

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: 'DON'T TELL ME YOU'RE ONE OF THOSE!' A
QUALITATIVE PORTRAIT OF BLACK ATHEISTS

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Black Atheists are one of the least studied and understood populations in American society. Drawing on literature from the sociology of religion, social psychology, and critical race theory, my research focuses on the following questions: Is there a meaningful 'Black Atheist' identity? And if there is, how do people who claim a Black Atheist identity conceive of it? How does this identity relate to the way in which they live their lives?

To explore these questions, this project aims to understand what it means to be a Black Atheist in America through in-depth open-ended qualitative interviews with 46 Black Atheists in the Washington DC/Baltimore area. This includes but is not limited to investigating and understanding Black Atheist identities, how Black Atheists conceive of themselves, how they perceive, internalize, and manage stigma, how they view in-group belonging, and how they understand their experiences as Atheists to be racialized. This project addresses the paucity of information on Black Atheists in America by investigating and centralizing their experiences, lives, and identities.

The results suggest that Black Atheists do indeed perceive themselves as holding a unique 'Black Atheist' identity. That is, they believe their being Black, and their being Atheist, inform each other in meaningful ways that affect their beliefs, behaviors, and lived experiences. Additionally, respondents described both an identity and emerging social space informed by the particular sets of challenges and racialized cultural and social pressures they face. Namely, they perceived pervasive and intense racialized stigma against Atheists within Black communities and often their own families, and also feel social distance from Mainstream Atheists, whom they perceive to be inattentive to the particular challenges faced by Black Atheists. Respondents also linked being Black Atheists to the way that they navigated familial relationships, romantic relationships, and broader communal spaces, engaging in significant amounts of stigma management. Most commonly this was done through use of the closet, which proved to be a significant social space for respondents. Additionally, there were potentially significant gendered ways in which respondents made sense of their identities, and linked them to the external world. In essence, the way stigma in America interacts with identity seemingly produces

distinctive identities at this particular intersection of race and religion. Because they reside at the bottom of two separate hierarchies, namely, Atheists are at the bottom of religious hierarchies, while Blacks are at the bottom of racial hierarchies, identity work and behavioral strategies in the face of stigma are likely to be particularly pronounced among Black Atheists.

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OF BLACK ATHEISTS**

by

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DEDICATION

I want to thank all the people who helped me out, and specifically thank a number of people who helped make the completion of this project possible.

My family. Mom, I know I couldn't have achieved anything remotely close to this without you. Your love, emotional support, financial support, and free and frequent babysitting were all key in completing this dissertation. And of course, the person I am today is more due to you than anyone else. I love watching you being grammy to the boys, and you opening your house when the family needed somewhere to go so I could do work. I'm so happy to have made you proud.

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gonna be alright' smile, and fat chubby cheeks all helped with this final push. Thank you my sons.

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Chapter One: Introduction

As I was entering a shuttle to pick up my car from the shop, another passenger, a lovely woman around 70 years old greeted me. We got to chatting, and she like many grandparents had gotten to the subject of her pride and joy. “He’s graduating from Roosevelt next month,” she grinned. “They make ‘em good there,” I replied as this is my alma mater. I explained to her that I had gone there, gone onto graduate school at the University of Maryland, and was currently on track to receive a PhD. “It’s great to see [one of] our young Black men doing so well in education. I’m proud of you baby. What is your thesis on?” she asked.

Feeling somewhere between defensive and embarrassed... I fibbed. ‘A study on Black religiosity,’ I answered sheepishly with coupled with a small but immediately present feeling of shame in the pit of my stomach.

“That’s wonderful,” she responded. “So you’re looking at Atheists and agnostics and people like that?”

I’ve rarely heard that distinction made by someone who wasn’t non-religious and thought that perhaps I had pegged the situation wrong. “Yes,” I responded. “I’m impressed you know that distinction,” I said perhaps a bit too excitedly.

She then looked me over and said “Don’t tell me you’re one of those,” as our shuttle pulled up to the Toyota dealership.

Faced with a second dilemma in less than five minutes, I came up with what I thought was a clever answer at the time. “All good here ma’am. Have a good one” I replied as I smiled and exited the shuttle.

This encounter stuck with me for a while. That I, a Black Atheist who was raised without religion and consequently have been explicitly out as an Atheist for as long as I can remember would feel the compulsion to lie in this manner suggested that this likely was an issue encountered frequently encountered by other Black non-believers. It really struck me how in the moment, I certainly had racialized thoughts. Why did I fib to this woman when I proudly tell everyone I know, in addition to most strangers when the subject even tangentially arises? Was it because she reminded me of so many of my friend's grandparents, who almost to a person were deeply religious both in the everyday language they used and in home décor? Was it because so often in my experience that in passing many of my fellow Black Americans have expressed our mutual solidarity through some sort of expression of Christianity? And what about the overwhelming majority of Black Atheists that have many more religious people in their social circles?

Statement of the Problem

Black Atheists are one of the least studied and understood populations in American society. Firstly, there exists relatively little published academic work on Atheists of any kind, let alone a complex racial-religious identity like Black Atheists¹. The relevant work that does exist is mostly about Atheist identities, with almost no attendance to race (Zuckerman 2010, Smith 2011). It is worth noting at most these samples tend to have one or two Black People; yet, most have none. There also is some analysis of Black Atheist writings and thought that are coming out of the English and Literature fields, mostly focusing on the writings of individual Black Atheists in the 19th

¹ This project capitalizes Atheist, Black, and White. I have chosen to capitalize Atheist in the same manner as religions like 'Christianity' because it is treated qualitatively similar to religions. Black and White are racial terms. Rather than describing the color of one's skin, these are social terms that are used to describe the person themselves (Cohen 2012, Tharps 2014).

and 20th century (Lackey 2007). Through blogs and social media, contemporary Black Atheists have brought some of their intellectual productions into the public eye, allowing an analysis of Black Atheists more collectively than has been done as of yet. However, this has yet to be done in a sociological context.

Second, as the most quickly growing segment of the American population understanding the Atheist identity and its interaction effects with social constructs like race will only become more important as they become an increasingly more visible segment of the population. Because of the unique social space in which they inhabit, it is very likely Black Atheists have uniquely crafted identities and strategies for simply navigating everyday life (Pew 2012, Kosmin 2009). Since both Atheists and Blacks recognize the stigma against them, it is likely that Black Atheists are relatively highly stigma conscious (Scmalz 2011).

Third, while there has been no shortage of study on Black sub-groups like Black feminists and Black radicals, few with the notable exception of Black LGBTQ individuals (who, like Atheists are stigmatized largely as a function of religion) have focused on groups that are also stigmatized by Black people (Pew 2012). This in-group stigma likely has numerous effects on the way Black Atheists manage stigma, particularly around other Black people and in Black communal settings.

Lastly, while readily identifying as Atheists, Black Atheists have been historically and systematically marginalized by the large visible Atheist movements. As a result, many Black Atheists have formed their own intellectual spaces, which have allowed, if not promoted, the unique development of identities, ideologies, political projects, and what this paper will discuss later as ‘ordinary theologies,’ (Hutchinson 2014, Hart 2014).

This project addresses the paucity of information on Black Atheists by investigating the experiences, lives, and identities of Black Atheists in the United States. Specifically, it focuses on six themes that at the outset of the project seemed very likely to relate to a potential Black Atheist identity: (1) the complexities of a racialized Atheist identity; (2) carrying multiple stigmas that stem from a subordinated racial and religious identity; (3) processes of marginalization within a marginalized population, in this case how atheism marginalizes African Americans within a Black population; (4) how Black Atheists recognize and manage stigma in light of this marginalization and other considerations of stigma; (5) how Black Atheists understand themselves and how they understand their relationship to other Black people, and other Atheists; and (6) how these factors affect the lived experience of Black Atheists.

Few peer-reviewed studies on any multi-faceted Atheist identity explore the potential richness of being a Black-Atheist, gay-Atheist, etc. Even if only approaching two or three percent of the Black population as many recent surveys suggest; that is still between 600K and 1 million Black Atheists whose experiences have yet to be explored and understood.. Few if any intersections present the opportunity to study such a uniquely marginalized group. Black Atheists are one of the few groups that arguably has no real 'in-group.' An in-group is defined as identification with a socially recognizable group, but there is also a component of mutual agreement within the in-group on who 'us' entails (Goffman 1963). Marginalized by American society because of race, Black Atheists are also marginalized within Black communities and public spaces because of their lack of religion; they often face racialized challenges of authenticity and belonging. They also face marginalization by mainstream Atheist groups and movements due to

what they perceive is a lack of understanding of and inclusion within their platforms and goals to address and bridge the unique challenges facing Black Atheists.

By exploring this largely unexplored group, this dissertation aims to inform current debates within sociology of religion, critical race theory, and social psychology. This dissertation will explore conceptualizations crucial to filling in and understanding several gaps in extant literature (Lackey 2007, Hutchinson 2013).

Some of the terms and language used by the Black Atheists in this study, and Atheists more broadly are not common in everyday speech, or are used in ways that are different than their common usage. Additionally, some of the terms from sociology of religion literature, and social psychology also fall under this category. For the purposes of clarity, Table 1 includes the definitions of such terms.

Table 1. Definitions of Relevant Terms

Term	Definition of Term
Atheist	An individual that does not believe in God or Gods. They may not be able to answer/ understand the question ‘Is there a God?’ or answer no to such a question.
Soft Atheist	An Atheist that does not profess a disbelief in God.
Hard Atheist	An Atheist that professes a disbelief in God.
Agnostic	An individual that does not have an opinion/ or finds it impossible to determine whether there is a God. Answer ‘is there a God?’ with ‘I don’t know.’
Theist	An individual that believes in God or Gods. Atheists use this term often to juxtapose believers to themselves.
Deconversion	Becoming irreligious/Losing religious belief.
None/ Nones	An individual who professes to have No religion. These people are not at all synonymous with Atheists, and nearly 2/3 believe in God. They are referred to as ‘Nones’ in plural.
Closetable	An identity that can be hidden, as opposed to something like skin color.
Becoming Atheist	How an individual comes to self-identify as Atheist. Almost always described as a process.
New Atheist	Term used to delineate the growing Atheist movement that began around the year 2000. Outside of Atheist circles, this is often synonymous with militant Atheism. Related to the emergence of the Four Horsemen, and the publication of the God Delusion.
Four Horsemen	Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennet, and Sam Harris. These 4 are often grouped together for having invigorating the New Atheist movement. Richard Dawkins ‘The God Delusion’ is the most popular New Atheist work.
Mainstream Atheist	Prominent and visible Atheists, and Atheist groups. These include the Four Horsemen.

Table 1. Definitions of Relevant Terms (Continued)

Term	Definition of Term
Positive Beliefs	A professed belief. An important distinction because Soft Atheists do not profess a disbelief in God. A negative belief is the lack of belief.
Anti-Theist	An individual who thinks that religion is an aggregate negative, or otherwise bad for society/humanity.
Humanist	A philosophy that places emphasis on Humans rather than the supernatural. Understanding people and the human experience is what is key for solving problems and maintaining fruitful societies. Soft Atheist by definition, also often given the prefix ‘Secular’
Black	The socially constructed racial category in America to which most people of African descent belong. Alternatively, a person that identifies as Black. This was the term most often used by respondents to discuss their identities.
African-American	A member of the African diaspora in America.

An Overview of Existing Literature

Although little sociological work exists on Black Atheists (even the studies on Atheist identity have few or zero Black respondents), they have been the subject of several works, mostly in English and History (Lackey 2007). In his book on Black Atheists, English Professor Michael Lackey (2007) describes them as a very small and scattered minority that nonetheless has a collective political identity. Phil Zuckerman (2009) describes ‘a collective political project’ as being a part of the ‘New Atheist’ experience and ‘new Atheist activism,’ an idea that appears to connect with Lackey’s work. Zuckerman does not analyze race, while Lackey suggests that the sparse and scattered nature of Black Atheists resulted in a more reactive identity (as opposed to

proactive). Jesse Smith (2011) has done work on the Atheist identity, and to a lesser extent the formation of that identity, but again offered no racial component. However Smith's contribution, that it is generally easier to both find support and come out the more social capital one has, is notable for this project given that it is contextualized in an American society in which social capital is often a function of race (Smith 2011, Strouble 2015, Liu et al. 2017).

In short, the social pressures of identifying as the most stigmatized identity in society, while at the same time daily carrying the most visceral mark of stigma in American society, have converged to create a unique and highly politicized Atheist identity that is increasing in activism and placing more importance on visibility and outreach (Edgell 2006). For example, Americans are more likely to agree with the statement "I would not want my daughter or son to marry an Atheist," than they are to affirm that statement with any other demographic group (Edgell 2006, Edgell 2008). It stands to reason that as members of the minority most often ascribed negative stereotypes and at the bottom of the racial hierarchy in the United States who also bear the added stigma of being Atheist (Edgell 2006, Hartman 2008) would produce a particular kind of 'Black Atheist identity.' Doug Hartman (2008) in his paper, 'Critical Whiteness Theories and the Evangelical "Race Problem": Extending Emerson and Smith's Divided by Faith,' furthers this notion in a brief discussion of how both Blacks and Atheists are held in similar status as uniquely culturally threatening. This points to the potential importance of intersectionality for studying Black Atheists. Kimberle' Crenshaw conceived of the concept of intersectionality as denoting the various ways in which multiple social constructs interact (Crenshaw 1991). Although her 1989 work "Demarginalizing the

Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" focuses on how the intersection of race and gender "shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences," it is a versatile concept that can be used to understand a wide variety of social intersections (Crenshaw 1989,p. 139). Furthermore because of the unique historical, political, and cultural importance placed on religiosity and the Black church by African-Americans serves as a further complicating factor for social isolation. That is to say, that the day-to-day social and cultural context of religious veneration makes coming out as a Black Atheist all the more risky.

In addition to being stigmatized in America at large due to their skin color, religion, and morality, Black Atheists are in the unique position of being seen as problematic and/or being disliked by the groups to which they belong. They have been largely excluded/unrepresented from the recent waves of Atheist activism, with many Atheist and Atheist groups saying they do not have time for the race problem, or taking the even more conservative stance that racial issues are relatively minor in scope (Hutchinson Washington Post 2014). In addition the 'New Atheist Movement'² organically (and not without logic) adopted a structure that privileged the highly educated, those who were well versed in philosophy and the classics, those with middle-class upbringings similar to the middle-class audience believed to be open to Atheist appeals, as well as those who could afford to take the risk and afford the cost as coming

² The New Atheist Movement is marked by the popularization of publications most notably the 'God Delusion' by Richard Dawkins, and works by Hitchens, Dennet, and Harris given the ironic nickname 'The 4 horsemen of the non-apocalypse' in the early 2000s. It differs from previous 'forms of atheism' as well as some contemporary one's in that it is much more critical of religion, and anti-theistic in the sense that a major tenant is that religion is inherently and demonstrably harmful to society. In addition New Atheists advocate for the scientific testing of religious claims more than earlier movements which were characterized more by philosophical thought experiments and pontifications on morality.

out Atheist.

Take for instance ‘The four Pillars’ of the ‘new Atheist’ movement; Dawkins, Dennet, Harris, and Hitchens, all White men who happen to share a number of other defining demographic traits as well (such being born in the 1960s or before, holding PhDs, and being comfortably middle-class or better). The same holds true of all major Atheist organizations Presidents and spokespeople with the only exception a solitary White woman. These groups have largely excluded Black Atheists from mainstream leadership positions and structural outreach. As such Black atheism has developed outside of the scope and reach of any centralized power structure that exists for larger Atheist movements even without being explicitly excluded. Such a schism/non-connectedness with the larger Atheist movement is yet another suggestion that we are likely to find a unique Black Atheist identity that has developed to fit the distinctive set of circumstances and challenges presented to Black Atheists.

What We Know About How Blacks View Atheists

Black Atheists also seem to be viewed at least in part as outsiders by other Black Americans. Hartman and Edgell’s findings both demonstrate that Black people are the racial group most mistrustful of Atheists, at a comparable to or exceeding the level of White evangelicals or self-identified conservative “Born-again” (Edgell 2006).

Additionally although most Black Americans are practicing Christians, they do not share similar sentiments about Black American Muslims (Hartman 2008). In fact, Blacks in America have the most positive views of Muslims of any racial group (Pew 2012). This is relevant for two reasons. First, it marks an important and qualitative distinction between groups of Black people like Muslims, who although they suffer from some degree of

double-barreled stigma in the larger society are still generally approved of and accepted by their in-groups.

Secondly it represents Blacks' relative openness to minorities, religious or otherwise, the notable exception of course being Atheists (Pew 2012). Almost every recent metric used to measure religiosity finds that Black people are the most religious racial group both in terms of belief and practice (American Religious Identification Survey 2008). There is also a very well documented connection between Black religiosity and Black culture that spans both critical race and sociology of religion literature. Sawyer (2000) concludes that in the Black American community, religion and spirituality have always been central to the 'project of seeking change'. Raboteau (2000) says that historically, the idea of 'social justice and Black religion [seem] inseparable.' There is a saying among Atheists that "coming out Atheist is political suicide"³ as an off-handed way of explaining why there are so few nominally Atheist politicians. For example, as of April 2017, there were zero out of 535 congressmen and zero out 50 governors that identified as Atheist, while every American President has professed to be Christian (Wing 2017).

In addressing how American politicians tend to deal with questions or rumors about their being irreligious, comparing Atheist to the scarlet letter (A for Adulterer) became fairly commonplace in Atheist circles. The Policy Research and Regulation Institute wrote an article in regards to questions about then Mayoral candidate Bill de Blasio's religion titled "Atheist: Still a Scarlet Letter in American Politics?" which put de Blasio's responses in the context of how Atheists are viewed. They conclude that even

³ Congressman Pete Stark, the first openly Atheist congressman of the 21st century has made this statement several times.

though Nones are nearly a quarter of the national electorate, the stigma associated with Atheism specifically is a decided negative against any candidate (PRRI 2013).

‘Coming out as Atheist is social suicide’ might be a more apt application of this idea to Black Atheists. In fact, in one of the first article about Black Non-believers published by the Huffington Post, radio host Jamila Bey says “‘It’s the A-word,” said Bey, 33, feigning a whisper. “You commit social suicide as a Black person when you say you’re an Atheist”” (Oduah and Bohn 2010) The potential difficulties of doing well and/or thrive socially when your ‘in-group,’ your supporters, the people that share many of your defining traits and experiences, think that a central part of your character is morally repugnant, are important to recognize in investigating the identities and experiences of Black Atheists.

In their paper, “Critical Race Theory as Ordinary Theology of African American Principals,” Witherspoon and Mitchell (2014) discuss ‘ordinary theologies’ that arise in response to ‘everyday racism’ as well as sexism in the case of Black female principles. They conclude that these ordinary theologies often take the form of spiritual leadership and are grounded in notions of social justice relating to African-American understandings of Judeo-Christian religion. These ordinary theologies manifest themselves as everyday practices, behaviors, and exchanges from things like student interactions to the things they emphasized at teacher only meanings. This reflexive turn toward religion, due to historical cultural ties, has been documented in other studies as well. While not explicitly exclusionary of the Atheist is at the very least a barrier to a sense of belonging and understanding.

In a similar vein, Black Atheists are likely to have developed their own ‘ordinary

theologies' in response to the stigmatization and discrimination against Atheists, particularly in response to the way in which Atheists are negatively seen by other Blacks. While these ordinary theologies are almost certainly related to both their experiences of being Black in America and being an Atheist in America, Black Atheists often operate in a space removed from common understandings of both. Not sharing religious ideals with their Black family and peers in a 'church-centric' culture, and not sharing common backgrounds or experiences with the majority of Atheists puts Black Atheists in a very unique space of having to make meaning of often being perceived as outsiders from the two groups with which they most closely identify (McQueeney, Witherspoon and Mitchell 2014).

The Unique Importance of Religion for Black Americans

In addition to being important culturally, religiosity is uniquely correlated to African American outcomes in America, including educational success, educational attainment, and SES (Jang 2010). Notably, only amongst Blacks is there a positive correlation between religiosity and doing well academically, and only amongst Blacks do you see a decrease in the number of unaffiliated/non-religious people. This holds true for most important quantifiable social factors including graduation rates, income, lower instances of drug and alcohol abuse, and well-being and mental health (Blaine and Crocker 1995, Jang 2010, Rote 2010). In Figure 1 we see that twelve percent of Blacks in America are unaffiliated. Amongst Blacks, education correlates negatively with being unaffiliated, 13% of Blacks that did not graduate high school are unaffiliated, while 12% that completed high school and 10% that completed college are unaffiliated. Among the 16% of the broader population this trend is reversed with 15% of people that did not

complete high school being unaffiliated. Moving up in education, 16% of people that graduated high school were unaffiliated, and 17% of people that graduated college are unaffiliated.

Figure 1. Comparison of Black and Non-Black Religious Affiliation by Education

Religious Affiliation by Education						
	<u>Evang. Prot. churches</u>	<u>Mainline Prot. churches</u>	<u>Hist. black Prot. churches</u>	<u>Catholic</u>	<u>Unaffil.</u>	<u>Other/Don't know/Ref</u>
<i>Among...</i>	%	%	%	%	%	%
African-Americans	15	4	59	5	12	5=100
Total population	26	18	7	24	16	9=100
<i>Less than high school</i>						
African-Americans	13	2	63	5	13	4=100
Total population	31	11	9	29	15	5=100
<i>High school grad</i>						
African-Americans	15	3	60	4	12	5=100
Total population	28	18	8	23	16	8=100
<i>College grad</i>						
African-Americans	15	9	53	8	10	5=100
Total population	20	23	4	23	17	13=100

Source: Pew Forum U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, conducted in 2007, released in 2008

(Source: Lugo et al 2008, Pew Forum U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2007)

Furthermore, religiosity correlates with positive outcomes (health, economic, self-assessments) more for Blacks than more than with other races in America (Rote 2011, Zuckerman 2009). Oates and Goode in their 2013 article ‘Racial Differences in Effects of Religiosity and Mastery on Psychological Distress: Evidence from National Longitudinal Data’ explicitly examine the link between religiosity and outcomes and its variance by race. By examining nationally representative longitudinal data they examine the “effects of religiosity and personal mastery, alongside other potentially consequential variables, on psychological distress” (Oates and Good 2013). Because of emerging evidence that religiosity and mastery may be differentially central, and beneficial to, the coping efforts of Black and White Americans, they test for variation across the two groups on the

impact of religiosity and mastery on distress. They conclude that their “findings solidly support the endorsed proposition of religiosity’s being particularly beneficial to Blacks’ emotional well-being and moderately support the prediction of mastery’s being primarily helpful to Whites’. Public religiosity substantially eclipses private and subjective religiosity as a facilitator of Blacks’ emotional well-being, and although main effects dominate, there are significant mediation and moderation effects of religiosity or mastery within each race” (Oates and Goode 2013, p. 48). In short, there exists a set of very real and pragmatic utilitarian arguments that religiosity specifically in the Christian form is beneficial to African-Americans (Ellison 1995, Schieman et al. 2006, Sherkat 2002).

Black Atheists also may be perceived as an affront to the American experience of Blackness because Black liberation movements and the Civil Rights movements were steeped in and experienced through the lens of religion and spirituality. In fact, in the same 2010 Huffington Post article, Bey goes onto say that “you renounce your Blackness. You almost denigrate your heritage and history of the people if you claim atheism.” Interviewed for the same article, Jamaican-American engineering student Duene Mclellan said “My family, my friends, my co-workers, my identity—everything was ripped away from me when I left Christianity,” suggesting the potential scope of repercussions for coming out as Atheist for Black Americans (Oduah and Bohn 2010). From slaves demonstrating agency and resistance through song, to the significance of the exodus story, to the leading Black orators of the 20th century, religion has been a driving force behind Black collectivity and progress. This is also born out numerically. Since polling began on the matter, Blacks have always measured higher on virtually every measure of religiosity as compared to other Americans (Oates and Goode 2013, Kopelson

2014). Black Americans are also much more likely to affirm that their religion plays an important role in cultural practices and behaviors (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2009, American Religious Identification Survey 2008, Oates and Goode 2013).

The historical importance of the Black church to the Black community and to social change and racial justice in America is well documented in both critical race and sociology of religion literatures. Robin Kelley (2009) in his book 'Thelonius Monk' discusses similar ideas in his work on the great Jazz artists' time spent playing revival music in the 1930's. Kelley mentions the notion that "Black clergy associated blues and Jazz with devil's music." He offers as an explanation that mainline leaders of Black churches had begun to seek to remake their flock in accordance with middle-class mores. The author also discusses how by the 1920's there was a very identifiable schism; most Black Baptist churches "developed a rift between ecstatic shouters and congregational singing on the one hand, and refinement quiet respectful worship on the other" (Kelley 2009, p. 45). Kelley explores the idea that Christianity; the right kind (and performance) of Christianity could serve to reinforce the humanity of Black people, and how this idea was understood by some contemporaries. Moreover this suggests that deviations from such a narrative were believed by Black clergy and many of their congregational members to be detrimental to the way in which Black people were seen as a whole; associating a lack of refinement, boorishness, and disrespect with 'the devil' and irreligion. That people could be labeled heretical even when professing to be faithful believers because of the ways in which they arranged and performed worship songs is telling for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that the contrast between respectable Black Christians and people outside of this scope extends to many Black people beyond

Atheists. Second, it reinforces the conception of the time that a narrow performance of Black Christianity was essential to advancing Black social causes in America (Kelley 2009).

Black Atheist Intellectual and Political Spaces

Modern day narratives and retrospectives further exacerbate this connection; with irreligious leaders often omitted from contemporary histories while the religious leaders have become even more revered (Lackey 2007, Lackey 2003, Winston 2012). In an attempt to make Black leaders even more palatable, their Christianity was emphasized as a means of taking advantage of the most useful pathway available between Blacks and Whites (Lackey 2007, Winston 2012).

Atheists, as a group, are seen, as among other negative things, as both unhappy, and self-loathing by a plurality of Americans (Zuckerman 2009, Wadsworth 2008). While historically there is much debate as to the degree to which Christianity was central to the founding of the United States, contemporary narratives about the history of the United States tend to eschew such nuance. This goes a long way in explaining Edgell's findings in "Shared Visions" that most Americans do not believe Atheists share their ideals of the country, they fundamentally reject the merit and inherent goodness of the religious ideas many Americans believe give this nation its moral fiber and prosperity (Edgell 2010).

In that same vein, it is very likely that Black Atheists can be seen as unappreciative of Black progress, or unwilling to recognize the centrality of religion to it. To be antagonistic to the institution that operated in parallel with movements towards liberation and equality throughout African-American history is seen as an affront to, or

proxy attack on those things (Winston 2012). The theoretical foundation of this project is grounded in many different areas of literature including sociology of religion, critical race theory, social psychology, and African-American studies.

Conversely, they are far and away the least likely to identify as having ‘no religion.’ And African-Americans that do identify as having no religion or unaffiliated are just about as likely as religious individuals of other races to express religious sentiments or perform religious behaviors or rituals. These factors likely combine to produce a group that is more stigmatizing and more distrusting of Atheists than the American population in general, which in turn creates a unique set of social pressures for those who self-identify, let alone self-present as Atheist.

In his article “One Percenters: Black Atheists, Secular Humanists, And Naturalists,” William David Hart explores the nuances in “rhetoric, emotional color, and practical engagement with religious cultures and institutions” which create small but meaningful distinctions among Black Atheists, secular humanists, and naturalists that are more than merely artful and stylized (Hart 2014). He explains that these nuances reveal different understandings of what nonbelief means to each respectively, and what ‘not believing’ entails in matters of conduct. They also disagree to varying degrees as to whether “nonbelief” is a proper way of describing their difference from theists and whether or not to do so in a racialized manner (Hart 2014). Bonilla-Silva explains his concept of racialized social systems as “refer[ring] to societies in which economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or races (Bonilla-Silva 1997). More broadly, to be racialized is to be categorically imbued with race. While they all tend to use racialized terms, Black

Atheists tend to more frequently use racialized rhetoric in defining themselves, and to juxtapose themselves from other Atheists. Black Atheists also emphasize the theist/Atheist binary significantly more than their other “one-percenter” counterparts (Hart 2014, Lackey 2007).

To distinguish them from their fellow African-American ‘one-percenters’ and skeptics, for the purposes of this paper, a Black Atheist (in the American context) will be defined as an individual that is a member of the African diaspora who ‘does not believe in God’ and uses the ‘Atheist’ label as a means of self-identification. Philosophically all ‘one-percenters’ are Atheists (lacking a belief in God), but when doing identity work, labels matter especially in how individuals understand the way in which they are presenting themselves to others.

The Relationship Between Mainstream Atheists and Black Atheists

It is important to investigate the relationship between Black Atheists and other Atheists, most notably mainstream Atheists. There are notable differences in the choice and usage of language, and ultimately in the way in which they present themselves as groups (and individuals within groups). Through this investigation this dissertation will examine the form and scope of these differences, whether they are related to significant contention or discord, and in-group sentiments.

The Tenets of Mainstream Atheism, Mainstream Atheist Groups, and Leadership

The ‘four horsemen’ or ‘four pillars’ of what has since been coined the new Atheist movement, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel

Dennet, are most representative of ‘mainstream atheism’. All but Harris were born in the 1940’s, all are White, all come from at least middle-class backgrounds, and more importantly design and present their work for middle class consumption and middle class causes.

As an intellectual and middle-class movement, the language, tactics, and overall mission of Atheists at large often systematically exclude Black people. Most Atheist platforms have no mentions of race or social justice. For example here is the Purpose Statement of American Atheists, the largest Atheist non-profit group in the country.

‘American Atheists, Inc. is a nonprofit, nonpolitical, educational organization dedicated to the complete and absolute separation of state and church, accepting the explanation of Thomas Jefferson that the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States was meant to create a "wall of separation" between state and church. American Atheists, Inc., is organized:

- to stimulate and promote freedom of thought and inquiry concerning religious beliefs, creeds, dogmas, tenets, rituals, and practices;
- to collect and disseminate information, data, and literature on all religions and promote a more thorough understanding of them, their origins, and their histories;
- to advocate, labor for, and promote in all lawful ways the complete and absolute separation of state and church;
- to advocate, labor for, and promote in all lawful ways the establishment and maintenance of a thoroughly secular system of education available to all;
- to encourage the development and public acceptance of a humane ethical system stressing the mutual sympathy, understanding, and interdependence of all people and the corresponding responsibility of each individual in relation to society;
- to develop and propagate a social philosophy in which humankind is central and must itself be the source of strength, progress, and ideals for the well-being and happiness of humanity;
- to promote the study of the arts and sciences and of all problems affecting the maintenance, perpetuation, and enrichment of human (and other) life;
- to engage in such social, educational, legal, and cultural activity as will be useful and beneficial to the members of American Atheists and to society as a whole.’ (American Atheists 2015)

Black Atheists Within Mainstream Atheism

Attempts to integrate racial or social justice, or critique the structure of systemic racism are often met with contempt and silenced, and often with familiar rhetoric. “Why do you have to bring race into this?” or “this is about science and skepticism” are two comments that I have seen in print and heard anecdotally many times. With many of their concerns largely unaddressed by larger and more prominent Atheist movements many Black Atheists have created groups (mostly by turning inward along racial lines) that have decidedly different mission statements. Take for example the African-Americans for Humanism statement:

‘African Americans for Humanism is engaged in developing humanism in the African American community. We exist for those who are unchurched or free from religion and who are looking for a rational and ethical approach to life. AAH believes that solving problems and attaining happiness should be rooted in reason, free inquiry, and critical thinking. We do not embrace ESP, astrology, numerology, or any other paranormal belief. We strive to deal with the problems of the world by fully developing our minds and properly analyzing ethical ideas.

Racism and slavery have plagued African Americans for centuries. Racial insensitivity and biased Eurocentric thinking have also caused great problems for African Americans. These problems are not always easy to detect and are often found in the least likely places and among the least likely people. AAH strongly opposes racism and challenges long-held beliefs which have consistently kept African Americans at a disadvantage socially, politically, and economically.

Traditional Western scholarship, philosophy, and ethical ideas have often been tainted by falsehoods. If world history is to be understood, it must first be understood that there are many different perspectives to examine. AAH presents many views which come into conflict with some of the established views of traditional Western scholarship, which adds depth to philosophical thought and helps create tolerance and understanding throughout the world community. AAH recognizes the accomplishments of religion, but also acknowledges its many shortcomings. No text—religious or otherwise—offers the last word on morality or solutions to human problems. AAH:

- Questions and challenges the religious beliefs which have been responsible for many of the problems plaguing the African American community.

- Fights racism through humanistic education.
- Acknowledges the contributions of humanists of African descent to world history.
- Seeks to develop wisdom and good conduct through living in the African American community by using rational and scientific methods of inquiry.
- Believes that the “good life” can be achieved on Earth through positive thinking, sharing ideas, and enlightened self-interest.
- Acknowledges the various styles of thinking that exist among individuals and groups, and seeks to determine the best course of humane and rational action for the African American community through open-minded examination of all ideas.
- Does not seek to put forth the specific agenda of any religious, political, or economic organization.

Humanism has a rich, though neglected, history in the African American community. African American humanists including W. E. B. Du Bois, Hubert H. Harrison, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, A. Philip Randolph, Richard Wright, and Carter G. Woodson, among others, have made significant contributions to history, literature, human rights, science, and activism. We can draw upon this strong humanist heritage to better understand our problems and devise solutions. Humanists encourage critical examination of all ideas and no concepts are regarded as sacred.’ (AAH 2015)

Differences in Mission

The contrast between these two statements is representative of some of the larger and broader differences that exist between ‘Black Atheists’ and Atheists at large. While there is little in the way of academic documentation, the real world differences that exist between ‘Black Atheist groups’ and larger more mainstream Atheist groups almost certainly have something to do with stigma regarding Black Atheists within the Atheist community. Though there is no survey data from which to draw, mission statements like these suggest that there are a myriad of social and cultural reasons that Black Atheists define as such, and that they see themselves as more than just non-believers. In fact with little doubt, they see themselves as ‘Black non-believers’ or ‘Black Atheists,’ an intersectional identity where Blackness informs atheism and atheism informs Blackness. Titles of many of the Black Atheist groups also suggest that many more of them

explicitly attach themselves to positive beliefs like humanism or skepticism, than do their more mainstream counterparts.

Additionally, while there have been no in depth or qualitative studies on the subject, several very high profile publications (NY Times, Washington Post, CNN, TheRoot) have published anecdotal pieces about racial issues within Atheist groups and movements. These pieces are all fairly congruent on the issues that they raise, namely that Black Atheists have a particular set of issues that concern them that are often dismissed by other Atheists. The following excerpt is largely representative of the issues raised in these anecdotal pieces as well as many of the mission statements of Black Atheist groups:

Faith-based institutions provide resources to these poor and working-class families. They also fight racial discrimination, offer a foundation for community organizing and create access to social welfare, professional networks and educational resources. These are essential issues, and Atheists of color often find themselves allied in these missions.

White Atheists have a markedly different agenda. They are, on average, more affluent than the general population. Their children don't attend overcrowded 'dropout mills' where they are criminalized, subjected to 'drill and kill' curricula and shunted off to prison, subminimum-wage jobs or chronic unemployment. White organizations go to battle over church/state separation and creationism in schools.

They largely ignore the fact that Black nonbelievers face a racial and gender divide precipitated by rollbacks on affirmative action, voting rights, affordable housing, reproductive rights, education and job opportunities. With the highest national rates of juvenile incarceration, as well as suspension and expulsion in K-12 schools, African American youth in particular have been deeply impacted by these assaults on civil rights...

But when we look to Atheist and humanist organizations for solidarity on these issues, there is a staggering lack of interest. And though some mainstream Atheist organizations have jumped on the 'diversity' bandwagon, they haven't seriously grappled with the issue. Simply trotting out Atheists of color to speak about 'diversity' at overwhelmingly White conferences doesn't cut it. As Kim Veal of

the Black Freethinkers network notes, this kind of tokenism exhibits a superficial interest in ‘minorities, but not in minority issues.’

So, in a nation where African Americans and Whites are still separate and decidedly unequal, Black Atheists are forced to form their own organizations, often getting pushback from some Whites about creating ‘separatist’ groups. (Sikivu Hutchinson, Washington Post Jun 16 2014)

Description of Research Project and Research Design

This project aims to understand what it means to be a Black Atheist in America through in-depth open-ended qualitative interviews with 46 Black Atheists. This includes but is not limited to investigating and understanding Black Atheist identities, how Black Atheists conceive of themselves, how they perceive, internalize, and manage stigma, how they view in-group belonging, and how they understand their experiences as Atheists to be racialized.

Overarching Research Questions

What does it mean to be a Black Atheist in America? To understand this, one must understand the interplay between Black Atheists and Black Americans. Notably, it is important to understand if they are questioned about their authenticity as Black people and how Black Atheists respond to such challenges. As is the case with Black feminists, Black Atheists have to traverse a number of considerations about authenticity; including the fairly widespread idea that their fundamental political project advances White middle class causes/movements. The interplay between Black Atheists and other Atheists and Atheist organizations also needs to be examined. Black Atheist groups and organizations have different mission statements than do the larger and more visible traditional Atheist

groups or ‘New Atheist Movement’ groups like American Atheists or The Freedom From Religion Foundation. They have very different conceptions on what it means to be an Atheist in America, differing scopes on policy issues, and the ways in which they attend to issues of gender, sexuality, and especially race.

How do Black Atheists view their Atheist identity? Do they understand it as a racialized identity? How do Black Atheists conceptualize ‘Black Atheists,’ and what do Black Atheists mean when they say ‘Black Atheist?’ Groups like Black Atheist DC Meetup regularly use the term in recruitment, newsletters, and online forums. Do they consider this to be an identity or do they largely compartmentalize their respective Black and Atheist identities? Do they see themselves as belonging to and with other Black Atheists, and how do they conceptualize and utilize ‘Black Atheist spaces?’ Is this racialized identity central to any political project?

How do Black Atheists perceive stigma? How do they conceive of stigma, and how do they experience stigma? How do they manage this stigma? How does their understanding of stigma and their subsequent stigma management affect their identities and their lives as Black Atheists? What considerations regarding stigma are most important for them, and from whom do they feel stigmatized? How do Black Atheists feel that their fellow Americans views them in general? Do they feel double-barreled stigma?

The following two research questions were initially part of the broader ‘*How do Black Atheists perceive stigma?*’ research question. They have been parsed out in this document for clarity.

How do Black Atheists feel that they are viewed by 'Black America?' Do they feel they are viewed negatively? Do they feel if they are viewed as outsiders? Do they themselves feel like outsiders? Black Americans are the most likely to affirm statements like 'I would not vote for an Atheist for president,' and the least likely to report being non-religious or Atheist. Additionally, it is not lost on Black Atheists that religion, specifically Christianity is central to African-American culture. In fact the majority of Black Atheists are likely to have grown up in such a tradition. Does this, or do they believe that this can affect their interpersonal interactions with family and community members?

How do Black Atheists perceive they are viewed by 'mainstream Atheists?' How do Black Atheists feel that they are viewed by other non-Black Atheists? Do they feel embraced, marginalized, or somewhere in-between? What have their experiences been when interacting with other Atheists and mainstream Atheist groups? Additionally, it is important to get an understanding of how Black Atheists feel mainstream Atheist leaders, groups, and group members viewed them. How have they experienced raising issues of race in the context of larger more mainstream Atheist ideas? Do they feel stigmatized more for being Black? Alternatively, do they feel more stigmatized for being Atheist?

Summary

Taken together, these factors and unique set of social pressures are strongly suggestive of a unique 'Black Atheist' identity. And indeed, respondents described both an identity and emerging social space informed by the aforementioned social pressures, societal and cultural narratives, and navigating interpersonal relationships. Black Atheists

in this study perceived themselves as holding a unique ‘Black Atheist’ identity. That is, they believe their being Black, and their being Atheist inform each other in meaningful ways that affect their beliefs, behaviors, and lived experiences. They found meaning and solidarity in this label, using that term as well as in-group language like ‘us’ and ‘we’ to discuss themselves in conjunction with other Black Atheists. In the same way that it is impossible to get a fully nuanced understanding of Black Women without tending to it, so too is it impossible to fully understand Black Atheists without appreciating the interactive effects of their respective identities. Additionally, respondents described both an identity and emerging social space informed by the particular sets of challenges and racialized cultural and social pressures they face. Namely they perceived pervasive and intense racialized stigma against Atheists within Black communities and often their own families, and also feel social distance from Mainstream Atheists, whom they perceive to be inattentive to the particular challenges faced by Black Atheists. Respondents also linked being Black Atheists to the way that they navigated familial relationships, romantic relationships, and broader communal spaces, engaging in significant amounts of stigma management. Additionally there were potentially significant gendered ways in which respondents made sense of their identities, and linked them to the external world.

This dissertation makes that case for the above findings mentioned by introducing the dearth of knowledge on Black Atheists as problematic and explaining why understanding this population can lead to meaningful sociological insights. Through exploring relevant literature, outlining and explaining the methodology used to conduct this study of Black Atheists, discussing and analyzing results, and concluding and summarizing what the results of this project might mean for current academic

understandings; this project explores what it means to be a Black Atheist in America. This introduction has briefly touched on all of the above, and can be used as a roadmap for understanding this dissertation.

The remainder of the dissertation examines aspects of a Black atheist identity. Chapter Two reviews relevant literature from the fields of social psychology, sociology of religion, and critical race theory. Chapter Three highlights the data and methods used for this study. This is an exploratory study that collected data through open-ended semi-structured interviews. Chapters Four, Five, and Six explore the results of my study. The results have been organized into three separate chapters for clarity. Chapter Four focuses on discussions that respondents had about race and racialized experiences. More specifically this chapter tends to exploring the ways respondents understand Black Atheist identities, the ways in which they describe communal and interpersonal stigma as racialized, gender dynamics, and ways that Black Atheists in this study related their identities and romantic lives. Chapter Five focuses on the way that respondents strategically navigate the world given their perceptions of stigma, and how they manage stigma and their identities, particularly through the use of the closet. Chapter Six focuses on discussions respondents had about other Atheists and Atheism more broadly. Namely it focuses on the ways in which Black Atheists in this study find aspects of mainstream Atheism misplaced, how they perceive the relationship between these groups, and the positive beliefs professed by members of the sample. Chapter Seven offers a summation of findings, concluding thoughts, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, I examine the existing literature relevant to understanding Black Atheists. Drawing on literature from the sociology of religion, social psychology and critical race theory, this chapter provides a foundation for my research questions, namely, Is there a meaningful 'Black Atheist' identity? And if there is, how do people who claim a Black Atheist identity conceive of it? How does this identity relate to the way in which they live their lives? I examine specific themes drawn from the sociology of religion social psychology and critical race theory that speak to this study, such as, issues of stigma and stigma management, religiosity, Atheist identities, race in America, the closet, double-barreled stigma, and large-scale demographic work on Atheists, and the religious composition of America. This chapter demonstrates the paucity of literature about/on Black Atheists specifically, and Atheists more generally. It also identifies the theoretical foundations that underpin this project.

Sociological Knowledge About Atheists and Religion

What we know about Atheists is that they are mainly first-generation, disproportionately White, male, young, and have attended some college (Kosmin 2008). In America, women attend worship services and pray more frequently than do men (Freese 2004, Miller and Hoffman 1995). Women also outnumber men specifically in American Christian congregations are under-represented amongst non-believers at 40%, and represent an even smaller portion of self-identified Atheists at about one-third (Kosmin and Keysar 2009). Men represent about 60% of None's, and the gender split amongst self-identified Atheists is even higher with men accounting for 66% or nearly two-thirds of Atheists (Kosmin and Keysear 2009). In addition from studies done by

Edgell (2008) and others, we know that Atheists are among the most disliked, if not the most disliked, groups in the United States. In her 2010 article ‘Shared Visions,’ Penny Edgell also explores how Americans relate trust to several demographic labels. Like she finds with dislike, she reports Atheists as being among the most distrusted groups in the United States as well. These facts, becoming increasingly well-established in social science are probably not lost on Atheists, who as stated above consist of a population whose majority grew up religious. There are also several anecdotal examples that demonstrate this American stigma toward Atheists, and the tendency of Americans to rank Atheists even lower than most traditionally marginalized groups across a number of metrics. For instance, the Boy Scouts of America are very open about not accepting Atheists as members⁴. In 2015 the Boy Scouts of America overturned a ban on openly gay scout leaders, leaving Atheists as the last major group banned from leadership and youth membership (Freedom From Religion Press Release, 2015).

In a 2003 book, *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction*, Julian Baggini defines an Atheist as “someone who doesn’t believe in God and/or finds the very concept of God meaningless or incoherent” (Baggini 2003). In the 2009 article, *Atheism and Well-Being*, Zuckerman provides some additional insight into the population of Atheists, discussing the effect of divorce on Atheist and secular identity. Zuckerman reports that “Lawton and Bures found that kids whose parents had divorced were more likely to become “Nones” later in life than kids whose parents remained married, a finding confirmed by Zhai et al.”. In the same article Zuckerman also discusses the effect of having Atheist parents reporting “Nelsen (1990) found that among American families, if the father had no

⁴ The Boy Scouts of America is one of the largest youth groups in the country and one whose membership since its founding has exceeded 100 million,

religion but the mother did, about one-sixth of such children grew up to become religious “Nones;” if the mother had no religion but the father did, about half of such children became religious “Nones;” and if both parents had no religion, approximately 84 percent of such children grew up to have no religion themselves. Clearly, childhood socialization is a major factor in determining whether someone will be religious – or not” (Nelson 1990, Lawton and Bures 2001, Zhai et al. 2007, Zuckerman 2009).

The “Nones,” a category that includes people who self-identify as Atheists or agnostics, as well as those who say their religion is “nothing in particular,” now make up 23 percent of U.S. adults, up from 16 percent in 2007 (Cooperman, Smith, and Ritchie 2015, Zuckerman 2007). But there is more to the story. To begin with, this group is not uniformly nonreligious. Most of them say they believe in God, and about a third say religion is at least somewhat important in their lives.

At the same time, between the Pew Research Center’s two Religious Landscape Studies – conducted in 2007 and 2014 – we also see consistent evidence that the “Nones” are becoming *less* religious or more *Atheistic*. For example, the share of religious “Nones” who say they believe in God, while still a majority, has fallen from 70 percent to 61 percent over that seven-year period. Only 27 percent of “Nones” are absolutely certain about God’s existence, down from 36 percent in 2007. And fully a third of religiously unaffiliated Americans (33 percent) now say they do *not* believe in God, up 11 percentage points over that time.

Similar trends are recorded on some other key measures of religious engagement. The share of religious “Nones” who say they seldom or never pray has risen by six percentage points in recent years, and now stands at 62 percent. Additionally a bigger

proportion of the unaffiliated now say religion is not important in their lives (65 percent) than said this in 2007 (57 percent) (Pew 2015). The 2010 American Religious Identification Survey study on None's was the last to ascertain Atheist self-identity which stood at between two and three percent of the nation's population (Pew 2015). In Figure 2, see the composition of self-identification of American None's.

Figure 2. Composition of Religious Nones

Composition of the Religious “Nones”

	Among all U.S. adults			Among the religiously unaffiliated		
	2007	2014	Change	2007	2014	Change
	%	%		%	%	
Atheist/agnostic	4.0	7.0	+3.0	25	31	+6
Atheist	1.6	3.1	+1.5	10	13	+3
Agnostic	2.4	4.0	+1.6	15	17	+2
Nothing in particular	12.1	15.8	+3.7	75	69	-6
Religion not important ¹	6.3	8.8	+2.5	39	39	0
Religion important ¹	<u>5.8</u>	<u>6.9</u>	<u>+1.1</u>	<u>36</u>	<u>30</u>	-6
NET Unaffiliated	16.1	22.8	+6.7	100	100	

2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014. Figures may not add to totals indicated due to rounding.

¹Those who describe their religion as “nothing in particular” are subdivided into two groups. The “religion not important” group includes those who say (in Q.F2) religion is “not too” or “not at all” important in their lives as well as those who decline to answer the question about religion’s importance. The “religion important” category includes those who say religion is “very” or “somewhat” important in their lives.

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(Source: Cooperman, Smith, and Ritchie, 2015 ,Pew Religious Landscape Study, 2014)

However, the Atheist population is likely to be larger still, given that it is an identity that many Atheists may feel the need to hide from others, in the “closet” and one which they might not report to researchers. Zuckerman (2010) in his article, “Atheism and Contemporary Rates,” gives a good overview of the number of Americans who do not believe in God. Though these are all slightly different measures, they all reflect a lack of belief in God or gods which is the definition of ‘soft atheism.’ This is also known as Negative Atheism. Hard or Positive Atheists often have positive views associated with their atheism; and while very there is a very important distinction, both groups are demographically Atheists. In the broadest sense people that identify as agnostic are Atheists as well as they lack a belief in God. However, they are much less likely to assert ‘I do not have a belief in God,’ than are the rest of their fellow Atheists; who incorporate

such a statement into their identities. “According to Norris and Inglehart (2004), six percent of those in the United States do not believe in God. According to a 2004 survey commissioned by the British Broadcasting Corporation, nine percent of Americans do not believe in God. Rice (2003) found that slightly less than four percent (3.8%) of Americans don’t believe in God or “a spirit or life force.” According to Hout and Fischer (2002), between three and four and half a percent of Americans are either Atheist or agnostic; Marwell and Demerath (2003) suggest an estimate of seven percent. According to Froese (2001), eight percent of Americans are Atheist or agnostic. According to Gallup and Lindsay (1999), five percent of Americans do not believe in God or a “Higher Power,” (Froese 2001, Hout and Fischer 2002, Rice 2003, Marwell and Demerath 2003, Norris and Inglehart 2004, Zuckerman 2010).

The ARIS (American Religious Identification Survey) is a semi-annual study done in conjunction with Trinity University with the principal investigators being Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar. The study asks for religious self-identification and asks a number of questions about religious preferences and tendencies. They find that by re-categorizing people in terms of responses to the questions rather than in the way they self-identify, the population of the “no religion” group increases from about one sixth of Americans to about one fourth. This gap suggests a desire on the part of some not be labeled as non-religious and represents a rudimentary strategy of self-presentation which is calling oneself something else. This also lends credence to the hypothesis that the closet is a significant social space for a non-trivial number of Atheists, and may be even more utilized by already marginalized populations. They also find that most Atheists are the first generation, and only 32 percent report being Atheist even at the age of 12

(retroactively reporting at the time of the survey). It logically follows that reaching an ‘age of reason’ is very important in both questioning the beliefs that permeate society, and in the majority of cases one’s family, and in eventually developing non-religious views. This will be attended to in this project. However the age of reason is a concept that might warrant an investigation of its own in future studies (ARIS 2008).

In regards to some positive beliefs related to the Atheist identity, and what we might expect to find in a sample of Black Atheists, the work of Caldwell-Harris et al. (2010) gives us something of a starting point. In talking about an Atheist sample she selected from members on the American Atheist (which is one of the largest and most prominent mainstream Atheist organizations) website through a recruitment method, she writes:

“Responding to the question, “Have you ever felt wonderment or felt as if you were part of something greater than yourself?,” 71% said "yes," citing Nature (54%), Science, (30%), Music/Art (12%), and Human cooperation (8%). Respondents explained their lack of belief as deriving from a preference for logic and rationality, suggesting an intellectual component to atheism. Findings thus support the stereotype of Atheists as logical, skeptical, and non-conformist, but not as cynical and joyless” (Caldwell-Harris 2011).

Social Psychology

This project draws heavily on social psychological work and literature. Particularly, it is concerned with how respondents conceive of their Black Atheist identity, how they think of themselves in relation to that conception, notions of in-group belonging, stigma, and stigma management. Within social psychology, this dissertation is

particularly grounded in George Mead's ideas about the self-concept, and identity theory as conceived of by Erving Goffman.

Self-concept

Mead argues that the self is socially constructed through the creation and subsequent understanding of the generalized other, which is the predicted behavior of another in reaction to oneself (Mead 1967). This helps participation in social situations, by allowing individuals to potentially protect themselves from harm, as well as providing a guide to expected behaviors more generally. For Mead, the self is composed of two parts; the "I" and the "Me," (Mead 1967). Through interacting with others, the individual's conception of the generalized other is continually informed and updated, and through this process the self is too developed and maintained (Pond 2015, Mead 1967). The "I" is the agential component of the self, and is how the individual generally views himself or herself. The "Me" is the more reflective part of the self, and generally represents how the individual is viewed by others (Mead 1967). Stigma, and the potential for it to be punished in social interactions, is therefore important in the development of the "I," the "Me," and the self, and by extension understanding stigma. Black Atheists may be even more likely than others to be aware of, and tend to stigma in their everyday lives particularly because their religious identities are highly stigmatized among people who share their racial identity.

Identity Theory

Goffman examines the relationship between self-presentation and identity construction through noting that an individual's identity is composed of one's actual identity and one's virtual identity. Someone's virtual identity is essentially how others

perceive them, while one's actual identity is how they perceives themselves (Goffman 1963). He argues that these aspects of one's identity (both virtual and actual) are not always seamless nor mirror images of each other. In addition, he notes that one's identity is tied to "identity pegs" or what is viewed as unique markers to this person's identity as well as one's personal biography. Goffman specifically suggests that to examine the complexity behind identity, social scientists should explore stigmatized groups and people (Goffman 1959, Pond 2015).

As conceived of by Goffman, Mead, and most of their modern contemporaries; dramaturgical understandings of conceptualizations of the self, the looking glass self, salience, and transitions between roles are important for understanding interaction effects with stigma (Goffman 1959, Goffman 1963, Mead 1934). The self is most often conceived of as a collection of identities, which individuals selectively inhabit and enact. Unlike role theory though, an identity does not cease when not acutely active. Rather identities are used to filter and process social stimuli.

Social identities are evaluative in nature and are used to evaluate not only the group but its individual members. Therefore groups are motivated to maintain positive evaluative status of their in-group. Social identity involves two socio-cognitive processes (Bauman 1990). The first is categorization or the production or reproduction of intergroup boundaries. The second is self-enhancement, which states that members of the in-group strive to maintain positive evaluative status and to do so may compare the in-group relative to the out-group in such a way that favors the in-group. Self-categorization and self-enhancement feed into "subjective belief structures" which structure how groups

interact. With most groups reluctant to accept them as in-group members, Black Atheists spend even more time than most marginalized groups being seen as ‘the other.’

Zygmunt Bauman (1990) conceptualizes social identities as being set up as dichotomies. “In dichotomies crucial for the practice and the vision of social order the differentiating power hides as a rule behind one of the members of the opposition. The second member is but the other of the first, the opposite (degraded, suppressed, exiles) side of the first and its creation. Thus abnormality is the other of the norm... woman the other of man, stranger the other of native, enemy the other of friend, ‘them’ the other of ‘us’...” (Bauman 1990). In its broadest sense stigma is a marker of social deviance (or deviation), used to identify individuals that violate or defy norms. Goffman describes stigma as something that "spoils" recognition of the individual's adherence to social norms in other facets of self (Goffman 1963). In other words, when stigma is activate the deviant trait is being perceived by others, the stigmatized identity or trait in question becomes the defining feature of the individual. More recently, in “Conceptualizing Stigma,” Phelan and Link (2001) have interpreted stigma as the convergence of four different factors: (1) differentiation and labeling of various segments of society; (2) linking the labeling of different social demographics to prejudices about these individuals; (3) the development of an us-versus-them ethic; and (4) disadvantaging the people who are labeled and placed in the "them" category (Goffman 1963, Boundless 2014).

Stigma and Stigma Management

Goffman’s work on stigma and stigma management explains that being stigmatized or to be perceived as having a stigma is undesirable (Pond 2015).

Specifically, he notes stigma “is really a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype.” Stereotypes as well as the stigma embedded within are both created and managed through interactions with others (Goffman 1963, Pond 2015). In a strikingly similar way to its historical application to African-Americans, Goffman states “we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce [their] life chances.” Subsequently those stigmatized individuals who are aware of this potential discrimination likely undergo stigma management (Goffman 1963, Pond 2015). In the case of Black Atheists, it seems certain that they are aware of the stigma they suffer from as Black people, and very likely to be aware of the potential stigma they could suffer from for being Atheists. Furthermore, they are also likely to be aware of the particularly unique and intense way that Atheists are stigmatized within Black communities more broadly. If true, this may even make them more likely than White Atheists to be aware of Atheist stigma more broadly, in addition to the potentially more narrow racialized way in which it might affect them.

For Edgell stigma against Atheists specifically is fundamentally a function of the concept of ‘otherness.’ This is stated both explicitly by her respondents, saying that Atheists did not share their visions of America or ‘what is good,’ in addition to being inherently juxtaposed as ‘other’ to any religion (Edgell 2010). In America Edgell surmises, Atheists are the quintessential other, perceived as being outside the bounds of national understandings of morality, untrustworthy, and immoral. The historical basis for racial formation and stigma attached to race, Blacks (along with Native Americans) are the traditionally quintessential ‘other’ of American history and culture. Lying at this

intersection are Black Atheists; seen as other, and consequently stigmatized by nearly every other segment of the population.

Negotiating Closetable Stigmatized Identities

As a bridge between identity theory and navigating multiple stigmatized identities that appear to conflict with one another, take the 2011 study "The Negotiation of Closetable Identities: A narrative Analysis of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered Queer Jewish Identity." Sandra Faulker interviewed LGBTQ Jewish individuals to investigate closetable identities, providing a particularly unique opportunity to understand the nuances of the identity negotiation processes at the intersection of multiple stigmatized identities (Faulkner 2011, Davis 2008, McCall 2005). Faulkner distinguishes 'Closetable identities' as those identities that can be concealed by utilization of the closet, from those identities like skin color that manifest themselves in more physically visible ways (Faulkner, 2011). She uses The Communication Theory of Identity (TCTI) as the frame through which to analyze her data showing how the interpenetrations of "identity layers and critical elements created changes and conflict in participants' lives that necessitated negotiating their LGBTQ Jewish identity" (Faulkner 2011). Her analyses of respondents interviews also revealed "conflicts related to self-perception, experiences, perceptions of others, and enactments of being LGBTQ and Jewish, many of which revolved around issues of alienation" (Faulkner 2011).

Willis had very similar findings in his 2009 study of Black gay men in the south (Willis 2009). This leaves significant potential for identity gaps to emerge, which in turn are likely to produce mostly negative outcomes (Faulkner 2011, Willis 2009). Respondents thematically described a sense of strain that was ever present in their lives

and they often mentioned explicitly seeking communities of support for one or both identity elements (Faulkner 2011, Willis 2009). Something similar likely applies to Black Atheists, with the notable difference of atheism often being potentially easier to hide (more closetable) than are sexual preferences and mannerisms. That is to say, negotiating the closet in an attempt to minimize strain, one is actually doing work that is itself a significant stressor. Because of the high degree of salience that religion particularly Christianity has in the Black community, it is likely that Black Atheists proceed with the most extreme of caution in this particular instance of negotiating the closet.

Using The Closet For Stigma Management

A notable feature of being in the closet for homosexuals is that, of course, not every aspect of being in the closet is positive and Paul Willis through three papers 'Laboring in Silence: Young Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer-Identifying Workers' Negotiations of the Workplace Closet in Australian Organizations', 'It Really is Water Off Our Backs: Young LGBTQ People's Strategies For Resisting and Refuting Homonegative Practices in Australian Workplaces', and 'From Exclusion to Inclusion: Young Queer Workers' Negotiations of Sexually Exclusive and inclusive Spaces in Australian Workplaces' tells us about some of the negative consequences of being in the closet through the study of the workplace (Willis 2010, Willis 2009). Willis tells us about 'The workplace closet in Australia which he calls a fundamental fixture in the working lives of many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ)-identifying employees who do not feel safe for their sexual identity to be known in their place of employment. He also tells about the processes of identity management that some workers adhere to for ensuring that LGBQ sexual identities remain invisible during work hours (Willis 2010,

Willis 2009). This strategy of remaining invisible often results of a feeling of being disconnected; and can even result in a lack of productivity which ultimately costs the respondent pay or their job entirely. How readily these strategies and consequences map onto the closet Atheist population is not yet known, but his investigation of workplace stigma is very insightful (Willis 2010). Furthermore, Willis (2009) tells us that the closet may also be a source of stigma itself, with the closeted individual being seen as not genuine, fake, or not true to oneself (Willis 2009). This means that there are possibly more consequences that result from stigma from the in group than previously considered and that some seeking out a place of safety may actually find the closet quite hostile because of this question of authenticity.

Conceptualizing How Race Might Affect the Social Space of the Closet

Several studies the work that examines the phenomenon of ‘becoming Atheist’ strongly suggests that becoming Atheist is a process rather than an acute event or transformation (Smith 2011). Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that ‘coming out’ as Atheist (or gay for that matter) is a thing of privilege (Kosmin 2009); with both the engagement of the process of coming out as well as ultimately identifying oneself as a part of a stigmatized other is something that correlates with SES, race, gender, and other markers of privilege (Edgell 2006, American Religious Identification Survey 2006, ARIS: Nones 2008). Additionally, it is likely notable that being Atheist is one of the easiest ‘closetbale identities’ to hide (Faulker 2011). In America not only are Blacks systematically ‘unprivileged’ but they are also as a consequence vastly overrepresented in the lower rungs of the socio-economic hierarchy as well (Squires 2014, Pew Trends in Social Life 2012, United States Census 2012). These factors make it very likely that the

closet is an important intellectual, developmental, and social space for Atheists in general, and particularly Black Atheists (and likely other marginalized Atheists). As one would therefore expect there are very few Black Atheists, amounting to about 1% of the African American population, and about 1% to 2% of the American Atheist population respectively (Kosmin 2009, Hart 2014). Black Atheists if narrowly defined in terms of self-identification amount to about 0.15% - 0.25% of the population but has grown rapidly over the last decade (Kosmin 2009).

As a result of this stigma and small population size, Black Atheists are likely more inclined to be in the closet or display closeted behavior, which is almost certain to have meaningful implications (Smith 2011). The closet is a term used in literature on homosexuals (LGBTQ studies, queer theory, gender studies, etc.) that describes the fact that this group sometimes remains hidden to the population at large. Although there exists little or no literature on closet Atheists (which a subsequent project can hopefully remedy) there is a body of literature from queer theory that this project will draw from. Here I articulate three aspects of the closet as conceived of about homosexuals by LGBTQ literature, and discuss how work on Atheists may take expand our knowledge of the closet, how it is negotiated, and the implications of making use of closeted spaces.

Somerville (2010) in, "Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Racial Closet Criticism," describes the closet both as a place of comfort and safety for those with homosexual identities as well as a place of growth and development, meaning that the closet is not simply a place where people with already achieved and hardened identities reside, but a place where ambiguous, undecided, deciding, and newly decided people go to grow and strengthen their identities.

Additionally most work suggests coming out of the closet is likely to be a process. From Bell (2003), Seideman (2005), and Somerville's research on coming out in the LGBTQ community (2003, 2005) we can begin to get a good grasp on what it means to come out of the closet. Though some like Smith would argue that coming out of the closet is the last step in the realization of one's Atheist identity, the confounding literature makes an excellent point. That is, the closet is a social space where many people with fully formed identities do indeed traverse, and can serve as a place of safety from hostile others regardless of whether or not one is seeking comfort from similar peers or seeking to develop/do identity work (Somerville 2008). Somerville also mentions that without an accompanying analysis of race or racialization, that the nuances of behavior cannot be fully understood (Somerville 2010).

How the unique racialized nature of Black Atheist's identities affects their use of the closet is something that this dissertation will tend to. However, the Huffington Post's interview of Jonathan, a 29-year-old Washingtonian sheds some light on what potentially may be found. He said "his lack of religion has been nearly paralyzing," and that "If I want a second date or a job in the community, I won't say I'm an Atheist. It's like we're fighting for our rights all over again." In fact the man interviewed in the article is known only to us as Jonathon because "[he] wouldn't reveal his last name out of fear of backlash among friends and family," (Oduah and Bohn 2010).

Many aspects of extant closet literature seem plausibly analogous to what might be observed in a closet Atheist population, while others seem likely not to intersect both closet Atheist and closet homosexual populations. Things likely to fall in the latter category are physical manifestations of sexuality; such as clothing, hairstyles, jewelry,

observed social behaviors like dating, flirting, or visiting clubs or other places notable for their homosexual patronage, which at least at first glance seem to have no direct analogue in closet Atheist populations. For this reason, an examination of how they negotiate their closetable identities would further our understanding of Black Atheists (Willis 2009, Smith 2011).

How Critical Understandings of Sexuality and Gender Can Be Applied To Understand the Space of The Closet for Black Atheists

Queer theory draws upon the works of Willis and Faulkner and is further theoretical basis for an investigation on Black Atheists. As is the case with the two studies above, there has been work done specifically on the intersection and navigation of multiple stigmatized identities, including a Black queer identity. Queer theory also contains significant work on the closet, most often conceived of as a space of growth and development, but often at the cost of authenticity (Evans 1999). Navigating the closet can also entail a significant amount of time, work, and energy (Swann 2015). Because they lie at the intersection of multiple stigmatized identities and are often stigmatized by their own in-groups, there is a good chance that the closet is a significant social space for Black Atheists.

How Being Black And Being Atheist Likely Leads To Double Barreled Stigma

Black Atheists concurrently hold two identities that rank at the bottom of their respective social hierarchies. On average, Americans demonstrate more stigmatized view toward Blacks than they do toward any other race (Cribbs 2012). At the same time, Americans on average demonstrate more stigmatized views towards Atheists than any other religious demographic (Edgell 2006, Edgell 2010). Simultaneously holding these

identities is likely to affect the way Black Atheists perceive stigma. This study will tend to what, if any interactive effects holding these two stigmatized identities have on Black Atheists, and explore their intersection. In other words, in what ways does being both Black and Atheist produce a unique set of experiences for respondents? Double-barreled stigma will be further conceptualized and discussed on page 54. Though the next two subsections conceptualize each respective barrel (stigma against Atheists, and stigma against Blacks) individually, it is important to remember that Black Atheists in this study reported experiencing these simultaneously and/or in conjunction with one another.

How Atheists are Stigmatized

Penny Edgell (2006, 2010) has twice conducted studies on the perception of Atheists in American society. Each time her results showed that not only were Atheists among the most stigmatized groups in the US, but that they were the most stigmatized group in the United States (Edgell 2006, Edgell 2010). Edgell analyzed data collected by the American Mosaic Project in 2003 in her paper “Atheists As Other” and used both phone surveys and administered paper surveys to collect her data using a random national sample derived from the census in ‘Shared Visions’. In Figure 3, the notable results are that out of all categories of people asked about Americans were most likely to say that they would not want their child to marry an Atheist, and that they would be less likely to vote for an Atheist president than a president categorized by any other word including Muslim, and gay (Edgell 2006).

Figure 3. Acceptance of Atheists Among Americans

Table 1. Public and Private Acceptance, Ranked Groups

Responses	%
This Group Does Not At All Agree with My Vision of American Society	
Atheists	39.6
Muslims	26.3
Homosexuals	22.6
Conservative Christians	13.5
Recent Immigrants	12.5
Hispanics	7.6
Jews	7.4
Asian Americans	7.0
African Americans	4.6
White Americans	2.2
I Would Disapprove if My Child Wanted to Marry a Member of This Group	
Atheist	47.6
Muslim	33.5
African American	27.2
Asian American	18.5
Hispanic	18.5
Jew	11.8
Conservative Christian	6.9
White	2.3

Source: American Mosaic Project Survey, 2003.

(Source: Edgell 2006, American Mosaic Project Survey, 2003)

Figure 4 offers a different way of understanding broad sentiments about Atheists by examining hypothetical voting behavior of Americans. Respondents to the Gallup poll (2015) were asked if they would vote for a well-qualified nominee of their own party given that person was a member of a certain demographic group/held a certain demographic characteristic (X Variable). More reservation was displayed toward voting for a qualified Atheist candidate (only 58% say they would) than any other category of religious person, and every demographic except for Socialist (47%) (Gallup 2015). Atheist is also the category of person American's are most likely to say they would not vote for (40%), again second only to people labeled socialist (50%). Because socialist is inherently political in a way the other categories are not, the potential pool of people who might vote for them is small relative to the other categories. This arguably makes Atheists the least disliked group across the political spectrum. The notion of a

conservative socialist or socialist Republican is absurd in the current political climate. In fact, they are essentially oppositional labels.

Figure 4. Would Americans Vote For a Qualified Candidate of Their Own Party if That Person were a _____?

Between now and the 2016 political conventions, there will be discussion about the qualifications of presidential candidates -- their education, age, religion, race and so on. If your party nominated a generally well-qualified person for president who happened to be _____, would you vote for that person?

	Yes, would	No, would not
	%	%
Catholic	93	6
A woman	92	8
Black	92	7
Hispanic	91	8
Jewish	91	7
Mormon	81	18
Gay or lesbian	74	24
An evangelical Christian	73	25
Muslim	60	38
An atheist	58	40
A socialist	47	50

June 2-7, 2015

GALLUP®

(Source: McCarthy 2015, Gallup 2015)

Edgell also reports that Americans are most likely to label Atheists as someone ‘who does not agree with their vision of America’ and deem them the least trustworthy of all Americans (Edgell 2010). The American Mosaic Project was undertaken in 2003, in a post-9/11 America where anti-Muslim rhetoric was at or near its peak. That Atheists could be seen as ‘less American’ or more deviant than Muslims at such a time and in such a social context speaks to the deep-seeded and almost reactionary dislike for Atheists broadly shared across American society. This kind of stigma as Smith’s work notes on Atheist identities certainly affects the development and expression of the Atheist

identity. Because religiosity varies by race, as does the manner in which the irreligious are stigmatized, there are likely to be some very stark differences between the experience of being a Black Atheist and the experience of being a White Atheist (Smith 2011, Zuckerman 2013). This is made even more likely as the nature of moral judgments (including stigmas and taboos) make them susceptible to varying by race (Ricciardelli 2013).

Much of Phil Zuckerman's research deals with the relationship between being Atheist and self-reported well-being are related, and is useful for connecting ideas about stigma with ideas about well-being. Using in-depth interviews, Zuckerman's results in 'Atheism, Secularity and Well-Being,' were in line with the vast majority of studies indicating that secular people do not seem to fare as well as their religious peers when it comes to many aspects of psychological wellbeing (Zuckerman 2009). In discussing potential reasons for these findings Zuckerman states that "there is certainly the possibility that because being non-religious in the United States makes one a member of a widely un-liked, distrusted, and stigmatize minority, this could take a psychological toll on the mental health and sense of well-being of Atheists and secular people, who may suffer from a sense of isolation, alienation, or rejection from family, colleagues, or peers" (Zuckerman 2009). In fact, as shown in Figure 5, of all the potential traits voters are asked about, "not believing in God" is the trait they find to be the absolute worst.

Figure 5. American Support of Perception of Candidate Traits

Candidate Traits: Positives and Negatives

<i>A candidate who is/has/does...</i>	More likely to support	Less likely to support	No difference	DK
	%	%	%	%
Served in military	49	4	47	1=100
Been a governor	37	5	55	3=100
Been a business executive	35	14	49	2=100
A woman	14	7	77	1=100
Black	7	3	89	1=100
Been an elected official in Washington for many years	26	25	46	3=100
Hispanic	8	11	80	1=100
Been divorced	3	11	85	1=100
Used marijuana in the past	5	24	69	2=100
Mormon	5	25	68	3=100
Homosexual	3	33	62	2=100
Never held elected office	9	51	38	3=100
Had an extramarital affair	2	46	49	3=100
Not believe in God	5	61	33	2=100

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(Source: Kohut et al 2011, Pew 2011)

According to Figures 4 and 5, coming out as Atheist is a risk; a mark of stigma that comes with potential costs and consequences. Because Blacks in America already suffer from one of the worst social stigmas they are probably less likely to embrace other highly stigmatized identities (Edgell 2010).

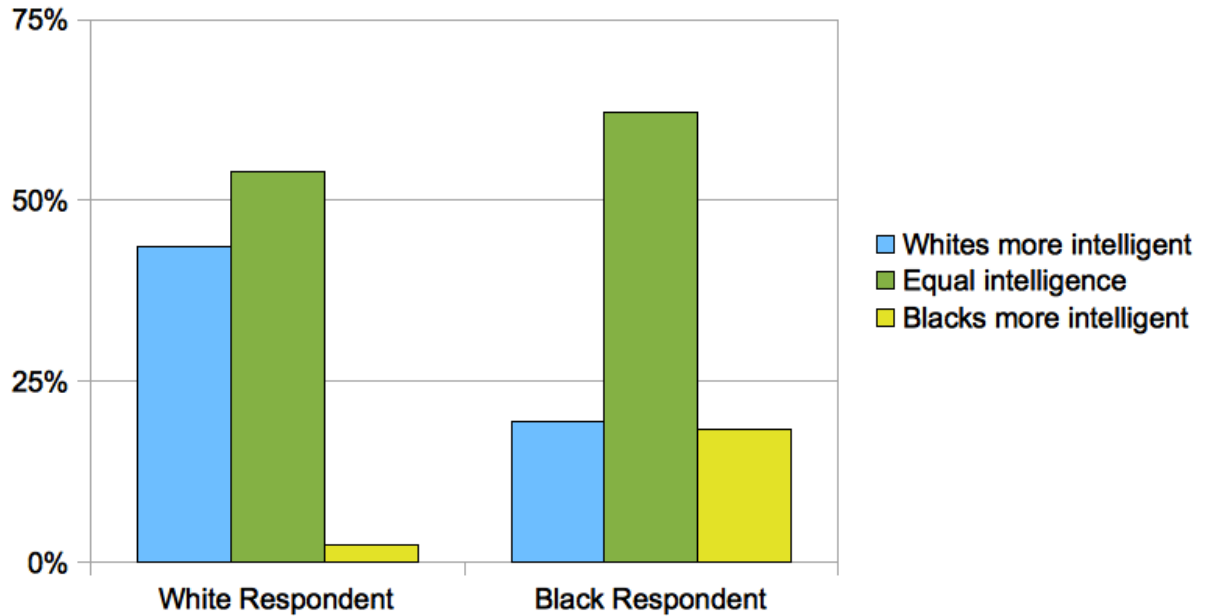
How Blacks in America are Stigmatized

Black Americans have higher unemployment rates overall by about double, twenty times less wealth, higher unemployment rates even when controlling for education level, higher poverty rates, lower incomes, and shorter life expectancies than their White American counterparts (Rehme 2007, Gallagher 2003). We also know that race still matters for attitudinal judgments and beliefs, and that though there has been a general upward trend in terms of more accepting racial attitudes perceptions of Blacks still differ

strongly from other races (Cribbs 2012). Black people are stigmatized as less intelligent, lazier, less disciplined, and a whole host of other negative stereotypes. This sort of racist stereotyping is illustrated in Figures 6 and 7. Among racial groups, Americans still say they are least likely to vote for a Black president or would accept an interracial marriage with a child. Similarly Blacks are seen as the racial group least likely to be viewed as 'sharing my values' by more Americans than any other racial group. Stereotypes and narratives about Black people further stigmatize them and marginalize them. Black sounding names are less likely to get call backs on resumes, and internet sales associated with Black bodies are much more likely to have their trustworthiness questioned. There are very few sectors of society or the economy in which Black Americans are not stigmatized and marginalized; playing a role in socialization, identity development, self-presentations, and cultural practices.

Figure 6. Perceptions of Racial Variance and Intelligence by Race

Who sees whites and blacks as equally intelligent?

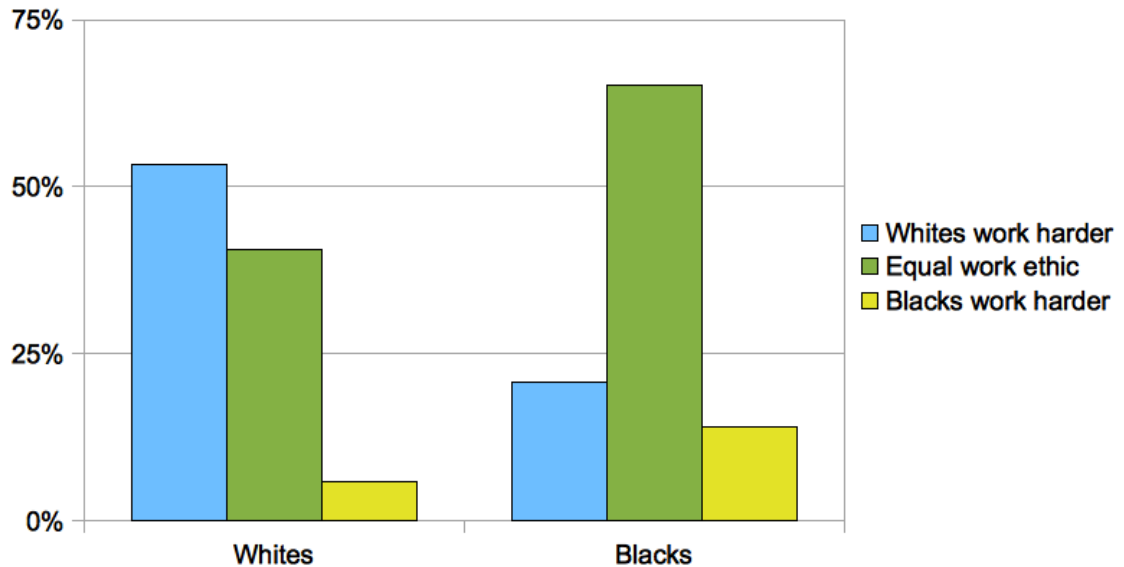


Graph by Corner of Church & State, an RNS blog
Source: 2012 American National Election Study
Based on questions asking respondents to rate different groups on seven-point scale.
Answers shown based on race of respondent.

(Source: Corner of Church & State, 2012, American National Election Survey, 2012)

Figure 7. Perception of Work Habits by Race

Who sees whites and blacks as equally hard working?



Graph by Corner of Church & State, an RNS blog
Source: 2012 American National Election Study
Based on questions asking respondents to rate different groups on seven-point scale.
Answers shown based on race of respondent.

(Source: Corner of Church & State, 2012, American National Election Survey, 2012)

Notably for the purposes of this project, anti-Black bias increases both implicitly and explicitly when the perceived prevalence of Blacks is increased. Anti-Black bias for example, is higher in states and cities where Black people are a relatively large share of the local population, and against those things perceived to be 'Black' like 'welfare'. (Gillborn 2008, Gervais 2011). This could very well be the case, with concerted pushback (subconscious or not) against Black Atheists perceived as trying to influence mostly White spaces. If so, it undoubtedly played a role in the formation of Black Atheist identities and groups.

A Racial Component to Religious Stigma

Stigma operates at numerous levels of the social sphere and at several social sites at the same time. In researching stigma as it pertained to religion in a small Ohio town, Vassenden (2011) finds that certain words carry extra weight/assumptions with them while others are devoid of most meaning. Vassenden remarked that 'White' transmitted very little about the religion while 'non-White' transmitted with it quite a bit about a person's religion. An important observation is that Whiteness hides information about faith, or even signals 'secular', whereas non-Whiteness signifies 'religious' across the racial boundary (Vassenden 2011). Because words like religious and secular carry different meanings depending on the race they are associated with, it highly probable that this phenomenon extends to Black Atheists. It is also likely that this perception extends to other Atheists; who are probably much less likely to assume or accept that a Black American is an Atheist.

Conceptualizing Double-Barreled Stigma

A fairly new conceptual framework is that of double-barreled stigma. Discussed in passing by Nyda et al. in 'Does Inclusive Practice and Staff Training Actually Make A Difference? Tackling Awareness of Heterosexism Within A Significant Provider of Community Mental Health Services,' describe it as suffering from two kinds of stigma at once. They specifically mention some of their respondents; LGBTQ individuals who sought mental health services, "feared double barreled stigma," (Nyda 2014). Through this double-barreled stigma, their respondents fear that their being stigmatized or otherwise seen as deviant for being LGBTQ would work not just in addition to, but in conjunction with their being stigmatized for their mental health. Though Willis does not

use the term himself, his work on gay Black men in the south also touches on the topic of double-barreled stigma (Willis 2012).

Because Blacks are in many ways the most stigmatized race in America, and Atheists the most stigmatized religious orientation, stigma is almost certainly an important consideration in the development of Black Atheist identities, and the Black Atheist experience more broadly (Pew 2012). Since we know that each component of Black Atheist identities is stigmatized, and particularly because of the way that Atheists are stigmatized among Black Americans, if and how these two stigmatized identities interact to produce a discernable double-barreled stigma is of both import and interest.

This particular intersection of identities and potential incarnation of double-barreled stigma has yet to be investigated. By learning about the intersection of the most stigmatized racial identity, and the most stigmatized religious identity it is possible to learn a great deal about how stigma operates, and stigma management. In turn understanding Black Atheists has the potential to help of the ongoing conceptualization of double-barreled stigma.

Race, Racial Identity, And Religious Affiliation Among Blacks: The Connection Between Religion And Black Americans

As mentioned previously, religiosity, spirituality, and the physical space of churches have played a uniquely important role in the Black experience in America, and have culturally infused into Black culture and Black communities more broadly. Studies on religion and race consistently show that racial minorities are on average more religious-and demonstrate more intensity in their religious beliefs than do Whites; and that in many ways religion, church, and spirituality are more culturally embedded in

African-American lives than in the lives of their fellow citizens (Gallup Daily Tracking Jan-May 2011). As is demonstrated in Figure 8, Blacks are the more likely than other Americans to self-identify as religious (86%), and very religious (53%). At the same time they are far and away the least likely to identify as non-religious (13%) (Gallup, 2011).

Figure 8. American Religiosity By Race

Religiousness by Race and Ethnic Groups

	Very religious	Moderately religious	Nonreligious
White Americans	39%	26%	34%
Black Americans	53%	33%	13%
Hispanic Americans	45%	33%	22%
Asian Americans	29%	32%	39%

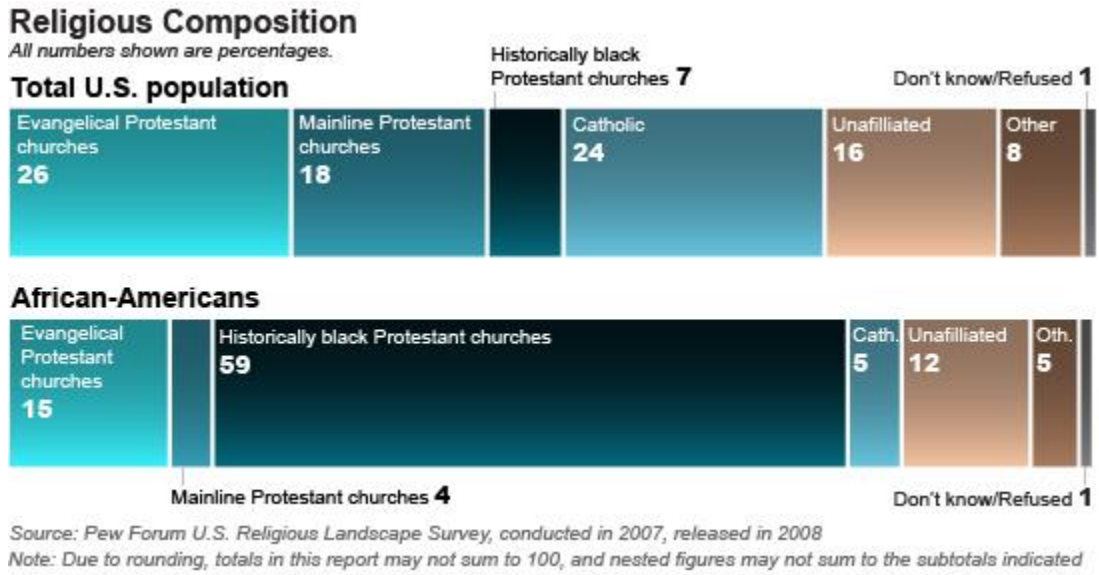
Gallup Daily tracking, January-May 2011

GALLUP[®]

(Source: Newport, 2011, Gallup, 2011)

Black Americans are also significantly more likely than other Americans to express religious or spiritual sentiments, believe that supernatural or religious forces affect their daily lives, and participate in behaviors that indicate religiosity such as church attendance and prayer. “While the U.S. is generally considered a highly religious nation, African-Americans are markedly more religious on a variety of measures than the U.S. population as a whole, including level of affiliation with a religion, attendance at religious services, frequency of prayer and religion’s importance in life.” As shown in Figure 9, compared with other racial and ethnic groups, Black Americans are the most likely to report having a formal religious affiliation at 87 percent (U.S. Religious Landscape Survey by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life 2007). Among American public overall, 83 percent of people are affiliated with a religion (Seghal 2009).

Figure 9. Black Religious Identification Compared To The Religious Identification of All Americans



“The Landscape Survey also finds that nearly eight-in-ten African-Americans (79%) say religion is very important in their lives, compared with 56 percent among all U.S. adults. In fact, even a large majority (72%) of African-Americans who report to be unaffiliated with any particular faith say religion plays at least a somewhat important role in their lives; nearly half (45%) of unaffiliated African-Americans say religion is very important in their lives, roughly three times the percentage who says this among the religiously unaffiliated population overall (16%). Indeed, on this measure, unaffiliated African-Americans more closely resemble the overall population of Catholics (56 percent say religion is very important) and mainline Protestants (52%).

Additionally, several measures illustrate the distinctiveness of the Black community when it comes to religious practices and beliefs. More than half of African-Americans (53%) report attending religious services at least once a week, more than three-in-four (76%) say they pray on at least a daily basis and nearly nine-in-ten (88%)

indicate they are absolutely certain that God exists. On each of these measures, African-Americans stand out as the most religiously committed racial or ethnic group in the nation. Even those African-Americans unaffiliated with any religious group pray nearly as often as the overall population of mainline Protestants (48 percent of unaffiliated African-Americans pray daily versus 53 percent of all mainline Protestants). And unaffiliated African-Americans are about as likely to believe in God with absolute certainty (70%) as are mainline Protestants (73%) and Catholics (72%) overall” (Seghal 2009).

Conversely, they are far and away the least likely to identify as having ‘no religion.’ And African-Americans that do identify as having no religion or unaffiliated are just about as likely as religious individuals of other races to express religious sentiments or perform religious behaviors or rituals. These factors likely combine to produce a group that is more stigmatizing and more distrusting of Atheists than the American population in general, which in turn creates a unique set of social pressures for those who self-identify, let alone self-present as Atheist.

In America being Black and spiritual is almost a given. Many studies show that Americans see spirituality (especially Christianity) as an essential part of Blackness (Raboteau 2000, Sawyer 2000, Lackey 2007, Schnoor 2006). Indeed every recent poll bears this out with African-Americans measuring significantly higher than other Americans on mostly every fundamental measure of religiosity including church attendance, prayer, literal interpretation of religious text, and importance of religious belief (Pew Trends In Social Life, 2012). Table 2 shows how even unaffiliated Blacks are about as likely to believe in Angels and Demons (66%) as the average American

regardless of religious affiliation (68%) (Pew Forum U.S. Religious Landscape, 2008).

Both critical race theory and sociology of religion literatures have examined this connection and implications of such an association.

Table 2. Comparison of Black and Non-Black Religious Beliefs

	<i>Believes in...God Absolutely Certain</i>	<i>Believes in...Literal Interpretation of Scripture</i>	<i>Believes in...Miracles</i>	<i>Believes in...Angels and Demons</i>	<i>Believes in...Life After Death Absolute Certainty</i>
Among...					
Among African-Americans	88	55	84	83	58
Protestants	91	60	88	87	63
Members of Hist Black Churches	91	62	88	87	61
Members of Evangelical Churches	93	62	88	89	71
Members of Mainline Churches	89	27	80	76	52
Catholic	80	43	83	73	47
Unaffiliated	70	33	70	66	34
Total Population	71	33	79	68	50
Protestants	84	46	86	79	62
Members of Hist Black Churches	90	62	88	87	62
Members of Evangelical Churches	90	59	88	87	71
Members of Mainline Churches	73	22	81	65	49
Catholic	72	23	83	69	45
Unaffiliated	36	11	55	40	21

(Source: Pew Forum U.S. Religious Landscape, 2008)

There is also a very well documented connection between Black religiosity and Black culture that spans both critical race and sociology of religion literature. Sawyer (2000) concludes that in the Black American community, religion and spirituality have always been central to the ‘project of seeking change,’ while Raboteau says that historically, the idea of “social justice and Black religion [seem] inseparable” (Raboteau 2000, Sawyer 2000, Zuckerman 2002, Zuckerman 2000). If experiences of marginalized others in religious communities are any indication, then Black Atheists face not only significant stigma, but significant social exclusion from communal activities (Yip 2002, Smith 2011). When studied more formally, “Atheists now [and have for several decades] rank at the bottom of large-scale polls of cultural inclusion,” and that amongst Black communities this effect is likely exacerbated (Gervais 2011, Edgell 2010, Edgell 2006).

Additionally, ‘Black Atheist’ seems to be an inherent racialized identity label (Lackey 2007, Swann 2015). While there are innumerable forms of religious practices among Black Christian and other Black theists, it is often the churches that carry the racialized label ‘Black churches’ rather than the church members themselves as ‘Black Christians’ (Lackey 2007, Winston 2012). For Lackey, Marti, and others this means that on occasions Black Christians share an important and usually beneficial connection with the dominant group, White Christians (Lackey 2007, Marti 2008, McQueeney 2009). There is an increasing body of literature on culture of poverty/cultural racism. However, the one thing that cultural racist tropes and arguments tend to avoid is Black religiosity, particularly Black Christianity (Farrakhan for instance would not be given a pass on his religiosity by similar people). Work ethic, language, fashion, music and art, and cultural values are all very much fair game for cultural racist tropes which have and continue to

take the form of arguments which place ‘Ebonics,’ ‘sagging,’ rap, or welfare as the reason for persisting inequality. In fact Black religiosity is often the only thing immune from such arguments (Haney-Lopez 2013). The implications of this both for Black Atheists and Black Christians are numerous and warrant further investigation on its own. However, for the purposes of this paper the most notable takeaway is that Black Atheists lack the most common pathway used to bridge the Black White divide in America. Black Atheists by virtue of not believing in God also lack the quality a plurality if not majority of Americans believe one needs to be a good moral person (Lackey 2007, Marti 2008, Wadsworth 2010, McQueeney 2009). This is a socially isolating set of circumstances, with Atheist voices being more or less excluded from public policy initiatives and coalitions for reform, social justice, or racial justice. The implications of this and other instances of social isolation for Black Atheists will be explored further in subsequent sections of this paper.

Lastly, in the 2014 paper, “Interaction of Socio-structural Characteristics Predicts Identity Concealment and Self- Esteem in Stigmatized Minority Group Member,” Plante uses structural equation modeling of survey responses to measure whether ‘socio-structural characteristics’ interact to predict concealment strategies as a way of managing perceived stigma. She found that “perceived permeability of intergroup boundaries predicted increased endorsement of concealment, moderated by the legitimacy and stability of intergroup status differences. Interacting socio-structural characteristics also predicted self-esteem, an effect mediated by identity concealment. The results illustrate that socio-structural characteristics can help predict stigmatized minority group members’ endorsement of identity concealment despite its potentially maladaptive effects,” (Plante

2014). In short, likely because they are already aware that they are stigmatized, minorities are much more likely to support concealment of a closetable identity despite the negative effects such identity concealment can have (Plante 2014). This is likely highly relevant in understanding Black Atheist identities, and becoming Atheist process.

Critical Race Theory and the Potential of Black Atheist Intellectual Spaces

While traditional understandings of race make religiosity and Christianity especially central to understanding the African-American experience (which it in fact is), critical race theory does not draw on ideas rooted in African-American Christian tradition to undertake analysis. In fact Kimberl'e Crenshaw writes that CRT (critical race theory) is interdisciplinary, borrowing "from several traditions, including liberalism, law and society, feminism, Marxism, poststructuralism, critical legal theory, pragmatism, and nationalism" (Paradise 2014). Drawing on such traditions allows for exploration of Black identities that deviate from traditional understandings of race, which often presume a religious frame. Using CRT concepts including 'Ordinary Theology' allows for the deconstructed understanding of intersections between race and religion.

One-Percenters

As mentioned before, these social factors and sets of arrangements as result in a very small number of Blacks in America identifying as Atheists. Tracing milestones of an emerging Atheist, secular humanist, and naturalistic imagination; Hart draws on "A Religious Portrait of African Americans," a 2007 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life that characterizes Atheists, agnostics, and other freethinkers as approximately one percent of the Black population (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2009). Based on 2010 census data that puts the Black population in American at

around 42 million, this would put the number of Black Atheists at just over 400,000. Calling the subjects of his article “one percenters,” after the 5-percenters that evolved out/left the Nation of Islam, he claims that atheism, secular humanism, and naturalism represent three perspectives of the same phenomenon (Hart 2014). That is, despite discrepancies in labels and certain positive beliefs, that these perspectives especially amongst African-Americans share so much in common warrant they be grouped as “one percenters”. Chief among these similarities is that they are “the dialectical other of theism,” constituted of similar kinds of religious objections and naturalistic affirmations (Hart 2014). Additionally he asserts that in all three cases, “negating theism does a similar kind of productive and creative work, energizing a different kind of affirmation” (Hart 2014). This small population, high potential incidences of closeted behavior, and the marginalized social position that both ‘Atheists’ and ‘Blacks’ occupy in America are likely important in understanding the way that Black Atheist identities have developed.

Summary

Taken together, existing theoretical work in the sociology of religion, social psychology, especially its treatment of identity and stigma, and critical race theory, especially its analysis of racial inequality, supports the likely existence of a unique racialized Atheist subgroup. Namely, the way stigma in America interacts with identity is likely to have produced unique identities at this particular intersection of race and religion. Because they reside at the bottom of two separate hierarchies, namely, Atheists are at the bottom of religious hierarchies, while Blacks are at the bottom of racial hierarchies, identity work and behavioral strategies in the face of stigma are likely to be particularly pronounced among Black Atheists.

Such theoretical work can be used in conjunction with qualitative data to better understand Black Atheists, how they conceptualize stigma, make meaning of identities, and if and how they understand their experiences as racialized. These understandings, in turn, can potentially help us expand and enhance understandings of double-barreled stigmatized identities more broadly, how the intersection of these stigmatized identities relate to stigma management, the closet, and what this confluence of factors means for identity work.

Chapter Three: Research Design and Methods

Though by nature qualitative data can be difficult to quantify and analyze, it can reveal valuable insight into attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and lived experiences that a traditional quantitative approach does not. The relative paucity of research regarding Black Atheists suggests that an exploratory, qualitative study is best for examining my research questions, namely, Is there a meaningful 'Black Atheist' identity? And if there is, how do people who claim a Black Atheist identity conceive of it? How does this identity relate to the way in which they live their lives? In this study, inviting participants to describe their sentiments, feelings, experiences, and ascribed meanings constituted the best way to begin to get at 'what it means to be a Black Atheist.' Open-ended face-to-face interviews, coupled with a component of observation, were selected as the primary method of data collection for this study.

In this remainder of this chapter, I detail the methodological approach of the project, the justification of the methodological approach, participant recruitment/obtaining respondents, data collection, the interview protocol, interviews and interviewer presentation, data analysis, transcriptions, respondent feedback, and methodological issues. This chapter serves as a roadmap for anyone interested in recreating this project, following up on this project, or in deriving alternative projects from this methodology.

Data Collection and Analysis Plan

This project focuses on Black Atheists in the Washington D.C. and Baltimore area. This exploratory study is not generalizable to a broader population. The greater Washington D.C. and Baltimore area was selected for several reasons. First, of the

various Black Atheist groups and meetups that exist nationally, a very high proportion meet in the D.C./Baltimore area. The area is also home to one of the largest concentrations of Black people in the country. Second, the Washington DC area is relatively transient in its population, allowing a good variation of geographical backgrounds (and cultures tied to those regions) to enter the sample, even when conducting interviews in only one region of the country. Third, with the area being highly educated and high income relative to the rest of the country, two factors that are positively correlated with the presence of Atheists, makes the Washington D.C. area a prime location to find and interview Black Atheists.

Methods

To understand the experiences of Black Atheists and drawing from my theoretical framework, my research design is exploratory and my methodology is interviewing.

Data was collected through in-depth qualitative interviews. Interviews were open-ended, semi-structured, conversational, and conducted face to face⁵. Through this method, I shed light upon a unique and understudied group, illuminate some basic concepts about Black Atheists, further understandings about conceptualizations of racialized identities, and make a contribution to sociological literature on stigma, critical understanding of race, and religiosity.

The open-ended approach to interviews gave respondents room to discuss their racialized experiences in a more organic and authentic matter. Because many of the questions involve intimate details about beliefs and religiosity, stigma, and allowing respondents the time and space to find their words, the interviews took on a conversational tone. It also allowed me as the interviewer to ask questions at appropriate

⁵ One interview with a public figure was conducted over the phone.

junctures in the conversation. The interview protocol used in this study can be found in Appendix A.

To be eligible for the study, respondents had to meet five criteria: 1. Identify as an Atheist, 2. Identify as Black or African-American, 3. Be 18 years old or older, 4. Currently live in the greater Baltimore-Washington area, or have grown up in the Baltimore-Washington area, and 5. Be available for a face-to-face interview in the greater Baltimore-Washington area.

Data Collection

Data was obtained through in-depth interviews with Black Atheists with a mix of gender, class, age, and presumably sexuality⁶. Interviews focused on how each subject understood his or her Black Atheist identities, meaning-making around other relevant labels and identities, perceptions of stigma, real and perceived consequences for revealing one's Atheism, and strategies for dealing or coping with stigma. Additionally, interviews touched on beliefs respondents associated both with Atheism and being a Black Atheist, what they think about the relationship between Black Atheists and mainstream Atheists, the respondent's transition to Atheism, closeted behavior, and sentiments about "coming out" in a potentially hostile cultural context. Questions and probes also discussed the associations respondents make between atheism and race, particular social pressures of being a Black Atheist, and whether they feel included in Atheist movements and groups. Notes were taken throughout the interviews, though not at the expense of engaging the respondent. Additionally after parting ways from the respondents, I took the next opportunity to write down my thoughts on the interviews in

⁶ Sexuality was not tended to when selecting respondents, nor asked about explicitly. However, some queer respondents brought this up on their own, or in relation to another question. LGBTQ Atheists also likely offer important insights into ity and stigma.

separate memos. If I took public transit, I wrote the memos immediately after getting on the bus or train. If I drove, I wrote them immediately after arriving home.

In this project, Atheist is operationally defined as someone who answers the question ‘do you believe in God’ with anything other than a “yes” response (e.g., no, or I do not know) and self-identifies as such. Though their reasons and positive beliefs may hinge on whether they profess a disbelief in God, a good number of Atheists ‘do not know if there is a God,’ think the concept incoherent, or think the concept fundamentally unknowable. That they identify as Atheist suggests not only do they not believe in God, but that they find the fact that they do not to be central to their identity. In America, the vast majority of people who do not believe in God will self-identify as agnostic or non-religious. There is only a fraction of people who will self-identify as Atheist (Cooperman, Smith, and Ritchie, 2015). Likewise, Black will also be a matter of self-identification.

Consent was obtained prior to the face-to-face interview, through an informed consent form that was emailed to the participant. This form can be found as Appendix B in the Appendix section at the end of this dissertation. Participants were additionally informed of their rights and protections at the outset of the interview. Respondents were assured throughout our correspondence, and at the outset of the interview that any and all write-ups or publications involving this data will make use of pseudonyms and obscure any identifying information so as to protect the identity of and maintain anonymity for respondents.

Justification for Questions

The interview questions used were designed to elicit responses on topics of inquiry, but open enough to allow a) the respondent the space to answer questions in

ways that are meaningful to them, b) the respondent to introduce unexpected or unanticipated themes, and c) the interview to take on a more conversational tone. Additionally, most questions had sub-questions or probes with them to either further engage the interview respondent, or to re-frame a question that they may have found confusing or hard to understand.

Questions are topical and relevant to existing literature, with some focusing on gaps between literatures. For instance Smith (2011) tells us what it is like to become an Atheist (while being aware that it is a stigmatized identity) but says little of interaction effects with race or other social constructs, while Johnson (2010) informs about ‘double-barreled stigma’ facing Black gay men. Through asking these kinds of questions of people at the crux of one of these intersections will give increased understanding into conceptualizations of, how ‘double-barreled stigma’ applies to Atheists, how racial and cultural contexts might affect beliefs and ideas about Atheists, and how ideas about atheism manifest themselves amongst people carrying physical markers of stigma.

In some cases, probes were used. Questions and probes were designed with the objective of being intelligible and accessible to an average American adult. A concerted effort was made to make questions as ‘lingo-free’ as possible, but due to the nature of the questions there is some ‘in-group’ vocabulary. For example, I did not talk about the Flying Spaghetti Monster; anthropomorphized spaghetti that many Atheists use to point to what they find is the silliness of religion. I did however; use some words like theist, deconversion, and at times in probes ‘coming out.’ I used these words because they are important in the Atheist experience, and are widely used in not just writing but everyday conversations.

For instance, the popular blog ‘The Thinking Atheist’ has a ‘Share Your Deconversion Story’ section, and the Richard Dawkins website has a section titled ‘Deconversion and Family,’ (TheThinkingAtheist.com, RichardDawkins.net). However, this did not prove problematic as the assumption that respondents would understand such vocabulary turned out to be true. In fact, respondents often used in-group or insider language including the term ‘deconversion’ without being prompted as they answered questions. As an example, most Americans do not use or contemplate the meaning of the word ‘theist,’ which was in fact used quite often and quite meaningfully by Atheist respondents to juxtapose themselves to the religious majority. Some of the other language and phrases introduced and used by respondents include ‘heathen’ as a seemingly affectionate way of referring to oneself as an Atheist and at times Atheists more broadly, ‘gaytheist’ or gay Atheist, and ‘liberation’ as an analogue for deconversion or becoming Atheist.

Additionally, certain divisions and/or schisms within Atheism like ‘strong Atheism vs. weak Atheism,’ as well as terms used to describe Atheist subgroups like ‘anti-theist’ or ‘militant Atheist’ was asked about in those terms (though explanations for every term were available in the case of confusion). The vast majority of respondents understood these terms, and nearly half of them availed themselves of such distinctions and language throughout the interview to describe themselves or others. They also used these terms relationally, and quite often attached respective values to them.

Revisions: Editing and Adding Questions

During the first three to four interviews, a few themes emerged that were not anticipated at the outset of this project. Most notably were multiple discussions of being a

Black Atheist as being impactful and detrimental to romantic lives, both as a broad demographic concern and as a matter of personal and anecdotal experience. As nearly every early respondent raised this issue, a small subset of questions was added before the outset of interviews. Because every early respondent raised this issue organically, all respondents provided data for this subset of questions. Other questions that were added included questions about gender, and birth cohort/generational observations. Because I grew up without a religion, some of the earlier interviews also helped me revise some of the general religious language in questions, and questions regarding historically Black churches specifically. Making use of this language allowed an even richer analysis of religious histories, familial religious practices, and beliefs.

Final Interview Protocol

The interview protocol consisted of six main sections; Demographic and Survey Style Information, Questions About Familial Religion, Black Atheist and Other Identity Questions, Questions About Stigma, How Black Atheists Conceptualize and Perceive Their Relationship with Other Atheists, and Questions about Disclosure and Closetedness. Questions were chosen based on extant literature, theory, and hypotheses derived from the application of theory to literature in regards to the Black Atheist population. See Appendix A for the actual interview protocol used of this study. Sections were grouped with other topical questions that were likely to be raised or touched on by respondents in close proximity. For instance, it is likely that a respondent discussed their religious history, during or after discussing their parent's religious history. Therefore, these questions are grouped together.

These questions cover among other things; the religious histories of the individual and very close family members, their becoming Atheist narratives, how they formed their identities and if they perceived these identities as racialized, how they felt race intersected with religion and atheism, how they perceived and internalized stigma, how they managed stigma, disclosure and closetedness, identity salience, questions about being a Black Atheist in Washington DC and Baltimore, dating, and their general lived experiences as Black Atheists.

Sampling

A little more than half (57 %) of the 46 respondents were comprised of Black Atheists from formalized Black Atheist groups, with the other half being comprised of respondents found from online ads targeting forums and less formalized social media groups, recruitment at the Reason Rally, and snowball sampling. Messages were posted on social media websites that cater to Atheist.

About a dozen other respondents joined the study through exchanging contact information at the 2016 ‘Reason Rally’ in Washington DC. The Reason Rally bills itself as the “largest gathering of Atheists, secular, and free-thinking individuals,” and is hosted semi-annually in Washington DC (Reason Rally 2016). Because of my previous work in addition to me being a Black Atheist, I had existing relationships with some of the leadership of Black Atheist groups in the Washington DC area. Initially, respondents from formalized groups were presented with a brief description of the project by group leaders and volunteered to participate by contacting me. In case trust or apprehension about anonymity, a second round of emails was sent out by group leaders about three weeks later with slightly different language giving the respondent the option to indicate

interest to group leaders, who would then forward that information to me. Allowing respondents to volunteer in this manner minimized any bias on the part of the researcher.

Of the 46 respondents, 26 (57%) were women with the remaining 20 (43%) being men. There was initially a skew in the number of female volunteer respondents relative to male volunteer respondents, that it did not appear would correct itself without intervention. Although there is anecdotal evidence that Black Atheists tend to have a closer to 50/50 gender ratio than the very heavily male skewed population of Atheists as a whole, the work of Zuckerman, Smith, and Kosmin et al strongly suggest that most any Atheist group would skew male (Zuckerman 2011). Of the first 20 volunteers that agreed to be interviewed, 14 were women. This is possibly due to women being more likely to volunteer, but also could speak to a different gender ratio among Black Atheists than there is among Atheists at large. However as an exploratory study, it made sense to maintain a sample somewhat in line with previous findings on gender ratios, and previous samples used in examining Atheist identities (Taniguchi 2006). To correct for this and bring the sample in line more with other Atheist samples in other studies, and with the best work on Atheist demographics respondents were asked to tap their social networks for other potential interviewees. At the conclusion of the interview all respondents were explicitly asked if they knew of or could think of anyone else that would like to participate in the study; but once the gender skew became clear, later respondents were overtly subsequently informed of the lack of male respondents and asked a second time to think of any potential volunteers. Because so many Black Atheists are not close interpersonally to any other Black Atheists (if they even know any at all) only ten respondents were pulled into the sample this way. However, eight of them were male.

Not only did this help balance the sample, but is also suggestive of a correlation between the closet or 'being out' and gender. Differences in recruitment method appeared to have no effect on the answers of respondents.

Lastly, although all literature suggests that Atheists skew in the highly educated direction, respondents without a college education who were not current college students were essentially absent from the initial sample. Interpersonal connections of the interviewer were used to bring in a couple respondents that had not graduated from college; however 43 of 46 respondents had at least an associate's degree (Kosmin 2009). Respondents spanned an age range of 18 to 66, with the age range of 30-40 containing plurality of 22 respondents. The age range of 40-50 contained another additional 15 respondents.

Obtaining Respondents

Finding Black Atheist groups, getting in touch with leadership, and finding respondents through leadership was not as problematic as may intuitively seem. Most groups have a contact number or e-mail, and many have a contact person or secretary that allows for dissemination of interview requests through a group. The groups and leaders who I contacted were all more than willing to hear about the study, and all said that they would be willing to help in full capacity.

In order to obtain respondents, emails were sent to leaders of selected groups as an initial point of contact, such as: Black DC Atheists Meetup, and the Frederick Douglass Society. If group leaders were willing to participate, and believed their group had members interested in sharing experiences through interviews we proceeded to secure individual respondents. The leaders were provided with volunteer solicitation

scripts that they could either post to a forum or social media, or email to their group. These scripts had instructions on how to volunteer for the study or inquire further about the study; to contact me directly via the listed contact information, or to indicate their interest to their group leader if they had some reservations about coming forward, anonymity, etc. Each potential respondent contacted by me via email. I thanked them for their interest and indicating how to proceed to setting up an interview. Interviews were set up at dates and times that were convenient for respondents, and locations were also mostly suggested and picked by respondents. Obtaining respondents through groups brought in the most respondents to the sample, 26. This pool of potential volunteers was rich, and there were a significant number of people that continued to volunteer even after data collection were closed.

Recruits from other internet sites went through a very similar communication process, except the initial point of contact was always an e-mail to me expressing interest in volunteering. When I received this contact, I responded with an email thanking them for their interest, informing them about the meeting procedures, and asked about potential dates and times they were available to meet. Subsequent emails were used to determine a date and time to meet.

Respondents who came from the Reason Rally were approached in a different way than those volunteers from formal and informal groups. I took the metro downtown to the National Mall with a notebook, and a pen, and sought out volunteers. There were not a lot of Black people there in the two hours I was there (the first two hours of the rally) and I simply walked up to each one I saw and explained a little about their project, and asked them to write down their names and contact information if they were

potentially interested in volunteering. I then sent out e-mails to people that had indicated interest, asking if they were still interested in volunteering. Subsequently, they went through a through a very similar communication process to all other respondents.

Interviews

Participants were asked basic questions to obtain demographic, and to increase comfort level before moving onto questions about their religious backgrounds. These questions often facilitated the beginning of a conversation, with respondents linking their parent's religiosity and the way they grew up to many of the questions I planned on asking, as well as some of the themes that emerged more organically. I then asked a question that the respondent had not answered or only tangentially touched on, which usually facilitated another stream of links between identity and experience, and personal narratives. I checked off questions and probes as the participant provided responses to them, making sure applicable questions were asked by the end of the interview. An example of a question that might have remained unasked is "what about the religious beliefs/religiosity of any siblings you might have?" if the respondent had already conveyed that they were an only child. The majority of respondents fit this general template. A small but significant minority (about ten respondents) began the interviews in a slightly more reserved fashion. In these cases I continued to ask questions about their religious history in the order in which they appeared, and pushed the built in probes. Usually within four or five more questions the style on their answers and general mannerisms became very qualitatively similar to respondents that fit the more open template. The two subjects most frequently associated with this shift toward openness and comfort were being asked to discuss the places of worship they attended growing up,

and being asked when they began to think of themselves as Atheists. That is, in thinking about their religious histories, and becoming Atheist process, some respondents seemed to become more comfortable in discussing the more personal and experiential aspects of being a Black Atheist. Regardless of their initial openness, in the end respondents similarly touched on or answered nearly all of the interview protocol.

Additionally, each respondent expressed their own unique narratives about what they believed to be important, and lived experiences as Black Atheists. Because they can provide good data, these ‘off-script’ narratives were encouraged through probes like ‘tell me more,’ or ‘how did that come to be?’

Interviews ranged from just over 40 minutes (42 minutes) to just under two hours (one hour and 53 minutes), with an average of about one hour (one hour and 3 minutes). There were no significant differences in gender or age that related to the length of interviews.

Interviewer Presentation

I presented myself as an insider both in the lead up to, and during the interview. I am readily identified as Black, and was up-front about being an Atheist myself. However I did not discuss my beliefs further, or what being an Atheist entailed for me. Instead I told respondents that asked for my answer or opinion on questions of that nature, that I would be happy to answer them at the end of the interview.

I dressed casually, jeans, T-shirt, and a jacket if necessary. I often wore Nike boots, which are a local fashion trend (in Washington DC and Prince George’s County, MD), which may have additionally given respondents insight on where I was from.

Feedback From Respondents

Overwhelmingly respondents were upbeat and engaged during interviews, with many expressing excitement to share their story, and that they were excited someone was taking up in the project. With almost no exceptions they seemed very comfortable sharing intimate details of their Black Atheist identity, experiences as Black Atheists, and other personal and biographical information about themselves. This likely indicates that there was trust both with the interviewer (me), as well as trust in the processes of anonymity and identity protection. In this regard, being an insider likely served as a benefit (Unluer 2012). At the conclusion of the interviews many respondents were genuinely thankful of me for having listened to their stories and/or for having participated. Additionally many respondents wanted to stay and chat at the conclusion of our formal interview recordings. The basic details and tenor of these post-interview conversations were recorded in memos at the next available opportunity. Most of these post-interview conversations were short, with the plurality of time spent with interviewees asking questions about my background and me. However, respondents also in turn disclosed a little more about themselves personally, and additionally talked a little about current events. The 2016 election for example was a very common subject raised by respondents. Although I recorded what I could of these interactions in secondary 'Post Conversation' memos, I did not include information gleaned from these conversations in the data that was ultimately analyzed. Because so many respondents post conversation questions focused on me, I did not want to include responses that may have been influenced by my answers or framing of these questions.

Why Qualitative Interviews Serve Best To Learn About Black Atheists

Due to the relative paucity of research regarding Black Atheists; allowing them to describe their sentiments, feelings, experiences, and ascribed meanings is likely the best way to begin to get at ‘what it means to be a Black Atheist.’ Open-ended face-to-face interviews, coupled with a component of observation, were selected as the primary method of data collection for this study. Though by nature qualitative data can be difficult to quantify and analyze, it can reveal valuable insight into attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and lived experiences that a traditional quantitative approach does not. Additionally, face to face interviews allowed me exposure to the body language and facial cues of respondents in order to better contextualize responses with tone and expression, and to analyze any thematic similarities in self-presentations. Furthermore, the exploratory and revelatory nature of qualitative research and particularly interviews closely match the need to explore the many unknown and understudied conceptualizations and understandings of Black Atheists. Without predetermined categories of analysis in-depth interviews allow the respondents to provide detail and nuance that is not only indicative of their own experiences and lives, but also likely relevant to the lives of other respondents. Allowing Black Atheist stories and narratives to emerge organically, and for respondents to frame their responses through the prism of race, religion, gender and other social constructs allows for a unique analysis. Because so much of understanding the experiences of Black Atheists relates to the way they understand, experience, and express their different identities, having them tell describe their own narratives allowed a rich and unique picture to emerge about this population.

Methodological Issues

Key methodological issues included finding and obtaining respondents from a small, underrepresented, and often un-formalized minority. Because coming out as an Atheist is highly correlated with other markers of privilege, and because atheism and non-religiosity is highly stigmatized among Black Americans, it is very likely that a significant portion of the Black Atheist population is at least partially in the closet. Additionally; though based on available evidence, creating an interview protocol for a population that does not have an established response pattern in academia required some assumptions and projection.

Drawbacks of this Method (Convenience Sampling)

Because it is not a random sample, results are not generalizable to Black Atheists across America as a group. Additionally, although there are individuals in the sample that are in the closet, not in any groups, and not with any online presence that would indicate their atheism, it likely is not representative of Black Atheists that do not express their atheism publicly in any way.

The sample of the study is likely to differ from a randomly selected sample in a few ways; people who join formalized groups are likely to be more comfortable in/with their Atheist identity, and often being more politically engaged. There is also the potential that older Black Atheists were oversampled, as more groups tend to skew older than younger (they tend to be led by middle-aged or older people, and likely skew toward those kinds of social networks), computer literate people and/or social media users, and college students/faculty (many of the groups meet on college campuses). Additionally as mentioned as a mitigating factor for age, and as suggested by the ‘coming out’ literature,

the sample also may have skewed toward the middle-class. Because ‘coming out’ of the closet and embracing a stigmatized identity is usually a complicating factor in one’s life, individuals that carry more markers of privilege or status are systematically more likely to come out of the closet than those that carry many markers of stigma or status (Moon 2004, Smith 2011). Johnson explicitly observed this phenomenon in Black gay men in the south; Black men from poorer and more marginalized communities were much less likely to be out than Black men with more access to wealth and affluent communities (Johnson 2010).

People who are very likely to have been under sampled or excluded from the sample are people with no online presence or group membership, people who live far from the major metropolitan areas of Washington D.C. and Baltimore (as this is where interviews mostly took place with a few exceptions), very closeted Black Atheists, and Black Atheists who would be unwilling to join a group or forum with ‘Black’ in the title.

Data

Data was analyzed using an embedded exploratory approach. Interview transcriptions began June 22nd between the 18th and 19th interview and continued in succession throughout the fall. Data was transcribed using Sony DigitalVoice and Microsoft Word, and then coded by hand. Data was then recoded, and entered into the statistical software program NVivo to be analyzed further. In addition to looking for the themes mentioned as likely to emerge in the proposal, analysis also looked for interpersonal consequences, narratives, personal experiences, meanings, other emerging themes, beliefs, and ideas. Demographic data like age and place of origin were also

recorded and were used in conjunction with other interview data in order to contextualize responses.

Transcriptions

Interviews were transcribed using Sony DigitalVoice to play the audio and Microsoft Word was used to type the transcriptions. Audio was played at normal speed so as to not distort tone or length of pauses. The audio was paused as necessary to allow me to keep up. Transcriptions included denominations as to who was speaking; and include ‘ahs, ums, and likes’ and notations of longer than normal pauses.

Coding And Data Analysis

The variables that were decided upon were a combination of a result of themes that emerged during interviews and reviews of memos, research questions, previous relevant literature, the hypothesis, and themes that the interview questions were designed to touch on. Such themes included how respondents understood the intersection of race and religion, familial issues, issues of in-group belonging, and issues that respondents related between their being Atheist and their romantic lives. There were multiple ways for concepts or ideas to emerge as themes. These included, but are not limited to being mentioned by large numbers of respondents, high levels of agreement across respondents or within subgroups, the absence of expected responses relative to current academic literature racialized experiences, how respondents discussed it, internalization and responses to stigma, identity work, and shared personal experiences or narratives.

Because little work has been done on Black Atheists, a number of codes like the discussion of one’s romantic life in the context of being a Black Atheist, and specifically interpersonal or general romantic trouble’s respondents related to being a Black Atheist

were unanticipated at the outset of this project. Table 3 provides an example of my coding methods.

Table 3: Sample Code of Religiosity and Definition

Household Religiosity Code	Definition
Extremely Religious	The respondent described a household or upbringing in which religion is central and church being frequently attended church bi-weekly or more or had parents or grandparents that were members of the clergy
Very Religious	The respondent described a household or upbringing in which religion is important or central and frequently attended church weekly
Moderately Religious	The respondent described a household or upbringing in which religion was a part of the familial identity or religious practices were a part of daily routines. Church attendance ranged from none to weekly
Not Religious	The respondents described a household or upbringing de-emphasized religion or generally did not practice religion
Atheist	The respondents described a household in which one or more parent did not believe in God or any gods

Summary Of The Sample

Table 4, provides a demographic overview of respondents in this dissertation. The chart includes relevant demographic information like occupation and highest level of education. The average age of 35.2 is in-keeping with the average age of all Atheists. A plurality of Atheists and agnostics (42%) are ages 18 to 29, 32% are 30-49, 17% are 50-64, and just 9% are 65 and older (Lugo and Cooperman 2012). The population of all U.S. adults is 22% 18 to 29, 35% 30-49, 26% 50-64, and 18% 65 or older (Lugo and Cooperman 2012). As is explained in detail in the next section, the sample is very highly educated (85% holding at least a 2-year degree, 74% holding a four year degree (or currently enrolled in a four year undergraduate program), 59% holding an advanced

degree, and 4% attending no college) and in conjunction also has a high share of white-collar or professional jobs. With one exception all respondents lived in the Washington DC (61%) or Baltimore (37%) area at the time of their interview, with 54% having been raised locally in or around either Washington DC or Baltimore, and 46% having moved to the area after being raised somewhere else. 57% (n= 26) of the sample was female, and 43% (n= 20) was male. This is a higher ratio of females: males than has been reported among Atheists in most large demographic religious studies. 11% of the sample is currently married, while 57 % of respondents had at least one child.

Table 4. Demographic Table of Respondents

Name	Age	Gender	Live	Raised	Highest Level Education	Married	Kids	Occupation
Raymond	21	Male	DC	Virginia	Current Undergrad	No	No	Student
Michelle	43	Female	DC	Texas	MA	No	No	Professor
Nicole	37	Female	Balt	Texas	MA	No	2	Patent Office
Thomas	29	Male	DC	DC	BA	No	No	Food industry
Maurice	46	Male	Balt	DC	MA	No	1	Accountant
Rochelle	29	Female	DC	Ohio	BA	No	No	Transportation
Grant	30	Male	DC VA	DC VA	Some Coll	No	2	Unemployed
Cleo	50	Female	DC	Grenada	MA	No	No	Freelance
Arthur	36	Male	CA	Compton	Some Coll	No	No	Rapper/ Musician
Katy	67	Female	Balt	Phila	Assoc.	No	2	Retired
Lydia	26	Female	DC	Cali	Assoc.	No	No	Between jobs
Dion	38	Male	Balt	Balt	Some Coll	Yes	No	Youtube Personality/ Rapper
Jalen	20	Male	DC MD	DC VA	Current Undergrad	No	No	Student
Patrice	38	Female	DC VA	New Orleans	MA	No	No	Law Firm
Raquel	38	Female	DC VA	Texas	MA	No	No	Writer
Marie	30	Female	DC	DC	BA	No	2	Teacher
Nia	33	Female	Balt	Tenn	MA	No	2	Theatre Production
Christina	25	Female	DC MD	DC MD	BA			Teacher
Mark	29	Male	Balt	Balt	MA	No	1	Law Enforcement
Lamar	26	Male	DC MD	DC	BA	No	No	Communications
Kristin	40	Female	DC VA	DC MD	PhD	No	No	Professor
Edgar	28	Male	DC MD	DC	MA	No	No	Dept. Commerce
Crystal	30	Female	Balt	DC	BA	No	4	Unemployed
Will	35	Male	DC MD	Frederick	MA	Yes	2	Electronics/ Computers
Celeste	46	Female	DC	DC	PhD	No (Div)	1	Smithsonian Museum Of Nat History

Table 4. Demographic Table of Respondents (continued)

Name	Age	Gender	Live	Raised	Highest Level Education	Married	Kids	Occupation
Catherine	27	Female	Balt	Balt	AA	No	No	Nurse
Jason	38	Male	DC MD	Miss	MA	No	No	Accountant
Tanya	31	Female	DC	St. Louis	BA	No	No	Hair Salon
Ryan	53	Male	DC	DC MD	MA	No (Div)	3	Finance
Layla	25	Female	Balt	Cali	BA	No	No	Unemployed
Roger	46	Male	Balt	DC MD	MA	Yes	2	Pilot
Geoff	31	Male	DC	Balt	BA	No	1	Rapper/ Producer
Lynette	39	Female	DC VA	New Orleans/ Texas	MA	No	No	Management
Bruce	32	Male	Balt	Balt	Assoc	No	1	Barber
Deena	54	Female	DC VA	Georgia	JD	No	1	Lawyer
Mary	41	Female	Balt	Boston	DSW	No	1	Social Work
Nelson	28	Male	DC	DC	MA	No	No	DC Public Schools/ Grad Student
Rita	48	Female	Balt	Phila	JD	Yes	2	Lawyer
Walter	47	Male	DC	Detroit	MA	Yes	No	Auditor for Fed Contracts
Bree	27	Female	Balt	Balt	MA	No	1	Consultant
Ciara	23	Female	Balt	Balt	Assoc	No	No	Unemployed
Bradley	18	Male	DC	DC MD	Current Undergrad	No	No	Student
Janet	51	Female	Balt	New Jersey	MA	No	1	Small Business Owner
Mike	32	Male	DC	DC	No Coll	No	1	IT
Whitney	32	Female	DC VA	Detroit	BA	No	No	Clerical/ Admin
Stacy	26	Female	DC	DC (MD)	MA	No	No	Teacher

The Backdrop: The Potential Significance Of Washington DC

In this section I discuss the demographics of the sample in further detail, how the respondents viewed the Washington DC/Baltimore region as potentially significant to Black Atheist identities, and discuss demographic trends of the Washington DC/Baltimore region (and the locale of the region itself) as potentially meaningful. To conclude this section I link interview responses, the demographics of the sample, and the demographics of the region more broadly with previously existing literature on ‘coming out’ being correlate with markers of privilege.

Regardless of age, gender, or where they were originally from, respondents believed that their location in and around Washington DC/Baltimore made it easier (though by no means easy) to be a Black Atheist than it might otherwise would be somewhere else. Respondents ascribed a wide variety of reasons to this connection, with about forty percent of respondents not able to really put their finger on it, but still believing it to be true. This large contingent (19 respondents) of the sample is best represented by a comment Lamar, a 26 year old from Southeast Washington DC, made. When probed about why he felt it was easier to be a Black Atheist in the DC/Baltimore area, he thought for a moment and then replied “I don’t know. It just is.” Similarly, lifelong Maryland resident Stacy said “I do think that it’s easier,” but was unable to come up with a more concrete reason. This was the most common response to this issue, though a majority of respondents were able to cite more concrete reasons for this belief. About a dozen other respondents also made relative comparisons of the region to ‘the south,’ ‘the country,’ or Bible Belt that they believed to be either more religious or more intolerant of/hostile toward Atheists. “It’s definitely not the south,” said Nicole who hails

from Texas. These sentiments were echoed by Lynette, who moved to Virginia after relocating to Houston during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. “Being from New Orleans, I know it’s easier.” Rochelle appealed to the idea that while “DC is technically in the south, but it ain’t country...” Another nine respondents (20%) cited the location and the mostly urban nature of the region. Addressing the issue Mike, a 32 year old DC resident said, “Yeah. You know how DC is. Lib, gay-friendly. More open.” Others pointed to the demographics of the region(s), four (9%) pointed to racial demographics, two (4%) pointed to diversity in the area resulting in coming into contact with other religious ideas including Atheism⁷, and two (4%) pointed to the relative affluence of the area.

While there was an overwhelming sense among respondents that being in the Washington DC/Baltimore area made living as a Black Atheist easier, with 40 of 46 respondents affirming that sentiment to some extent, they varied as to the reasons why. Regardless of their reasons, respondents painted the Washington DC/Baltimore as a place where some of the difficulties of being a Black Atheist can be muted. While there was broad agreement across the sample, there seems to be a trend in the data of those having moved to the region from somewhere else and appealing to prior experience. Respondents that grew up as locals, were more likely to say something along the lines of Lamar, that ‘it just is,’ than were other participants.

There are in fact, several notable features (and combinations of features) of the region that go towards explaining some of the respondent’s sentiments that living in the Washington DC/Baltimore area makes it easier to be a Black Atheist. Washington DC

⁷ This is arguably related to the urban nature of the region, but only two respondents made mention of religious diversity.

and Baltimore are both composed of a plurality of African-Americans, and the Maryland counties in between also have a high Black population relative to the rest of the country. Northern Virginia is very close to the national average in terms of Black population as a whole. The large concentration of Black people between Washington and Baltimore may serve as a buffer, reducing the intensity or instances of stigma in one of the barrels of our metaphorical shotgun (Census 2010).

When incorporating a number of factors such as church attendance, belief in God, and daily prayer, Maryland (22nd) and Washington DC (27th) also rank as moderately religious states, with each ranking in the 20's according to a Pew measure of religiosity (Lipka 2016). Virginia ranks 14th in religiosity, making it the least religious state in the south excluding DC and Maryland, with the Northern part of the state which was included in the DC region being significantly less religious than the Southern and Western parts of the state. However, it is very notable that the other states with high shares (Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee) of African-American populations rank at or near the top of the list (Lipka 2016). Conversely, the seven least religious states (Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, Washington, Alaska) all have above-average White populations and below-average Black populations (Census 2010, Lipka 2016). This makes the DC area fairly unique in terms of having a large African-American makeup, but not a very high level of religiosity. Put in other terms, it is arguably the least religious area of the country that has a large concentration of African Americans.

Additionally, in the Washington DC and Baltimore metro region there are a number of mechanisms and outlets for support for Black Atheists, as well as some

outreach. There is a high concentration of Black Atheist groups relative to most other metropolitan areas, most of which have zero. In the DC-Baltimore region there are at least four organizations with over 100 members; African-Americans for Humanism DC, Black Non-Believers of DC, Frederick Douglass Humanist Society of Baltimore, and the DC Region Secular Blacks. A fifth organization, Secular Sistahs in Oxon Hill, Maryland has an indeterminate amount of members, but appears to have a notable following.

These groups do some forms of outreach and are active in local communities, and meet regularly in local venues. AAHDC has held an annual lunch on the Black Atheist day of solidarity for seven consecutive years, and plan to continue. The FDHSoB marched in the Martin Luther King Jr. Day parade in Baltimore in 2016. Black Non-Believers of DC had a booth at the 2016 Reason Rally. In short, although they remain very small minority, Black Atheists maintain some degree of visibility in the region.

Respondents discussed the relevance of being able to contact and get together with other Black Atheists, which they linked with their comfortability with their own identity. Mike who attended DC public schools said “I thought I was the only one. It took a long time and Roland (Founder of African American Humanism DC) to realize I wasn’t,” said referring to the sense of isolation he felt before he found a local Black Atheist group. Very similar sentiments were echoed by Cleo (aged 50), who discussed having been an Atheist for nearly a decade before finding AAHDC, which she credits with “helping me find other people like me.” Given the high number of Black Atheist groups in the area who help facilitate those contacts and meetings, it seems likely that their presence is related to the perceptions respondents have of the relative ease of both

connecting with other Black Atheists, and the relative ease of being a Black Atheist in the area.

Additionally, many mainstream Atheist organizations headquarters-are based in Washington, and many of the largest Atheist and secular gatherings take place in the Nation's Capital. The Reason Rally, which according to the Huffington Post and other estimates was the largest gathering of non-believers in American history, has been held in DC in its two inaugural years of 2012 and 2016 (Rosch 2016). American Atheists, the largest Atheist and secular organization in the country is also based in Washington DC. DC is also one of, if not the most heavily targeted city by secular organizations, including the Freedom From Religion Foundation in terms of advertising and promoting secularity (FFRF 2016 Press Release). In 2016 for instance, the organization explicitly targeted the city in a lead-up to both the Reason Rally and local elections as described in a May 2016 press release⁸:

“For the next two weeks, nonbelievers will be taking over the transportation system in the nation's capital.

Capitol Hill employees will ride to work in PRTC commuter buses wrapped with a giant message stating, “I’m an Atheist and I Vote.” Downtown commuters who drive or ride Capital BikeShare will be greeted by illuminated kiosk ads featuring young, millennial Atheist voters.

The ads are part of Freedom From Religion Foundation's campaign to highlight the exploding secular voting demographic in advance of the June 4 Reason Rally and the June 14 presidential primary in the District of Columbia. The ads will run from May 23 through June 6.

"We're blanketing the District with images of young secular voters, to show the faces of the fastest-growing voter demographic in America," says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. "While the Religious Right is hemorrhaging

⁸ The press release remains on the FFRF website as of March 15th 2017.

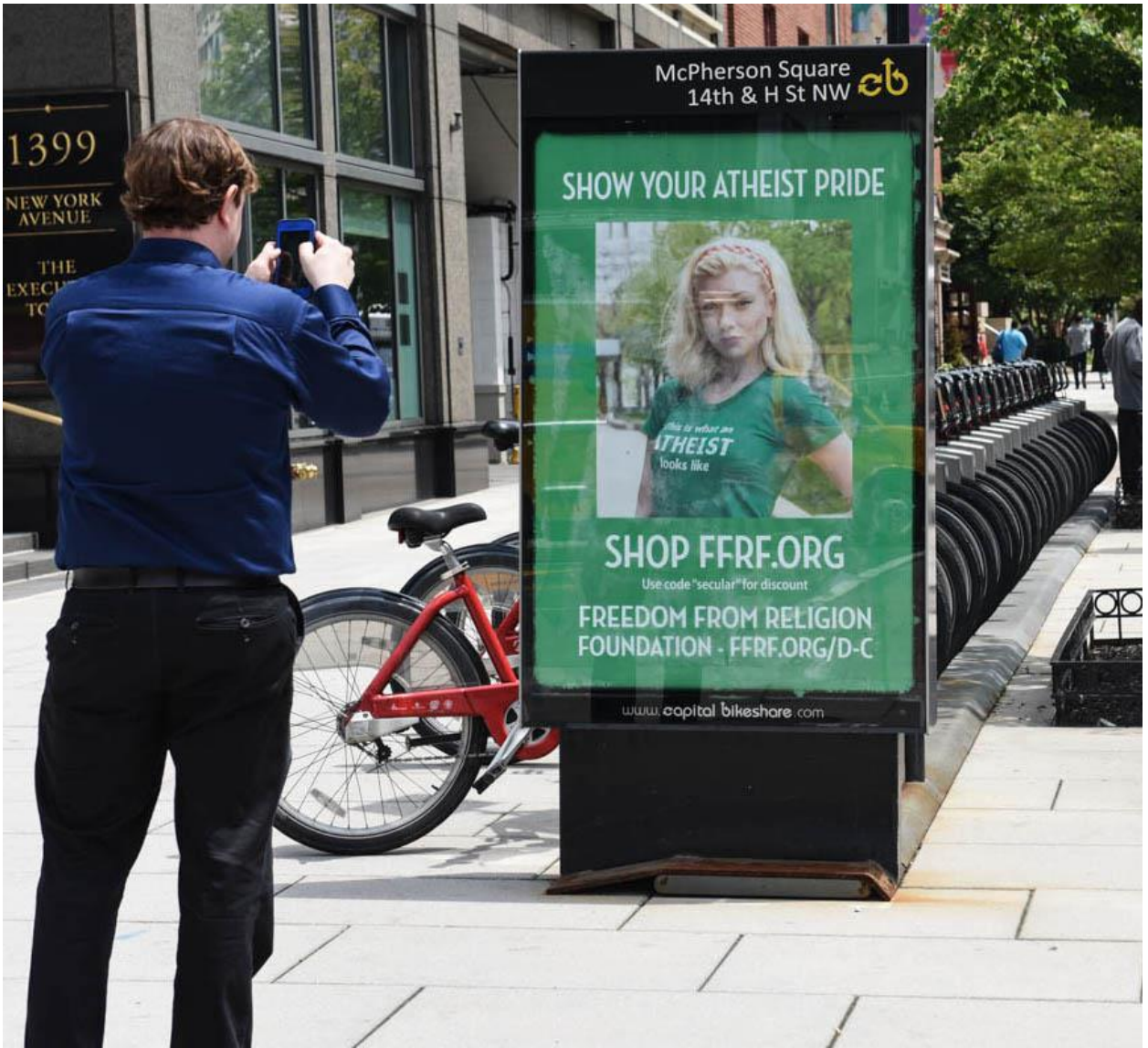
numbers and influence, secular support is skyrocketing, with 20 million new people on our side of the aisle since Barack Obama was first elected. Our leaders need to see our presence and hear our priorities."

The ads lead into the June 4 Reason Rally at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., which is being sponsored by a coalition of secular groups, including FFRF. The event will be the world's largest gathering of nonbelievers. Some of the most well-known freethinkers in the country are making an appearance, such as Bill Nye the "Science Guy," actor Johnny Depp, magician Penn Jillette and FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker."

- See more at: <https://ffrf.org/news/news-releases/item/26701-Atheists-taking-over-d-c-transportation#sthash.huazFPAY.dpuf>

<https://ffrf.org/news/news-releases/item/26701-Atheists-taking-over-d-c-transportation>

(Freedom From Religion Press Release 2016)





Major court cases in the Supreme Court and district courts that rule on religious matters also disproportionately take place in Washington DC, routinely attracting activists and local media attention. For instance, in 2011 when American Atheists sued to remove the 9/11 cross from the new Ground Zero memorial, the case was heard in Washington DC (Jenkins 2011). The corresponding debate and media coverage was also elevated in the region, especially after courts ruled against American Atheists in July 2014 (Jenkins 2011, Skea 2014). In short, the high level of attention that Atheists devote to Washington DC, the high level of activism, and the relative visibility of Atheists and atheism through ads and media likely help normalize atheism in a way that it is not in most other regions, and perhaps makes it more conceptually accessible to locals.

Restated, Atheism is not quite as weird or strange in DC as it is in most other places.

This is notable given that in his 2011 study that linked anti-Atheist sentiment to mistrust, Gervais also indicated Atheists face less prejudice the more widespread atheism is perceived to be (Gervais 2011). More specifically, Black Atheists have a presence in the region that appears stronger and more deeply rooted in the local region than do many other areas of the country. Taken together, these phenomenon potentially make the space

to do the identity work involved in being a Black Atheist more open and accessible than they might otherwise be in most areas of the country. The DC/Baltimore area seems to offer a unique combination of 1) a high concentration of Blacks; 2) a moderate level of religiosity; 3) a high concentration of Black Atheist groups and the ability to connect with other Black Atheists and 4) something of a normalization of the Atheist identity. Though it is possible that these effects extend to other areas that have one or more of these markers, their combination does appear to be somewhat unique to the region.

Additionally, Washington DC., Virginia, and Maryland all have median incomes that consistently rank in the top ten, and rank in the top ten for the percentage of adults with bachelor degrees or higher (Stein 2016). Although not discussed by respondents, these two markers of privilege are relatively accessible in the region and stand as potentially noteworthy. That is, even though respondents did not reference the fact that these privileges systematically exist in the region, they almost certainly are related to the way Atheism is 'done' in the region, and who is likely to come in contact with and have access to Atheist ideas (Moon 2004, Johnson 2010, Smith 2011).

Although the vast majority of respondents state that they believe that living in (and in many cases growing up in) the Washington DC/Baltimore area generally made or makes living as a Black Atheist easier, more research needs to be done on this issue. They seem to relate this to living in a region with a large Black population, to it not being one of the more religious regions of the country, and to the small but growing visibility of Black Atheists in the area. Exactly how Black Atheists internalize these effects and how particular they are to the Baltimore/DC metropolitan area are certainly deserving of

future study; and may help inform emerging findings about the becoming Atheist process, stigma management, and the coming out process.

The Privilege of Coming Out: Markers of Education and Occupation

This sub-section discusses the high level of education found in this sample, and the systematic presence of markers of privilege like education and income in the Washington DC/Baltimore region. I subsequently relate the education levels and occupations seen in this sample of Black Atheists and in the region to literature that links ‘coming out,’ and markers of privilege. To end, I compare the sample with large-scale demographic trends seen in samples of other Atheists.

Thirty-nine out of 46 respondents either obtained at least an Associate’s degree or were currently enrolled as undergraduate students. Only two respondents attended zero college. 27 of the respondents had some sort of advanced degree (PhD in History, MA in Accounting). These rates of 85% holding at least a 2-year degree, 74% holding a four year degree (or currently enrolled in a four year undergraduate program) 59% holding an advanced degree, and 4% attending no college far outpaces national averages of Black educational attainment which stand at 32.4% holding a two year college degree, 22.5% holding a four year college degree, and 8.2% holding some sort of advanced degree, with 47% not having attended college (Ryan and Bauman 2016). While this largely holds true with findings that Atheists are significantly more educated than the general public, it runs counter to the evidence that suggests that religiosity positively correlates with education for African-Americans. In fact not only were the Black Atheists in this sample more educated than the average Black American, they were more educated than the average

American (27% hold a four year college degree), and even the average Atheist (43% hold a four year college degree) (Pew 2016).

Other studies of Atheists have demonstrated that there is a relationship between education level and the likelihood that one identifies as an Atheist across a number of different samples (Hartman 2009, ARIS 2008, Pew 2012). While in general respondents did not make this link directly, they did say things like “science helped me see the way things were,” and “I couldn’t learn that and still believe,” that appealed to education and learning more broadly. Furthermore, it seems very likely that this high level of education and often the corresponding increase in average salaries serve as markers of privilege, which help mitigate or potentially insulate the respondent from the negative consequences associated with being an Atheist, and the potential ways in which being a Black Atheist may compound this. This too reinforces emerging academic notions about coming out being related to markers of privilege. Further, identifying as Atheist may itself be associated with markers of privilege, especially in the case of the Black Atheist.

In her 2011 work "Coming Out Narratives: Realities of ity," Marni Brown explicitly discusses the relationship between privilege and coming out through qualitative interviews with 60 self-identified gay and lesbian individuals. She states that “through the multiple and sometimes complicated intersections of race, class, gender, capital, place, religion, and the body, my analysis exposes institutional and interactional dimensions of power, privilege, and oppression in coming out narratives. Indeed, the kind of "American" or "routinized" homosexuality described by post-closet scholars privileges White, non-gender conforming, middle-class individuals, most often male and urban. Coming out stories that express or embody elements of non-normativity become

marginalized and marked as different. In conclusion, it exposes how privilege functions as a dimension to coming out stories, leading to marginalization and oppression amongst already discriminated identities” (Brown 2011). The extremely high levels of education found in this sample, and the high percentage of White collar and prestigious jobs strongly supports this idea set forth in Brown. Furthermore, because Black Atheists are additionally stigmatized for being Black, the relationship between privilege and coming out may be even stronger than it is for the average Atheist.

In this sample, the high level of education, and relatively high share of fairly secure good paying jobs reported likely serve as these markers of privilege. Additionally they reinforce the relationship between education level and identifying as Atheist demonstrated in large-scale demographic work (Kosmin 2009). Both large-scale social surveys like the ARIS, and the kind of ethno-demographic work done by Zuckerman both suggest that Americans that identify as Atheist are highly educated relative to their American peers as a whole (ARIS 2010, Zuckerman 2011).

The majority of respondents also had White-collar jobs, a number of them fairly prestigious. Among the sample were four musicians (including three Black Atheist rappers), a high level executive at a Smithsonian Museum in DC., a federal auditor of airplane purchases from a large company, several lawyers, a professor, several graduate students, and a pilot for FedEx. This educational and economic success mirrors the trends of success that we see with Atheists large in America. A recent Pew Research Center study in 2012 found that “44% of Atheists and agnostics have at least a college degree, compared with 26% of those who say their religion is ”nothing in particular” and 28% of the general public. And about 38% of [A]theists and agnostics have an annual family

income of at least \$75,000, compared with 29% of the general public” (Pew 2012, Pond 2015). This sample of Black Atheists was very highly educated, with 85% holding at least a two-year degree, 74% holding a four-year degree (or currently enrolled in a four year undergraduate program) 59% holding an advanced degree, and only 4% having never attended college.

However, it is also notable that while their education levels and occupational success put them in line with many Atheists (43% hold college degrees, nearly two times the national average); it makes them quite divergent from the educational attainment and occupational success of Black Americans in general (22.5%, about two-thirds of the national average). While this was generally not discussed with respondents, this fairly significant divergence from a highly salient in-group is another factor that may play into the feeling of social isolation that many Black Atheists in this sample went on to describe feeling. Though they do not report being stigmatized for such markers of privilege in and of themselves, such markers may serve to reinforce an already existing sense of ‘not truly belonging.’ Future research on if and how Black Atheists internalize this, and if and how they feel it plays a role in their lives may yield results that go toward answering such questions.

Chapter Four: Racialized Understanding of Atheism and the Black Atheist Identity

In this chapter, I examine Black Atheist identities, how respondents understood this identity, and how respondents connected this identity to the way they live their lives. This chapter organizes findings from this study around two main themes.

In Part I, titled "How Black Atheists Understand Themselves and Black Atheist Identities," I discuss how the Black Atheists in this sample conceive of and understand their identities, how they understand these identities to be racialized, and how this identity is shaped through experiences/perceptions of stigma and stigma management. I examine the way in which respondents perceived and experienced stigma, how they understood this stigma to be racialized, the ways in which they went about stigma management, and the ways in which they relate stigma to their identities as Black Atheists. This section also presents gender dynamics that arose during the interviews, specifically, differences in the way men and women in the sample talked about their identities.

Through allowing a more detailed and descriptive analysis of the important qualitative differences among Atheists, these typologies allow a more robust understanding of how Black Atheists use the closet, and operate in their day-to-day lives.

Part I: How Black Atheists Understand Themselves and Black Atheist Identities

This section will address major finding regarding the way respondents talked about the combination of race and religion in shaping their identities. Participants were asked a number of questions about race in addition to organically touching on the subject across interviews. They nearly unanimously linked their experiences as Black Americans to their atheism (98%), and saw themselves explicitly as being ‘Black Atheists’ (70%). They not only recognized these identities as connected, but as inseparable and highly informative of one another. Through moral, intellectual, and pragmatic reasons they link their atheism to their Blackness and vice versa. Black Atheists in this sample also related the high levels of religiosity among Black Americans compared to the rest of the country, and the unique historical importance of the Black church not just in spiritual and moral matters, but in political, social, and communal matters as well to amplified consequences for identifying as a Black Atheist. They link this stigma to the development of their identities, and additionally link religion, and particularly Christianity to a set of considerations they describe as unique to Black Atheists. As an important note, Black Atheists in this sample provided a wide variety of narratives regarding the closet. Though much more needs to be done, enough emerged from these narratives to suggest that conceptualizing the closet as a continuum rather than the traditionally used dualistic notion of ‘in’ or ‘out,’ is necessary to fully understand the ways in which respondents talked about using the closet. There were significant qualitative differences between the ways and the frequency Black Atheists in this sample talked about utilizing the closet that simply cannot be captured by using a conceptual binary. Subsequently I have offered typologies that more robustly capture the nuanced

way in which respondents discussed the closet, and they will be used in this dissertation.

The proposed typologies are listed in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Closet Typologies

Theme: Closet	Operationalizing of the Closet Theme
Completely Out	Respondents who disclosed their Atheism to most family members and friends. This group tends not to shy away from their atheism, they will tell strangers or imply their atheism in routine conversation
Mostly Out	Respondents who disclose their atheism to a significant number of people, but remain in the closet in one or more important relationship or setting. For example, they may be completely out in their personal lives with friends and family, but be in the closet in their work space(s).
Significantly In and Out	Respondents who approach a 50/50 ratio in terms of disclosing their Atheism. They are out in a significant part of their lives, but are also in the closet in a nearly equal number of facets of their lives. For example, out with significant others, friends, and siblings. Closeted with parents and at work.
Mostly Closeted	Respondents that attempt to hide their Atheism from most people in their lives. However, they have some forum, group, or friendship in which they are out.
Completely Closeted	Respondents that attempt to hide their Atheism from nearly everyone in their lives. Anything that may identify them as Atheist is done anonymously.

Answering one of the main research questions at the outset of this project, Black Atheists do indeed consider the particular identity of ‘Black Atheist’ to be a racialized identity. That is, they understand race and religion as two components of their identities that work in conjunction with one another, and that inform one another. More specifically, they relate their lived experiences as Black people to the ways in which they ‘do Atheism,’ and ultimately the way they in which their identities as Black Atheists are

shaped. Respondent's race affected the way they expressed their Atheism and thoughts on religiosity more broadly, and often made sense of their Atheism through the use of racial narratives. An overt example of this was said by Deena, "you look at what religion, especially Christianity did to Black folks in America..." "They let slaves read one thing... the Bible... I can't believe it's because it was good for us" said Walter echoing the same sentiment. Mark a 33-year old from Germantown added, "I call myself a Black Atheist because that's what I am." Nearly seventy percent of respondents (32 out of 46) echoed this sentiment. This pragmatic identity coupling at such a high rate is likely to be more prevalent in Black Atheists than their White American counterparts.⁹ That is not to say that Black Atheists did not have intellectual reasons for their atheism, they all did to one extent or another. But the degree to which they link their atheism and the condition of being Black in America remains noteworthy.

Black Atheists understand themselves to belong to a uniquely racialized identity at the intersection of Black and Atheist. Respondents describe how these two identities function in conjunction with one another, and also describe a relatively isolated social space for this identity to develop. Most respondents (72%) noted that they believe the way we 'do' Religion in America is inherently racist. The following exchange with Jalen is representative of this overarching belief:

Interviewer (Me): what do you think other Atheist that are mostly White think of other Atheist think of black Atheist?

Jalen: the White Atheist that I've seen and the significant ones like Jorgen Maxwell tend to understand black culture and the African diaspora and uh rapping of diff ideology's and concepts that came out of ancient Egypt or ancient Africa or civilization itself, I haven't really seen to a White Atheist that is a racist cause I feel like that's contradicting itself in a way cause its like to be a White Atheist

⁹ This potentially applies to a wide variety of minorities or members of indigenous groups that were negatively affected by colonialism, or similar practices.

you are coming onto the opposite side because the black Atheist is not trying to support that White god

Interviewer: right

Jalen: and that's really what it is...you know in context so I haven't come across a White Atheist that doesn't like black people

Interviewer: So do you think that the way we do religion (I'm not trying to put words in your mouth), is inherently racist?

Jalen: Yes.

Interviewer: Alright, tell me a little bit more about that.

Jalen: If you're speaking in terms of the oppressor trying to subliminally put ideologies so we can conform to White society, then yes. Because that's why you have post traumatic slave syndrome and the whole epigenetic of you know consciously and going off how Black people have been exploited and victimized through the doctrine. I honestly don't, I think that's a portion of why we are still enslaved but, I do think that, I look back at like music, but in terms of religion, there's no question.

It also stands noteworthy that respondents at least in part link this belief with the reason that they became or are Atheists. Namely, like Jalen, they view religion in America as inextricably linked with racism.

Black Atheists in this sample also describe a feeling of being pulled in two different directions from their two main in-groups, with each side essentially saying that Blackness and atheism are not compatible. They also relayed that this idea constantly reinforced through lived experiences. As is discussed later, respondents generally report that the dislike of Atheists within Black communities is both pervasive and acceptable. On the other hand, they consistently feel distance from more mainstream Atheists, largely due to their perceptions that the latter do not understand the racial considerations that can make living as a Black Atheist extremely treacherous.

How Respondents Viewed Black Atheist Identities and the Salience of Its Two Major Components

Respondents spent a significant amount of time discussing their perceptions of their identities, and any collective group identity they felt. Across interviews there was widespread agreement about how they categorized and labeled themselves, and notions of in-group belonging. Respondents used words like ‘we’ ‘ours’ and ‘us’ in meaningful ways that pertained specifically to Black Atheists. More than half, 70% called themselves or referred to themselves explicitly as “Black Atheists.”

There was also near universal agreement among respondents that Black is a more salient identity than is Atheist, and in turn also reported feeling more in-group solidarity with Blacks relative to Atheists. Though respondents consistently and repeatedly reference the racialized nature of their Black Atheist identity, they were equally consistent in their being Black in America is their most salient identity. Not one respondent reported thinking of themselves as an Atheist first, with all respondents attesting that their race drives more of their interactions and behavior. Rather, Black Atheists in this study reported seeing themselves as Black (African-American) people first. “I wear this skin everyday... most people can’t get me for being an Atheist... cause they don’t know,” said Maurice, an accountant in his mid-40s. Geoff added a very similar sentiment saying “The bad things that happen to me mostly happen because I’m Black so I have to go with that [identity].” Thomas, who is a 29 year old DC resident offered “Well... I think religion hurts me as a Black man... so I’m against it. But make no mistake that when I walk down the street I do it as a Black man in America.” Only a handful (3 out of 46) of respondents emphasized that their Atheist identities were as

active, or drove as much of their behavior as did their racial identity. It may be notable that Raymond, and Jalen, two of the three undergraduate students in the sample were two of the three respondents that discussed Atheism and Blackness as similarly salient. Bree also relatively young (27 years old from Baltimore) joined Raymond and Jalen in saying "... I think I think more like an Atheist... but I know that's usually not why others treat me a certain way." Although a very small portion of the sample, that this slightly dissenting group is all young may point to younger Black Atheists having different experiences than some of their older counterparts.

Their responses stand in stark contrast to research findings on their White counterparts, because White is systematically de-racialized in the United States (Doane 1997). As such, Atheist seemingly constitutes a more salient identity for White Atheists relative to their racial identity, which likely helps explain some of the wide chasms existing between White and mainstream Atheist and Black Atheists on where the focus of their collective energy. Sociological work on race often discusses this conscious deracializing of White Americans "the salience of their ethno-racial identity may appear muted to Whites" (Doane 1997). Additionally work in sociology of religion using largely or all-White samples suggests a highly salient Atheist identity (Smith 2010, Greska 2015). Smith, for example, states that for many of her interview subjects, their new Atheist identity became a highly salient part of their self-identity. This held true even if the person in question received negative reactions or experienced hostility from others after 'coming out' or otherwise expressing Atheistic sentiments. She explains that despite the fact these new Atheists recognize their marginalized position in society, rather than feeling a sense of anomie, most respondents discussed feelings of freedom, autonomy,

and liberation through narratives of achieved identity construction. That is to say, Atheists in Smith's sample are proud to be Atheists (Smith, 2010).

While Smith's findings largely hold true for Black Atheists, Black Atheists in this study also expressed a component of pride related to racial solidarity, social justice, or both. More than half of respondents (54%), including Michelle and Mark explicitly discussed this concept. "They think they need to save us... the Godless... But really I'm trying to wake them up [Black Americans] because you're still worshiping a slave religion," said Michelle. Discussing the same idea, Mark explained, "Almost every Black person I know thinks God is on their side or our side. I look at em like... are you crazy? If this is loving Black people... then uh-uh." That is to say that, because Black Atheists in this sample view religion as a tool of oppression to the Black condition in America, they generally believe that in removing these metaphoric shackles they open up space for new and compelling arguments for Black progress, social justice, and equality. This idea is summed up very well by Will, age 35, who stated, "if you fight on that ground... you see what you get." This idea that the visions for equality, the urgency of progress, and our ability to imagine fairness are generally impeded by religion; and serve as unique and purposeful impediments to Black progress in America specifically, was cited widely by Black Atheist respondents (Greska 2015, Smith 2010). This group of respondents was joined by seven additional respondents (70% in all) in offering Atheism as a prescriptive measure to curb some of the racial inequality seen in society, who link casting aside what they perceive to be inherently racist religious beliefs with allowing/creating new pathways toward, and different social spaces of equality.

“Of Course” It’s harder to be a Black Atheist: Racialized Family and Communal Considerations

Another finding is that Black Atheists consistently attest to believing that as Black Atheists in America, they have more difficulties and obstacles in general than their White Atheist and/or mainstream Atheist counterparts. Among other reasons they point to the cultural importance of religion to Black communities and Black culture in America, cultural importance and centrality to the Black family, the fact that there are fewer Black Atheists and subsequently relatively few places to meet and confide in other Black Atheists, and the racialized transmission of race in America more broadly. In America, Black identity conveys religiosity while White identity does not. Therefore Black Atheists are systematically more likely to be seen as violating assumptions.

It was surprising how unanimous and convicted respondents were on this issue. All but one respondent (98%) made or affirmed a statement along the lines of ‘being a Black Atheist is more difficult than being a mainstream Atheist.’ For many (31 out of 46, 67%) the idea that this was even a question whose answer needed to be ascertained was laughable. To many respondents it was plainly obvious to the point of being self-evident that, as Mark put it, “of course Black Atheists have it harder.” Respondents widely shared the belief that they faced more difficult circumstances than other Atheists, and mostly attribute this to race. Responses that suggest their perceptions of how the uniquely culturally infused issues of religion that they tie to a distinctly racialized stigma against Atheists within their own communities, and to the double-barreled stigma of being both Black and Atheist. Along these lines and in a somewhat humorous fashion Edgar, age 28, said “we’re Black. Everything is harder.” Respondents widely agree that as Black

Atheists, they face difficulties that their mainstream counterparts do not, and mostly relate these issues to race.

While comments like Edgar's do point to racism operating broadly across society, they also strongly emphasize that many of the unique hurdles in their lives are related to them being both Black and Atheist. While respondents openly talk about experiencing racism in their lives, and even relate it to issues within Atheism more broadly, they do not attribute the stigma they feel from other Blacks to racism. Rather, they attribute it to the strongly embedded nature of religion in Black culture in America, which they further relate to the acceptability of stigmatizing Atheists in Black communities. It is also notable that while they still agree with these sentiments, the youngest respondents (Bradley, Jalen, Raymond, and Ciara) in this sample tended to talk about their own difficulties in milder terms than did the rest of the sample. These difficulties included communal stigma, as well as their navigation of interpersonal relationships, and romantic relationships (discussed in further detail later in this chapter). The youngest members of this sample were all students (Ciara had just completed her Associate degree in the spring, just weeks before we interviewed) and thus do not have qualitatively comparable work lives/work experience as the rest of the sample.

Stigma Management and Navigating Stigma

Black Atheists in this sample both identified stigma as important in informing their identities and interpreted stigma through a racial lens. This section analyzes the way in which Black Atheists in this sample perceived stigma, and how they understand this stigma to be racialized/have a racial component. As mentioned in the previous section, Black Atheists are highly stigma conscious, they are aware of the stigma against Black

and Atheists, in addition to the unique racialized stigma they report having to traverse. The recognition of stigma combined with perceived consequences lead all respondents to think about how to best manage stigma. The social spaces in which respondents felt it most important to navigate stigma included familial relationships and close friendships, communal or public relationships, romantic relationships, and work-spaces. Respondents also discuss how the stigma they perceive in these areas to be related to them being both Black and Atheist, and specifically discuss feeling racialized stigma from other Black people.

Family and Interpersonal Considerations

Respondents discussed feeling stigmatized, or perceived they would feel stigmatized should those close to them learn of their atheism. This included immediate family members, extended family members, close friends, and romantic interests and partners. These responses included both discussions of experiences and feedback from those with the Atheist identity exposed, and the projections and perceptions of more closeted respondents. Overwhelmingly respondents attested to the idea that since most of their close social circle is embedded in a culture to which religion was particularly and uniquely central, the stigma they felt as Black Atheists was heightened in both intensity and scope.

Only four respondents described their immediate family as either being relatively non-religious, or as being open or accepting of skeptical views. While they too report many of the same extra-familial and cultural challenges, as did respondents from more religious households, with few exceptions, they had qualitatively different experiences in their home lives. Most notably, their perceived consequences for coming out involved a

different and mostly milder set of considerations. The vast majority of respondents (89%) came from ‘very religious’ or ‘extremely religious’ households.

Describing how her southern Baptist mother would likely react to learning she was an Atheist, Patrice, age 38, touched on what religiosity in a household could potentially mean for Black Atheists. The following exchange began with Patrice being asked about how she believed her mother might react to learning she was Atheist:

Patrice: “her she would probably be extremely sad, which is why I wouldn’t want to tell her

Interviewer (Me): would she feel like it reflected upon her?

Patrice: she would probably blame my dad []

Interviewer: ok... can [cut off]

Patrice: actually, because [laughter] she blamed my dad for leaving the church, they are like you know their marriage issues in the past, you know, she put on, you know, god represent—your father is supposed to represent your god to a person, so if you have, you know, any type of issue with your dad, that’s why you decide not to [um] bare a relationship with god, that isn’t true, you know [] at least in my case, and I think probably a lot of cases”

Patrice: I think [ah] [:::] they probably try not to [um] I haven’t told my family. [Um] they know that I am not religious [um] that’s as far as I think anybody wants to go with it.

Interviewer: so knowing you are not religious, do they send you literature, things like that to try and get you back on the—the right track or—or however they would see it?

Patrice: they—my mom has some subtle [um] well not even so subtle [um] things; like they will—they will invite me to church and I will go for certain programs and things I don’t mind [um] she—my mom consults herself with the idea that I know the truth, so she is like well I know that you know one day perhaps you will start going back to church or whatever

One important thing Patrice mentions is that she feels that as long as she doesn’t profess atheism (or presumably a disbelief in God) that her family would view her as within the scope of someone who is still working toward their relationship with God or

the church. Her family seems to view it as more of a hiccup on her path to salvation, as opposed to people who profess atheism, which respondents repeatedly suggest is viewed as having taken a position against God. Many respondents (43%) also echoed this understanding. In short, they appear to have internalized the idea that they can at least in some sense be accepted even when admitting to reduced or muted religiosity. Responses among this group were consistent across age and gender, but notably, like Patrice, sixty percent (12 out of 20) of them were born outside of the Washington DC/Baltimore area. It is quite possible that being raised in the Washington DC/Baltimore area makes one and/or one's family and friends systematically more likely to be familiar with Atheism. Further, the majority of respondents (83%) reported believing that others perceived 'atheism' in a qualitatively different, and significantly more negative light than even demonstrating a lack of religiosity or being non-religious.

Another item that emerged is the tendency of respondents to suggest that other members of their social circles would blame external forces for pushing or pulling someone toward atheism. In this case, Patrice literally says, "that there would be blame to go around" if she revealed her atheism. Religiosity of parents or immediate caregivers certainly seemed to matter greatly both for considerations of coming out, and in reactions that respondents received while going through the coming out process. The way in which participants view their coming out as Atheist as a major potential disruption to the most important of familial relationships like the relationship with one's parents, and family life more generally, have been borne out by the narratives of the eight respondents who have told these people.

One respondent Cleo, a woman in her early 50's who migrated to Charles County MD from the Caribbean while stopping in New York City in between, described the most extreme reaction of all:

My father came to visit me when I was living in New York. ...He tried to give me more stuff, and I was like OK I'm finally tired of this... I'm going to tell him. You know... I had been here [The United States] for a while and was getting more comfortable with what I believe and so I just told him... Dad I don't believe this anymore. He hit me in the face... just like he would growing up... and I stopped him and screamed this was my house and he had to leave... We have spoken some since, but never seen each other.

While Cleo was unique among the eight respondents who had revealed their Atheism to a parent or grandparent in experiencing physical violence, seven of them describe a negative reaction. Four including Nia describe being angrily challenged. "Don't you know God loves you?!... He [God] gave you that brain..." she said recalling her mother's reaction.

These narratives contrast with current research on Atheists in which the majority of participants tend to report out stories that have neutral or moderately negative reactions (Greska 2015, Pond 2016). In a 2015 study, Greska analyzed Smith's 2010 study of Atheist identities and applied it to a sample of 14 college Atheists. Like Smith, Greska uses a sample of Atheists that was over 90% White. She found that many of the Atheists within her sample appealed to the idea of people 'preferring,' that they not be Atheists. They apply this idea of preference both to coming out, as well as the way their families perceive their Atheist identity. This she argued, as would I, echoes the tenor of many respondents from analysis Smith, though those respondents did not use the word preference at nearly the rate of Greska's¹⁰. Her respondents describe most of the negative

¹⁰ Perhaps the fact that Smith's sample was Australian and not American can explain this difference in language. Though they describe the reactions they get, and the reactions they project in similarly mild

feedback they get in very mild terms, and overtly appeal to the idea of preference. She suggests this is an important factor in the way they maintain their Atheist identities.

Talking about a young woman in her sample named Aria, Greska goes on to state that “although she cited feeling like she had to defend her Atheist identity around her boyfriend’s religious family and around her grandmother who would prefer that she went to church, Aria said that she generally feels accepted by the academic community and by society as a whole,” (Greska 2015).¹¹

fashions, people in Greska’s sample were exponentially more likely to explicitly appeal to the idea of ‘preference.’ There is also a wider range of ages in Smith’s sample as opposed to the all-college sample of Greska.

¹¹ She describes a second respondent, Matthew as saying that he was sure his grandparents would still love him if they knew, but that they would undoubtedly “prefer” that he was a Christian.” Matthew goes on to further raise and explain this idea of “preference” by describing how he does not feel completely accepted in society as an Atheist. He explained, “Does society wish I wasn’t an Atheist? Completely. I believe they [society] wished that I believed in some religion....One of the things is that...certain [political] parties would never accept me for being an Atheist. So while society will accept that I’m an Atheist...they will always try to change [me].” A 3rd respondent named Brian also attested to this notion of his family “preferring” that he not be Atheist. She explains that his entire family is aware of his atheism, and quotes him as saying, “It’s not like they don’t show me the same affection that they show the other cousins. It’s just sort of like passive aggressive. It’s sort of like ‘I’d really prefer if you weren’t an Atheist, but I still love you,’ ” (Greska 2015). She goes on to conclude that “although many participants do not experience dramatic consequences for their atheism such as being

In contrast to the idea of preference presented in Smith and Greska, Black Atheists seem to both experience, and in the case of closeted members of the sample project, more intense reactions for revealing their atheism (Smith 2010, Greska 2015). This held true across the sample regardless of how closeted they were. Respondents link this increased hostility with the high levels of religiosity among Black Americans, and with the cultural importance and infusion of religion to Black people collectively and communally.

Forty-four out of 46 respondents described in great detail the amount of consideration they gave to how their family and close friends might perceive or did perceive their atheism. The two exceptions were notably both undergraduate students, with one coming from a mostly non-religious immediate family and the other coming from a non-traditional religious family in the mode of new-age spiritualism (both described having friend groups that were mostly open to their beliefs, and one was completely out of the closet). Potential alienation from friends and family was a specific concern shared broadly across all respondents, although for the youngest respondents it appeared to be less of a preoccupation. For many respondents these considerations compel them to utilize the closet to prevent being seen as Black Atheists within their close social circles. For others, it meant (or additionally meant) carefully strategizing on how to come out, and whom to come out to. But for a vast majority of respondents; almost nine out of ten, projected or experienced overall negative consequences for ‘coming out’ as an Atheist. It stands to note that 61% of respondents expressed doubt that disowned as a family member, there is still a discomfort that accompanies an Atheist identity that many respondents expressed,” (Greska 2015).

they would ever reveal their atheism to their parents or immediate caregiver, or stated overtly that they never would. Additionally, a handful of respondents had no living childhood caregiver, or a caregiver who was incapacitated or disabled. In the case of one respondent who grew up mostly in foster care, they considered no one in this role.

The Intense Manner In Which Black Atheists Perceive Communal Stigma

Respondents repeatedly referred to the unique cultural importance of religiosity more broadly, and Christianity specifically as a stigmatizing and complicating factor in their lives. Obviously, communities are comprised of the individuals and families that the respondents describe in the interpersonal section. But respondents also alluded to a racialized religiosity that permeated many of their public interactions, and underpinned many of their passing encounters. A sports analogy might help to crystallize this notion of a racialized communal pressure. Take for example is a city where a particular sports team is very important to the local populace; like the Red Sox are for Boston. Wearing a Red Sox jersey transmits the idea that one is a Red Sox fan almost anywhere, but in Boston there is an additional level of transmission communicated along the lines of ‘I’m a proud Bostonian.’ Conversely were one to wear an Arizona Diamondbacks jersey, it would transmit that one was a Diamondbacks fan and not a Red Sox fan. However, wearing the jersey of their rival New York Yankees in Boston, like wearing a Red Sox jersey itself carries with it an additional level of transmission. It not only says ‘I’m a Yankees fan,’ but is also very likely to transmit the idea that one does not like, or actively dislikes, or roots against the Red Sox. Being a Black Atheist is to often be seen as not just wearing the wrong team’s jersey, but wearing the jersey of the archrival team.

Michelle, age 43, mentioned that in her majority African-American community in rural Texas that college bound students are literally told from the pulpit “not to be an Atheist.” “You’re told to prepare to protect yourself from an enemy who will tell you there is no God. Not to forget where you came from, and the importance of God in your life.” She mentioned there being a broader narrative at her church that Atheists were “not to be trusted,” recounting hearing a Bible verse as a youth that said “only a fool says there is no God.” The verse in question is Psalms 14:1, and Michelle said it had the effect of “rendering Atheists mute” for quite some time in her life. She continued, restating the message such verses gave off saying “How could they be anything but a fool? ... If they were foolish enough to say there was no God then I automatically don’t pay any attention to them. If they did not believe there was a God it meant they could not be trusted on any other level.” The prominence of the church in this particular community meant that this was a widely held and “constantly reinforced” view throughout the community. Patrice goes on to explain how she perceives the mindset of “the Black community” as it pertains to atheism, and how it prolonged her becoming Atheist process in the following exchange:

Patrice: [um] [hmm] [...] if anything might have taken me longer [um] only because of the—the mindsets within the Black community. There is a lot of guilt [um] and fear kind of put on [um] people for a lot of things actually [laughter] in the Black community

Interviewer (Me): right, oh yeah.

Patrice: [um] but the—the religious part—even if you don’t go to church because there are quite a few Black people don’t go to church, they are not living according to any type of religious teaching []

Interviewer: right

Patrice: but you have to say that you believe in something []

Interviewer: right

Patrice: [um] to cut ties with that is[:::] challenging so perhaps—maybe if I have grown up on—maybe specifically as a White American I think other people of color probably have the same—similar challenges.

Respondents perceive stigma against Atheists to be both more intense in nature, and more prevalent and widespread amongst Black Americans. This aligns with analysis of religious surveys that ask about views of Atheists (ARIS 2008, Pew 2012). In the following exchange, Raquel another Texas transplant to the DC area discusses stigma in a variety of ways.

Interviewer (Me): So uh... how do you think Atheists are perceived in general?

Raquel: Ass hell-bound extra stupid niggas... that's pretty much the way they make me feel *laughs*. And then they say crazy shit like 'Girl why don't you ever call me?!' And I'm like hmmm.... why don't I ever call you

Interviewer: Ha. Right... yeah so if you said something Atheistic to uh any people close to you would they not take kindly to that.

Raquel: Oh they would declare... I've been told you know be careful what you say. Oh I'm sorry I can't have this conversation with you I don't want to jeopardize my relationship with the lord affiliating with you

Interviewer: Damn

Raquel: I'm like you don't wanna jeopardize your relationship with the same imaginary homeboy I just broke up with? Ok so I don't want to... er what I choose to do is not antagonize. So and the best way to not antagonize is to not get antagonized. So I don't bother them.

Interviewer: So people really think that talking to an Atheist at least in your case can be

Raquel: (interjects) can be contaminating

Interviewer: (repeats) can be contaminating. OK that's the word... With that can you uhh tell me how important is being an Atheist to you?

Raquel: Uhh I think it's the difference between life and death quite frankly. It's uh been really, it's been really fun to have had a sincere position on each side of this coin. Because it makes my new 3rd position... and that's what comes out of being an Atheist (inaudible) necessarily so. I can quite literally look across at both and I find it fascinating to look at the believer [Raquel] and to look at the Atheist [Raquel]. And to see them very similarly, equally passionate but one far more useful *laughs*"

Particularly of note are the ways in which she immediately interpreted the word Atheist itself to be racialized, the positive take she has on her Black Atheist identity despite stigma, and the way she described this stigma as extending to Atheists as being viewed as literal contaminants.

Moreover, a majority of respondents (78%) described a culture in which it was perfectly ok to discriminate against Atheists, and in fact describe routinely being in spaces where it is actively encouraged. Both the scope of sources and the manner in which Black Atheists are constantly confronted with the idea that "you are not one of us," dominate the way in which Black Atheists internalize communal stigma.

Questions of Authenticity

One specific manifestation of communal stigma the vast majority of respondents mentioned is that of questioning their authenticity as Black people. Respondents both perceived and reported hearing other Blacks in America as viewing atheism as outside the scope of Blackness. The way that respondents internalized and responded to such challenges greatly affected the manner in which they went about navigating the unique space which they occupy.

Notably, it is important to understand that the manner in which they are questioned (by other Black people) about their own authenticity as Black people often goes directly to the idea that they stand against Black progress. In one form or another,

nearly every respondent either experiencing this directly as an out Black Atheist, or reported observing it from the relative safety of the closet.

One specific form of this authenticity questioning, was that respondents perceived as Atheists to be taken as challenging the civil rights movement in some fashion. These perceived challenges at times applied to the success of the movement, but were mostly seen as challenging the ideology of the movement or as attempting to undermine its most important figures. The following exchange with Patrice, touches both of these forms, while at the same time pointing to the reasons why the latter is more often not the primary focus of these authenticity challenges:

Patrice: [...] [um] [...] I think—well from what I have seen it's—it's—they just see it as somehow disrespectful to []

Interviewer (Me): disrespectful?

Patrice: [um] I—I think—you know [huh] I think from slavery [um] well during slavery I guess [um] the slaves kind of tied themselves or parallel themselves to [um]

Interviewer: Israel

Patrice: Israel, yeah. So I think that kind of still [um] is lingering like we are—basically we couldn't have gotten this far but—by

Interviewer: right, right, ok.

Patrice: so to say that the lord doesn't exist I mean []

Interviewer: right.

Patrice: how did we get this far [laughter]

Interviewer: right, got it. No that's—that's something I feel like I hear is implied in the anti-Atheist language

Patrice: yeah.

Interviewer: that you are anti-Black progress [um] []

Patrice: right, right, *right!*

Both in this exchange and previous ones, Patrice touches upon what is routinely reported by other members of the study. In short, Patrice and others believe that their being Atheist would be taken as something of an insult to other Black people close to them, and potentially more broadly. Because they perceive and in many cases have experienced others to have linked Black progress and positive communal Black experiences with religiosity, that saying you don't believe in one (God), is taken as an affront to the notion of the other (Black progress).

Lamar echoed this idea when he talked about having heard “but MLK [was Christian]” as a response from a friend when talking to a 3rd party about some of his beliefs. “It’s like they think you hate Martin, [laughs]... it’s like what?!” What both Lamar and Patrice recall experienced by almost 30 respondents. What’s more, many like Lamar who said “but a lot of people are probably really like that,” believe that the idea that Black Atheists are somehow betraying the legacy of King and other Civil Rights leaders, the Civil Rights movement, and liberation theology; and even the suggestion that they are against or impeding Black progress is widespread in their broader communities.

In the reported experience of respondents, affirming the role of religiosity as central to abolition and the civil rights movement serves as a litmus test to expressing appreciation of the history of Black progress in America. Not making this affirmation is often taken as a challenge. Nia, a 33 year old woman who has lived in Baltimore County for six years after moving to the area from Tennessee to attend college explained “it’s like if you’re not with them on God or Jesus then you might as well be on their side (presumably the side of those in favor of racial oppression).” Many other respondents

discussed their perceptions and experiences that being Atheist (or professing atheism) was often linked with questioning civil rights leaders, the successes and righteousness of the civil rights movement more broadly, or otherwise being unappreciative or ignorant about Black progress in America. About 75% of the respondents reported directly hearing some version of this line of argument, and an even greater number (83%) discussed a more indirect form of this knowledge, or spoke to the idea that such a sentiment prevailed in the ethos of many Black communities.

Additionally, about 15 respondents (33%) further explained that they felt that the vast majority of Blacks in America view being an Atheist, and Atheism, as anathema to the Black experience. This is best summed up by what Rochelle said about a fairly common refrain amongst Christian apologists. “You probably know... you the guys that say there’s no such thing as Atheists... I feel like [among Black people] it’s like no such thing as Black Atheists,” she said. This idea that being Black in America and being Atheist are incompatible is reflected in the identity struggles that many participants described during their becoming Atheist process. Because of the salience and prominence of this identity these authenticity questions mattered greatly for respondents. That they recognized that coming out or otherwise being revealed as Atheists (in some cases even being suspected) could seriously jeopardize the way others perceive their racial identity. Their status as ‘true in-group’ members, and their perception of the way they believe they will be viewed by other Blacks more generally, certainly affected the way that Black Atheists chose to present themselves. As Edgar put it, “they check your Black card.”

Moreover, Black Atheists in this study routinely described hearing “That’s a White thing,” or similar derivations that imply one are in league with ostensibly White

causes. And by further implication either ignoring or being against black causes. “They look at it like it’s a White thing,” said Nelson, age 28, a lifetime DC resident and graduate student in a philosophy program. “Like that’s some stuff for White people,” he continued pointing away from the table of the NW Washington bistro we were sitting in. Stemming from his discussion of King, Lamar went on to say “it’s like they can have that. You can have religion. Got it? No question.” Michelle, who seemed loathe to bite her tongue at any point during the interview actually went on to say that she believed a “lot of Blacks people see that as some White shit.” In addition, the suggestion that atheism is a “White thing,” seems to operate in conjunction with the implication that one is against, or undermining Black causes or Black progress, which Black Atheists feel is comparable to being called a “sell-out.” There is a long and documented history of terms for applied to Black people deemed inauthentic members of the in-group. Such terms include ‘sellout,’ ‘uncle tom,’ ‘house negro,’ and ‘bougie’ (Reynolds 2011, Bogle 1973). While the utilitarian usage and moral appropriateness of these terms is an ongoing debate within Africana Studies and other disciplines, their deployment nonetheless seems to serve as an analogue for the form that some of the authenticity considerations that our Black Atheist respondents felt and experienced.

In fact, as is the case with Black feminists, Black Atheists have to traverse a number of considerations about authenticity; including the fairly widespread idea that one of their fundamental political projects (feminism or atheism) advance White middle class causes/movements (Collins 1993, Cole 2008).

ABC’s *Blackish* is the second most watched network television series amongst Black households after *Scandal* (Nielsen 2015). An October 2016 episode directly

addressed the notion of “that’s a White thing” that several respondents said they’ve heard directly, and most have heard alluded to. In fact in reference to atheism, the main character Dre says “This is some White shit!” and concludes that he has “surrounded the kids with so much White people stuff that they no longer believe in God.” I have written a more in depth review of ‘God’ the 2nd episode of the 3rd season of Blackish that is highly illustrative of the ways in which Black Atheists described this overarching perception in their own lives that can be found in an extended footnote¹².

¹² The episode begins with a family dinner in which Dre admonishes new character and houseguest Johan for reaching for food before saying grace. Dre then asks his oldest daughter Zoey to lead the family in saying grace. She replies “I don’t know if I feel comfortable leading grace, when I’m not sure if I believe in God,” which immediately sours Dre’s expression which he follows by asking if she is a Wiccan.

Johan Bow’s brother who has just returned from two years teaching in France implies that he is an Atheist by saying “I’m with Zoe. I believe in science, not some fake man in the sky.” In his first appearance in the series, Johan is called a “pompous croissant-eating fool,” by Dre and presented as much. He is depicted as liking long French style meals, generally looking down on American conventions like refrigerating butter, and speaks with an almost Mid-Atlantic accent¹². In a later solo interview style scene Johan turns to the camera and says and self-identifies as Atheist by saying “there are more Black Atheists than people think... We have our own bowling team.” This pompous privileged presentation and mentioning of relative social isolation also mirror narratives as told by respondents.

For the rest of the episode, Dre oscillates between panic and anger, and goes to great lengths to return Zoey to her status as a believer. He tricks her into praying, he points to benign accomplishments and tells her that she could not have done that without God. Dre then goes to his mostly White corporate office and discusses his issue with his co-workers. His White boss responds that “I don’t do the whole God thing,” while joking that religion makes for great tax deductions. Most of his White co-workers concur with these sentiments, while his two Black co-workers proudly profess their love of God and Jesus. One goes through a humorous demonstration of showing his cross necklace and religious tattoos saying “I love me some God.” As Dre looks around the office, the descriptor believer pops over the heads of his Black co-workers, and non-believer pops over the head of most of the White co-workers he scans past. conclusion that atheism is a symptom of Whiteness. “This is some White shit!” he declares after realizing he’s “surrounded the kids with so much White people stuff that they no longer believe in God.” [that Dre gives historical context by explaining how Black people turned to religion during slavery.

Dre and his mother Ruby both panic in a variety of ways about Zoey “straying” from her faith,” a recurrent gag throughout the episode¹². Along with Dre making it his mission to convince Zoey that she needs God both in her life and to give meaning and guidance to her through life, Ruby also shares this focus, offering to perform an exorcism and offering a variety of other biblical remedies.

The episode ends with Bow in a medical office getting an ultrasound, surrounded by Dre and the kids. As the doctor or nurse searches for the fetal heartbeat, there is a moment of panic and somber looks cross Bow and the rest of the family’s face. After about 45 seconds (an eternity of sitcom tension) even the doctor/nurse begins to show an expression of worry. She asks Bow to adjust herself to a new position, and a few seconds later, Bow herself a medical doctor sheds a tear in worry. A strong rhythmic heartbeat finally breaks the tense silence, with Zoey uttering the words “thank you God,” causing Dre to smile proudly and embrace her (Hope 2016).

This portrayal is consistent with the way in which Black Atheists in this study report perceiving other Blacks to view atheism as outside the scope of Blackness, as well as how they believe themselves to be viewed as ‘not fully Black,’ and even as potentially hostile to Black causes like the Civil Rights movement. The majority of respondents reporting that they believe “that’s some White shit!” characterizes many of the authenticity challenges that they face. They strongly incorporate this understanding into how they navigate they closet, and ultimately into many of the behaviors and self-presentation decisions that they make.

More broadly, respondents also discussed their awareness of the cultural importance of religion, particularly Christianity to African-Americans more broadly. All respondents discussed the relative religiosity of Black Americans in some fashion, and nearly all of them relate this to a broader communal emphasis on religion. Additionally, many respondents reflected or reported on how they themselves personally experienced this emphasis, this intersection of culture, religion, and race from an insider perspective. For example, Nia, age 33, discussed having a cotillion in Tennessee “where every other word was God, or Jesus... all wrapped up in this nice Black middle-class wrapping.” Jason discussed a more subtle form, age 38, who recalled the following.

The manner in which this episode of Black-ish treats Black Atheist, irreligion among Black people touches on a myriad of issues raised by respondents. In addition to exploring the notion of atheism being a “White thing,” the episode also touches on the historical importance of religion for Black people and discusses how it came to be linked with Black progress and a sense of communal hope. The episode also depicts numerous suggestions throughout the episode that being Black and being Atheist are incompatible. As is noted, Johan, Dre’s Black Atheist brother in law is depicted as being snobbish, pompous, elitist, as believing that the way the French take three plus hours to eat dinner and store butter at room temperature as being superior to their conventional American counterparts. In many ways, he is depicted as being something other than Black and ostensibly European. Like his wife Bow (who is more in unison with Dre during the episode than she is in most), Johan is in fact mixed race, having a Black mother and White father.

Growing up, if you played ball, the church league was everything... to be in [the league] you had to go to one of the churches... this is like the thing to do on weekends, feel me?" These respondents were able to discuss feedback loops, which continually reinforced the notion that this intersection was important to the Black experience, and in many ways being Black. Thomas mentioned succinctly that "praise and worship are good. Skeptical thinking is bad... and there ain't much of a gray area really.

Of the various kinds and sources of stigma the respondents discussed, the one most often described in personal and hurtful terms were these questions of authenticity. Notably, respondents were more often than not able to talk very impersonally about the implications of religious belief. As an example, respondents were not offended that others thought they would go to Hell, ascribing this to being the logical conclusion to belief. Because the majority of Black Atheists reported that Black was their most salient identity, these sorts of questions from their main in-group carried notable weight. Several respondents gave blunt insight into this perceived challenge to authenticity. "They do. Well they [Black Americans] act like Black people can't be Atheists," said Thomas. "That's a line you just don't cross," responded Will. "As Black people you're supposed to be Christian. But if you aren't... you had best believe in something," said describing his encounters with attitudes that expect religiosity of Black Americans. This is especially notable that in fact, many Black Atheists in this study ascribe at least part of their atheism to the fact that they believe that religion (and Christianity in particular) has done historical harm to the Black condition in America, and that religion (and again in particular Christianity) continues to serve as an aggregate detriment to American Blacks. In fact, most relate their atheism to ideas of liberation, freedom, and/or equality both personally (80%) and as prescriptive model (70%) for Black people collectively.

Gendered Effects

In talking about being Black Atheists, men and women in this sample talked very differently about their identities, gender, and also seem to appeal to different sources for informing their Atheism. This subsection will discuss these differences in the ways men and women understood their identities, how these differences may affect how men and women in the sample understand Atheism, and a potential emerging Black Atheist feminist space.

Among the most notable findings, were that a majority of female respondents (88%) also linked their atheism with gender, while men mentioned gender very little, and made even fewer mentions of any potential links between their atheism and gender. Also of note, large-scale demographic studies have shown the Atheist population in America to be about two-thirds male, but the Black Atheists that made up this sample had significantly more females than males (Zuckerman 2007, Kosmin and Keyser 2009, Lugo et al. 2012, and Cooperman, Smith, and Ritchie 2015). While it is not possible to draw demographic conclusions from this sample, this difference from what the traditional understanding of the Atheist demographic is noteworthy. Whether or not the notable male female gender gap we see among Atheists may be muted among Black Atheists, requires further analysis from a broader more nationally representative sample of Black Atheists. Nonetheless, interview responses about gender and Atheism, and the manner in which Black women in particular link them as a liberation strategy suggests that Black Atheists do indeed have the potential for a different gender dynamic than currently exists among Atheists more generally.

Of the 26 female respondents, 23 of them cited their belief that religion looks down on and oppresses women. In their responses, the majority of female respondents linked religion and patriarchy. A dozen female respondents alluded directly to Biblical passages that reinforced these notions. Celeste, age 46, who holds an executive position with the Smithsonian explained sexism she saw in religion. "...It's a lifetime of them telling you you're worse. You can't be priests... then you get married and they tell you to listen to an obey your husband..." Mary, a 41-year-old transplant from Boston, was one of several female respondents who also alluded to a link between female sexual control and religion saying, "They tell you who to fuck... only fuck to pro-create..." Rochelle discussed the same idea while also pointing to the disparate ways the ideas of sexual sins are applied. "I only ever hear about women's sex sins. The sins of women. Women are tempting... Don't be tempting. All the while the Pastor is hitting up the lady in the first row." The idea of a religious leader behaving in a sexually improper or hypocritical manner was not exclusive to her analysis, and was raised by about 25% of all respondents, and nearly half (46%) of female respondents. Other forms of oppression linked to religion by female respondents included sexual repression, female circumcision, inequality in gender roles, and sexism more broadly.

Many female participants also linked atheism with feminism broadly, and in some cases they made these links explicitly to Black feminism or radical feminism. Nicole said of becoming an Atheist, "it made me freer as a Black woman." Crystal said, "Women are the keepers of the church but the church is the keeper of women," pointing to the oppression she saw towards women from religion despite the fact that the majority of church-goers in the United States are women. Another common theme across respondents

was them pointing to what they saw as numerous forms of hypocrisy. Eight-seven percent of respondents mentioned something along these lines. Some like Mary pointed out that poor people use religion for comfort, but that they believe “religion exploits poor people. What’s that guy... [Creflo] Dollar? He told his congregation he needed a jet or helicopter... And you know he probably already drives the nicest car up in there.”

Respondents also explicitly linked gender liberation and atheism, saying things like “religion looks at women like lessers... like lesser beings,” and that religion “controls women.” Prompted by being asked about the feedback she’d gotten about being an Atheist, Michelle gave a very detailed answer that touched on gender, race, sexuality, and the importance of ity:

Umm... from Christians kind of limited just the whole fearful kind of... I can't believe you're abandoning your roots kind of foolishness. And I always argue if I... if we stuck to our roots as females we wouldn't be doin shit, as Black people we wouldn't be doin shit, as queer people we wouldn't be doin shit. So this root that you are committed to is very troubling. And if you don't think like that if you don't make it to that place of considering why am I so dedicated to this root? If you can't figure this out on your own or if it scares you to ask it. You should at least ask your question 'why are you afraid to ask the question?' Ask the question... ask yourself what's preventing you and if you can't do that well you know whatever. Then you are dedicated to doing something and you don't know why and don't care to know. You know... I can't help you.

Female respondents strongly emphasized that they believed this link between atheism and liberation of women to be especially true of women of color saying things like “I feel free... especially as a Black woman.” “I feel like the way we talk as sisters... as Black women and how we should discuss these things,” was the way Rochelle put it. Cleo added, “I can’t understand being Ok and happy being in something that thinks I came from a man’s rib... and people I know took that very seriously.”

This is not unlike some of the language used by some Black female Atheists that have emerged as leaders or otherwise visible figures in some Atheist circles. The Huffington Post ran a March 23rd 2016 article titled ‘10 Fierce Atheists: Unapologetically Black Women Beyond Belief, written by Sikivu Hutchinson, who is herself a leading Black Atheist voice. One of the women profiled is Deanna Adams the author of ‘Musings on a Limb ~ Thoughts of a Black, Atheist, natural hair rocking, professional mom’ speaks directly to the links that female respondents made across interviews:¹³

I believe the Black church has done great harm to Black women, especially with its misogynistic gender roles that demean us intellectually while using us as workhorses to further the aims of the church/pastor. My goal is to encourage other Black women to break the bondage of the psychological abuse known as religion so we can actively take on the dismantling of the white supremacist patriarchy, which remains because of our learned docility. – Deanna Adams (Hutchinson 2016)

In the very same manner as the majority of the female respondents of this project, Adams broadly links religion with harming Black women through linking religion to both White supremacy and patriarchy.

Relative to the small number of leaders in current Black Atheist movements¹⁴, there are a relatively large number of Black women. In fact, over half (6 out of 10) of the people Hutchinson’s profiled also used strikingly similar language to that used by my interview respondents. Table 6 is an over from Hutchinson’s piece appear in their entirety with a short description of the person being profiled, followed by a quote from them:

¹³The About section of Deanna Adams blog reads as follows: In addition to living in this interesting world and paying attention, Deanna Adams is the author of the blog “Musings on a Limb,” where she expresses her views as an African-American, Atheist, professional mom on subjects related to the ity of racism and skepticism. She is a former board member of Houston Black Nonbelievers and currently serves on the board of Humanists of Houston. Deanna also discusses feminism, misogynoir and various related topics on the Freethinking Femmes podcast/blog and as a guest on BARS: the Black Atheist Radio Show.

¹⁴ Leaders of local Black Atheist groups like AAHDC, as well as online organizations.

Table 6. Language of Black Atheist Female Leaders

Demographics	Narrative
Bridgett “Bria” Crutchfield is an agnostic Atheist, secular activist, secular leader, fabulously 40-something out lesbian.. She heads the Black Non-Believers of Detroit.	“I am a Black woman, lesbian and Atheist. I fight for the underdog because no one fought for me. My being an Atheist is an integral part of my being and it’ll be a cold day in hell before I sweep myself under the rug in order to assuage the masses.”
Debbie Goddard is a queer, Atheist, secular organizer, skeptical activist. She is vice president of outreach and director of African Americans for Humanism at the Center for Inquiry.	“I see too many good people use religion to defend and shield their prejudice, bigotry, and inaction. As a queer Black Atheist in America, I know that if things are going to change, then we need to question and challenge those religious attitudes. And we need to take action now, today, in this world, instead of waiting for justice in some imagined afterlife.”
Mandisa Thomas is the founder and President of Black Nonbelievers, Inc.	“I am a Black Atheist, and proud of it. Our existence is just as important to the Black community as any other, and there must be a reminder of the diversity that was always present. We can no longer treat atheism like the elephant in the room, even if we don’t agree, there should be an understanding that we are here — and that we aren’t going anywhere.”
Ayana Williford is a 35 year-old social worker committed to social justice and empowering the Black community. She is a member of the Secular Sistahs.	“I identify as a Black female Atheist by denouncing all forms of religious doctrine and advocating for other Black women to live freely.”
Diane Burkholder is a Black mixed-race queer Atheist shit starter, currently living in Kansas City, MO. She is a founder of One Struggle KC, co-moderator of Kansas City Freethinkers of Color and co-moderator of Kansas City Mixed Roots.	“I describe myself as an ‘Atheist’ to normalize the term among Black and Brown people as many are taught that Atheists are white men who ‘worship the devil’. As a Black feminist who lives in the Bible belt, I use my voice to create space for other non-religious people who are often shut out of social justice conversations because they are not ‘in the church’. It’s also critical that we dig deeper and unpack our internalized oppression. We cannot replace white supremacy with Black heterosexism- they are all tools of power and control. ALL Black people must be free, not just ‘conscious’ heterosexual Black men. ity or bust.”

(Hutchinson 2016)

These narratives from respondents and leadership figures alike point to a high level of ity among Black Atheist women, not just between being Black and Atheist, or being female and Atheist, but that all three of these identities inform and reinforce each other in meaningful ways. That is, their experiences as women seem to affect the ways in which their Black Atheist identity manifests itself, suggesting a potential identity tripling. What's more are that many respondents seem to recognize this connection. Given the similarity in participant's responses, and those of some position of leadership and prominence, there certainly appears to be a Black female Atheist language that acknowledges and centralizes the role of ity in their lived experiences. Moreover, they apply this understanding in a critical way so as to shed light on their marginalized position, specifically saying that religion is a major source and facilitator of racism, sexism, sexual repression, and other forms of oppression that when combined represent unique challenges to women of color. Finally, they overwhelmingly reject the idea that current Atheist movements are open and encompassing as it regards race and gender, and seem to have developed their own language in part because of this perceived hostility. That is, due in part to the unique marginalized position the inhabit, Black Atheist women appear to have created a 'feminist Black Atheist space,' with their own language to both reinforce this space and export their ideas to a wider society.

While they shared similar focuses on racism and social justice more broadly, very few male (10%) respondents trafficked in the same sort of language as did Black Atheist women. In addition to not tending to gender in the same way as female respondents, male respondents also linked religion and sexual repression at much lower rates.

This further extension of ity to the realms of gender and sexuality by women in the sample is likely due to differences in lived experience, perhaps particularly because of the male dominated nature of contemporary mainstream atheism. It is also possible that male Black Atheists also support male domination, but in different forms or in different ways than do mainstream Atheists. In fact given the way in which many of their respective charters and/or mission statements differ, understanding whether this affects the manner in which mainstream Atheists and Black Atheists respectively internalize gender norms might prove insightful.

These links that Black Atheist women make are something that deserve further consideration and could yield promising findings that challenge some of the scholarly consensus regarding the intersection of religiosity and gender, religiosity and race, and the intersection of all three. Additionally, many female Black Atheists incorporate sexuality into this intersection, citing the ways in which female sexuality is regulated and controlled by religion.

Summary

Black Atheists in this sample do recognize themselves to hold a meaningful intersectional identity, which has been shaped by racialized experiences. In fact 70% report identifying as or referring to themselves explicitly as ‘Black Atheists,’ and used in-group terms like ‘us’ and ‘we’ to discuss themselves in conjunction with other Black Atheists. They link this identity entails a high degree of stigma amongst Blacks America broadly, and most recognize this stigma within their own families and communities. They also believe this stigma to be both pervasive and acceptable within their social circles.

Additionally, they experience and project experiencing this stigma more intensely than has been reported in other studies about Atheists.

Furthermore, gender certainly appears to matter among Black Atheists in this sample. Across age and place of origin, female respondents linked their gender with their being Black and being Atheist. Additionally, they also linked sexual repression with religion in a way that male participants did not. Through these unique intersectional links, and the dissemination of these ideas through writing, social media, and ad campaigns a unique intersectional language and philosophy appears to be developing among Black Atheist women.

Chapter Five: Strategically Navigating the World as a Black Atheist

In this chapter, I analyze the ways in which respondents talked about living their lives as Black Atheists, how they relate their identities to major aspects of their lives like work and dating, and the ways in which they talked about utilizing the closet. More broadly, I talk about the ways in which they strategically navigate the world given the way that they perceive and experience stigma. To close the chapter, I summarize the findings and discussions presented within.

The way in which they perceive stigma, in addition to the consequences they believe they would face for being out and open Atheists, led most of the Black Atheists in this sample to describe themselves as being careful as they navigate their social lives. Additionally they related this careful navigation of the world to the development and presentations of their identities. This section discusses some of the main considerations that Black Atheists in this sample describe as they go about navigating interpersonal relationships and communal interactions. Some of the most notable of these considerations are navigating romantic relationships, and navigating work-spaces. Respondents commonly discussed using the closet in ways to reduce or minimize their potential exposure as Atheists, and discuss the aforementioned considerations as drivers of their closeted behavior.

Forbidden Love: The Effect of Being a Black Atheist on One's Romantic Life

The most prominent unexpected finding was the way in which respondents linked being Black Atheists with their romantic lives. Other studies of Atheists (all with mostly White samples) have not revealed such a connection. In this section I will discuss how respondents in this sample of Black Atheists made these connections, how they believe

these connections have manifested in their lives, and why they appeared to make them at significantly higher rates than Atheists in general. Nicole brought up the issue of Black Atheists having trouble finding compatible long-term partners. "... yeah. [Pause] it's funny I was—[um] I was on a date a few years back and I told the guy that—well I don't know if you will get to this but dating within the Black community" she started organically, assuming that naturally I would ask about such an important issue. "Sort of," I replied, as I hastily wrote in the notes I was taking in bold letters; **ASK ABOUT THIS ISSUE- LOVE LIVES**. Following up with the remaining respondents by asking them directly, I realized my questions had not anticipated something that was very much central to many of the narratives respondents wanted to tell me about being a Black Atheist. "It's hard," described Mike. "It's already hard enough dating being a Black woman. You throw Atheist in there and... your chances aren't great," described Cleo, a single woman in her early 50's.

In truly the most unexpected finding for me, the vast majority of the respondents attested that the fact that they are Black Atheists contributes to the dissolution of romantic relationships, as well as the difficulty in finding a partner as Black Atheists in general. Outside of two current undergraduate students, all respondents discussed dealing with this issue in one form or another. This points to what could be an age effect in the data regarding dating. For example, it is possible that the undergraduates have not pursued a serious relationship in which their beliefs might be problematic, or that they themselves are dating people who are too young to have developed rigid notions of religiosity. It is also possible that they are benefitting from the prominence and relative normalization of Atheism amongst Millennials as compared to older generations.

Although it must be noted that for some respondents revelations of their Atheist identity were not the negative inflection points that they feared; either being able to overcome the issue, or it being mostly a non-issue, or a muted issue, the majority of respondents relayed overwhelmingly negative feelings and experiences regarding the lived romantic lives of Black Atheists. Though some Black Atheists in this study overcame this to lead romantic lives that they described as fulfilling, happy, and fruitful, just over half of the sample implied that something of this sort currently applies to them. Notably, only 15% are currently in long-term relationships.

There were also about ten respondents that suggested that they could not see themselves with a very religious person. These people have all dated religious people before, and they are not unwilling to do so in the future. However, they mentioned two main reasons why they did not envision being able to have a long-term relationship with a very religious theist. One camp is best summed up by something Grant, age 30 said, which ultimately go to issues of compatibility; “I’m not sure how a really religious person would be able to tolerate my skepticism.” Grant went onto say that he had only “really had one long-term girlfriend... [of] about 7 years... but couldn’t engage her about religion or how I really feel.” He went on to say that he routinely went to church with her up until a very recent move, and that he “did not let it be known that [he] oppose[s] [their] kid’s going to church [weekly].” Arthur, 36, mentioned that he had largely given up the idea of dating saying “I don’t ever think I’ll find a woman that will work with me. Not one that will be ok with everything I believe.” The other camp appealed more to issues of pragmatism, such as the potential that a long-term relationship would be unaccepted or undermined by a partners family members, some believed they would be

more compatible with a non-religious or irreligious person, and in a few cases the respondent reported feeling they would have to remain in the closet for an already existing relationship to continue to work. In a longer discussion about dating, Nicole went on to discuss this compatibility issue, as well as a few other aspects of dating as a Black Atheist:

Interviewer (Me): so like you mentioned boyfriend, do you think you could date someone long term and not disclose this?

Nicole: No, I would have to tell them, and in fact, I—I've—I've—I've kind of ended [um] dating situations with people because they really wanted someone who was strong in church [...] or who—you know, loves the lord or whatever else

Interviewer: Right

Nicole: and so I would just tell them that I am not religious (pause) and you know that's when you get "but you are not, ya know one of them Atheist"

Interviewer: Interesting

Nicole: my boyfriend now [...] he is from Haiti, so he [um] [...] yeah [:::] he doesn't... he's a [combination of Christianity, Buddhism and the traditional]... so we have kind of like well, you know whatever. [Um] he doesn't mind. I—I think he believes in god but it's kind of loose so you know, he—he—he is not bothered by it.

Only eight of the 46 (17%) respondents described themselves as currently being long-term coupled or any other form of extant long term romantic relationship (married or with the same individual for more than a year), six of whom were men. Of those eight relationships, four are with other self-identified Atheists, with an additional two identifying their partners as non-religious. Only four men and one woman were currently married, while eight additional respondents had been married previously. Seven of these eight were married to religious people. Three of these respondents identified as Atheist going into the marriage, and four did not. Three of the seven came out during the

marriage. One respondent, Celeste was married to another Black Atheist, and they had one child together before they divorced.

Though this sample of long-term coupled Black Atheists is too small to draw any broad conclusions, taken in conjunction with some of the other gender findings of this study, it is very possible that gender is a significant factor as it regards to romantic lives. Thirty percent (6 out of 20) of Black Atheist men in the sample were currently in long-term relationships, compared to just under 8% (2/26) Black Atheist women in the sample described being in the same kind of ongoing long-term relationship. There are several possible explanations for this. One is that all women, but particularly Black women, attend worship services more than men, and that religion has become associated with the gender roles of both mother and matriarch (Freese 2004, Miller and Hoffman 1995). A second is that men are generally judged less for their deviant behaviors than are women, and Atheism is very much looked at as deviant in America (Kreager 2009). A third possibility independent of religion, is that in America Black women are seen as one of the least desirable demographic intersections by society, while Black men are more likely to be seen as desirable (Lewis 2013).

Some respondents described the revelation of their atheism as beginning a process, that in retrospect they attributed as a turning point in the dissolution of a relationship, or the beginning of the end of a relationship. As an example of this Mike described the breakup with his girlfriend in the following terms, “It’s not like things snapped right away... but I feel like since I told her [I was an Atheist] that things just started moving downhill.”

Ryan, age 53, described it as one of the main issues in the dissolution of his marriage. “She knew how I was and was ok with it... but then something happened at her church that caused her to leave the church. And in finding a new church she somewhere along got to the point where it was an issue.”

Others described something much more acute “I could see... it like... freaked her out. We finished that date and I never heard back,” mentioned Mike, age 32. “That was the last communication we had for real...,” said Nia . Kristin described in detail how an eight month relationship, which she described as ‘going good’ ended abruptly. “After I told him... well he kinda really found out really... like two hours later his Facebook status update changed to you know... only a fool says in his heart there’s no God or some Christian quote like that.” She recalled that they spoke via text message the next day about “regular stuff,” and assumed things were still going fine. The next day she said she received a text message that read “something like ‘I need to be with someone that loves God.’”

Describing a particularly acute reaction, Patrice describes another acute breakup in the following interview exchange:

Patrice: yeah. [Pause] it’s funny I was—[um] I was on a date a few years back and I told the guy that—well I don’t know if you will get to this but dating within the Black community [] ...

Interviewer (me): whatever this is to you I want you to tell me, but like those are the things I—I am—I am interested in.

Patrice: Ok.

Interviewer: is it because you are Black, is it harder to tell your parents, is it harder to tell your boyfriend, is it harder to tell anybody that tends to be in a Black social network? []

Patrice: right, right. Yes, and that—that’s what—that’s—Black people respond really [um] well in this particular case, the guy actually was backing away

Interviewer: yeah.

Patrice: like I don’t want to get struck by lightning [laughter]

Respondents clearly recognized a correlation, (often assigning a direct causal effect) their being Atheist as a reason for some particular schisms or arguments in relationships, and difficulty finding a long-term partner more broadly. “Like for real, who would want to date a Black Atheist? Besides each other. For real... I guess I mean Black people [in particular],” stated Shelia. Shelia went on to state that “lots of them [my relationships] go great early... then comes a point where I either have to let down or want to come out and say... you know.” She went on to describe a narrative in which she either felt comfortable enough with her partner to tell him, or too uncomfortable, or deceptive, not to tell him. However, this revelation of atheism (and sometimes just non-religiosity in general) often was the beginning of a downturn in the relationship.

In most cases respondents made partial or total use of the closet for some duration of romantic relationships. Typically this was not something revealed before a first date. However outside of that, strategies for revealing one’s lack of belief varied greatly. Some discussed this issue on a first date, while others have partners that they have not told to this day. Others eased into revealing their atheism. Jason, a 38 year old from Bowie, explicitly discussed this notion. “I told her that I didn’t go to church on one of our really early dates. Three or four months later I figured it was time to say, let her know I don’t believe.” Other respondents were more upfront about their atheism. As Bree put it, “I just rip the Band-Aid off.” Such an analogy demonstrates just how stigmatized she considers herself as a Black Atheist to be, literally comparing the revelation of her atheism to a

partner to a well-known form of physical pain. Maurice echoed Bree's idea of revealing one's Atheism fairly early on saying "I just get it over [with]... I don't want to end up wasting time." The idea that it is a game-changer, likely to be seen as problematic, and a potential relationship ender was a position conceptually held by the majority of those sampled. And in turn, them being Black Atheists played a major role in the way that respondents evaluated and proceeded forward in romantic relationships.

Having a desire to remain single was something reported by two respondents making it very unlikely as a potential explanation for being such widespread uncoupling. Rather, about half (48%) of respondents explicitly discussed some level of frustration in being unable to have found, or potentially find a compatible long-term partner with which they could be honest about their atheism.

Considering the level of stigma that expected to be reported prior to the conducting of this project, perhaps it should not have been unexpected that Black Atheists would report having troubles in romantic partnerships. However, other research on Atheists does not report or hypothesize such romantic issues (Smith 2010, Zuckerman 2011). Although further research is required to see if this finding extends to Atheists at large, there is little doubt that Black Atheists in this study see their Atheism as a complicating factor, quite often to the point as serving as an impediment to their romantic lives.

Working at Work: Navigating Work Spaces

About four in ten respondents described concealing their atheism in workplace settings specifically. Unlike their close family and friends, and in some ways unlike the reflected appraisals they get from communal perception, Black Atheists behavior in

relation to their disclosure of their atheism was not highly related to what their co-workers or boss thought about them personally. Rather, it was much more closely tied to potential repressions regarding status at work, having the potential to be seen as a disruption, and having the potential to jeopardize employment.

Christina, a 25-year-old woman working in the education field, noted two interesting points:

Well you basically can't get a job at like half of the good schools because they are religious and require you to be. But even at public school I have to watch what I say in a way other people that work with me don't. I remember seeing Atheist teachers on the news... I don't remember what happened to them, if they got fired or not. But I'm scared of how parents would react if kids came home and said Mrs. Smith says there is no God.

In addition to the workplace considerations they have that are specific to their particular work environments, Black Atheists also spoke of larger communal considerations at work in certain circumstances. Bruce, a 32 year old who works in a barber shop between Washington D.C. and Baltimore, said that "You know... at the barber shop we talk about mostly everything. Sports... lots of sports, women, politics, the streets and everything else. But when it comes to religion that's [atheism] just out. It's not like... I'm not sure how my boss would feel about it, or really anyone else." His description of atheism being one of the few subject not to broach (the other topic he mentioned as not to broach was supporting Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Race) inside a barber shop speaks to the communal stigma surrounding atheism in majority Black communities and spaces. Tanya a woman from St. Louis who too works at a hair salon with a mostly Black clientele said "I don't think some of my clients would want an evil Atheist all up in their hair," noting that God and church affairs were a frequent topic of conversation when she engaged in private appointments in addition to the salon in

which she worked. Patrice adds to this sentiment in the following exchange about her Black-owned workspace.

Patrice: yeah but that—the kind of reaction that, you know, it—it [um] it's everywhere for the Black community. The—the religious undertone at work [um] I work for a Black owned company [um] I would feel, would I feel more comfortable saying I was a gay or more comfortable saying I was a witch

Interviewer (Me): [laughter]

Patrice: it's kind of hard but I think the atheism would really be an issue [laughter]

Additionally, as mentioned in Chapter Three (with additional detail provided in both Chapter Four and Chapter Five, the maintenance of a steady job and career is very much related to coming out. In this sample, about three-quarters (76%) of the sample had White-collar jobs, and about 50% of the sample had jobs in relatively highly compensated professions. Five of the seven 'mostly out' or 'totally out' respondents hold such a job. As such, many respondents used the stability (and in many cases the related financial benefits) as a bridge to the coming out process. Many respondents seem to have concluded that jeopardizing this stability with relatively little to gain personally would make it even harder to navigate the world as the Black Atheists. Put another way, because it does not entail the same authenticity challenges or pose the same identity threat most Black Atheists in this sample have largely calculated that 'coming out' as Atheist is not a consideration worth pursuing. Because they are also not nearly as bothered or disheartened by these challenges as they are with some of the other aspects of being a Black Atheist, and because the stability and markers of privilege that come with many of their occupations protect them in other realms of their life Black Atheists take extra care not to become exposed as Atheists at work.

The Acceptability Within Black Social Circles of Stigmatizing Atheism

Black Atheists in this sample were certainly stigma conscious in these two aspects of their lives (romantic lives and work), but also mentioned recognizing that stigma against Atheists affects their lives more broadly. Specifically they mentioned what they saw as the uniquely culturally embedded nature of this dislike of Atheists amongst Black people more generally. The way in which they perceived this stigma varied some in terms of intensity, but varied little in terms of scope or conceptualization. The harsh manner in which respondents perceived others to view Atheists is in line with what the Edgell findings suggest people actually do think about Atheists (Edgell 2006, 2010). All respondents expressed varying views on Atheists being disliked, and a majority suggested they believed Atheists to among the most disliked populations in the country, and specifically among Black communities. Additionally, many Black Atheists in this sample reported many people in their social circle as linking religiosity and morality, much in line with what Penny Edgell reported in her 2010 paper ‘Shared Visions.’ Eight percent of the sample reported perceiving others more broadly to make this link between being religious and being moral, and many described having to deal with direct and indirect challenges to their morality and their ability to be moral.

Roger, a 46-year-old man from the Columbia area, expressed his sentiments this way: “you’re the only person that every religion says is 100% certain going to hell. That makes you pretty disliked.” Echoing that theme, Lydia who to this point remains completely in the closet says “Americans definitely have a negative view of atheism, I think people see it as just a free for all of rape and murder with no morality to guide them.” This perceived link between atheism and Atheists with immorality or amorality

was touched on by a number of respondents, with Carl saying “They [religious people] feel like there is no bound on their [Atheist] morality.” This perceived lack of morals or unbounded morality not only seems a driver of stigma, something that Atheists must consider when navigating the closet, but is likely plays a key role in developing a firm boundary between Atheists and religious people (Edgell 2010). When discussing perceptions of stigma, respondents heavily drew upon past experiences in religious settings and their own former religiosity.

Catherine stated that in her close family networks and at the church she regularly attended growing up that the most pervasive belief about Atheists was that they “had no morals” and “had been tricked by the devil.” Deena, a 54-year-old lawyer, recalled what she herself used to think about Atheists, saying, “synonymous with Satanism... that’s what I equated it to and that’s what a lot of Christians relate it to I think.” In fact about 18 respondents mentioned at least one person in a close personal network associated atheism with worshipping the devil or Satanism. Due to this pervasive belief about atheism, Atheists are perceived as amoral beings combined with the unique social stigma of Atheism amongst Black Americans, Black Atheists describe navigating a world in which it is often acceptable to demonize Atheists. This sort of widespread, open, often times tolerated, and many times encouraged stigmatization and discrimination against Black Atheists is certainly a driver of utilizing the closet. Notably, the cultural and racialized manner that these forms of stigma and discrimination take; not only portray the Black Atheist as morally bankrupt, a threat, and largely undeserving of interpersonal time, but they question the very authenticity of their solidarity in the experience of Blackness in America. Unsurprisingly, the majority of respondents displayed closeted behavior. While

only about one-third of the sample was completely in the closet, 41 out of 46 respondents reported making use of the closet in some capacity. Their use and deployment of the closet was both strategic and pragmatic, taking into account stigma, potential reactions and consequences, social and financial ties, and location. At the same time their use of the closet, left many respondents with their own authenticity questions regarding their own presentation of religiosity and Atheism/non-belief. Respondents also described ‘the cost’ of this struggle with authenticity.

Some respondents extended the acceptability of stigmatizing Atheists within Black culture to pop culture. During our interview, Rita recalled a video she had seen on Youtube.

Rita: I remember I saw this video on Youtube... some people debating this thing Steve Harvey... you know him right?

Interviewer: O Yeah

Rita: And he was saying something about how you shouldn’t talk to Atheists, or something like that. And I’m just like c’mon... it’s irresponsible and ignorant.

Steve Harvey who has substantial cultural influence among Black Americans; after starring in and hosting several popular shows and movies like *The Original Kings of Comedy*, *The Steve Harvey Show*, *The Steve Harvey Radio Show*, and *Family Feud*, typifies what many respondents see as the moral perception of Atheists among in African-Americans. In fact, there were four respondents that appealed to something that Harvey had said to point out this link, and how they felt it pervasive¹⁵. The quote that Rita was referencing was, “You’re sitting there talking with a dude and he tells you he’s an atheist, you need to pack it up and go home. You know, talking to a person that don’t believe in God, what’s his moral barometer? Where’s it at? It’s nowhere” (Chapman

¹⁵ I found numerous quotes from Harvey on Atheists when searching for what Rita was referencing.

2015). This implication that Atheists have no morals or are immoral, seems very much related to respondent's belief that it is widely acceptable to demonize Atheists.

The exchange that Rita recalls, and the way in which she analyzes it, speak to the narratives that Black Atheists in this study reported in their own lives, particularly the way they report it being conventional and standard practice to look down on, openly dislike, and even to shun them. Lamar best sums up the way in which most respondents spoke about this issue saying "All the time I hear I'm not shit... we're dumb, we're wrong, and we're evil." The almost omnipresent stigma that Black Atheists describe feeling drove a significant amount of decision making and behavior, and ultimately stigma management.

Navigating The Closet As A Black Atheist

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the closet is a significant social space for Atheists broadly. In this sample of Black Atheists, nearly every respondent attested to utilizing the closet at some point (98%), 89% still regularly using the closet in some form, and over three-quarters (76%) are very or totally in the closet. In this section, I will discuss stigma and other considerations that go into the decision to use the closet, how Black Atheists in this sample navigate the closet in lieu of these considerations, and how they understand themselves to be managing stigma through use of the closet.

Because of the way they feel about and perceive stigma, and particularly because of the way they feel that their own Black communities at large perceive Atheists and Black people more generally, Black Atheists make significant use of the closet. Some use the closet as a place of growth and exploration, while others use the closet as a place of shelter and safety. Scmalz's work on 'stigma consciousness' (defined as one's sensitivity

to stigma) says that it varies from person to person (Scmalz 2011). Because of their unique set of circumstances; the majority of Atheists having been highly integrated into theistic in-group thinking, Atheists are likely to be highly ‘stigma consciousness.’ They are and/or have been privy to internal expressions of how the dominant group (theists, usually Christians) views Atheists in a way that distinguishes them from most stigmatized groups. They have sat in the pews often hundreds of times where the people from whom they are trying to avoid detection also sat, and know firsthand how Atheists are discussed and perceived. In fact, many of them held similar beliefs themselves prior to becoming Atheist. They’ve been religious, they’ve prayed, had religious experiences, and have real-life experience generally internalized things as religious people. Because they are likely to know which words or actions would be seen as alarming or suspicions, they can do a uniquely good job of navigating their social lives, including religious spaces, undetected. Indeed nearly all respondents had religious upbringing. As was mentioned by several respondents in the previous section ‘The Acceptability Within Black Social Circles of Stigmatizing Atheism,’ most respondents are acutely aware of the particular manner that Atheists and non-believers are seen in their social circles.

Seven of the respondents, most notably the rappers whose niche is being ‘Black Atheist Rappers,’ were either nearly completely and publicly out of the closet, or completely out. However, with only one exception (Arthur, who is publicly out through his music career), even the most ‘out’ Black Atheists in this study still made use of the closet and closet strategies at times. An 18 year old respondent named Bradley, one of two respondents that described growing up in a household with a parent that explicitly identified as Atheist, provides an example of this. “My mom, she’s an Atheist. So is my

sister. But we all pretend to believe a little for my Grandma.” Like me Bradley is out in his day to day life, and has other Atheists in his close familial circle, but still at times turns to the closet to get through some social situations. Potentially of note is an almost deferential use of the closet when interacting with older and especially elderly Black Americans.

However, unlike for the majority of our participants (85%) who are mostly closeted or completely closeted, staying under the radar and being undetected is not a major preoccupation for them. Consequently, closeted behavior, and the sometimes copious and burdensome amount of work that goes into maintaining a closeted identity drives relatively little of their day to day lived experiences. Bradley in fact went on to explain that “lucky for me... most everyone I know knows.” The other six respondents (15%) who were mostly or completely out also mentioned valuing the ability to mostly be their authentic selves, and as Roger put it “not having to worry about religion as much.”

Most respondents (85%) however, utilized the closet quite a bit in their everyday lived experience, and discussed it as an important and notable social space for them. The closet was not just a place where respondents resided at times to keep their Atheist identity concealed, but a place from which they were also able to peer out while making calculated judgments about self-presentations and/or coming out.

Respondents associated both positive and negative aspects with the closet, but the majority of them viewed it as an aggregate positive. Even more respondents (87%) saw the closet as necessary, both as a space of development, and as a space that ultimately had to be navigated in order to maintain healthy social lives. In fact Thomas, who because of

his being the son of a preacher feels he has an incredible amount to lose said “I literally could not imagine what my life [would] be like if I had to tell [that I was an Atheist].”

As to why they remained in the closet, nearly all respondents reported some version of not wanting to deal with perceived ‘aftermath.’ That many respondents used aftermath is suggestive of just how big a deal they think it is/would be to come out. Some feared ‘being ostracized’ ranging from no longer being invited to family gatherings or parties, having people stop asking for advice, to being the focus of anger. The completely closeted respondents feared becoming estranged entirely from large portions of their family and friends. Catherine thought that if she came out as an Atheist, “that they [mother and grandmother] might never talk to me again” and “My family is so Christian, so believe their way is the only way, the Bible is the only way. I might as well be dead to them, not dead like they would disown me, but obviously I’m going to hell. And I think it would hurt them more than help them type thing. I don’t think it would help them understand me, I think more than anything they would be judgmental. They’d think like I’m just so far gone... At least if I was gay or a whore or something all I’d have to do is turn to Jesus and confess my sins. But if you don’t believe in God there’s a long way back to believing in God.” Thomas stated, “that probably be the end of that” in reference to his relationship with his parents. Mark Zuckerman connects stigma and well-being of Atheists, saying they very well may “suffer from a sense of isolation, alienation, or rejection from family, colleagues, or peers” (Zuckerman 2009). However, on top of these potential pitfalls, Black Atheists also report having to navigate cultural and communal considerations of race that extend beyond their immediate social circle.

A number of respondents indicated age (of family members) and religiosity as a factor here, with a number citing they did not want to worry or upset elderly people who cared for them. In responding to the question, ‘What might be the effects of you informing your family that you are Atheist?’ both Michelle and Christina laughed at the idea of telling their grandparents, after spending more time to contemplate telling other family members like siblings. Michelle offered the following: “Toward the end, people are held together by loosening screws... who am I to fuck with their screws?” Christina took a similar position stating “I can’t see how them thinking I’m going to hell or them thinking they’re not going to heaven would help.” Broadly across interviews, respondents tended to discuss informing or potentially informing peers than they did parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other members of their social circles that were older.

A Challenge To Dualistic Notions of The Closet: Being Selectively In and Out of the Closet and Being Out in Private

This section discusses five different strategies that Black Atheists used to navigate the closet. 98% of the sample describe having used one or more of these strategies at least once, while 85% of the sample describes using one or more of these strategies on a routine bases. It is important to note that although these categories will be discussed as distinct, there is a significant amount of overlap in the use of these strategies. Most (93%) interview subjects availed themselves of more than one of these strategies, at times using them in conjunction with one another.

Non-Disclosure

This was the simplest, most available, and widely used strategy. The vast majority of Black Atheists (88%) in this sample simply do not divulge the fact that they are

Atheist unprompted. Some respondents report this leading to uncomfortable exchanges. Molly said, “my Mom will say things to me like I think God wants this for your life, or God would want you to do that. But it is really frustrating because I want advice from my Mom.” The vast majority of respondents cited stigma as the reason they do not disclose their atheism. “It just seems like an unnecessary risk,” said Edgar. “There’s already so many reasons why people don’t like you, why probably give them another one?” “Going through the motions” is the way that several respondents described interacting with people when the subject of religion or a religious duty arose. Both because of personal and family history, as well as the fact that being Black in America transmits religiosity, respondents report being perceived as religious during most of their interactions.

Denial

Denying that they are Atheists constitutes a second strategy that Atheists use to navigate the closet. Saying ‘no’ or otherwise assuaging concerns if someone becomes suspicious because of their behavior or speech and asks them about being irreligious. Though not incredibly demanding of respondents that make use of this strategy, it is a form of active deception. This extends beyond the question ‘are you an Atheist?’ and to other questions that express feelings about God, religion, and religiosity. Many respondents reported that they felt someone in their lives was ‘suspicious’ that they might be an Atheist. If they perceived this to be the case they often intensified the measures they were taking in order to remain in the closet until they perceived the threat of being exposed to have reduced. Layla stated that she thought her Step-father was becoming suspicious of her saying, “I think Gavin might be on to me. He [recently] revealed a fire and brimstone side of himself that I hadn’t seen before.” Justin explained that from time

to time a sibling would question him about his level of dedication to Jesus. “When she does that I just turn to one of my favorite verses [and say it], and that seems to go away for a few months.” These two respondents and several others suggest that ‘hiding in the closet’ as an Atheist may not be as easy as intuition might suggest it. On the contrary, many respondents report having had to defend themselves from accusations of not being religious enough such as not praying as much, or being seen less frequently in church. To deal with these sorts of situations respondents would typically reassure whomever they were speaking to that they indeed still engaged in the behaviors in question. Answering the question what are the drawbacks of not telling certain people you’re an Atheist?”

Kristin responded that it meant she had to be dishonest. She explains further:

I remember I had an Aunt that any major thing... Easter, Christmas, Thanksgiving... anytime we have a big [family] meal, and we’d go around and say something. And I would never say anything about God. And she’ll ask, she’ll ask me about my relationship with the Lord... and I say ‘it’s really strong Auntie.

Though only two respondents actually had to defend themselves from being accused of being an Atheist directly, many respondents expressed feelings that their risk of being exposed went up greatly in the line of such questioning. Though more research is needed, there are potentially interesting links to be found if this line of questioning is tended to in conjunction with ‘coming out.’ Respondents likely relate these lines of questions to the ways in which they believe family members and friends might react to their ‘coming out,’ and use these sorts of interactions as a gauge for what they might expect.

Mitigation

Some of the less closeted people also used the term *agnostic* as a way of self-presenting as non-religious. There was a general sense among the respondents that self-

identifying as agnostic would mitigate the stigma associated with the word Atheist. As mentioned by respondents in the Chapter Four section “Of Course” It’s harder to be a Black Atheist: Racialized Family and Communal Considerations, and in Chapter One through the work of Kelley, atheism is sometimes associated with positive beliefs (devil-worship, nature-worship, and communism were some of the associated beliefs encountered by our respondents) in a way that the term agnostic has not and thus as one respondent said “carries less baggage.” For our more closeted respondents, this generally was not an available tactic. Catherine says she uses the term ‘agnostic’ often. Michelle who offered a very similar sentiment explained further that, “They would still fear, feel afraid that I wasn’t saved... and might never talk to me again except to try to bring me back [to the lord]. But at least they wouldn’t be afraid of me,” in reference to coming out as an agnostic rather than Atheist. Alternatively, a few Black Atheists in this study (11%) described themselves as spiritual when pressed. Raymond explained, “like yeah I definitely use spiritual non denomination a lot [to refer to myself], as far as Black Atheist I never really get the opportunity to use that but I would classify myself as that.” It is likely that ‘spiritual’ is seen as a middle ground between religious and agnostic, and is generally conceived of in a much more positive light than Atheist.

Maintaining The Illusion

Maintaining the illusion refers to the performances of religious behavior and/or a maintenance of a disingenuous religious identity. It is the most active strategy that emerged for navigating the closet, and some of the ways in which respondents go about maintaining the illusion are discussed below. For instance Layla, who is still a member of a musical group at her church estimates that she spends “15-20 hours a week putting on a

show... I'm doing a double dance, it's really lame." Seventeen (37%) respondents described this as a routine part of their lives (an additional 12 respondents, or 33 percent, report doing this on a more infrequent basis); ranging from maintaining the illusion in just one interpersonal relationship (i.e.: a romantic partner, or a grandparent) to maintaining the illusion in larger group settings like those of Saturday or Sunday family dinners or choir practice. As an example of the former, Catherine describes routinely visiting her grandmother in her nearby home and recounts usually engaging in a ritual in which they "discuss the blessings in my life since I last saw her." Edgar offers an example of the latter describing his continued participation as a mentor for a church youth group. "I didn't really enjoy the activities less after [I became an Atheist]. And I still loved the kids... to stay I have to say an opening and closing prayer... doesn't kill me so I just do it." Maintaining the illusion was a broad strategy, but participants also associated two very specific sub-strategies, Performing My Role, and Church Attendance that multiple respondents mentioned.

Performing My Role

Many respondents in this study mentioned that they would indeed take an active role in prayer as a strategy that they used to navigate the closet. Will said "at home I play my part," and Catherine said that when her mother calls and asks to pray, she "put's the phone down until it's [her] turn to talk." Most respondents that utilize this strategy specifically discussed having to do this during familial prayer before meals. Geoff says "that there are certain things that are expected of me, and if I don't do them then I'll have to come up with a reason why. So I just do them." He goes on to say, "I just say Ok grandma, nod, and agree," said Rochelle on the same subject. Adding more detail to this

sentiment, Nia said, “I’m my mom’s rock. . . . part of that[duty] is to keep her happy. . . sometimes that means saying, Amen.” There was a general sentiment amongst respondents employing this strategy that it was easier to do a duty than to debate the reasoning, practicality, or necessity of said duty. This led to an apathetic “going through the motions” approach toward religious duties, performing them but using as little energy or being as Geoff put it as “mentally absent” as possible. Respondents discussed performing their role mostly in interpersonal terms, as opposed to denial and mitigation that they discussed using communally and/or publicly as well.

Church Attendance

While some of the Black Atheists in this study still attend church, most do not. It is important to note that over the past 50 years church attendance among all Americans has dropped (Presser and Chavez 2007). As such not regularly attending church is not seen as nearly as peculiar or strange as it once was. Of the respondents in this study five respondents went weekly, four went monthly or more, four went “only on major holidays,” and seven went “only on trips back home.” In the words of Thomas, a 29 year old male from Washington D.C. someone who regularly attends church, “*maintaining the illusion* is a lot of work.” The illusion to which he is referring is projecting the idea that he is a believing and practicing Christian. Thomas, who is the son of a preacher and one of five respondents who had a parent or grandparent who at some point in time had practiced ministry, in great detail about the active lengths he goes to not arouse suspicions, but also the way in which he practices resistance from the closet. “Growing up, church was everything,” he stated. Thomas still attends church regularly but with a much reduced frequency. As he puts it, “It’s to keep up appearances, being part of the

first family you know we always have an active role and sit up front, so it wouldn't look right if I was just never there," noting that he gradually phased out going on more optional days like Saturday mass and now only semi-regularly attends mass on Sundays and special occasions. In fact, to aid himself in reducing the amount of time he felt he needed to put on the illusion maintaining performance, he used an interesting strategy of purposefully getting a job where he was required to work some Sundays.

For the 43% of Black Atheists in this study who mentioned going to church as a strategy for navigating the closet, going to church was linked with the importance maintaining a religious presentation. Related to what Thomas described, respondents in this category tended to come from highly religious households, or had/have entered a relationship with a highly religious person. They tended to view it as a nearly sure-fire way to hide their Atheism. Layla spoke to this sentiment saying, "...maybe they should... but they're not looking for Atheists there."

Thirteen (28%) of respondents expressed that they went to church at least once a year. Among this set of respondents, age appears to be a factor, as 69% of this subset is under the age of 30. As youth correlates with dependence on parents, it is very possible that the importance of pleasing their parents is qualitatively different for younger respondents. Related, income and other resources tend to increase with age, and younger respondents may be systematically less likely to have markers of privilege at the rates of older respondents. Alternatively, they may have simply had less time to go through the coming out process, or develop or adopt less active strategies.

Drawbacks Associated With The Closet

There were real pitfalls and negative experiences associated with all strategies of hiding atheism. Grappling with issues of authenticity was something the majority of respondents that utilize the closet discussed. Many respondents said something similar to Rochelle, who stated “I fear that they’ll never know the real Rochelle.” Participants like Mike also mentioned how “stressful” the work of navigating the closet could be, somberly saying “...it’s hard to keep straight things you don’t believe... and it takes a little something, a little piece of you... a little piece of, er out of you every time you do it [say something untrue or that you don’t believe].” Additionally respondents mentioned discussed how allowing others to continue to believe that they are religious effectively served as an impediment to having productive discussions about important issues with many of those close to them. Layla provides a telling example:

I spoke to my mom and her husband, Gavin, about my current job dilemma. I spoke to them about how I worry Sally won't have the work load to support hiring me again. We went round and round talking about the pros and cons of changing jobs. I had just finished expressing, with much conviction, that I must make the correct choice. I will not be a financial burden to them or my boyfriend again. I will be self-sustaining and that I cannot mess this up. Then, Gavin’s pupils got really big and he said with teary eyes, ‘I know we may disagree on this, but I have to say that whatever door you choose to walk through, God is on the other side. There is no wrong answer. And when you choose a door and you walk through, into the hands of God and His plan, He will lead you to a door that may not have been open before. He will take care of you if you just trust in Him. I ... thought about picking a moment, just like that, to 'come out' to my parents, but I just couldn't do it. I needed their advice. I needed to keep them happy and keep them talking so I could get the parental guidance. I kept my mouth shut and fell into the all-too-familiar pattern saying, ‘Yes, and I know I'll be OK. I have you guys and His plan.’ I scooted along through the rest of the conversation... wishing there was a better way to go about it.

In this case the fact that the respondent cannot reveal her atheism serves as a barrier from her receiving parental advice. And despite her disillusionment with receiving

advice through a prism with which she does not believe and to which she cannot relate, she still needed to reaffirm their beliefs to complete the ‘maintenance of the illusion.’ Though age and relative dependence on parent’s likely matters, older respondents described similar experiences and outcomes.

Summary

Due in part to the particular racialized nature of this stigma, namely questions of authenticity and true in-group belonging, most Black Atheists strategically utilize the closet to navigate these social spaces. Though there were downsides associated with the closet, respondents generally agreed utilizing it was necessary and that it was a significant space of development.

Black Atheists in this sample also linked their identities with numerous aspects of their lives. Notably they linked being Black Atheists to difficulties in finding and maintaining long-term romantic relationships, and to their behavior at work. More broadly, respondents reported feeling their identities as Black Atheists necessitated them navigating a unique set of considerations as they navigated their lives.

Given these considerations and the way they perceived stigma, the vast majority of respondents reported undertaking some sort of stigma management. Utilization of the closet was by far and away the most commonly cited way by respondents of managing stigma. Among the sample a number of qualitative differences arose in narratives about closet use both in regards to the degree to which respondents were ‘in’ or ‘out,’ and the strategies they availed themselves of. This chapter has described several of these strategies in detail and described how they are at least in part a function of the unique set of considerations Black Atheists report having.

Chapter Six: Black Atheists Relationship To Mainstream Atheism

As can be evidenced by the language used by respondents to describe themselves in Chapter Four, Black Atheists believe that their concerns go largely unrecognized, due much in part to the marginalized position of their identities. Specifically in the case of Black Atheist women in this sample, mainstream Atheists are viewed as having many oppressive and discriminatory practices. This chapter will discuss the manner in which Black Atheists in this study viewed themselves and Black Atheists collectively in relation to other Atheists, particularly mainstream Atheists. It will discuss the differences and discord Black Atheists in this study perceive in this relationship, what they believe causes/drives this contention, and in-group belonging with other Atheists. This chapter will also detail the religiosity and beliefs of Black Atheists in this sample, making relative comparisons to those of Atheists at large. This chapter concludes with an analysis of the manner in which respondents discussed their ‘becoming Atheist’ process, and the factors respondents cited as important in this process.

The Sometimes Strained Relationship Between Black Atheists, Mainstream Atheist Groups, and New Atheists

While Black Atheists in this study problematized questions of authenticity and other stigma against Atheists from other Blacks, they generally did not report struggling with issues of in-group belonging as it regards their Black identity. However, while they are very much Atheists, and very much hold an Atheist identity, Black Atheists in this study generally report feeling that their Black Atheist identity (again, respondents recognized their identities to be racialized and composed of two inseparable parts that inform each other) serves as a barrier from them feeling a part of ‘a broader Atheist

community' in the same way they report feeling a part of the broader 'Black community' in America. Put another way, they feel much more social distance to Atheists than they do to other Black Americans. Across the sample this was explained both as a function of salience, as was mentioned in Chapter Four (p. 113), and that the way in which the closet offered protection within Black communities had no analogue in relation to their Blackness amongst Atheist communities.

This discord with mainstream Atheist communities often takes one of three forms. First, Black Atheists feel that mainstream Atheists and Atheist groups ignore the specific racialized set of issues and considerations that many Black Atheists have to deal with. Second, Black Atheists believe that mainstream Atheists and Atheist groups do not relate the issues of social justice and racial inequality to religion, and as such are either unwilling or uninterested in addressing those issues in a systematic way. Third, derived from the second, is that Black Atheists see mainstream Atheist groups spending a significant amount of their time, focus, and resources on litigious matters relating to law, separation of church and state, and debating theological matters. Here it is harder to understand individual sentiments, but a number of respondents thematically touched on the issue. In contrast, the majority of respondents in this study described both themselves and other Black Atheists as being more focused on the implications and consequences of historical and contemporary belief. These three forms of discord that Black Atheists in this sample expressed about Black Atheists relationship to mainstream Atheism are discussed further below.

Form One related to the way in which Black Atheists in this study felt that many issues they cared about were not valued by mainstream Atheists. Nelson best summed up

this form of discord by saying, “I say I’m a Black Atheist because other Atheists, they just... I don’t know. Like they do what they do. What we want ain’t important.” Rochelle mentioned that she “enjoy[ed] linking with other Black Atheists... because they get it because they have the same issues.” Both Nelson and Rochelle are speaking to the idea that they have a set of concerns, and care about issues that they believe to be generally outside the scope of concern for mainstream Atheists. Twenty one respondents gave responses that mostly reflected this idea.

Form Two “I just know you have some all-lives matter people in there,” said Lamar. This sort of analysis by respondents suggests that they perceive that there is a contingent within mainstream atheism that opposes some of the positions regarding race and justice that were professed across interviews. This was appealed to by only a handful of respondents, though most respondents painted mainstream Atheists as more neutral as opposed to actively oppositional.

Form Three “They’re into all this shit, and it’s like... why? I’m getting... there’s real problems out here,” said Edgar. “Now I don’t like those militant Atheists,” Catherine said referring to what she essentially described as “petty” legal battles. Participants that perceived this form of schism tended to highlight that they believed mainstream Atheists who emphasized or focused on ‘the wrong issues.’ The dozen respondents that highlighted this form mostly focused on the legal focus of mainstream Atheists, or alternatively like Edgar suggested that they spent their political capital in the wrong place more broadly.

Though these three forms of what? vary in approach, they are all essentially pointing to the same main issue, namely, Black Atheists perceive that Black people and

Black issues are broadly ignored by major Atheist organizations and figures, and that this neglect aggravates the specific difficulties that come with being a Black Atheist. The theme and tenor of interviewees responses can be investigated by further analyzing statements made by important organizations and figures. For instance the ‘About Us’ of the American Atheists website reads as follows:

Since 1963, American Atheists has been the premier organization fighting for the civil liberties of Atheists and the total, absolute separation of government and religion. American Atheists was born out of a court case begun in 1959 by the Murray family, which challenged prayer recitation in the public schools.

That case, *Murray v. Curlett*, was a landmark in American jurisprudence on behalf of our First Amendment rights. It began:

“Your petitioners are Atheists, and they define their lifestyle as follows. An Atheist loves himself and his fellow man instead of a god. An Atheist accepts that heaven is something for which we should work now – here on earth – for all men together to enjoy. An Atheist accepts that he can get no help through prayer, but that he must find in himself the inner conviction and strength to meet life, to grapple with it, to subdue it and to enjoy it. An Atheist accepts that only in a knowledge of himself and a knowledge of his fellow man can he find the understanding that will help lead to a life of fulfillment.”

American Atheists is dedicated to advancing the civil rights of Atheists, promoting separation of religion from government, and providing information about atheism. Over the last fifty years, American Atheists has fought to defend the separation of religion from government with legal actions, lobbying the federal and state government, and engaging in protests and other public actions to ensure that the rights of Atheists are protected.

Members of American Atheists staff are frequent guests in media to defend our policy positions and advocate for the acceptance of Atheists throughout the nation.

American Atheists is home to the largest collection of Atheist and freethought literature in the world, the Charles E. Stevens American Atheist Library and Archives, and makes available to researchers and members of the public one of the most comprehensive collections of Atheist publications from the late 19th century onward.

We have built a robust and diverse community of more than 170 local partners and affiliates across the nation and work with advocates, activists, and coalition partners in all 50 states and internationally.

American Atheists provides resources to those seeking information about atheism, the history of freethought, religion, and mythology, and maintains a speakers bureau for colleges, universities, clubs, and the media.

Our scholarship program recognizes student leaders and advocates and recognizes those whose activism has improved the quality of life for Atheists in the United States and protected the Constitutional separation of religion from government. – About Us: American Atheists website (Atheists.org)

As evidenced above in the statement from American Atheists the largest Atheist organization in America, there is a strong focus on legislation, court cases, and other litigious matters. Furthermore there is an overall preoccupation with the separation of church and state, something scarcely mentioned by the respondents in this sample, and something that makes hardly any appearance in Black Atheist literature. In fact, about one fourth of respondents were critical of such a focus.

Instead, respondents tended to be critical of religion as a construct and a tool of oppression, especially in the American context, and most especially as applied to the condition of Blackness in America. This left less space to focus on being overly critical of religion, with even less of a focus dedicated to being critical of individual religiosity.

The following is the charter of the Frederick Douglass Humanist Society of Baltimore:

We are a community that honors Frederick Douglass as one of the great advocates of civil and human rights, the pursuit of education, free inquiry and critical thought. Our community is open to all people who are committed to humanistic values. Our mission is to advance humanistic values that emphasize reason, critical thought, free inquiry, human dignity, welfare and freedom. We are a non-theistic and educational organization that respects and welcomes all people from various backgrounds regardless of race, sex, national origin, or sexual orientation. The ultimate humanist principle and fact about all people in this world is that we are one race-- We are the Human Race. (Jan 2017, Homepage, Frederick Douglass Humanist Society of Baltimore, website)

Again, notably present are mentions of equality, inclusivity, overt race, and civil rights. Notably absent are any mentions of church- state separation, litigation or legislation, or judicial matters. These thematically different takes permeate the vast majority of literature that is put out by these two respective camps, and are very much representative of the differences that respondents alluded to. In short, whereas mainstream Atheists generally emphasize litigious matters, church-state separation, and on challenging religious beliefs, Black Atheists are more focused on demonstrating the correlation between religion and large-scale inequalities, taking a critical approach to long-standing understandings of the role of religion, and on the consequences of beliefs rather than the beliefs themselves. It seems Black Atheists in this study, who face a much higher degree of social rejection due to the additional communal stigma they encounter, are naturally more focused upon how to impart knowledge about atheism, or conversely the negative effects of religion to their community, as either of these objectives may serve to reduce their rejection and increase inclusion.

As shown in this section as well as the introduction, the manifestations of these differences can be seen in the language used in official group literature, the language of respondents, and consequently correlated with the way in which respondents viewed this discord. Black Atheists spend comparatively little time discussing the fallacy of religious beliefs in and of themselves, focusing more rather on their belief that these religious belief systems lead to decidedly negative consequences, especially to Black people. That these beliefs are untrue, of course underpins the validity of such arguments. However, that these belief systems are damaging does not hinge itself on religious beliefs being

untrue in quite the same way that it does for the respondents of Smith, nor the literature of mainstream Atheist groups or New Atheists (Smith 2011).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, respondent's in this study overwhelmingly (96%) indicate they identify more with the language of Black Atheist organizations and figures, than they do with mainstream (ostensibly White) Atheist groups and figures. Aside from overtly expressing solidarity with other Black Atheists, the general language they used, and the manner in which they linked race are much closer to the mission statements of Black Atheist groups. Further, while they have numerous critiques of mainstream Atheists and Atheism, there were relatively few of Black Atheists and Black Atheist groups.

Not all respondents saw negativity between the mainstream Atheists and Black Atheist camps. Many respondents viewed mainstream Atheists as important intellectual influences, while about ten respondents pointed to what they saw as strains of anti-racism within more mainstream Atheist groups, movements, and figures. This link was made most explicitly by Raymond, who said the following:

The White Atheists that I have seen, the significant ones, like Jordan Maxwell, tend to understand Black culture and the African diaspora and the raping of different ideologies and concepts that came out of ancient Egypt and ancient Africa and its civilization itself. I haven't really seen a White Atheist that is a racist or, because I feel like that's contradicting in itself in a way because to be a White Atheist you are coming on to the opposite side, because the Black Atheist is not trying to support that White god. And that's really what it is, you know in concept, so, I haven't come across a White Atheist that doesn't like Black people.

In fact, despite the negative relations that were pointed to the many respondents consider some mainstream Atheists as important to their development as Atheists, and valued their intellectual contribution. The majority of respondents also credit White

Atheists like Maxwell, Dawkins, and Silverman with being among the most important intellectual influences as it related to their becoming Atheist process. Christopher Hitchens, a British journalist was far and away the most cited influence among respondents, among whom many cited his debates on Youtube. The respondents that brought him up mostly cited his direct style as being appealing. Notably, of the 15 respondents that discussed Hitchens as an influence, 11 of them were men. Like fellow New Atheists Dawkins and Harris, Hitchens has been charged with being sexist numerous times. For example in 2007 he wrote the article ‘Why Women Aren’t Funny,’ for Vanity Fair, and the thesis very much matched the title. That in this sample, males were more likely to cite New Atheists as strong or important influences may speak to some of the gendered findings discussed in Chapter Four.

Feelings of Solidarity With Mainstream Atheists

However, there were varying degrees to which respondents truly considered themselves to be a part of the same ‘in-group’ as more mainstream Atheist. Across respondents, Atheist was not nearly as salient of an identity or in-group as Black and for female respondents in the study, gender was also a more salient identity than Atheism. In general, the number of Atheists that respondents knew interpersonally was relatively small, as was the number of respondents who attested to having Atheist friends or family that they described as ‘very close.’ In contrast, other Black people made up the majority of most respondents social circles.

Like with their racial in-group, Black Atheists experience numerous confounding factors regarding their ‘true membership’ in mainstream Atheist circles. Respondents that did not discuss salience, or who gave either short or ambiguous answers when asked the

question ‘Do you have an identity or identities (explain as ‘way of thinking of yourself’) that is/are more or less important than others?’ were then probed with the question “So when you vote, do you do so as an Atheist, a Black person, a man or woman?” None of these respondents answered ‘as an Atheist.’ However, in this case ‘true membership’ has less to do with rigid notions of authenticity, and more to do with disagreements on atheism as a political project and potentially notions of salience. These notions of belonging and their consequences are also significantly less salient than those related to respondents Black identity.

In many respects, Black Atheists feel like their presence and input is received by many mainstream Atheists as a co-option or intrusion. This sentiment is best summed up by Raquel, who said “they’ve got their own problems... why would they want ours?” Additionally, Dion a Youtube musician from Baltimore who specializes in Atheist rap added “about half of my fans.... er subscribers but when I put some real shit in there... all of a sudden I have PM’s (private messages) like... ‘well, did you ever think about that?’ Or what about this [perspective]? And it’s like I’m putting myself out there... I’m rapping my truth.” Both Raquel and Dion imply, though in different ways, that they believe their outspoken presence is taken as an incursion into territory that does not truly belong to them. What this might mean for Black Atheists who are largely already aligned with more mainstream Atheists is unknown. Respondents generally did not assert that they believed there was racial animus at play, but rather suggested it was the racialized nature of the ideas they held. That is, many seem to believe that there still exists potential to form meaningful coalitions with mainstream Atheists. However, they remain

discouraged to this point about the inclusivity of mainstream Atheists, often finding their racialized ideas questioned, looked down upon, marginalized, or rejected.

Answers and statements that spoke to or mirrored this statement were fairly common across interviews. While respondents stopped short of describing the relationship as adversarial, they tended to describe it as competitive and fraught with mistrust. Notably, this did not extend to discussions of White Atheists with whom the respondents had close ties. Rather, respondents discussed these friends in open interpersonal terms. The difference in both goals and tactics, their perception that mainstream Atheists are either unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge the particular difficulties faced by Black Atheists, the feelings of Black Atheists that Atheists at large engage in intentional and unintentional exclusionary practices, and their perceptions that their focus on racial equality and social justice more broadly are often seen as co-options serve as barriers to Black Atheists true in-group membership into what is currently perceived as the ‘Atheist community,’ as represented by the 4 Horsemen, Atheist organizations that receive media attention (ex: American Atheists), and beliefs the public associates with Atheism.

Beliefs, Ordinary Theology, and The Becoming Atheist Process

As was discussed in Chapter One (pgs. 6 and 7), in the context of mainstream religiosity, Atheism itself is a negative belief. However Atheists, including the Black Atheists in this sample have many beliefs and ideas about religion and religiosity. In this section, I will discuss the way in which respondents generally conceived of religiosity and religious belief, how and why respondents disbelieve, and the positive beliefs professed by respondents regarding religion and religiosity. Subsequently I discuss how

Black Atheists in this sample related some of these beliefs to science. Throughout this section, I will also discuss how respondents related these beliefs to race. To conclude, I analyze the ways respondents talked about their ‘becoming Atheist’ process in conjunction with these beliefs.

Religiosity

Although there are significant levels of discord regarding focus and how Atheism should position and present itself as a movement, Black Atheists in this sample showed little difference from other Atheists when it comes to religiosity. Like other Atheists they view religion as illogical (93%), a clear construction of humans and a product of society (80%), and demonstrably untrue in some claims (67%). Moreover they take many of the most basic claims (theodicy) of major religions not to be that humans were created, that there is an afterlife, and generally that there is some sort of anthropomorphized force guiding or directing all or much of the universe to be untrue or untestable/unprovable. Like other Atheists they do not believe in God or gods of any sort, either finding these concepts incoherent or expressing a disbelief in God (Smith 2011). Like Atheists more broadly, they also point to contemporary religions being no different in truth value than mostly discarded beliefs about gods like Thor or Ra, which are now widely, considered myths throughout society (Baggiani 2003, Zuckerman 2009). Nelson mentioned how a significant amount of his philosophy training is based on this understanding. “We’ve got to read all the classics... reading them as true was never on the table. We look for meaning, and outlooks, and philosophy,” he said, before noting “I think that’s where religion is going.” Ryan, a 53 year old who works in finance, furthered this connection to include comparisons between contemporary religions. He discussed this in conjunction

with his military service in the Persian Gulf War (also known as The Gulf War, or The First Gulf War).

You know... you gotta learn about where you're going before you go over there. You know?... So I'm learning... And I'm still a believer at this point... you know going in I think all this Muslim stuff is evil... and then I'm like you know what?... This is the exact same shit.

Similarly, and also like other Atheists, the majority (63%) of respondents also alluded to the idea that an appeal to any specific religion over the other is a form of special pleading. This sentiment was best summed up by Nelson who touched on this theme by saying, "you see some [Blacks] try to reclaim religion... like those Black Israelites you see downtown, or how the Muslims, the Black Muslims tried. But it's sort of ridiculous... because you're really just picking what you like. Cleo also mentioned that she "dabbled in many religions" after leaving Christianity before deciding that they were all equally problematic. Among other ways of describing religious belief were "silly," "childlike," "childish," or as "security blankets." "It's a man in the sky... that's silliness," said Raquel. Walter echoed these thoughts saying that "it's ridiculous to believe what someone thousands of years ago who didn't know anything about the world... not close to us."

Despite how they described their feelings of religious belief, most respondents mentioned at some point during the interview that they generally "understood" or "didn't blame" people for holding those beliefs. This is likely related to the experience that most had of holding a good deal of the religious beliefs in question.

About ten respondents expressed a little more hostility than was typical of the sample. While the criticism is indeed in a similar fashion, the language typical of this viewpoint was a little more biting and accusatory. This difference is best summed up by

Michelle who was describing how she felt when approached about going to Church. She describes her feelings as follows, “Like someone says 'hey you guys go to church?' (points her finger) are you guys about some active clownery or did you grow up?” Again, the critique of religion being child-like is similar to that of the majority of the sample. But the image of a clown, or ‘clowning’ makes this and other comments like it, much more likely to resonate as negative with audiences.

Both in terms of religiosity, and the manner in which they view religion as fallacious, the Black Atheists in this sample showed little difference from what has been reported in other research about Atheists more generally (Smith 2011, Zuckerman 2009, Edgell 2008). However, there appear to be notable differences in the way that disbelief manifests itself, with Black Atheists once again notably tying their disbelief to issues of race, the history of racism in America, and social justice more broadly.

Though we did not overtly discuss certainty, most respondents seemed confident in their position¹⁶. However many respondents discussed a link between the cultural religiosity they described encountering in their daily lives, and having difficulty initially reconciling their atheism. Some discussed the difficulties in overcoming certain religious ideas that they used to believe to be true like God is watching me, that there is an authoritative source to turn to for dilemmas, that there is some sort of personal eternal existence, and/or that there is a heaven and/or hell. Additionally many Black Atheists discussed having to dispense of specifically racialized religious notions like Black salvation is only achievable through Christ or Christianity, or that there is an Exodus-style promise of deliverance through God more generally. Geoff mentioned something that addresses the centrality of the Exodus narrative specifically to Black religiosity and

¹⁶ As far as I am aware no study has examined certainty (or religious certainty) among Atheists.

historically Black churches saying “I get why they sang. I get why they believed like... that was all they had. They called Tubman Moses right... they took what they had and made hope.” “I found lots of comfort in my belief God had a plan for me... and for us [Black people]... that we suffer for a reason,” said Kristin, a 40 year old biology professor. Respondents discussed these ‘cultural beliefs’ and the role that they played in their becoming Atheist process.

One can see how dispensing of beliefs like heaven and hell can be a difficult task on its own, but the manner in which so many of these beliefs are culturally tied to a highly salient racial identity is an even further complication for Black Atheists. Furthering this notion, Michelle talks about how she still uses habits that she learned from her religious socialization to reminisce over her childhood and generally promote warm and fuzzy feelings. At the same time, in the following exchange she discusses the what she sees as the pitfalls of having Christianity so tightly wound up in communal Blackness, and how she believes those things have harmed her, and harm Black people more broadly.

Interviewer (Me): So you told me that some things happened to you like getting kicked out and having to go to counseling. Were those mostly because you were gay?

Michelle: Totally. Homosexuality it was all about me being gay. They were trying to cast it out, psychoanalyze it out, medicate it out and then as I got older. Actually... I'm just gonna make this statement really quick and not belabor the point. But now and again... no no very frequently (short pause) I listen to Black Christian radio stations because it was what I was raised on. And I listen to it because I want, I want to hear it with my new ears. And I've been listening to this one channel in the town that I was raised in KHBM 97. My uncle he actually has a show on there talking about... called 'Construction Time' and he talks about things that people wanna hear about construction and construction companies and architecture and guys on the ground call in. He's even got a following in some little town in London. This Brit used to live in Dallas and he brought him back to London. So it's really sweet the way this community things works because I've

listened to (inaudible) Heaven 97 ever since I was a little girl. So listening to it is kinda like I've been transported back to the early 80's and I'm ridin in grandmas green car.

Interviewer: Right

Michelle: So it's kinda cool. And they have this one sections that's called 'Ask The Bishop' and the Bishop is like (mumble) Dear Abbey. So he's Dear Abbey and there's a moderator and people call in. Out of all of the people that call in all of the time I listen to the show... whatever he's talked about... spread peace, spread love, spread joy, bless one another, understand when you're blessed, give thanks when you're blessed... (mimicking using a phone) Now we're ready for the callers let's ask the Bishop. You're on ask the Bishop... (in older sounding voice) Well Bishop I just wanted to ask you now what to... how am I supposed to act now that my niece has come out as a bisexual... she wasn't raised that way. Question after question, caller after caller, is addressing something about homosexuality and bisexuality. And I'm like after all the things this guy has talked about for 45 minutes all of your questions are about how to deal with homosexuals, how to accept them but not accept their friends, uh how to pray for them, where to make em sleep, somebody kicked one out would you be sinnin' to take it in. Just... and it's all about young Black kids who are gay. And I'm like of all the things going on in the Black community politically, economically, socially, in education, in our relationships with [the] police, with the increased surveillance of the police state. Out of all the shit going on in Black Americans lives... some homosexual teenager is what's got them bent all out of shape on Ask the Bishop.

While not asked about directly, these sorts of habits were mentioned by 48% of the sample. As mentioned above, some discussed these habits and/or residual beliefs in regards to problematizing their becoming Atheist process. While Michelle describes listening to Black Christian radio as bringing about feelings of nostalgia, she also discusses finding these sorts of programs as problematic when listening with her 'new ears.' Nonetheless, it is a habit that she regularly engages in, and speaks about enjoying. Katy, the oldest respondent in the sample at 67, describes a deeper sort of tension, and discussed feeling a sense of cultural loss or disruption related these habits and residual beliefs.

So much of who I was, I guess who I am too... was tied into being a Christian... a woman of God. Relationships, what I did, what I watched... I loved Soul Food

[the film]. Love it to this day... but it's like I can't get that back. Now I look at movies like Madea and roll my eyes. My daughter, she loves them. But now I see that as Christianity is gonna save us and don't like that... But I liked liking Soul Food [laughs]

While Katy mentions this sense of loss in more communal terms, Thomas discusses it more personally. Thomas furthered this notion of loss to the personal by saying: "...so many of my really good memories are in church... with my Dad, watching my Dad, being with my sister... playing. It's not like I feel bad or whatever... but it's like that connection to them [the memories] isn't as strong." Including Katy and Thomas, twelve respondents in all (26% of the sample, and just over half of the 48% who discussed still engaging in religious habits)

Others like Bree who "still love[s] Gospel music," and Edgar who still works in a church youth group are representative of the other segment of this 48%. These respondents tended to discuss these habits in mostly benign terms, and do not raise the issue of them causing tension. While they regularly engage in habits they believe they otherwise would not except for their religious backgrounds, they did not discuss them in a negative light. In fact, they tended to discuss them as fun, enjoyable, or nostalgic, doing them voluntarily, and often engaging in them alone (Michelle listening to Black Christian radio). Respondents generally did not relate these sorts of beliefs and habits to strategically saying or doing something while navigating the closet, which they often discussed as feeling mandatory and/or like work. However, the way in which these habits and residual beliefs culturally informed respondents likely helped enable them to conceal their Atheism.

Positive Beliefs

The discussion of positive beliefs holds an important place in debates within and about Atheism. Not believing in God is not a positive belief (it is a negative belief), but believing or asserting that ‘there is no God’ is a positive belief. Because Atheism is “the absence of a belief in God” Atheists are often charged with ‘believing nothing,’ or ‘believing in nothing,’ they have developed language to delineate what they actively believe (Baggiani 2003). Put differently, if someone states a negative belief ‘I don’t believe in ghosts,’ it is generally taken to mean that person has little or nothing to say about ghosts. Because what underpins Atheism is a negative belief, Atheists are often seen as having ceded their ability to make claims about religion and religiosity. In order to discuss what they do believe in a manner that does not betray the negative belief that makes them Atheists in the broad sense, the term ‘positive belief’ is used to denote what they do think and feel about religion and religiosity. Also of note, is that there is an important distinction within atheism that makes use of this same language. An Atheist who believes or asserts ‘there are no Gods or God’ is a Positive Atheist, while an Atheist that does not believe in God or Gods but make no such assertion as to their existence is a Negative Atheist.

Though a variety of positive beliefs varied greatly, there was a general theme of relating religion to racial inequality, racism, and social inequality more broadly. In addition to the racist way in which they felt religion was deployed in America, 67% of respondents mentioned that they believed the Bible specifically made it easier to be racist (or used to facilitate racist ideologies). A number mentioned passages and religious understandings that have indeed been used to support slavery, segregation, and racism

more broadly. “It’s clear certain people are better than others... how’s that going to work out?” Thomas said. “You are the Israelites... and they are whoever... and you [Israelites] get special rules... that’s in there,” said Cleo

Other respondents echoed Biblical understandings that they believed to be racist, or contributors to racism. “The curse of Ham and all that shit,” said Jalen. “Slaves obey your masters,” recalled Raquel. The majority of respondents touched on the idea that the Bible “approves of slavery.” Moreover, they further linked this to racism in America, and the Bible as a tool of justification of oppression. A majority of respondents including Mike also pointed to the fact that the Bible was often “the only book slaves were allowed to read,” as further evidence that the Bible, and Christianity more broadly were systematically used to pacify or otherwise make slaves accepting of their positions, and to promote the continuance and acceptance of the institution of slavery. Michelle continued this line of thinking saying “I’m pretty sure they didn’t give them [slaves] a book that would actually fix... you know... help their problems.”

In addition to reasons related to race and racial inequality, Black Atheists took several other moral stances in regards to religion. As was discussed earlier, female respondents strongly linked forms of gender inequality like sexism, sexual repression, sexual violence, and rigid gender roles with religion. Some also pointed to most religions claiming to have some universal truth or special knowledge as something that has and does lead to conflict.

About half the sample, the three queer respondents, and about 20 others linked homophobia and religion. “That Prop 8 stuff, and it’s a little more complicated... but that’s the reason (religiosity) for stuff like that,” said Rico referring to the colloquial idea

that Prop 8 to ban same-sex marriage in California in 2012 passed in large part due to Black support. In fact, about half (54%) of these respondents linked what they saw as relatively high levels of homophobia in African-Americans to high levels of cultural religiosity.

Large-scale social surveys have in fact shown that Blacks are in fact less likely to support same-sex marriage than Whites, and that Black Protestants are the 2nd least likely religious demographic to favor same-sex marriage to White Evangelicals (<http://www.pewforum.org/2016/05/12/changing-attitudes-on-gay-marriage/>). While support for same-sex marriage may not be the best proxy for the broad kind of homophobia that some participants described, nonetheless represents some relative level of antagonism toward the issue that has largely come to symbolize the Gay Rights movement. Moreover, a number of respondents made the connection between Black religiosity and homophobia, and found this connection to be an important one.

In conjunction these sets of beliefs that Black Atheists in this study were systematically likely to hold seem to speak to a developing belief system among Black Atheists. These beliefs inform each other and work in conjunction, and provide respondents with language and a basic ideology. Like other ordinary theologies, Black Atheists beliefs seem to have emerged from their organic lived experiences, specifically in having to adapt to challenges related to their social location.

Science

Like other Atheists, Black Atheists in this study strongly embrace science. Sixty-one percent of respondents brought up the topic of science when discussing their ‘becoming Atheist’ process, or as justifying or reinforcing their Atheism. The most cited

well-known Black Atheist by respondents was not a famous historical figure like Zora Neale Hurston or Bayard Rustin, or one of the Black Atheist rappers, but Neil de Grasse Tyson¹⁷, physicist, and host of ‘Cosmos’ and several other educational science television shows. Will discussed mentioning watching Cosmos as an important bonding experience he has with his 6-year-old daughter.

I do all kinds of science stuff with her... just really embrace science. We watched that show with Neil de Grasse Tyson on Fox... Cosmos. She just asks so many questions, and she’s so inquisitive... it’s building her up to where she has answers and doesn’t have to turn to religion.

Not only does he link understanding science with becoming/being Atheist, he actively believes that by engaging his daughter in such experiences that she herself is more likely to be an Atheist. As mentioned in the Literature Review and the ‘The Privilege of

Coming Out: Markers of Education and Occupation’ section (p. 102), about 15

respondents also brought up evolution as important for helping to orient their beliefs in a mostly naturalistic way. Kristin, herself a biologist furthered these sentiments by saying, “what we know about life... comes from science.” This mirrors findings of Smith, Pond, and other qualitative studies about Atheist identities, and the becoming Atheist process (Smith 2011, Pond 2015, Greska 2015). While some cite this as a reason they are Atheist or believe religion to be wrong, most simply appeal to science as the best way to answer questions.

They linked science to becoming Atheist, as well a source of grounding for some of their positive beliefs. Particularly, about 15 respondents appealed to the idea that “we are one race,” as being grounded in science; specifically biology and genetics. Thomas contrasted this idea to how he perceives religion suggests race operates by saying “they

¹⁷ Some respondents affectionately called him ‘NDG’ or ‘NGT.’

[Christians]¹⁸ say you've got the Hammites, Canaanites, Israelites. And they're all trying to kill each other... or supposed to kill each other because they're different [races].”

Many respondents also used history in a very similar way, relating knowing more history with being able to look at religion more critically. Sometimes the terms history and science appear to be used interchangeably as a proxy for learning more generally.

Becoming Atheist

In analyzing the becoming Atheist process in her investigation of Atheists in Australia, Smith states that “because religious beliefs and practices are socially learned, there must take place an unlearning process for those who eventually come to reject it” (Smith 2010). The sample of Black Atheists in this project identifies two major themes as major parts of their unlearning process, and causally linked them to the becoming Atheist process. These two themes were investigating science, “seeing how the universe was” as Catherine put it, or being put in close proximity with new people (college roommate, barracks) that challenged their views. Thomas credited his roommate with his eventual transition to atheism provided the following story, “He asked me where I thought Gandhi was going, where I thought Bob Marley was going... and I had to admit, Hell.” Thomas went on to say that he did not become an Atheist immediately, he like nearly all respondents went on to describe his eventual self-identification as an Atheist as a process. But it was his conversation with his roommate that Thomas considers “really when I started my deconversion.” In an ironic use of religious language, the term ‘deconversion’ was used by a number of respondents to denote their process of becoming Atheist. Moreover, it is suggestive of the manner in which they perceive themselves (and

¹⁸ Potentially other Abrahamic faiths as well.

probably rightly so) to be outside of the mainstream or deviant, and the way in which they view becoming Atheist as literally shedding something.

Michelle discussed how she perceived race affected her becoming Atheist process, and how it also affected the composition of White people she socialized with, specifically in the context of friendships.

It has certainly changed the type of White person that's in my social sphere. Not affiliating with uh White Christians cuts down the number of Whites I know... drastically. Which means that... the White's that I hang out with are usually other things like Hippies, or stone-cold progressive potheads. It's one... whatever people who are not definable, because that's what defines them... a lack of conformity, and I like that. That's what I need. I find myself to be particularly suspicious of those who so eagerly conform. I've been coerced by them to conform, why are you so eager to do this on your own?

A similar sentiment was echoed by eight other respondents, with an additional four respondents who suggested that something similarly applicable applied to some of their choices in making friends without suggesting it applied specifically to White associates. For these 12 people, being an Atheist was linked with friend choice which as has been noted in other Atheist studies such as those by Pond who mentioned “that being around likeminded individuals and forming friendships was a benefit of identifying as Atheist,” for some of her respondents (Pond 2016). However the degree to which these eight respondents racialized the manner in which being Atheist affected their choices in making friendships, and the potential they see in friendships with non-normative Whites is notable.

The ages at which respondents began their coming out process varied from age 16 having never come out. There was one respondent (Bradley) who never really identified as religious, and thus does not have a becoming Atheist process narrative, or coming out story that is analogous to the rest of the sample. Most of the respondents continued to

utilize the closet, with only about six respondents being ‘fully’ out. As stated before, for the plurality of the sample, being ‘out’ in any more than a limited fashion was perceived as either unthinkable or out of the question. For those respondents who did come out, began the coming out process, or were adamant about doing so one factor seemed to matter above all else, support.

Support Matters

Many of our respondents spent a significant amount of time at some point in their lives looking for support specifically for their Black Atheist identity. Many respondents also discussed how they continued to feel alone even when they were aware of the presence of other Atheists more generally. This is suggestive that the awareness of and solidarity with other Black Atheists is meaningful for participants. Walter, who is an auditor of federal contracts, spoke about how this issue impacted his life saying, “I’ve never been one of those cool guys... but I’ve felt even more alone as a Black Atheist. My ex-wife... you know I thought she was Ok with it. Not like it was discussed... but... But time passed, things happen... turns out she wasn’t. Now that’s done... I’ve just really spent a lot of my life with this feeling alone.” He went on to say, “in fact meeting you, having this conversation is... people usually don’t want to talk to me, and almost never [about] this me. It was good to say some of them.” Though he acknowledges he does not have the outgoing personality people associate with popularity, Walter feels like this sense of being alone has been exacerbated by the fact that he is a Black Atheist.

Additionally, amongst respondents, there was a notable correlation between knowing Black Atheists or otherwise supportive people at a young age, and the overall level of comfort or discomfort the respondent experienced during the becoming Atheist

process, and in the coming out process. In the following exchange, Lynette touches on this connection while discussing her becoming Atheist process.

Interviewer (Me): You kind of answered this already but, what role do you think that your race played in you becoming Atheist?

Lynette: Um, I think it played a unique role but I don't think it affected me one way or another becoming an Atheist or identifying as Atheist. But at the time, I was in college, my friends that I was close with at the time, you know, they were all Black but a mix of religions. I had an Atheist friend, and I actually found it surprising when I first met her, you know, that she was raised as an Atheist, and she's Black. And some other friends who were very religious and some who were sort of religious. I had a unique group of friends in that sense so I do feel like it maybe made me I guess more comfortable exploring the possibility of being an Atheist more so than if I had (inaudible) a group of that was like lets go to church every Sunday you know... instead of going to the bar. Haha"

Perhaps by no coincidence, Lynette, who was one of the few participants to have a Black Atheist in their close social circle, described one of the easier becoming Atheist processes. That is not to say that White Atheist friends and allies did not matter to respondents. They most certainly did, with many respondents stating the importance of White friends early on in their becoming Atheist process when, as Thomas put it, "I thought I was the only one," before he met his college roommate. However, suggestions about coming out and/or assurances from White Atheist friends and acquaintances that did not understand the particular dilemma posed to Black Atheists because of the racialized nature of their identities and communal considerations, were generally taken with a grain of salt. The following short exchange with Michelle; which actually began as a discussion of the feedback she gets for being Atheist, illustrates the manner in which respondents talked about the value they saw in connecting with other Black Atheists;

Interviewer (Me): what's the race of the people I guess the Christians and the secular people you're referring to or thinking about when I ask you that question about feedback?

Michelle: Oh yeah White and Black, but primarily Black for the Christians. But they're not exclusively (inaudible)... And primar... increasingly more Blacks amongst my Atheist community which is very nice. And it's because I'm meeting people of African heritage that have already taken this journey, done this work for themselves and who... like [my girlfriend] and I carefully approached this conversation and feel people out.

In this case, the ability to talk to someone who had already and dealt with this specific kind double-barreled stigma mattered greatly to Michelle. Moreover, the way in which she used “this journey” and “this work” seemed indisputably racialized, pertaining specifically to other Black Atheists. By extension, other Atheists generally cannot do this work, and thus cannot provide the same level of experiential guidance as Black Atheists tend to see these experiences as fairly dissimilar. What seemed to matter most for the coming out process of the respondents to this sample was knowing and having the support of other Black Atheists.

Summary

Black Atheists in this study discussed a meaningful tension between Black Atheists and mainstream Atheists. Respondents nearly universally agreed that mainstream Atheists did not acknowledge, understand, or tend to the set of racialized considerations that Black Atheists must undertake. Additionally, a majority of respondents felt that mainstream Atheists were either not amenable or not interested in promoting such an understanding. Respondents in the study made note of a litigious focus amongst mainstream Atheists that they themselves generally prioritized well below focuses on social justice and racism. The belief that the way religion operates in America is inherently racist was a reason for Atheism/disbelief in this sample.

However, the Black Atheists in this study displayed striking similarities to other Atheists among other religious beliefs. They both relate science to their disbelief, find

religion incoherent, and recognize their stigma relative to their religious peers. Black Atheists in this study also mirrored trends amongst other Atheists of being highly educated, young, and systematically holding professional jobs.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

In this chapter, I summarize the results of this project, evaluate the predictive value of extant research in understanding Black Atheists, and re-examine the initial Research Questions. Additionally I will link some of the findings in this paper with current literature, at times reinforcing emerging or accepted notions, and at times challenging them. Lastly I will discuss the implications that these findings in particular, as well as understanding Black Atheists more broadly offer for fruitful study.

Summation of Findings

As was suggested by reading Hart and Witherspoon together, Black Atheists indeed developed their own ‘Ordinary theologies.’ While these ordinary theologies are clearly related to their experiences of being Black in America and being an Atheist in America, Black Atheists often operate in a space removed from common understandings of both. Not sharing religious ideals with their Black family and peers in a ‘church-centric’ culture on the one hand, and not sharing common backgrounds or experiences with the majority of Atheists puts Black Atheists in a unique space of having to make within the two groups to which they belong while often being perceived as outsiders (McQueeney 2015, Witherspoon and Mitchell 2014). Moreover, Black Atheists recognize themselves as holding a racialized Black Atheist identity, refer to themselves as ‘Black Atheists,’ and describe in-group solidarity with other Black Atheists.

Because of the manner in which Black Atheists are perceived and consequentially stigmatized, marginalized and socially isolated, they occupy a unique social space with relatively little influence from external ideas. There are very few people clamoring to be Black Atheists and even fewer coalitions actively recruiting them, and as such very little

co-option. In this vacuum Black Atheists have (have had) a distinctive opportunity to define their own identities.

In an ironic twist, while Black and Atheist are certainly two of the most stigmatized identities in the United States, few efforts exist to demonize the identity of ‘Black Atheists.’¹⁹ In part due to their small numbers and as well as being an unacknowledged group, the competition to define ‘Black Atheist’ and meaning making and symbolism attached to the label has been left largely to Black Atheists themselves.

Because they are so marginalized and seemingly lack major characteristics often essential for membership to the groups they identify with, Black Atheist identities developed in a vacuum (Lackey 2007, Edgell 2010, Edgell 2006). These identities emphasize grounding racial and social justice in naturalism and science, while at the same time taking critical approaches to understanding the historical and contemporary impact of religion on African-Americans.

Through their understanding of their identities and stigma Black Atheists in this study described a unique set of considerations that Black Atheists must traverse. Accordingly, respondents in this sample described engaging in various forms of stigma management, with utilization of the closet as the most important of these. Through use of the closet, and a number of closet strategies related to concealment, Black Atheists in this sample made strong links between their identities and the way they navigate their lives.

In addition to the manner in which they perceive stigma from other Blacks, respondents also pointed to several areas of discord with mainstream Atheists. These areas of discord mostly related to race, and respondents contention that mainstream

¹⁹ Think ‘Asian Wiccan’ or ‘Gay Nascar Fan.’ The definitions and related meaning-making for these sorts of terms in the lexicon are up for grabs.

Atheists focus on litigious matters at the expense of race, neglect to the considerations such as ? and ? that Black Atheists in this study value, and engage in discriminatory practices. While some respondents noted the intellectual contribution mainstream and New Atheists provided, they overwhelmingly reported feeling social distance from these groups.

Although respondents also reported feeling little in-group solidarity with mainstream/other Atheists, their beliefs about religion and appeals to science were very similar. Black Atheists in this study also link their ‘becoming Atheist’ process to race, and attest to the value of knowing other Black Atheists that have experienced and understand the sets of racialized considerations they discuss.

Returning To The Literature And Theoretical Framework

The interdisciplinary literature that served as the foundation of this project was indeed able to shed light on the main research questions of this project. Driven by Mead and Goffman’s understanding of identities and the self, social psychological understandings of identity combined with Smith and Zuckerman’s understanding of the development of the Atheist identity provided valuable insight into the way that Black Atheist identities themselves developed. Critical understanding of race further facilitated the understanding of the Black Atheist identity. This field provided a framework to understand the ways participants linked being Black and being Atheist as part of a larger political project that aimed to critique religion and Christianity as a facilitator and driver of racism and other inequalities, while further linking atheism with freedom, liberation, and equality more broadly.

Via its focus on the concept of the closet, LGBTQ literature also proved to be a very good guide to understanding how Black Atheists engaged in stigma management through using the closet. Respondents used the closet to manage stigma, and have a place to develop their identities in relative safety were notably similar across Black Atheist respondents in this sample and the manner in which LGBTQ individuals utilize the closet in sociology, queer studies, and other disciplines. Similarly, both groups negotiate their closetable identities through the prism of stigma (or projecting stigma).

The manner in which respondents used the closet may speak to the ways in which they talked about salience. Respondents were in the closet as Black Atheists, and as such, in the closet as Atheists, but not as Black people. This is their primary identity that maintains its position in the front stage, and as such is almost always activated. Though perhaps intuitive, this likely results in the increased salience and development of this identity relative to their Atheist identity. Moreover, this identity can be communally and publicly developed in a manner that is at times inaccessible to either respondents Atheist identities or their Black Atheist identities (Quinn 2014).

Findings Unforeseen By Literature

However, there were a number of areas in which the literature and existing theoretical frameworks either did not provide insight, or were challenged by some of the findings of this project. Most notably, demographic and qualitative work on Atheists, sociology of religion understandings of the gendered nature of religiosity, and Black religiosity specifically, all point to the idea that we would find a male-skewed sample of Black Atheists (Zuckerman 2009, Kosmin and Keysar 2008, ARIS 2008, Pew 2012). However, the opposite was found with the majority of the sample being Black Atheist

women, and prevented from being even more female skewed by taking measures to bring in relatively more men. Furthermore, the women in the sample linked gender, atheism, and being Black in a way highly suggestive of an emerging Black Feminist Atheist philosophy, complete with leaders, an emerging language, and critiques to offer. That is to say, there is a set of ideas that seem to have coalesced in/around this social space.

The link that respondents make between their atheism and their gender is notable for its potential to challenge current understanding of the intersection between gender and religion. While there is wide consensus on the fact that women in the United States are more religious in both belief and practices than their male counter-parts, there is a longstanding debate as to why (Hacket and Cooperman 2016).

At times, these works address links that religious women make with their gender. Like Hacket and Cooperman surmise most related work suggests gender roles rather than beliefs are the driver of the consistent gender split in church attendance and religiosity we see in America, and across most Christian majority countries (Hacket and Cooperman 2016). However, consistently across female respondents multiple links were made between their atheism and their gender, and very little literature have addressed the absence of religiosity of women, particularly Black Women Also notable, is how explicit many of these links were in nature.

Previous literature also was not suggestive of the ways in which participants linked their being Black Atheists with issues in their romantic lives. Dating is a seemingly mostly unexplored area of extant Atheist research, and even the academic work like that of Zuckerman which explicitly addresses Atheist happiness and well-being does not distinguish the link between atheism and romantic lives as being particularly

problematic or notable. However, it was a serious and important preoccupation across this sample regardless of age or gender. It is quite possible that this link is somewhat unique to Black Atheists, in part due to the complications of communal stigma (p. 146). Familial and other communal considerations loom large in the dating lives of Black Atheists. Many report fearing rejection because of their atheism, a seemingly accurate assumption given the number of respondents in the sample who associated the dissolution of at least one relationship with their being a Black Atheist.

Some literature, including that on the racial transmission of religion, also suggests that Black Atheists might feel some sort of identity conflict (Vassenden 2011). Although people around them saw being a ‘Black Atheist’ as an identity conflict to the point of questioning their racial authenticity, Black Atheists saw the two components of their identity as working together. Rather than describing being Black and being Atheist as being in conflict with one another, respondents nearly unanimously described the manner in which these two components informed each other as a part of a Black Atheist identity.

While the Black Atheists in this sample largely mirrored the fact that Atheists are the most highly-educated religious demographic, and also make more money on average, these results stand in contrast to the demonstrated connection between religiosity and educational and socio-economic outcomes of Blacks in America. Although African Americans are the only racialized group in the United States for which religiosity is positively linked to these outcomes, the fact that this sample was significantly more educated and tended to hold more prestigious and economically rewarding jobs than the average African American challenges at least some of this consensus around this relationship. In fact, that they are significantly more educated than even Atheists on

average is suggestive that these markers of privilege matter relatively more to Black Atheists in terms of both self-identifying and outwardly identifying or coming out as Atheist. Alternative explanations like the idea that perhaps the link between religiosity and educational outcomes for African-Americans is a function of structural issues such as the manner in which public schools are funded, or that some of these outcomes are more a function of religious certainty than religiosity should be explored²⁰.

Exploring and Answering Research Questions

In this subsection, I provide a brief analysis of how the findings in this study address each research question. Recall that this study focuses on the following questions: Is there a meaningful ‘Black Atheist’ identity? And if there is, how do people who claim a Black Atheist identity conceive of it? How does this identity relate to the way in which they live their lives?

There a meaningful ‘Black Atheist’ identity. Through interviews, participants began to shed light on what it means to be a Black Atheist in America. In part, it means navigating a complex web of considerations of race and religion, and quite often these considerations are racialized. Because of the way in which they recognize the multiple stigmas against them, it is through very careful navigation of this space that characterizes the way most Black Atheists live their lives.

To understand this, one must understand the way in which Black Americans seemingly intensely disliked Black Atheists. They believe that this widespread dislike applies both to individuals and to a broader collective sense of ‘Black community.’ Notably, it is important to understand the racialized manner in which they believed they

²⁰ The ‘best and brightest’ as well as more privileged blacks are often selected out of public schools. Overwhelmingly the schools these students systematically go to are religious schools.

are questioned about their authenticity as Black people, and how this affects the way they choose to express this identity.

Being a Black Atheist in this study also seems to mean feeling some level of social distance from more mainstream Atheists in America. Many feel like outsiders within mainstream Atheist organizations like American Atheists, and within the ‘New Atheist’ movement that has come to mostly dominate current Atheist social movements. In part, they feel as if the important set of racialized considerations that respondents repeatedly emphasized the importance of, are either minimized or not recognized at all by mainstream atheism. Additionally but not unconnected, Black Atheists feel like the focus of mainstream Atheist leaders and groups is too often misplaced on church-state separation issues, and other litigious matters. Rather, Black Atheists generally feel that the focus of Atheism should be the historical and contemporary inequalities they believe stem from religion, and consequently tie atheism as a political project to anti-racism, social justice, and equality more broadly.

Respondents conceptions of their identities. Respondents overwhelmingly described ‘Black Atheist’ as a strong identity. In fact, it was how the majority saw and referred to themselves. “I am a Black Atheist,” was a common refrain throughout the project. Across respondents, there were similar narratives painted of how being Black and being Atheist informed each other. In fact, nearly all respondents explicitly linked the two by either professing beliefs that religion and Christianity as practiced had been particularly harmful to African-Americans, or that they otherwise justify widespread racial inequality and the structures that produce such inequality.

Consequentially, respondents tended to view being Black Atheists as being linked with equality, freedom, and liberation more broadly. This applied both to them as individuals who already identify as Atheist, and to a larger political project they prescriptively feel could help Black people more broadly.

Participants also made consistent and coherent 'in-group' usage of the term 'Black Atheist,' further emphasizing the strong nature of this identity. "As Black Atheists," "Us Black Atheists," and "Being Black Atheists," were some of the meaningful ways in which respondents talked about themselves and others like them. Many specifically sought connectedness and community with other Black Atheists, and there appears to be evidence that this variable is linked both with the becoming Atheist process as well as the coming out process. Due to the marginalization that they feel in both Atheist and Black social circles, respondents saw great value in the creation and utilization of ostensibly Black Atheist spaces.

Respondents relate to the way in which Black Atheists live their lives to their marginalized positions, and the stigma(s) attached. Black Atheists in this study had a very unique perception of stigma tied to their unique social location, and unique set of social pressures and considerations. They believe that they are stigmatized both as Black people, and as Atheists. Further, they attest to believing that within Black communities' stigma against Atheists is even more intense than it is amongst the general population, and is both pervasive and acceptable. One particular way this stigma manifests itself in a racialized manner is through questions of authenticity, either through the questioning of 'true in-group' belonging, or the implication that Black Atheists are unappreciative of Black progress or Black history.

The respondents in the sample clearly indicated that they perceived themselves to be viewed very negatively by 'Black America' at large. They described two distinct kinds of racialized stigma that they experienced or perceived. One, they recognize that Blacks in America are more hostile and less trusting of Atheists than are Americans on average, which they characterized as the widespread and often acceptable dislike of Atheists. Additionally, they describe a second racialized authenticity challenge in which it is routinely communicated to them that Black Atheists functionally challenge the Civil Rights Movement, and Black people "don't do atheism," or Atheism is a "White thing."

A minority of Participants expressed some sentiments about sometimes feeling alone in Black cultural spaces. Even within this minority, the salience of their Black identity remained extremely high, as was the case with nearly all respondents. In fact, most respondents cited their self-interest as Black people and in some cases specifically as Black women. Additionally they believed that atheism serves as a functional edge to expose the manner in which religion has harmed American Blacks, and also see it as serving a larger collective racial self-interest.

While they themselves generally did not feel like outsiders, the idea that Black Atheists are viewed as outsiders by other Black Americans was shared almost universally. They reported feeling their authenticity questioned in a very racialized manner that included suggestions that Atheists were inherently unappreciative of or hostile towards the Civil Rights Movement and leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. These sorts of racialized and communal considerations of how Black Atheists are stigmatized by other Blacks, manifests to the point where many Black Atheists in this sample either cannot fathom or are unwilling to really test the waters of coming out. Almost certainly

because of the way they perceive this racialized stigma, and because the majority of their families and social circles were mostly Black, only seven out of 46 Black Atheists in this sample were ‘completely out,’ or ‘mostly out’ of the closet. The closet was a very significant social space for participants in this sample, and the high rate of usage amongst participants suggests that Black Atheists may be relatively more likely to be in the closet than the average Atheist in America.

This calculus of essentially muting their atheism, and especially muting it in Black social circles, to preserve or protect the way in which they were viewed by their racial in-group, also speaks to the difference in salience that Black Atheists professed. Across respondents, with few exceptions, discussed both explicitly as well as consistently implied that their racial identity as Black people (in an American context) was significantly more salient than their identities as Atheists. Although they described these identities as strongly informing another and in many ways inseparable, Black Atheists appealed to the idea that because they ‘wore their skin color,’ that their identities as Black people were almost always active, while being Black transmits religion in this society (people assume religiosity of Blacks) and they had relatively fewer social situations in which their Atheist identities were active. Additionally, because Blacks are stigmatized in America, many Black Atheists described being reticent to attach another major stigma to themselves. Again, alluding to the fact that they ‘wear their skin color,’ Black Atheists reported that they felt racial discrimination unavoidable, whereas through utilization of the closet they largely felt control over when and where they might be stigmatized or discriminated against for being Atheist.

Respondents also described feelings of significant social distance from mainstream Atheists. It was nearly universal among the sample (98%) to describe feeling more in-group salience with other Black Americans than they did with other Atheists. Some of this is related to the closetable nature of Atheism, combined with an inability to “turn off [one’s] skin color,” and the ever-present physical manifestations of race. In conjunction with significant use of the closet by this sample of Black Atheists and the racial transmission of religion in America, this lead them having significantly more interpersonal interactions in which they were perceived only as Black.

Notably, a majority of the sample described mainstream Atheists as being uninterested in or unwilling to understand the unique set of racialized considerations that Black Atheists face. Further the sample described mainstream Atheists as nearly equally uninterested or unconcerned with many of the issues they as Black Atheists found most pressing. The sample was especially critical of the litigious focus of mainstream Atheists, which they felt came at the expense of focusing on race and social justice. About half of the sample perceived mainstream Atheists to view the interjection of beliefs and concerns of Black Atheists as an intrusion or co-option of their own already established groups or movements. Because of the aforementioned reasons, many in the sample asserted that they felt little in-group belonging with other Atheists. They also strongly emphasized their belief that because of their unique set of considerations, particularly traversing racialized communal stigma, that Black Atheists have a significantly more difficult path to navigate than do mainstream Atheists.

Other findings

Aside from the findings that helped specifically illuminate the research questions that drove this project, there were a number of other findings from the interviews given in this project. Notably, this sample of Black Atheists showed little difference from other Atheists in terms religiosity and appeals to science. Other notable findings included the importance of gender amongst Black Atheists as it pertains to language, belief, and identity. Respondents also made very strong links being a Black Atheist and their romantic lives that were unanticipated at the outset of this project. The Black Atheists in this sample described beliefs about religion and religiosity that were very similar to those that Atheists more broadly have been reported to hold. Large majorities of this sample view religion as illogical (93%), a clear construction of humans and a product of society (80%), and demonstrably untrue in some claims (67%) (Swatos and Olsen 2000, Roof 2003, Zuckerman 2011). Moreover, they believe that the basic claims of religion are untrue, and specifically believe the concept that there is a God, Gods, or other spirits to be untrue, nonsensical, or impossible to prove (in the case of some respondents they said it was impossible to test). This too is in line with what has been reported about other Atheists (Lizardi 2010). However, they diverged from other Atheists in the ways they expressed some of their positive beliefs. Sixty-seven percent of respondents mentioned that they believed the Bible facilitated and/or promoted racism, with many citing the ways that the Bible treats race a 'real' and meaningful as particularly facilitating racist notions. Much of what Black Atheists in this sample said across interviews was underpinned by the belief that religion has been particularly harmful to Black people.

Like other Atheists, they also linked their beliefs as Atheists to science (C. Smith 2003, Zuckerman 2007, 2011).

As mentioned before, the gendered findings of this project were both unanticipated and contrary to many of the understandings about both Atheists and Black religiosity. Women in the sample consistently linked both their gender, and corresponding issues of sexuality with being Black Atheists. For Black women, the perception that religion, Christianity, and even the Black church have effectively served to harm women of color seems to have fostered the development of their own uniquely critique that includes linking religion with racism, sexism, and unequal sexual practices. The degree to which the rhetoric and use of language amongst the Black Atheist women in this sample, and the women that have begun to emerge as leaders in Black Atheist social spaces is also quite notable. In fact, it strongly suggests a uniquely and emerging Black Atheist Feminism. Additionally, through this lens they offered critiques of sexism and a lack of diversity in leadership within mainstream Atheism.

The degree to which respondents linked their romantic lives and dating was also completely unanticipated. Current understandings of Atheists do not mention this as a notable complicating factor in their lived lives. However, it was widely reported by this sample that they believed being Black Atheists had direct and significant effects on their romantic lives, and these effects were overwhelmingly described in negative terms. Most respondents described having at least some relationship troubles related to religiosity, and many attributed the dissolution of a romantic relationship directly to the fact that they are Black Atheists. Furthermore, at least in part because of these reported experiences, many Black Atheists to have a negative outlook on easily having fulfilling romantic lives.

While eleven members of the sample explicitly mentioned that they did not feel they could maintain long-term compatibility with an extremely religious pool, most understand religiosity to be central to finding a rewarding long-term partner. No respondents ruled out or spoke negatively about dating non-black people, yet dating in America tends to be intraracial. Given this, Black Atheists confront a potentially small dating pool for those respondents who are looking for other Black Atheists. More research is necessary to make any conclusions on dating, but preliminary findings within this sample suggest that there may be a gendered component to dating for black Atheists. Among the possibly relevant conceptual reasons, that females are perceived to be engaging in greater role rupture than their male counterparts stands out as a potential reason for any gendered difference. It is also possible that the correlation between education and atheism plays a factor in gendered differences, as the gender education gap is greatest amongst Blacks in America (Buchanan 2011).

The results of this study also seemingly challenge sociology of religion literature that as a consensus suggests that religiosity negatively correlates with school performance, educational attainment, and educational outcomes more broadly with White, Asian, and Hispanic Americans. The only racial demographic in which religiosity is positively correlated with school outcomes is among Black Americans. These results challenge that idea outright, and also suggest the potential need for a re-examination of the pathways and socialization processes used to explain these different racial outcomes²¹. A study regarding religion as a proxy variable may be informative.

²¹ Perhaps there are structural forces that drive educational outcomes for African-Americans more than belief, at least relative to American demographics.

Age also emerged as a potentially important factor for the ways Black Atheists live their lives. While there were striking similarities in the ways in which Black Atheists in this sample related their identities to their romantic lives at nearly every age, two of the three youngest members of the sample spoke about this link in a completely different way. As mentioned in Chapter Four, it is possible that Atheism is becoming increasingly normalized in younger birth cohorts (Hart 2014). This may be particularly true in college settings. It is also possible that this effect of normalization is also happening (although likely at a slower rate) in non-college spaces, which may eventually relate to the way Black Atheists experience stigma. Of the few members of the sample that suggested and/or reported that their Atheist identity is as or more salient than their Black identity, all were under 27, and was reported by two of the three members of the sample under age 21 (all three were also undergraduate students at the time of the interview). These three young people, in addition to two others (aged 27 and 33), also generally spoke about their stigma in milder terms (though only in two cases was this stigma actually described as mild) than did the sample on average. Although there were so few respondents under 21 (three), the manner in which the youngest members of the sample spoke about themselves marks a potential qualitative difference in the ways younger Black Atheists experience stigma. A sample that incorporates more Young Millennials and members of Generation Z have the promise to yield notable correlations between age and the ways Black Atheists experience their lives.

Similarly, the ages of people within respondents social circles also emerged as a potentially important consideration. Through their narratives a number of respondents

mentioned treading much more carefully around older people, and being much more hesitant to consider coming out to them.

Implications of this Study

This study of Black Atheist identity offers promise in forwarding the academic understanding not only about Black Atheist identities, but also on the intersection of race and religion more broadly. It also explores notions of in-group belonging, stigma, stigma management, identity work and development, and identity conflict. Through the way that Black Atheists describe experiencing double barreled stigma, we can additionally explore notions of identity salience and authenticity.

The results of this study suggest several implications. First, this study suggests that conceptualizing the closet in a dualistic way (as has traditionally been done) glosses over very important differences amongst people that to this point have generally lumped together as ‘being in the closet’. Rather there are degrees of being in the closet (and conversely degrees of being out) as suggested by the aforementioned proposed typologies of Black Atheists relative closet behavior. Most of the respondents were neither entirely in nor out of the closet, and generally have to navigate being ‘in’ and ‘out’ at the same time. This challenges the idea that dualism, as currently conceptualized, can describe the robustness and diversity of the closet.

The significance of the closet in this study points to a promising link between the growing body of Atheist literature and LGBTQ closet literatures. Both groups are among the most stigmatized in the United States (Edgell 2006), have significant portions of their populations in the closet, and offer up similar considerations and reason; for example, avoiding stigma, not wanting to be shunned or treated differently, fear of repercussions,

and fear of being set back financially (Somerville 2008). Though there are dissimilarities, comparing these two populations offers potential insight into the conception of the closet, closeted behavior, and stigma management more broadly. Lastly, results suggest that Black Atheists and other closeted minority groups offer promising and relatively untapped populations of interest that can even further help explore conceptualizations about ‘the closet,’ how it is navigated, and the effects it has on its users.

A second implication of this study concerns how this study has the potential to challenge scholarly conceptions of religiosity itself. As currently conceived of, Atheist is at the opposite end of the religiosity spectrum as fundamentalism (the spectrum runs from fundamentalist to not religious, portrayed as polar opposites when visualized on a linear spectrum). However, the way in which respondents talked about themselves suggests their ways of disbelieving, and positive beliefs common throughout the sample that may serve as a proxy to religiosity. Put another way, there are indeed habits and practices that are common to many Black Atheists. While obviously not a religion, or dogma, these practices are nonetheless related to respondents religious identity or lack thereof and the way in which it intersects with their racial being Black in America. The unique sorts of racial considerations respondents felt they had to navigate particularly because they hold a Black Atheist identity, further inform these practices.

There are significant gaps in scholarly literature focusing on Black Atheists. This project aimed to shed light on some of these gaps, as well as demonstrating that there is significant value to be gained in understanding Black Atheists. In addition to being valuable in forwarding more robust understandings about Atheists and Black Atheist identities, it also furthers conceptualizations about the intersection of race and religion,

advance critical understandings of the crucial role religiosity plays currently and historically for African-Americans, and the complexities of navigating a ‘double barreled’ stigmatized identity.

Though the question of what the ‘Black Atheist’ identity is certainly merits further investigation, this study provides a foundation for further research. This sample suggests that Black Atheists are highly educated, mostly liberal, mostly young, and are strongly influenced by the unique position of the social space which they occupy, namely the intersection between two highly marginalized identities, and due to their very unique set of social circumstances likely to have developed their own ‘ordinary theology’ (Witherspoon 2014). The way in which these identities and consequent ideologies/theologies develop are also influenced by fact that there are so few Black Atheists numerically and that they already wear one very visible sign of stigma (Smith 2011, Lackey 2007, Lackey 2009, Hart 2014). Furthermore, like Atheists in general, they are likely to have spent time navigating and negotiating the closet in response to the Atheist identity being among the most stigmatized in America. However, given the testimony of the sample and the way they experience cultural and communal stigma, they relate to diverging from the uniquely religious in-group to which they belong; they may utilize the closet at even higher rates than do their White counterparts. Uniquely high levels of religiosity, religion being important in everyday cultural practices, and the amount of historical cultural import placed on religion combine to make the Black Atheist (and all Atheists) particularly demonized within Black communities. This specific set of pressures, combined with respondent narratives and behaviors suggest that Black Atheists are even more likely than Atheists in general to utilize the social space of the

closet (Smith 2011, Faulkner 2011). Lastly due to the considerable strain of negotiating two highly stigmatized identities, and a lack of important cultural pathways with both Atheists and African-Americans respectively they are likely to spend considerable time seeking community and highly unique identities are likely forged in these marginal social spaces (Zine 2008, Venzant 2011).

Though more research is needed regarding how Black Atheists and other groups who are stigmatized by their respective in-groups manage stigma through using the closet, there is no doubt that the closet is a significant social space for Black Atheists, one where they do identity work from a safe space, and at the same time search for allies and acceptance.

Further understanding of Black Atheists and Black Atheist identities will help understand other growing minority Atheist populations, critical understandings of what it means to be Black in America, and bolster considerations of the complex intersections of race, religion, and irreligion. Additionally, it has the potential to both challenge and contribute to literature on the closet, negotiating closetable identities, and on people that carry multiple stigmatized identities.

To better understand this identity both warrants and requires further research. Hart says that he cannot imagine a future of Black religion in America which does not “[accord] a more prominent role to one percenters” (Hart 2014). This is important not just for the use value for understanding this increasingly professed identity, but for understanding that there are likely to be large qualitative shifts in Black Atheist identities should they become more formally ingratiated in large-scale social movements and coalitions. As it stands today their very small numbers and uniquely marginal status

almost certainly play a distinctive role in the development, maintenance, and expression of Black Atheist identities. Both their numbers and their level of integration into other groups and coalitions are certainly variables to monitor going forward.

Additionally, Will Gervais and others have done research suggesting that the more prevalent Atheists become, the less they will be discriminated against (Gervais 2011). This holds true for both implicit understandings of Atheists being more prevalent as well as explicit measures (Gervais 2011). Indeed, “reading about Atheist prevalence reduced implicit Atheist distrust” and that “anti-Atheist prejudice was reduced where Atheists are more common,” (Gervais 2011). The inverse, however, is true of Black people. That is, anti-Black bias increases both implicitly and explicitly when the prevalence of Blacks is increased. Anti-Black bias for example, is higher in states and cities where Black people hold a relatively large share of the local population (Gillborn 2008, Gervais 2011). It is impossible to know without further study how these effects manifest themselves to Black Atheists without future study. However, the implications these two seemingly competing phenomenon have on both Black Atheist outreach and inclusion into coalitions could be both vast and illuminating for the development and maintenance of Black Atheist’s identities moving into the future.

Focusing on this uniquely marginalized population has the potential to bolster understandings of broader themes and social processes. Because Black Atheists operate at the crux of two of the most stigmatized identities, how they manage stigma provides significant insight into the concept of double-barreled stigma. Furthermore, the unique racialized stigma they perceive from other Black Americans, and the marginalization and the social distance they feel from mainstream Atheists can inform understandings of ‘in-

group ‘ belonging. This stigma was linked by respondents to utilize the closet, and specifically utilizing to avoid what they perceive to be the likely disruption of familial, romantic, or communal relationships. Aside from helping to understand utilizing the closet in conjunction with, and as a form of stigma management, narratives painted by participants strongly suggest that traditional dualistic notions of the closet do not capture the nuanced utilitarian manner in which Black Atheist used the closet. This presumably extends to other populations that make use of the closet. Additionally, the way they perceive stigma, utilize the closet, and conceive of ‘ coming out,’ offer insight into the Atheist ‘ coming out’ process, and the ‘ coming out’ process more broadly. There appears to be two important unique gender dynamics operating among Black Atheists. One, female Black Atheists linked both gender and sexuality to their atheism, linking religion to forms of oppression of both constructs, and additionally strongly linking religion to the oppression of women of color specifically. A second is that through mutual understanding of these links, a number of Black women have either emerged as leaders of local groups or created their own. Through an increasing interconnectedness partly facilitated by social media, a language appears to be developing that is suggestive of an emerging Black Feminist Atheist space. This has the potential to bolster understandings how these identities come to be formed, how these multiple identities inform each other, and to expand insights into the intersections of race and religion more broadly.

Appendices

Appendix A Interview Protocol

BLACK ATHEIST AND OTHER IDENTITY QUESTIONS

- How do you identify yourself religiously?
 - If someone asks “what is your religion?” and you were to answer them honestly, what would your answer be?
 - IF NOT ATHEIST DATA WILL NOT BE USED (There will be several checks during the recruitment process to attempt to ensure all respondents self-ID as Atheist as well)
- Tell me about the time when you realized you were an Atheist?
 - Probe: When was it?
 - Probe: Was it a process, or something that happened more quickly?
 - Probe: Tell me about how you think being Black might have played into your thought process.
- Tell me about your religious history.
 - Probe: What characterizes your parents?
 - Other close family members?
 - Church attendance?
 - Did you stop going to church? If so could you please explain this process to me?
- What does the term Atheist mean to you?
- Tell me what it’s like to be a Black Atheist?
 - Probe: Can you recall any unique experiences you might have had?
 - Probe: Does it matter to other Atheists that you’re Black?
 - Probe: What does it mean to be Black in America?
- What does identifying as Atheist mean to you?
- Does everybody know that you are an Atheist?
 - IF NO Probe: Who does not?
- Tell me about how you think Black Atheists are received by their families and communities.
- Tell me how you are received by other Atheists when you tell them you are also an Atheist.
- Do you use the term ‘Black Atheist?’
 - Probe: Can you tell me why? OR Why not?
- When you discuss your religious beliefs or lack thereof with other people does race emerge as a subject?
- Do you have an identity or identities (explain as ‘way of thinking of yourself’) that is more or less important than others?
 - When you vote, do you vote as an Atheist, a Black person, man/woman, or both?

QUESTIONS ABOUT FAMILY: RELIGIOUS BELIEFS, DEGREE OF DISCLOSURE, AND INTERPERSONAL INTERACTIONS AROUND RELIGIOUS IDEAS

- What religion would you say would best categorize your mother, father, or whoever else raised you?
- How would you characterize her level of devoutness/devotedness?

- Can you tell me more about the role religion played in their lives?
- Are your parents mostly representative of your broader family? Did religion play a similar role for them?
 - What about at family gatherings?
- Would you please tell me about the church or churches your parents took you to as you were growing up?
 - How many members were there?
 - How often did your parents take you to church?
 - For how many years did your parents take you to church?
- Did you ever have an active role in church?
- Can you recall what your beliefs were growing up?

DISCLOSURE AND CLOSETEDNESS

- Do you tell people that you are an Atheist?
- Who have you told/do you tell?
 - Probe: If there are people you do not tell can you please explain to me how you arrived at that decision.
- What are the benefits of not telling certain people that you are an Atheist?
- What are the drawbacks “ “?”
- Is it important to you that other people know that you are an Atheist?
 - What are your plans for disclosure in the future?
- What might be the effects of you informing your family that you are Atheist?
 - Your friends?
 - Everyone in your life?

HOW BLACK ATHEISTS CONCEPTUALIZE AND PERCIEVE OTHER ATHEISTS AND ATHEIST GROUPS

- Can you tell me what people or figures come to mind when you think of famous Atheists.
 - What about Atheist activists?
- Tell me what you think of [Famous Atheist Figures mentioned above]?
 - **IF UNADDRESSED-** Tell me what you think of [Atheist Activist Figures mentioned above]?
- Tell me what you think about larger mainstream Atheist groups like American Atheists.
- I noticed you [DID/ DID NOT] mention any Black Atheists.
 - IF DID Probe: Can you think of any others?
 - IF DID Probe: You mentioned [QUITE A NUMBER/ ONLY A FEW] Black Atheists. Can you tell me if you think this is typical of other Black Atheists?
 - IF DID NOT Probe: Why do you think that is?
 - IF DID NOT Probe: Can you think of any?
 - IF DID NOT Probe: You mentioned [QUITE A NUMBER/ ONLY A FEW] Black Atheists. Can you tell me if you think this is typical of other Black Atheists?
- What about Atheists in general [do you think that they would come up with Black Atheists if asked to think of their own list]?

- Do you personally belong to any Atheist groups, meet-ups, message boards, or chat rooms?
- Tell me about how being in the DC affects your being an Atheist?
 - Do you think it would be harder or easier being a Black Atheist somewhere else?

QUESTIONS ABOUT PERCEPTIONS OF STIGMA

- Could you tell me what other people in America think about Atheists? [in general? (Do you think Atheists are stigmatized? Being an Atheist is stigmatized?)]
 - What about just African-Americans? What do they think about Atheists?
 - Why do you think they are different than Americans in general?
- Can you recall a time when you felt uncomfortable because you were an Atheist?
- Can you recall a time when you felt shunned, ostracized, or somehow unable to participate in something because of your views?
- Do you think that it is harder being a Black Atheist?
 - Probe: Why?
- Tell me what you have heard your family and friends say about Atheists.
 - Were Atheists ever explicitly discussed by a pastor, priest, or other clergy member in church?
- Can you tell me about any way in which you believe dating or other relationships are affected by you being a Black Atheist?
 - How?
 - Has it been problematic or mostly a non-issue?

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION TO OBTAIN

- Year born or approximate age.
- Where the respondent grew up.
 - In what state did you attend high school?
- Education and occupation information
 - Did you ever attend private school?
 - Was it religiously affiliated?
 - Did you attend private school for the majority of your pre-college education?
 - What is the highest grade you've completed?
 - What would you say best describes your occupation?

Short Survey

1. Age
2. Current occupation
3. Where were you born?
4. Where did you grow up?
5. When did you arrive in the DC/Baltimore area?
6. In which religious tradition were you raised?
7. Public or private school?
8. Were any of your schools religiously affiliated?

9. Highest degree.
10. What church/places of worship did you attend growing up?
11. What age were you when you first thought of yourself as an Atheist?
12. Do you have children?
13. Do your children go to church?

Appendix B Obtaining Consent

I am requesting a waiver of written consent. Participants will be asked to agree orally to participate in the study after hearing the script below. This research involves very minimal risk to participants. These risks consist due to the fact the interviews will be audio recorded. However, all identifying information and all audio recordings will be stored in a password safe hard-drive in a locked office. Due to the nature of these minimal risks and the care that will be taken to protect all private information I am requesting a waiver of written consent.

Immediately prior to each interview, the student investigator will read a brief summary and of the project and discuss participants' rights, as it appears in the beginning of the interview protocol. The text will contain information for the Principal Investigator and the IRB office. Participants will be informed that the participation is voluntary. The investigator will ensure that the consent process takes place away from others. All interviews will be held in English. Participation consists of responding to interview questions, which will take approximately 1 hour. Interview questions will focus on social media communication practices. Examples of questions include: "What does being an Atheist mean to you?", "Do you think it matters to other Atheists that you're Black?", "How do you think being an Atheist has affected any of your relationships? Would it?", and "How do you think being Atheist affects the way that you interact within Black communities?" Participants will be informed of the researcher's wish to audiotape the interview for purposes of accuracy; however, participants may withdraw from participation at any time.

The following script will be used to obtain oral consent:

Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this study, which explores the relationship between social media and empowerment. As I mentioned, this interview is part of my dissertation research project in the Sociology Department at the University of Maryland. I am interested in how Atheists, particularly Black Atheists understand and make meaning of their experiences. This project is conducted with the supervision of the chair of the project of the class Dr. Kris Marsh. There are no direct benefits to participants. However, possible benefits include a contribution to a growing body of sociological knowledge about Atheists. Your participation is voluntary and you can terminate your participation at any time.

The interview will last about 60 minutes and will focus on your experiences as Atheists.

Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by storing data in a secure location, i.e. investigators' computers. In addition, your name will not be identified or linked to the data at any time unless you give your express consent to reveal these identities. Only the principal and student investigators will have access to the participants' names. If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the principle investigator, Daniel Swann by telephone (301-509-0392) or email

(daswann@umd.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact the Institutional Review Board Office at the University of Maryland, by email (irb@umd.edu) or telephone (301-405-0678). This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

Your participation in this project indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read the consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Do you agree to participate [If yes, continue. If no, stop.]

The interview will last approximately 60 minutes, and I would like to ask your permission to record this interview for accuracy. The recording will be available only to my supervisor and me, and your identity will be kept confidential. Your identity will not be revealed in any report. If your words are included in the results, any identifying information will be removed.

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