatic relationships
- Not generally diatonic, several modulations

Any elements incongruent?

What is being communicated about their understanding self as a Black queer male within their friend group?

The opening major arpeggiated chords that span several octaves followed by blocked chords that emphasize a major tonality may reflect that Jaleel has had positive experiences within his friend group. The succession of M2, and M3 intervals, as well as the octave intervals that move chromatically, perhaps reflect that while his relationships are generally positive may have experienced moments discomfort of tension that center around his identity. This potential tension can be further explained by the descending chromatic chords that later follow. The ascending glissandi that emphasize major 7th chords may indicate that there's a sense of ease and tenderness in his relationship with his friends. Perhaps this ease means that he's comfortable with showing all aspects of his identity. The octave leaps used at the end that ascend, before dropping down to the low range of piano, may convey that there's high and lows within his friendships.

Improvisers: Jaleel

Title: Country   Length: 1:11

Instrumentation: Piano

Overall Impressions (How does it feel emotionally/relationally?): Anxious and uneasy, seems to be searching for stability, moments where there's confidence only to be thrust back into unease

Form: Free form

Most Salient Elements: Texture, Tonal

Elements with Most Tension: Texture, Tonal

SECTION   1 (0:00 – 0:25) 2 (0:26 – 0:40   3 (0:41 – 1:11)

Rhythmic Elements:
- SECTION 2: Brief motif of short vs. long notes
- Overall, no salient rhythmic elements

Timbre:
- Overall contrast of soft and violent moments
- Moments when the sustain pedal is use
- Moments when the timbre sounds more muted
- SECTION 1 and SECTION 2: Notes generally are more connected to one another
- SECTION 3: Notes aren't connected and uses of wide leaps

Volume:
- SECTION 1 and SECTION 3: Volume is variable and inconsistent
- SECTION 2: Volume consistently stays around a mezzo piano/piano

Phrasing:
- Phrases/sections are not of equal length
- Melodic phrasing generally has downward motion
- SECTION 1: One instance of prolonged upward melodic motion

Texture:
- Homophonic
- Moves rapidly from dense to thin textures
- SECTION 1: Generally dense texture, with one instance of thin texture towards the end
- SECTION 2: Thin texture dominants with dense texture towards the end
- SECTION 3: Primarily thin texture
- Entire range of the keyboard is explored
- SECTIONS 1 & 2: Registers changes are more fluid and connected
- SECTION 3: Drastic and abrupt changes in register, alternating between extreme low and high ranges

Tonal Elements:
- Parallel triadic harmony that switches between major, minor, and chromatic

- Chromatic feels salient
- No diatonic tonal center
- SECTION 3: A appears to be a grounding tonal area
- SECTION 3: C is repeated in the high register creating a m3 interval with A

Any elements incongruent?

- Use of close triads chords, that tonally sound dissonant

What do I feel like is being communicated about the understand themselves as a Black queer male in society?

The use of descending chromatic chords that end with low bass notes convey a feeling of falling or sinking. Perhaps this means the Jaleel is sinking into feelings of stress and tension brought on by society. Low octave bass notes that contrast higher octave notes create a sense of unrest and unease. This could mean that Jaleel feel a sense of unease navigating society as a Black queer man. The overall piece generally utilizes the lower range of the piano, which makes the music feel weighted and heavy. Maybe Jaleel feels as though he's experiences as a Black queer man in society come with a heavy weight that he feels he has to carry. There are moments where there is a contrast between piano ranges (upper range and lower range). Perhaps this is a representation of Deshaun vs. society, where society is conveyed through the lower range of the piano and Deshaun is represented through the higher range. These opposite ends of the piano are never played together, which is signify that there's disintegration. Maybe Deshaun feels like his identity isn't able to integrate into societal systems.

Improvisers: Donovan

Title: Family   Length: 1:14

Instrumentation: Piano/Keyboard

Overall Impressions (How does it feel emotionally/relationally?): Melancholic and somber

Form: ABA'

Most Salient Elements: Tonal, Rhythmic

Elements With Most Tension: Tonal *very little moments of tension*

SECTION   1 (0:00 – 0:33)2 (0:34 – 0:54)3 (0:55 – 1:14)

Rhythmic Elements:
- Generally consistent meter (4/4, 65 bpm)
- Rubato is used throughout
- Same rhythmic motif used the entire time (1+2+3 4 1)
- Rhythmically simple

Timbre:
- Constant throughout

Volume:
- Overall volume is static

Phrasing:
- Phrases are clearly formed and transition smoothly from one to the next
- Use of brief pauses before beginning the next phrase

Texture:
- Thin texture throughout
- Monophonic throughout

Tonal Elements:
- Centers around E minor; diatonic
- Repetitive motif of ascending arpeggiation that emphasizes chords
- Brief moments where m2s are utilized that create glimpses of tension
- Tonally stable
- Descending bass line (E, D, C, B) contrasts with ascending melody
- Moments where bass notes are accented
- Notes stay in the mid-range of the piano the entire piece

Any elements incongruent?

What is being communicated about their understanding of self, as a Black queer male within their family?

- The repetitiveness of the arpeggiated accompaniment, descending bass line, chordal progression, and static volume creates a sense of routine and monotony. Perhaps Donovan feels as though he is stuck in a monotonous routine within his family. The general minor tonality utilized provides tonal stability, while also creating a sense of somberness. This may reflect both a sense of stability that Donovan feels within his family and a sense of sadness that he may experience. Perhaps Donovan is sad that he can't be his authentic self around his family. The use of m2's creates fleeting moments of tension. Perhaps this represents moments where Donovan has attempted to showcase his identities within his family, only to be met with discomfort. The piece is limited to the mid-range of the piano. Perhaps Donovan feels as though he ability to live authentically as a Black queer man is limited within his family.

Improvisers: Donovan

Title: Friends   Length: 1:26

Instrumentation: Piano/Keyboard

Overall Impressions (How does it feel emotionally/relationally?): Tender and loving

Form: Through-composed

Most Salient Elements: Tonal, Rhythmic

Elements With Most Tension: Tonal

SECTION   1 (0:00-0:29)   2 (0:30-0:51)   3 (0:52-1:26)

Rhythmic Elements:
- Unclear sense of timing, meter generally feels like 4/4
- Rubato used a lot throughout
- Rhythmically simple
- Repetitive rhythmic motif (1+2+3 4 1)

Timbre:
- Timbre remains constant

Volume:
- Volume is static throughout

Phrasing:
- Phrasing is inconsistent
- Irregular phrase lengths
- SECTION 2: Use of silence and musical pauses make phrasing feel inconsistent

Texture:
- Thin texture throughout
- Monophonic throughout

Tonal Elements:
- Frequently uses dyads throughout that move in the same direction
- Melody is support by sustained bass line notes
- Tonally stable
- Generally, centers around E minor and go to the relative major key (G major)
- Utilizes ascending arpeggiations that outline major and minor triads
- Use of space/brief silence in between phrases
- SECTION 1: Tonally repetitive
- SECTION 2: Feels similar to SECTION 1
- SECTION 3: Break away from the same tonal repetition as SECTIONS 1 and 2 by utilizing relative major key
- Notes occur primarily in the mid-range of the keyboard.

Any elements incongruent?

        N/A

What is being communicated about their understanding of self, as a Black queer male within their friend group?

- The piece's combination of the descending bass line, use of sustain pedal, the use of minor and majority tonalities, and melody create a feeling of tenderness. Perhaps Donovan has felt a sense of tenderness from his friends and generally feels supported. The piece uses major intervals, which may represent his racial identity and sexuality. Perhaps his identities are positively integrated into his friend group. While the first section of the piece is repetitive, the following sections break away from that repetitiveness melodically. Perhaps this means that Donovan feels more comfortable exploring and expressing his identities with his friends.

Improvisers: Donovan

Title: Society   Length: 0:33

Instrumentation: Piano/Keyboard

Overall Impressions (How does it feel emotionally/relationally?): Calm, reflective, and predictable.

Form: Through-composed

Most Salient Elements: Tonal, Rhythmic

Elements With Most Tension: Tonal

SECTION   1   2   3   4

Rhythmic Elements:
- Rhythm is repetitive and predictable
- Use of simple rhythm (1+ 2 3 4)
- Rhythm seems to be motivic
- Generally metered (about 58 bpm)

Timbre:
- Timbre is static throughout

Volume:
- Volume is static throughout

Phrasing:
- Roughly even phrases

Texture:
- Monophonic
- Thin texture

Tonal Elements:
- Tonally center seems to be "A"
- Bass notes utilize 1st and 5th (Do/So) scale degrees
- One singular moment of tension (diminished chord) at the beginning
- Use of suspensions throughout that carry into one another
- Use of pedal creates overtones
- Only the mid-range of the piano is utilized

Any elements incongruent?
- Use of one diminished chord that doesn't fit with the overall tone of the piece

What is being communicated about their understanding of self, as a Black queer male in society?
- The use of cluster chords and unresolved suspensions create tension. Perhaps this means Donovan experiences tension within society. The repetitive nature of the 1+ 2 3 rhythm in the ascending arpeggiation creates this feeling of movement; however, it doesn't feel

like the piece is going anywhere. Perhaps Donovan is moving through society, but not making any progress. The use of the sustain pedal with cluster chords create a series of overtones that sit on top of the piece almost like a fog. Perhaps Donovan feels lost in a haze within society.

Improvisers: Tyrone

Title: Family   Length: 2:57

Instrumentation: Piano

Overall Impressions (How does it feel emotionally/relationally?): Generally positive and almost innocent w/ moments of tension. Very structured

Form: Through-Composed

Most Salient Elements: Tonal

Elements With Most Tension: Tonal

SECTION 1: (0:00 – 0:25) 2: (0:26 – 0:39) 3: (0:40 – 1:07) 4: (1:08 – 1:31) 5: (1:32 – 2:03) 6: (2:04 – 2:41) 7: (2:42 – 2:57)

Rhythmic Elements:
- SECTION 5: Distinct time signature difference; 6/8 (Compound meter)
- Pulse versus no pulse
- Harmony groupings of 3 feel salient
- SECTION 1: Fluid tempo, use of rubato
- SECTION 3: Fluid tempo, with moments of a structured pulse
- SECTION 4: Appears to be metered (2/4)
- SECTION 5: Remains metered in 2/4, using primarily half notes, which create a bell tone effect
- SECTION 6: 4/4 meter using some rubato

Timbre:
- Generally, Tyrone plays with a lightness
  - Because of this the bass note interjections feel more intentional and contrasting
- SECTION 3: Pedal is used to create dense muddied effect in the low range of the piano

Volume:
- Generally, volume is static, staying around mezzo piano/mezzo forte

Phrasing:
- SECTION 1: Use of rubato, not strictly in time
- Generally, transitions between sections feel fluid and smooth
  - Typically, a low piano sound signifies an upcoming transition
- Continuously alternates from use of rubato to structured pulse
- SECTION 1: Use of rubato and lullaby melody creates feeling of tenderness

Texture:
- Use of dense closed chords harmonies
- Aside from occasional outliers, piece stays mainly in the mid-range of the piano
- SECTION 4: monophonic with a thin texture and no supporting harmonies
- SECTION 5: Close triadic harmonies in the upper register

Tonal Elements:
- SECTION 1: Tonally stable and consonant, centering around D major
- SECTION 1: Melodic line is "Lullaby and Goodnight" melody
- SECTION 2: Seems to serve as a transition, shifting tonality (major → minor)
- SECTION 3: Whole tone scale is playing in the low end of the piano
- SECTION 3: Succession of P4 intervals in the mid/upper range of the piano immediately followed by sustained bass note (Db)
- SECTION 3: No sense of a tonal center
- SECTION 4: Use of scales that shift tonal centers (D → G → A)
- SECTION 4: A major scale is interrupted by return of Db bass note, but resumes shortly after to finish the section
- SECTION 5: No use of a melodic line
- SECTION 5: Half note triadic chords feel triumphant, but are interrupted again but the Db bass note
- SECTION 5: Tonally stable
- SECTION 6: Chords seems to center around A major w/ a minor tonality shift that ends with a low bass note
- SECTION 7: Return of SECTION 4 motive (i.e. D major scale)

Any elements incongruent?
- Low bass note that interjects throughout the piece

What do I feel like is being communicated about how their sense of self as a Black queer man within their family?
- I would gesture that Tyrone's identity as a Black queer man within his family is complex, as evidenced by the varied time signatures, tonality shifts used throughout. I would guess that growing up, Tyrone was provided love and care from his family, as evidenced by the lullaby and goodnight motif used at the beginning, the opening major tonality, and opening tonal stability, but then perhaps as he started coming into his identity as queer there was some tension. This tension can be seen in the low bass note that interjects throughout the piece. Due to this tension, I think Tyrone tried to adapt and fit within the structure and limits that he felt was placed upon him, as evidenced by the use of the scale patterns that are utilized throughout. The middle of the piece utilizes upper register major chords that are then interjected by a low bass note. This could mean that Tyrone began allowing himself to explore his identities, which continued to create tension within his family. Currently, I would guess Tyrone isolates his queer identity from his family and plays the structured role he feels he has to around them, as evidenced by the minor tonality shift that concludes with a low bass note and is followed by the return of the scale pattern.

Improvisers: Tyrone

Title: Friends   Length: 2:00

Instrumentation: Piano/Keyboard

Overall Impressions (How does it feel emotionally/relationally?): Joyful & celebratory that transitions into tenderness, supportive, and reflexive/reminiscent

Form: Through-composed

Most Salient Elements: Rhythm, Tonal

Elements With Most Tension: Tonal

SECTION   1: (0:00 – 0:32)   2 (0:32 – 1:03)3 (1:04 – 1:43)4 (1:44 – 2:00)

Rhythmic Elements:
- SECTION 1: Highly rhythmic and syncopated, 4/4 about 100 bpm
- SECTION 2: Contrasting tempo from SECTION 1
- SECTION 2: Utilizes rubato, not strictly metered, no sense of time signature during the first half of the section
- SECTION 2: Second half of the section becomes metered in 6/8
- SECTIONS 2 - 4: focus shifts from the rhythm to the harmony
- SECTIONS 3 - 4: Non-metered, liberties taken with the tempo, rubato utilized

Timbre:
- Timbre static throughout

Volume:
- Volume level is static throughout

Phrasing:
- SECTION 1: Staccato
- SECTION 2 - 4: Very legato & connected
- Transitions between sections are fluid and thoughtful

Texture:
- SECTION 1: Homophonic
- SECTION 2- 4: Dense texture (Major 7th chords), homophonic, w/ close chords
- Mid and upper range of the piano used throughout with occasionally use of low bass notes

Tonal Elements:
- SECTION 1: Melodic → Harmonic (i.e. monophonic → homophonic)
- SECTION 1: Tonally stable, centers around D major
- SECTION 2: Again, tonally stable and diatonic, still using D as the tonal center w/ functional harmonies
- SECTION 2: Arpeggiation that outlines major triads
- SECTIONS 3 - 4: Continued use of diatonic and functional harmony
- General use of 7th chords throughout

- Use of chromatic chords throughout to create moments of tension and release
- Overall stable tonality that uses major tonality

Any elements incongruent?

- N/A

What do I feel like is being communicated about their understanding of self, as a Black queer male within their friend group?

- Tyrone's identities seem to be celebrated and uplifted by his friends, as evidenced in the use of the ascending arpeggiated major chords. My guess is that he generally feels supported by his friends, as reflected in major tonality and the functional harmonic chords that accompany the melodic lines and the tonal grounding in D major throughout the piece. The use of major 7th chords and dense homophonic texture creates a feeling of tenderness and reflexivity. Perhaps Tyrone's friend group provides a tenderness that gives him room to reflect on his identities authentically. The use of legato to connect notes throughout the piece, perhaps indicates that Tyrone feels connected to his friends. I would gesture that Tyrone may feel as though he has the freedom to express his, as indicated by the fluid and thoughtful nature of the musical transitions and the use of rubato, non-strict meter. There are moments of tension and release that are created by the chromatic chord. This tension may reflect that not of Tyrone's friendships are perfect, despite the overall positive associations with his friend group.

Improvisers: Tyrone

Title: Country   Length: 2:00

Instrumentation: Piano/Keyboard

Overall Impressions (How does it feel emotionally/relationally?): Scary, anxiety-inducing, filled with sadness and tension

Form: Through-composed

Most Salient Elements: Tonal, Rhythm

Elements With Most Tension: Tonal

SECTION   1 (0:00 – 0:21)   2 (0:22 – 0:49)   3 (0:50 – 1:29)   4 (1:30 – 2:00)

Rhythmic Elements:
- SECTION 1: Unmetered and no sense of pulse
- SECTION 2: Also unmetered and out of time
- SECTION 3: Slight sense of meter; however, heavy use of rubato
- SECTION 1: Cluster chords are accented, staccato and separated
- Following SECTION 1, notes become more connected and legato
- Generally, tempo is fluid, increasing and decreasing to create tension

Timbre:
- Timbre is static throughout

Volume:
- SECTION 1 is the loudest section (forte)
- Following SECTION 1, there a drop in volume to about mezzo forte which carries through the rest of the piece

Phrasing:
- Clearly formed sections
- Phrases are irregular
- Brief pauses are taken in between sections

Texture:
- Texture has moments of density and thinness
- Dense texture bookends the piece (cluster chords)
- Full range of the keyboard is explored

Tonal Elements:
- SECTION 1: Use of clusters chords in both the low and high register, unstable with no tonal center
- SECTION 2: Monophonic, solo melody
- SECTION 3: Tonally stable, minor tonality
- SECTION 4: Ascending arpeggiated diminished chords utilized, followed by connected cluster chords

- SECTION 4: Low range tremolos utilized followed by blocked cluster chords
- SECTION 2: Descending and ascending intervallic leaps (Ascending: m6, M6, tritone; Descending: A4)
- SECTION 2: Tonally centered around D minor

Any elements incongruent?

What do I feel like is being communicated about their experience as a Black queer male in society?

- Tyrone's experience as a Black queer man in society seems to be one filled with conflict and sadness. This is perhaps reflected in the use of minor tonality times and cluster chords in both high and low registers of the piano. My guess is that Tyrone has experienced societal conflict in abrupt explicit ways and subtle implicit ways. Perhaps Tyrone is saddened by the way in which society has instilled fear and anxiety within the cultural circles that he inhabits. Musically these feelings of fear and anxiety are expressed in the use of ascending arpeggiated diminished chords, cluster chords, the low register tremolos and descending and ascending tritone, m6, and M6 intervals. Additionally, the sense of anxiety is reflected in the tempo fluctuations, where the increase and decrease in tempo is used to create tension. The piece has a thin monophonic texture throughout the middle of the piece, with moments were there's only a melody. Perhaps this reflects feelings of having no support from society when it comes to Tyrone's expression of his identities.

Improvisers: Daniel

Title: Family   Length: 0:49

Instrumentation: Piano/Keyboard

Overall Impressions (How does it feel emotionally/relationally?): Curious & exploratory, repetitive

Form: Through-composed

Most Salient Elements: Tonal

Elements With Most Tension: Tonal

SECTION   1(0:00 – 0:13)   2 (0:14 – 0:49)

Rhythmic Elements:
- No sense of pulse/meter
- Piece

Timbre:
- Timbre is static throughout

Volume:
- Volume is static, staying at about a mezzo-forte/forte

Phrasing:
- Irregular phrases

Texture:
- Thin texture throughout
- Hands are playing separately throughout the first half of the piece
- Hands play together for the last 18 seconds of the piece
- SECTION 2: Utilizes major chordal harmonies with and without support low bass notes
- Generally, stays in the mid-range of the piano

Tonal Elements:
- SECTION 2: Major triad chords are repeated CM to FM (I – IV)
- SECTION 2: Beginning of section utilizes single note arpeggiation that outlines C major triad
- SECTION 1: Utilizes notes that don't fall within the key of F
- Centers around F as a tonal center in SECTION 1 but seems to change to C in SECTION 2

Any elements incongruent?
- SECTION 1: Melodic line notes that fall out of the C major tonality

What do I feel like is being communicated about their understanding of self, as a Black queer male within their family?
- The opening phrase of the piece centers around F major; however, the last note of the phrase ends on a B natural. Given that the opening phrase is ascending and ends on a

non-chord tone, it gives the notion that something is being questioned. Perhaps this reflects that Daniel may be questioning how his authentic self fits within his family. Additionally, as the listener, I struggled determining whether the tonal center was F or C. Maybe this parallels a struggle that Daniel is having, when it comes to his identity as a Black queer man in his family. The use of repeated I IV major triad chords may mean that Daniel is struggling to make progress in his family and make constantly feel like he's repeating himself frequently. This repetition may also mean that Daniel goes through the motions within his family, performing in a way that is congruent with his family dynamic even though it may not represent who he authentically is.

Improvisers: Daniel

Title: Friends   Length: 0:34

Instrumentation: Piano/Keyboard

Overall Impressions (How does it feel emotionally/relationally?): Bright, joyful, light-hearted & playful

Form: Through-composed

Most Salient Elements: Tonal

Elements With Most Tension: N/A

SECTION: 1 (0:00 – 0:06)   2 (0:07 – 0:18)   3 (0:19 – 0:26)   4 (0:27 – 0:34)

Rhythmic Elements:
- SECTION 1 & 2: Fit within a 2/4 meter at around 140 bpm
- After the SECTION 2, the remainder of the piece doesn't appear to be metered
- Heavy use of staccato throughout the piece

Timbre:
- Timbre is static throughout

Volume:
- Volume is static throughout

Phrasing:
- Phrasing is irregular
- Phrase lengths are even

Texture:
- Thin texture
- Monophonic

Tonal Elements:
- Tonally stable for the entire piece
- Piece is centered around the key of C major
- Range of the notes generally stay in the upper end of the piano
- No harmonies, occasional use of major intervals that are consonant
- Melodic line generally uses step wise motion, with occasionally ascending leaps that outline major triads
- Melodic line has one large descending octave leap
- Melodic line utilizes repeated notes throughout the piece

Any elements incongruent?
- Piece is overall congruent

What do I feel like is being communicated about their understanding of self, as a Black queer male within their friend group?

- Given that piece is in a major key utilizes that upper range of the piano, it may mean that Daniel's experience within his friend group is generally positive and stable. The use of staccato throughout the piece creates a feeling of playfulness. Perhaps Daniel is able to freely play and explore within the borders of his identity, when around his friends. Daniel utilizes ascending and descending octave intervals towards the end of the piece. This could reflect that there are shared commonalities amongst he and his friends, which is further support by the overall congruency and stability of the piece.

Improvisers: Daniel

Title: Country   Length: 0:33

Instrumentation: Piano/Keyboard

Overall Impressions (How does it feel emotionally/relationally?): Discomfort, eerie & anxiety-ridden, disorganized

Form: Through-composed

Most Salient Elements: Tonal

Elements With Most Tension: Tonal

SECTION: 1 (0:00 – 0:10)   2 (0:12 – 0:18)   3 (0:19 – 0:33)

Rhythmic Elements:
- SECTION 1: Appears to be metered (2/4), with a tempo of about 60 bpm
- After SECTION 1 the piece doesn't follow a set tempo or meter
- Tremolos used throughout are uneven

Timbre:
- Timbre is unchanging

Volume:
- Volume is static and stays at a forte throughout

Phrasing:
- Phrases are irregular and uneven
- Brief pauses are taken in between phrases

Texture:
- Dense, polyphonic texture
- SECTION 3: High-range tremolos disappear, while low range tremolos continue

Tonal Elements:
- No sense of tonal stability
- No sense of tonal center
- Dissonant throughout the entire piece
- No use of a melodic line
- Opposite ends of the piano are being utilized (low-range and high-range)
- SECTION 1: utilizes clearly defined cluster chords
- SECTIONS 2 & 3: Utilize tremolos
- Tremolos are generally inconsistent in their duration, occasionally stopping and starting again

Any elements incongruent?
- N/A

What do I feel like is being communicated about their understanding of self, as a Black queer male within society?

- The use of low cluster bass notes played at a forte dynamic creates a muddied sound that overpowers the upper range tremolos. Perhaps Daniel feels overpowered by society. I wonder if Daniel's existence as a Black queer man in combination with society creates tension and instability, as evidenced by the lack of a tonal center and tonal stability in the piece. The brief pauses within in the music seem to be used to get quick relief from the cacophony of sound. Maybe Daniel tries to find ways to get relief from what he experiences within society.

Improvisers: Deshaun

Title: Family   Length: 1:23

Instrumentation: Piano/Keyboard

Overall Impressions (How does it feel emotionally/relationally?): Uneasy, false sense of security, resolution that is always followed by tension

Form: Through-composed

Most Salient Elements: Tonal

Elements With Most Tension: Tonal

SECTION   1 (0:00 – 0:36)   2 (0:37 – 1:03)   3 (1:04 - 1:11)   4 (1:12 – 1:23)

Rhythmic Elements:
- Free meter
- Rubato heavily used throughout
- Tempo is fluid

Timbre:
- Timbre remains static throughout

Volume:
- Volume is static throughout (mezzo piano)

Phrasing:
- Phrasing is irregular
- Lingering sustained notes used as transitions into new phrases

Texture:
- Dense texture
- Pedal used to create overtones throughout the piece

Tonal Elements:
- SECTION 1: Opens with descending intervals (A4, M6, A4)
- General melody ascends and descends in step wise motion
- No big leaps or jumps in the melody
- Centers around A, possibly A Locrian mode with a raised 6th (F#)
- Melody and harmony share equal importance
- A4 and M6 intervals occur throughout
- Melody is often feels scalular, outlining arpeggiated diminished/augmented chords
- Melody and harmony create short-lived moments of resolution that are immediately followed by diminished and augmented chords

Any elements incongruent?
- The jazz style of playing against the heavy use of diminished/augmented chords, intervals, feel conflicting

What do I feel like is being communicated about their experience of self, as a Black queer male in their family?

- It feels as though Deshaun's experience of self, within his family, is complicated, as evidenced by the use of the A Locrian mode throughout the piece. Given that the opening piece opens with A4 and M6 intervals, I gesture that perhaps Deshaun feels a sense of unease within his family. This feeling of unease/uncertainty is seen throughout the piece through the use of the sustain pedal to create augmented, minor, diminished overtones. The use of sustained notes in the left-hand accompaniment in conjunction with the upper register legato melody, suggest aspects within Deshaun's experience of family that are both tender and sad. The use of rubato and non-strict meter throughout create moments of tenon and release; however, the resolutions are quickly followed by diminished and augmented chords. Perhaps this reflects how Deshaun experiences his identity within his family; constant moments of tension that never fully resolve in ways that feel positive.

Improvisers: Deshaun

Title: Friends   Length: 3:47

Instrumentation: Piano/Keyboard

Overall Impressions (How does it feel emotionally/relationally?): Uplifting, peaceful, hopeful, gentle

Form: Through-composed

Most Salient Elements: Rhythm, Tonal

Elements With Most Tension: Tonal

SECTION   1 (0:00 – 1:15)2 (1:16 – 1:50)3 (1:51 – 2:14)4 (2:15 – 2:48)5 (2:49 – 3:47)

Rhythmic Elements:
- SECTION 1: Pulsed with moments of rubato (bpm goes from about 95 bpm then drops to about 85 bpm)
- SECTION 1: Metered (4/4)
- SECTION 1: Driving dotted eighth rhythm in the beginning then gradually disappears when the tempo changes
- SECTION 2: Contrasts SECTION 1; heavy use of rubato
- SECTION 2: Metered (4/4) with no strict adherence to a tempo
- SECTION 3: Metered (4/4), pulsed, with a tempo around 88 bpm
- SECTION 4: Metered (4/4), pulsed, some rubato utilized
- SECTION 5: Similar to SECTION 1, tempo slows down, use of rubato til the end

Timbre:
- Timbre remains the same throughout

Volume:
- SECTION 1: Volume is static throughout (mezzo forte)
- SECTION 2: Volume is static throughout (mezzo forte)
- SECTION 3: Volume increases from a mezzo forte to a forte
- SECTION 4: Volume static (mezzo forte)
- SECTION 5: Volume is static
- SECTION 6: Volume is static

Phrasing:
- SECTION 1: Use of 4-bar phrases
- SECTION 1: Well-defined cadence points
- SECTION 2: Irregular phrasing
- SECTION 3: 4-bar phrasing returns
- SECTION 4: 4-bar phrasing continues
- SECTION 5: 4-bar phrasing continues
- Transitions between sections of planned structured

Texture:
- SECTION 1: Rich harmonic texture lead by melodic line
- SECTION 1: Tonal density, use of stepwise non-chord tones in the accompaniment
- SECTION 2: Texture becomes thinner, accompaniment less busy (slower movement)
- SECTION 3: Texture density increases, homophony
- SECTION 4: Dense homophonic texture
- SECTION 5: Similar to SECTION 1, texture begins thin out towards the end
- Upper range of the piano is heavily used; however, entire range of the piano explored throughout

Tonal Elements:
- SECTION 1: Tonally stable, primarily centered around C, with a tonal change to Db, major
- SECTION 1: Use of repeated C note throughout
- SECTION 1: Melody uses stepwise motion an arpeggiation, no huge leaps, descending and ascending lines
- SECTION 1: Active accompaniment with simple melody on top
- SECTION 2: Tonally stable, primarily centered around Ab
- SECTION 2: Simple melody, stepwise, descending and ascending lines
- SECTION 2: Use of pedal point note (Db), while melody is descending
- SECTION 2: Harmonic resolution is delayed and expanded before resolving
- SECTION 3: Seems to center around Ab
- SECTION 3: Use of stepwise octave intervals
- SECTION 3: Melody remains simple. No major leaps or jumps
- SECTION 4: Use of ascending blocked chords that help outline the melody
- SECTION 4: Use of fast ascending melody flourish (utilized throughout)
- SECTION 4: Use of brief musical pauses
- SECTION 4: Continues cycles of tension and resolution (delayed resolutions emphasizing dominant harmony and tension)
- SECTION 4: Db tonal center
- SECTION 5: Tonal center returns to C
- SECTION 5: Elements are similar to SECTION 1, as the draws towards the conclusion arpeggiation in used
- Major tonality throughout the entirety of the piece
- Functional harmony throughout

Any elements incongruent?
- Overall use of tension and release used seems to pair unexpectedly with generally major tonality

What do I feel like is being communicated about their understanding of self, as a Black queer male in their friend group?
- The opening tempo and repeated driving dotted eighths notes lead me to believe that perhaps Deshaun's friendships are a driving force in his life. Major tonality of the piece suggests that Deshaun experiences of self has been generally positive. Perhaps Deshaun's friendships have changed over time, as represented by the change in tonal centers;

however, he has generally felt supported, as evidenced by homophonic texture. I would gesture that use of tension and delayed release used throughout may represent conflicts that involve his identities and his friends. Though these moments of tension have occurred, and perhaps lingered, they eventually resolve. The ascending and descending arpeggiated and stepwise melodies and fast upward note flourishes may represent the journeys that have taken place within his friendships, with ascending flourishes representing the positive outcomes of said journeys. The fluctuation and fluidity with pulse and tempo could represent how he is able to fluidly move maneuver within his identities when with his friends.

Improvisers: Deshaun

Title: Family   Length: 1:23

Instrumentation: Piano/Keyboard

Overall Impressions (How does it feel emotionally/relationally?): Uneasy, false sense of security, resolution that is always followed by tension

Form: Through-composed

Most Salient Elements: Tonal

Elements With Most Tension: Tonal

SECTION   1 (0:00 – 0:36)   2 (0:37 – 1:03)   3 (1:04 - 1:11)   4 (1:12 – 1:23)

Rhythmic Elements:
- Free meter
- Rubato heavily used throughout
- Tempo is fluid

Timbre:
- Timbre remains static throughout

Volume:
- Volume is static throughout (mezzo piano)

Phrasing:
- Phrasing is irregular
- Lingering sustained notes used as transitions into new phrases

Texture:
- Dense texture
- Pedal used to create overtones throughout the piece

Tonal Elements:
- SECTION 1: Opens with descending intervals (A4, M6, A4)
- General melody ascends and descends in step wise motion
- No big leaps or jumps in the melody
- Centers around A, possibly A Locrian mode with a raised 6th (F#)
- Melody and harmony share equal importance
- A4 and M6 intervals occur throughout
- Melody is often feels scalular, outlining arpeggiated diminished/augmented chords
- Melody and harmony create short-lived moments of resolution that are immediately followed by diminished and augmented chords

Any elements incongruent?
- The jazz style of playing against the heavy use of diminished/augmented chords, intervals, feel conflicting

What do I feel like is being communicated about their experience of self, as a Black queer male in their family?

- It feels as though Deshaun's experience of self, within his family, is complicated, as evidenced by the use of the A Locrian mode throughout the piece. Given that the opening piece opens with A4 and M6 intervals, I gesture that perhaps Deshaun feels a sense of unease within his family. This feeling of unease/uncertainty is seen throughout the piece through the use of the sustain pedal to create augmented, minor, diminished overtones. The use of sustained notes in the left-hand accompaniment in conjunction with the upper register legato melody, suggest aspects within Deshaun's experience of family that are both tender and sad. The use of rubato and non-strict meter throughout create moments of tenon and release; however, the resolutions are quickly followed by diminished and augmented chords. Perhaps this reflects how Deshaun experiences his identity within his family; constant moments of tension that never fully resolve in ways that feel positive.

Appendix B

Post Improvisation Reflections

<u>Family Reflections</u>

"Jaleel" (Participant 1)

<u>Question 1</u>

My racial identify and sexuality was very constricted and heteronormative until about 10 years ago. I was also raised in the church, so I kept the improve very religious and hymn like to represent that.

<u>Question 2</u>

I was very aware and a lot of this aspects of my life continue to affect how I present myself today.

"Donovan" (Participant 2)

<u>Question 1</u>

For me even right now I'm not out. I'm always dreaming for the day I do because I'll feel free. Although, coming from a religious family it's always been hard and moments in my life where my family denounced homosexuality. There has always been that tension and have known I was gay since elementary school. Although, it was never accepted in my family due to religion. I was glad to have such great brothers in college to help me be myself but now that I've graduated and I'm home it's definitely been a little hard on me but again I'm hopeful for the day I come out to them.

<u>Question 2</u>

Yes, I honestly don't know if my family will be ever ok with it. A memory I have is Thanksgiving after the Obama administration was debating to make gay marriage legal in

America. The discussion at the table was pretty wild and honestly didn't speak up much. I

think my accomplishments will allow them to see that God has always been with me even

when I'm just being myself, a gay Black Man.

"Tyrone" (Participant 3)

Question 1

Racial identity in the dark tone clusters and low tones; church symbolized by insertion of

hymn (Holy, Holy, Holy)

Sexual identity – in the bright and playful treble sounds; scalular passages = playful,

queer, femme-boy nature

Question 2

Brought back memories of a fractured childhood relationship with my stepdad and the

fact that I thought he hated me because of my effeminate nature as a young boy; hence

the dark tones. The brighter scalular passages represents the good times of family;

especially when there was harmony in the home, when parents were not fighting each

other physically. The use of lower tones reflects on the pain and prejudice me and my

family experienced in the small rural town we lived. Racism obvious and racism not-so-

obvious.

"Daniel" (Participant 4)

Question 1

For me it was a mix of low tones that I think represented my family (I thought of my

immediate nuclear family) and then me being represented by higher tones. I think that I

was trying to represent that we were not in harmony and over time have grown to be

more in tune with each other…even though it took time. In terms of my blackness, I

always associate lower octaves with blackness. It sounds powerful.

Question 2

For my family I think I see my Blackness and my sexuality as intersectional. But with my

family I think my sexuality is the thing that sticks out most to me. The lower tones I use

to represent my family really remind me of times of feeling a little lonely because I didn't

know how they would react to my sexuality. And in the beginning, it really was not all

that positive, but as time passed, we really grew together, and I think we are at a place

where we are stronger. I still, though, feel like the person that's "different." And my

sexuality is something that I always feel is out there. I also think the chords represent a

"you get it" feeling when they finally understood more about what it means to have a gay

family member.

"Deshaun" (Participant 5)

Question 1

I felt drawn to begin with the tri-tone because of its inherent eerie quality and the fact that

it was once banned from the church (similar to that of many of those around me and,

really, myself. - I never left the church and was never asked to leave (nor did my family

abandon me or disown me…they did express dismay of course but we're working

through it.) As a gay Black male, my race and sexuality have had many battles within

their cohabitation as well as their separate battles in life. (Not sure if that's making as

much sense as I'd like it to…but things have definitely been difficult.) The tri tone then

developed into a beautiful chord because there's always been surrounding me in the

midst of every obstacle and at times it was even gorgeous (Eb major 7 chords) and the

story has yet to be concluded so I ended similar to where we started on the 5 chord and

ended it there (half cadence). Honestly, my identity has been a struggle throughout my

entire life, but I have truly embraced it over the years and that has caused my family to

slowly make changes as well.

<u>Question 2</u>

When I am with my family, I always have a small guard up. That sounds so sad and

unfortunate, but it is truly for the protection of my own peace of mind and mental health.

I know they love me unconditionally and I trust that, but I know that there are views and

ideas that we may never see eye to eye on. I feel the need to be "strong and masculine" as

one of the few men in the immediate family that is able bodied and in my current age

bracket, but I am also naturally pretty "soft and feminine" (at least I self-identify that

way) so while I don't cover it up, I feel the need to be aware of how I express myself at

times.

<u>Friend Reflections</u>

"Jaleel" (Participant 1)

<u>Question 1</u>

"It was happy and it was in a kind of the "sky is the limit" type thinking when it came to

think of my friends and chosen family. My racial Identity was a big aspect for me until

later within my college years when I attended an HBCU."

<u>Question 2</u>

"I was just aware that I was different, but it didn't matter as much. I was encouraged to

represent myself in various aspects of gender expression and authenticity throughout my

high school time up until now."

"Donovan" (Participant 2)

<u>Question 1</u>

There are friends who have gotten me through so much and have always supported me.

They were the ones who listened when I came out to them in college and also lifted me

up when I felt I wasn't enough. Of course, I have had some family support and getting

understanding and feeling listened to is something my friends did really well. Of course,

being Black and gay did have its struggles being idolize not for who I am but more of the

stereotype of being a Black gay man. I'm just glad I had some wonderful people to help

me recognize when something was good or not healthy for myself.

<u>Question 2</u>

I definitely wasn't aware of this issue until I came out and started to make my ways on

dating apps. That's when I noticed the issue more regarding being a gay Black individual.

"Tyrone" (Participant 3)

<u>Question 1</u>

The major-ness of the keys the use of unison – because my blackness and my sexuality

are tied together. The people I call friends see both equally and love both equally.

<u>Question 2</u>

I was aware that I am blessed to have people of all races/backgrounds who love both

aspects equally and see both as parts of me that are inseparable. I also had to

acknowledge those family/friends who do not honor my sexuality with some use of minor

chord toward the end of the improv.

"Daniel" (Participant 4)

<u>Question 1</u>

My racial identity was again represented more by the lower octave and then the higher

octaves were definitely more to how I picture my sexuality. I wanted it to be quicker to

represent that my friendships are pretty animated and fast paced. They are also pretty fun.

The lower notes were featured less often because when I am with my friends, I feel like

my race is the last thing I notice. But I also know that when my friends need to have my

back for something race-related they will be there to notice as well. I also tried to connect

the tune with a scale because I think that within my friend group things really flow

together well.

Question 2

I was thinking about the idea that I consider identities less when it comes to my friend

groups and focus more on the personalities and values that the folks bring. I know that

race and sexuality are important, but I feel like with my friends it doesn't matter as much.

In those relationships, I believe, again, that my sexuality is much more front and center

than my race. I was also thinking that I have many more straight friends than gay friends,

but we typically have the same levels of fun, laughter and energy.

"Deshaun" (Participant 5)

Question 1

This one got me emotional, I knew I immediately wanted it to be based around "the

people's key" (C major) because it makes me happy and there's a simplicity to it that is

easy to relate to. I wanted it to have an upbeat vibe (if you can't tell I'm a pretty lyrical

player and love lots of sustain pedal and sweeping flowing 8th notes. [this may also be

the high school accompanist in me] MY friends make me so happy and give me all the

love and encouragement that I need to make it through life. They are so much like family

it is crazy. The music got more complicated when I felt a key change in my spirit lol. I

then thought about some of the dark times that I have had both with them and personally.

Sometimes it doesn't seem like we are going to make it through the difficult times (and a

very small number of them did not and we ended the relationship and some of the music

definitely reflected that sadness) but the joy comes back around for the current group I

have in my life. They make me so happy it is absolutely amazing, and I love them so

much. I was thinking of the fun I had with some of them even last night.

Question 2

With my friends (I love the chosen family phrase) I feel like I am completely myself.

There are no secrets here. They know me inside and out and it allows for a closeness like

none other. Most of my friends are in some way or another in a minority group and I

totally believe that that strengthens the bond between us.

Society Reflections

"Jaleel" (Participant 1)

Question 1

"A lot of downward and downtrodden chords. Being black in this time and space in our

country is depressing and what feels like a downward spiral in my opinion. Every time I

feel like I have made some progress it feels like eventually I am back to square one which

is also compounded with my queerness which is most often exiled in the black

community. People tend to have the mindset that you are Black and you don't want to add

or you are not allowed to express yourself outside of just being black because people

judge you off of stereotypes or television depiction."

Question 2

"Yes constantly. Between seeing unarmed black women and men and especially Black

trans women and Black trans men. We are just trying to get the world to accept us as

people and show them that are lives even matter. I don't know if I will be able to see a

group of Black queer folx ever truly be able to be their authentic selves without criticism,

so I find myself conforming often just to get by."

"Donovan" (Participant 2)

<u>Question 1</u>

I know this will sound crazy but especially after this summer I think the majority of

people of this country can and will help the LGBT community in our country and I

believe people are starting to be more open to the idea of being gay, trans and more. I do

think we must keep pushing for Black Lives Matter and being accepting of black lives of

the LGBT community. There's been some many people of color in the LGBT community

that have fought for our freedom to express ourselves and be who we really are. As long

as we as a country grow over the bigotry and disinformation. I think this country can be

great and free for everyone.

<u>Question 2</u>

I definitely knew being gay and Black in this country was a problem in this country. I

knew this because it was used as a slur all the time during high school on me and even

my family made fun and attack people of the LGBT community.

"Tyrone" (Participant 3)

<u>Question 1</u>

Treble splatters in the right hand were gun shots because of my skin color and gender.

Lower tones were representative of oppression – color and sexuality. Full of clusters,

atonality, and dissonance because this country overall is not kind to people of color or

queer people

Question 2

The history of the country as it relates to Native Americans and non-European folks,

especially people of African descent is marred with blood. I couldn't help but think of the

senseless killings of my trans brothers and sisters who often go unnoticed.

"Daniel" (Participant 4)

Question 1

I think here everything is messy and jumbled. My sexuality and race were pretty equally

represented with the low and high octaves and I think I think about them both pretty

regularly in the context of the country. It doesn't sound good, and I don't think it is

supposed to based on the current context and climate? There was also a moment where I

switched to all low octaves to represent that at some moments, I feel like my Blackness is

specifically under attack. The tones don't feel positive, and I don't think I have a sense of

positivity in our current climate. I also think the lower songs represented a lot of grief and

sadness. I didn't want to have any part of this really feel like it sounds good because I

think there is just so much bad that it overwhelms any silver linings.

Question 2

The first thing that came to mind was that the country was a mess. I feel like it's

dangerous to be Black and dangerous to be Black & gay. I was thinking about all of the

frustrations that come with the killings of people that look like me and this feeling of

loss, and sadness, and sometimes fear. I also think many times I fully experience America

(and describe myself to others) as a "Black gay man." BUT there are times where the

only thing I can think about is how poorly Black people are treated here. When I was

thinking about the country, I was thinking about the climate as a whole and not

necessarily individual actors or agents. With that said, I think our cultural climate is

really problematic and there isn't necessarily a perceived end to that either.

"Deshaun" (Participant 5)

Question 1

This one is obviously quite dark (Again with the recurring theme of sadness) The current

state of our country has me often on the verge of tears and most of the time these days IN

TEARS. So, there's so much sadness and there's a lot of unexpected turns. It feels as a

gay Black man in America there are obstacles that are waiting for me at every turn (as

there are for most everyone) that are designed to see my demise. Every time it feels like I

find a groove or a safe haven, there is something else waiting to bring about more

difficulties. Sometimes it is hard to get out of bed each day knowing that there is so much

trouble and trauma awaiting me outside. There is almost safety in this current situation

because I get to stay home more and avoid potential conflict. I worry about the country a

lot and it feels slightly lost and there is at times no hope, but I have to believe there is

some so that is why the improv ended on an open chord rather than any quality. I

considered a major triad but that didn't feel right to me neither did a minor one…so alas.

Question 2

I may have already answered this in my previous answer, but I am highly aware of my

race and sexuality in America. There seems to be an openness to my being homosexual

that just doesn't seem as open to my being Black. Granted both of these things are out of

our control and yet we find ways to judge them and decide what rights one can have and

their claim to health care, etc. It is fascinating to me. I am hyper aware of it all and the

experience is not a pleasant one as of late, but I have to believe there is hope for

tomorrow I suppose. There are changes and I just want to see them happen sooner and

greater.