



# Aunties, Aunts, and *Tías*: The Forgotten Othermother Supporting and Housing LGBTQ Youth

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## Abstract

Research on youth can miss important aspects of their lives if this work focuses only on the parent-child relationship. This focus can also overlook Black feminist interventions to understanding the roles of othermothers and can miss how nonparental relatives such as aunts may provide support, housing stability, and safety for youth. On the basis of a mixed-methods longitudinal study with 83 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth in South Texas and the Inland Empire of California, the authors intervene through examining how aunts' supportive practices shape LGBTQ youth's experiences of housing stability and safety. The findings empirically demonstrate how LGBTQ-supportive aunting practices, such as educating other family members about LGBTQ people and housing an LGBTQ sibling, actively challenge cisheteronormativity. This study moves forward research on family processes by not focusing on parent-child relationships or LGBTQ "families of choice" to instead examining how aunts can support LGBTQ youth, disrupt cisheteronormativity, and prevent LGBTQ youth from becoming unhoused.

## Keywords

gender, sexuality, housing, family, youth

Research on youth, particularly on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth, misses important aspects of the lives of young people if this work focuses only on the parent-child relationship. A focus on parent-child relations can also overlook Black feminist and other women of color interventions to understanding the complex roles of maternal figures, or othermothers, in the lives of youth (Collins 2000; Troester 1984). Moreover, research on LGBTQ youth often examines the parent-child relationship or "families of choice" – LGBTQ people relying heavily on friends for social support (Bailey 2013; Dewaele et al. 2011; Reczek and Bosley-Smith 2022). Some work, though, has begun to document the importance of other family members in LGBTQ people's lives, such as siblings and other extended kin (Bosse et al. 2023; Lavender-Stott and Allen 2023; Reczek, Stacey, and Dunston 2022). Building on this work, more research is still needed around how extended family members, such as aunts and othermothers, may support LGBTQ youth through affirming practices. We turn, then, to LGBTQ youth's experiences with support and housing to fill these critical empirical gaps and to continue to expand theorizing beyond the parent-child relationship in order to understand the complexities of youth's lives today.

Notably, we turn to LGBTQ youth and housing because 1 in 10 (about 3.5 million) youth ages 18 to 25 years experience housing instability yearly in the United States (Morton et al. 2018), and LGBTQ youth constitute about 40 percent of the youth homelessness population (Durso and Gates 2012). Past research about pathways into housing instability for LGBTQ youth experiencing this instability include: family rejection, familial abuse, familial and residential instability, backgrounds of poverty, and discrimination within child custody systems (Castellanos 2016; Cochran, Sullivan, and Mays 2003; Durso and Gates 2012; Reck 2009; Robinson 2018a, 2018b, 2020; Shelton and Bond 2017). Mainly, research and theories about families and LGBTQ youth homelessness focus disproportionately on the parent-child relationship and on parental rejection (Robinson 2018b, 2020). There is little

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to no scholarship on the role of nonparental relatives such as aunts and othermothers in prevention of LGBTQ youth homelessness. Our research intervenes by centering Black feminist theorizing on the role of othermothers to understand how nonparental relatives such as aunts may play a critical role in the lives of LGBTQ youth, including providing housing and LGBTQ-specific support. Although not all youth in this study come from Black families, we use the theorizing around othermothering to show the importance of aunts as extended kin networks in LGBTQ youth's lives. As we show, not only are aunts potentially important for housing, but also aunts may disrupt the reproduction of cisheteronormativity in the family.

This study is a landmark longitudinal project on LGBTQ youth, family, and housing – the Family, Housing, and Me (FHAM) Project – which follows 83 LGBTQ youth (ages 16–19 years) in the Inland Empire of California and in South Texas. We ask, Are there specific practices that aunts engage in that support housing stability and safety for LGBTQ youth? In answering this question, this study documents how aunts provide support and housing to their LGBTQ nieces (the gender-neutral term for the child of one's sibling). As we demonstrate, aunts engage in LGBTQ-supportive aunting practices—such as educating other family members about LGBTQ people, supporting an LGBTQ niece via social media, using correct pronouns and names, and taking in and housing an LGBTQ niece—that actively challenge cisheteronormativity in the natal home and that prevent LGBTQ youth from becoming unhoused. Notably, we turn to LGBTQ youth with low or ambivalent parental support and who may be vulnerable to housing instability to make larger empirical, methodological, and theoretical interventions about how aunts (including heterosexual aunts) can challenge cisheteronormativity, can serve as an important social support network for youth, and can serve as housing support for young people. Through this documentation, this study calls on sociology, gender and sexuality studies, family studies, and housing studies to take seriously the importance of nonparental relatives in people's lives, especially in marginalized people's lives.

### **Normative Ideals of the Family Limit Social Scientific Research**

The study of the family has historically centered the marital relationship between husband and wife and the vertical dynamic between parents and children (Grafsky et al. 2018; May and Lahad 2019; Milardo 2010; Reczek and Bosley-Smith 2022). Moreover, research on the relationships between LGBTQ people and their families of origin often focus on the parent-child relationship, even for adult children (Reczek 2020), with limited research on sexual orientation disclosure to grandparents and siblings by gay men, bisexual people, and lesbians (D'augelli, Grossman, and Starks 2008; Grafsky et al. 2018; Scherrer 2010, 2016). Almost all studies

on the impact of family support on LGBTQ youth focus on the parent-child relations exclusively (Grossman et al. 2021; Kibrik et al. 2019; Needham and Austin 2010; Ryan et al. 2009, 2010; Watson, Barnett, and Russell 2016; Watson et al. 2019). Other studies examine the family more broadly as a unit of support (Doty et al. 2010; Johns et al. 2018; Lavender-Stott and Allen 2023; McConnell, Birkett, and Mustanski 2015) without specifically examining the role of different family members. More recent studies, however, have documented the impact of relationships between LGBTQ people and their siblings and have demonstrated that sibling support and rejection can operate differently compared with parental support and rejection (Bosse et al. 2023; Reczek et al. 2022).

Nonetheless, the consequences of this focus on the parent-child bond and sibling relationships include limited information on LGBTQ youth and other adult family members such as aunts. Yet there are many indicators that other relatives may be important for the support and well-being of LGBTQ youth. For young people, studies have shown that relationships between youth and nonparental adults tend to be high quality, low conflict, and highly supportive (Attar-Schwartz, Tan, and Buchanan 2009; Beam, Chen, and Greenberger 2002). Moreover, extended family members are a central part of Black, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, and low-income family life (Gerstel 2011; Sarkisian and Gerstel 2012; Stack 1975). In one of the few studies of these LGBTQ family relations, Black and Latinx LGBTQ youth and adults are significantly more likely to describe maternal family members—mothers, othermothers, sisters, grandmothers, and aunts—as supportive figures that teach them how to be resilient (Collins 2013; Stone et al. 2020).

Another consequence of this focus on parent-child relations in the study of LGBTQ youth is inadequate theorizing about the causes of LGBTQ youth's housing instability (Robinson 2018b). First, many studies of LGBTQ youth and housing instability emphasize parental rejection as the cause of LGBTQ youth homelessness (Robinson 2020). This focus on parental rejection can be a slippery slope of constructing poor families and families of color as more prejudiced than middle-class white families, while also eclipsing larger structural causes of homelessness (Robinson 2018b, 2020). Second, there is no study of whether supportive extended family members can prevent some LGBTQ youth from experiencing housing instability. Most research on LGBTQ youth's housing instability examines youth who are unhoused and without regular shelter. There is no systematic analysis of whether extended family networks prevent that homelessness. Nonetheless, nonparental relatives' assistance for youth may include instrumental support, including financial assistance, or housing youth who have been kicked out or who left their parental homes (Jones 2011; Kaiser 2018; Wang et al. 2019). Given this previous work, supportive nonparental relatives may be critical for providing instrumental support to meet tangible needs and emotional support for LGBTQ youth. Yet there is almost no research examining LGBTQ youth and

their relationships with adult nonparental relatives (Riggs 2019; Sterrett et al. 2015), even though, adult nonparental relatives may be in a unique position to prevent LGBTQ youth experiences of housing instability and to buffer parental rejection and conflict within the natal home. This study joins other scholars in not only decentering the nuclear family but also in interrogating what is missed in the lives of LGBTQ youth (and youth more generally) if scholars only focus on parent-child dynamics. One thing missed is potentially how adult nonparental relatives can be a main source of social support, including housing support, for youth.

## Theorizing Aunthood and Othermothers

Othermothers, or women who assist biological and adoptive mothers in mothering, are central to the institution of Black motherhood (Collins 2000; Troester 1984). These othermothers often include sisters, aunts, and grandmothers, whereby women play a central role in raising and caring for all children in Black extended families (Collins 2000). These networks often also include “fictive kin”—a term for those who are not related by blood but have a close relationship to someone who has children—and these fictive kin can often include “play aunts and aunties” and “play grandmothers” (Shange 2019; Stack 1975). Moreover, the importance of extended kin networks is also explored in and through Black queer life, Latinas’ networks, and within Indigenous parenting practices. Black queer scholars have analyzed play aunties and ballroom houses as forms of queer kinship that extend these Black cultural traditions (Arnold and Bailey 2009; Lundy-Harris 2022; Shange 2019). Chicana and Latina feminists have recently articulated the importance of *comadrisma* as an alliance between women around mothering that deconstructs biological primacy and heteronormativity in the family (Caballero et al. 2019; Lopez 1999; Upton and Hernandez 2023). Indigenous mothering networks also often work toward rebuilding care and families from the trauma and pain that they endured from historical oppression, displacement, and the removal of their children from their communities (McKinley et al. 2021).

In addition to othermothers, aunthood itself is still an undertheorized and underresearched category in social scientific work on families (May and Lahad 2019). In this regard, aunts (as well as uncles) are the “forgotten kin” (Milardo 2010). Even if forgotten, overlooked, and underresearched, aunts serve important roles in the family, including buffering the relationships between parents and children (Milardo 2010). Aunts do this work through aunting practices. These aunting practices can include being someone to talk to and get advice from, giving gifts and treats, providing encouragement, and maintaining family connections but often at the boundary of the home, and these aunting practices can also occur through kin keeping such as serving as role models, second mothers, othermothers, and confidantes to their

niblings (Ellingson and Sotirin 2006; May and Lahad 2019). Aunts can serve as the main person of emotional and instrumental support, and this support is often unidirectional: the aunt is a giver to their nibling but not expecting their nibling to do anything in return (Ellingson and Sotirin 2006; May and Lahad 2019).

To date, there is still little research on aunting and othermothering practices as ways to support and provide housing stability for LGBTQ youth. This study begins to fill these gaps. We also examine whether aunts and aunties could challenge the cisheteronormativity in a nibling’s parental home. Indeed, the family and home are often a gender and sexuality factory invested in upholding and maintaining cisheteronormativity and heteronormativity (Stacey 2021). Parents, especially fathers, are often consciously aware of trying to make their sons live up to hegemonic ideals of masculinity (Kane 2006), and mothers often assume their children are heterosexual, discuss love and dating in terms of heterosexuality, and may erase LGBTQ people from their children’s lives (Martin 2009). Parents and other family members often police sexuality vis-à-vis policing gender through enacting heteronormative compliance: “the beliefs and practices of obedience established by parents, siblings, and other relatives with the purpose of policing and reproducing heterosexuality as the norm within families and society at large” (González-López 2015:184).

However, as theorized by the field of critical aunty studies, aunts and aunties, including heterosexual aunties, are queer figures who blur the boundaries of the nuclear family and the home (Khubchandani 2022). That is, the “home” is not always a sanctuary for queer and trans people, and as such, the aunt can infiltrate the borders of the home and be life-giving or lifesaving to queer and trans youth (Khubchandani 2022). One reason aunts may be able to step in to act in the best interests of the child is because aunts are not held accountable to the same regulative power of the moralizing gaze that often holds parents (and especially mothers) accountable for their children’s actions and for who their children are (Lahad and May 2021). Aunties, then, in blurring the boundaries of the home and of the nuclear family, expand these relations beyond their heteronormative nuclear formations (Khubchandani 2022). We empirically build on the nascent field of critical aunty studies through examining aunts who provide support, including housing support, to their niblings and how this support can challenge both the focus on the parent-child relation in social scientific research and on the cisheteronormativity of the nuclear family and the home.

## Data and Methods

This article is based on qualitative interviews with 83 LGBTQ youth (16–19 years old) in South Texas and the Inland Empire of California, two understudied places in LGBTQ research. Notably, both South Texas and the Inland

Empire have high Latinx populations and are heavily working class, helping capture the lives of LGBTQ youth, especially LGBTQ youth of color, in “ordinary” towns and cities outside of the often overstudied major metropolitan areas in research on LGBTQ life (Stone 2018). All interviews in this article were conducted in the summer of 2022. These interviews are part of a larger longitudinal study that is following the 83 youth for two years (summer 2022 to summer 2024). The broader study seeks to understand the experiences that LGBTQ youth have in relation to nonparental family members, housing, support, and a sense of safety.

The 83 LGBTQ youth were recruited through an online prescreening survey distributed via social media, paid social media ads, and local LGBTQ organizations’ mailing lists. Information and recruitment materials were given to community organizations in South Texas and the Inland Empire that would likely fit the study’s research criteria. The research team also curated a robust presence online, advertising the study on Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, Reddit, and Discord through posts and targeted advertisements. The short prescreener survey included basic sociodemographic questions (ZIP code, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, gender identity, socioeconomic status), the youth’s current housing situation (who they live with, whether they pay rent, whether they have independent housing), and a modification of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Dahlem, Zimet, and Walker 1991; Zimet et al. 1988) that focuses on parents rather than family more broadly. Research team members selected youth from the prescreening survey on the basis of race, age, place, and level of social support from parents. All youth selected were 16 to 19 years old, were dependent on others for housing, and self-reported that their parents are ambivalent or low supportive on the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support questions. Youth were then contacted for interviews, with the goal of conducting 40 interviews at each research site. In all, more than 1,000 people took the recruitment survey, and 83 youth were chosen to participate in the interviews on the basis of their survey responses.

Through this prescreener, we recruited 41 LGBTQ youth in South Texas and 42 LGBTQ youth in the Inland Empire, most of whom were transgender or nonbinary youth of color who were still in high school. More than 60 percent of the youth (51 youth in total) were 16 and 17 years old. More than 80 percent of the youth (69 youth in total) were Latinx, Hispanic, Black, Asian, Indigenous, or another racial identity that is not non-Hispanic white. Almost 70 percent of the youth (57 youth in total) identified as trans, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, questioning, or another gender identity that is not cisgender. Studying this population of youth is important because transgender, gender-expansive, Black, and Latinx LGBTQ youth disproportionately make up the population of LGBTQ youth experiencing housing instability (Choi et al. 2015; Page 2017). Furthermore, almost 40 percent of the youth (32 youth total) were from outside

major metropolitan areas, such as the Rio Grande Valley, Texas-Mexico border towns such as McAllen, rural areas such as Nuevo and Winchester, and other places such as Indio and Hemet, filling another gap in the literature as scholars know little about the housing instability of LGBTQ youth who live outside of major metropolitan areas, where youth may have access to fewer social services (Curry et al. 2020).

Importantly, most research on LGBTQ youth experiencing housing instability relies on shelters and homeless service organizations for recruitment and focuses on LGBTQ youth who are already unhoused or living on the streets. Yet not all LGBTQ youth who leave their parental homes end up living on the streets. In not recruiting youth who are already unhoused and in examining how and why the youth did not end up on the streets, the methodological intervention of this study can help scholars to develop theories about the pathways to housing stability and to examine how nonparental relatives’ support pathways of housing stability and safety before youth end up at shelters, on the streets, and in contact with homeless service organizations.

Moreover, only LGBTQ youth aged 16 to 19 years old at the time of the first interview were included in the study to follow them during a time of transition of family relations (from adolescence into early adulthood), to make cases more comparable, and to ensure all participants remain within the young adulthood age bracket at the end of the study. This research was approved by the institutional review board at Trinity University. LGBTQ youth younger than 16 years could not be included in the study because of institutional review board restrictions. Youth who were 16 and 17 years old could participate in this study without parental consent. Studying mature minors without parental consent is a common practice in the study of LGBTQ youth to protect them from their gender and/or sexual identity being revealed to parents (Miller et al. 2006; Mustanski 2011; Sims and Nolen 2021; Taylor 2008). Informing parents that their teenager is involved in research as an LGBTQ person may lead to harm to the child, including the possibility of abuse from parents or homelessness because of family rejection. Additionally, from a sampling perspective, only allowing LGBTQ youth with parental consent to participate can limit the sample to LGBTQ youth who are out and supported by their parents.

The qualitative interviews in summer of 2022 mapped out youth’s family connections, identifying the 5 to 10 most significant family members in youth’s lives, and the specific practices family members engaged in that youth find supportive, ambivalent, and hostile. These interviews also examined housing situation, family life, familial support and conflict, and interactions with other people and institutions such as school, religion, work, and friends. Youth were also asked about their feelings of safety, housing security, and support in their current home. All interviews were semistructured and conducted over Zoom by a person on the research



team. Zoom interviews can extend recruitment reach and inclusivity, allow people to use the chat feature to disclose more sensitive topics and build deeper rapport, is more accessible, and has no travel requirements (Gray et al. 2020; Oliffe et al. 2021; Tungohan and Catungal 2022). As many youth in this study relied on parents for transportation, Zoom allowed the research team to reach a broader demographic and allowed some youth to use the chat feature to discuss topics around gender and sexuality that they may not want to say out loud.

Interviews lasted 1 to 3 hours, with the majority lasting about 90 to 120 minutes. No youth were interviewed in the presence of any family members to protect youth from being inadvertently outed. Youth were asked at the start of each interview if they felt safe discussing sensitive topics at their current location; if they did not, the interview was rescheduled. Each youth received a \$40 Amazon gift card for the interview. All names are pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. The interview questions most relevant to this article were the following: “How would you describe your relationship with your aunt(s)?” and “Which one of your family members is the most supportive of you in general?” In addition to these questions, the mention of aunts appeared throughout other parts of interviews depending on the participant.

The qualitative interview data were professionally transcribed through a transcription service and cleaned by a team member. Transcripts were entered into NVivo and coded using flexible coding techniques (Deterding and Waters 2021). The flexible codes for interview 1 were developed by the research team. To analyze the definition of family, the research team coded for which members of the family (e.g., grandmothers, aunts, siblings) were referenced by the youth in their interview. The research team also engaged in detailed thematic analysis by examining the flexible codes developed for the specific practices that youth participants identified as meaningful for their housing stability and sense of safety. Members of the research team performed axial coding by combining the initial aunt codes into prominent themes throughout the interviews, such as “support” and “housing.” Through this process of oscillating between the small details and overarching themes, members of the research team analyzed the codes to understand the unique relationships between LGBTQ youth, housing, support, and aunts.

## Findings

When asked to identify their most important nonparental relatives during the summer 2022 interview, 38 youth mentioned their aunts, and an additional 12 youth described a “play aunt” or fictive kinship. Three most common themes that youth described were that aunts gave LGBTQ-specific support, that they got anticipatory housing support from their aunts, and that their aunts were actually housing them.

## LGBTQ-Specific Support

A main way aunts supported LGBTQ youth was through providing LGBTQ-specific support such as supporting an LGBTQ sibling via social media, being a confidante that one could disclose their LGBTQ identity to, and through educating other family members about LGBTQ people and topics. For instance, Jax (they/them) was a 19-year-old, white Hispanic, pansexual, nonbinary youth from San Antonio, Texas, who said that their “mom isn’t very accepting of LGBT stuff.” They also said that they are close with their grandma, but the grandma does not know anything about Jax “being anything LGBT-related” because Jax “doesn’t think that would go over well.” Nonetheless, Jax has a play aunt, their mom’s really close friend, who is emotionally supportive. As Jax explains,

It’s cool because [my *tía*] follows my Instagram, and I post all these political things because I’m a poli-sci major. And she always likes them and then tells me, “Oh my God, this is happening, and I’m so mad.” It just means a lot that I have somebody that agrees with me politically, and I can talk to, and she talks to my mom about LGBT stuff. My mom is always just like, mm-hmm, but it always feels nice when I’m there because it feels nice to have somebody in the family who supports me.

Studies have shown that LGBTQ youth often use social media to find information and social support from other LGBTQ people (Berger et al. 2022; Selkie et al. 2020). This online social support can also improve LGBTQ people’s mental health (Berger et al. 2022; Selkie et al. 2020). Instead of just finding other LGBTQ people online for support, Jax’s story shows how aunts liking posts and interacting with them online become types of digital aunting practices of supporting and caring for an LGBTQ sibling. This support can also translate to offline support that can challenge the cisheteronormativity of the family, as Jax mentioned their *tía* talking to their mom about LGBTQ topics.

Another type of LGBTQ-specific support that aunts provided was being the confidante that LGBTQ youth could disclose their identity to. Liam (he/him) was an 18-year-old, white, bisexual, cis man from a “small suburban town” in Atascosa County, Texas. Liam said that his adoptive parents, especially his mother, are religious, and when the topic of LGBTQ comes up in the household that it can turn into “a heated argument.” As Liam sees his parents as “resistant toward” LGBTQ people, he said that he has not “come out as bisexual” to them. He did, however, talk about his supportive aunt, who grew up in the same house as his mom but who is a fictive aunt. Liam said,

Whenever I became more comfortable with it and I knew that this is a part of me, my aunt was the first person I told. And I was very nervous, even though I knew she wouldn’t react badly to it. But I was still nervous just because it was the first person I told, and I’m just the first time I’m getting it out. I told her and she

was very supportive. She hugged me and we just shared a very strong moment that I remember very perfectly.

Disclosing one's gender and/or sexual identity can be a tremendous act of resistance that disrupts cisheteronormative assumptions of the family and within the home (Robinson 2020). However, this notion of disclosing one's gender and/or sexual identity can ignore the economic and other factors that can shape how LGBTQ youth navigate their gender and sexuality within their households. For Liam and other youth, disclosure could generate even more conflict and tension in the home. Hence, Liam felt no need to disclose his sexuality to his parents. Liam did come out to his aunt, which both allowed him to find strong emotional and queer support from her and allowed him to stay within his parental home without having or needing to disclose his bisexual identity to his parents.

Aunts also can do the labor of educating other people in the family, including children, about LGBTQ people and through showing LGBTQ support. Ki (he/they) was a 16-year-old, white, queer, gender-fluid youth from Moreno Valley, California. During the interview, they were currently living with their grandma, grandpa, aunt, uncle, two younger cousins, a dog, a cat, and a snake. He said that his grandma struggles with their pronouns a lot, which Ki said is not good for their mental health. Ki also discussed how his aunt in the household does a lot of work in supporting them. As they explained,

I do live with my aunt, and she is amazing...I also have a cousin, and my aunt taught my little cousin, even though she's 9, a lot about LGBTQ stuff. And she's very open and wants her daughter to be knowledgeable. So, I think that's something that really helps LGBTQ people.

They went on,

So, when I told my aunt and my cousin, it was like... We were just eating dinner, and I was like, "Oh, yeah. I'm not a girl, I'm a dude." They were just like, "Oh, okay." And my little cousin was like, "Wait, what?" And then my aunt was like, "Remember we talked about this, there's people who are trans." And I was like, "You teach my cousin about that?" And I wanted to cry.

Ki even gave more specific ways that their aunt supports him:

It's more just that [my Aunt and cousin] are always using my pronouns, or they're always correcting themselves. Like, I don't think I'm very much heard them call me a girl or use my deadname. And they're just very like...Also, whenever we've had talks about, like, we were gonna plan to go to Pride, they were like, "Oh yeah, we are so doing that for you because we wanna be your supportive family members." It's just anytime a topic around the subject comes up, it's just met with a bunch of love.

Gender-affirming practices such as using correct pronouns and names for trans and nonbinary youth can be one way of

disrupting cisheteronormativity and offering support. Indeed, the aunt educating other family members, including children in the family, about trans people made Ki feel emotionally validated that they "wanted to cry." These gender-affirming supportive practices, or even just trying, can help LGBTQ feel seen, loved, and safe.

### *Anticipatory Housing Support*

Several youth in the study discussed the emotional, instrumental, and queer and trans support that their aunts provided and how this support related to the youth anticipating that their aunts would house them if needed. Clay (he/him) was a 16-year-old, white Hispanic, pansexual, trans man, from San Juan, Texas. Although he feels generally supported by his parents, his parents do not use his correct name or pronouns in the house. He only goes by his real name and pronouns at school. During the interview, he talked about his *tía* who is affirming of his gender and sexual identities. He said,

But I remember my aunt in Dallas, she was talking about...because she works...she's a doctor, so she works with clients all the time. And she was trying to find out more about the LGBTQ community. And so I was like, "Yeah, this and that. This is what they..." The pronouns and all that stuff. And she was like, "How did you know that? How do you know all this stuff?" And I just told her, I was like, "Yeah, I'm transgender at school," or whatever. And she was like, "What? Oh, my God." She was so excited.

Clay went on to say, "Yeah. So super supportive. And she was also telling me, like, 'Hey, if you need hormones, I got you.' And I was like, 'Wait second. Really?'" In response to the question if he could not live with his parents anymore, where would he want to live, Clay replied,

I would want to live with my *tía* from Dallas, because she's financially stable. So I have to put that into account. And plus, she told me, she's real supportive and all this stuff, and I'm real close to her, so I feel like that would be the best option.

Access to gender-affirming hormones during adolescence is associated with favorable mental health outcomes (Turban et al. 2022). Trans people, however, often go through medical bureaucracies and barriers to access hormones, and trans youth often have to rely on their parents to try to access gender-affirming care (Clark, Marshall, and Saewyc 2020; Gridley et al. 2016). In Clay's case, a family member, his *tía*, could potentially help in providing the material support to get Clay hormones. Not everyone, though, has an aunt with resources and social and cultural capital to provide this type of trans-specific material support. This trans-specific support as well as Clay's *tía* being "financially stable" made her an ideal place to live if Clay ever needed a place to move to.

Some youth linked this anticipatory housing support specifically to safety. Biscuit (he/they) was a 16-year-old,

Hispanic (Puerto Rican/Mexican), queer, nonbinary youth from San Antonio, Texas. They wanted to be on testosterone, but their mom said they needed to wait until they were 18. Biscuit said they fought a lot with their mom, as they wanted more control of their own body. As Biscuit explained,

One time, me and my mom got into a really big argument, and I ran out of the house—not good judgment, but I did. And I was out there for a long time and I was freezing to go back home because I was so upset. And my aunt ended up calling me is like, “Hey, are you okay? Are you safe?” And I was like, “Yeah.” And she was like, “Okay, I’m coming to pick you up.” She picked me up, and I stayed at her house for a bit, but I also had school the next day, so I had to go back home, but I know if I needed a place to stay, my aunt would definitely come get me.

Biscuit also said that his aunt went to this LGBTQ group to get “more knowledge in LGBTQ.” Biscuit even talked about their aunt making them a nonbinary blanket. They said, “Each one of us got a knitted pride flag blanket from my aunt. My aunt crochets, not knit but crochets. So, she made, I have a nonbinary one and my siblings all have their own.” Biscuit went on to explain his sense of safety in relation to his aunt’s support. They stated,

I feel much more safer, like I have a second plan if things go downhill, and I know someone will always be there for me when I need some space away from my family and I know I can rely on her.

On the basis of receiving past emotional and instrumental support from their aunt picking them up and making them a nonbinary pride blanket, Biscuit felt he always had a safe place to stay if needed with his aunt. This anticipatory support can work to challenge cisheteronormativity within the home and within the family as youth might be less afraid or less stressed to discuss gender and sexuality within their natal homes if they know they will not end up on the streets.

Housing support and gender and sexuality support often went together, especially in needing a reprieve from parents who do not support the youth being LGBTQ. Mary (she/they) was a 17-year-old, Latina, omnisexual, gender-nonconforming youth from Upland, California. Mary lives with her mom, who does not believe Mary is nonheterosexual, and instead thinks Mary is going through a phase. Mary talked about being out to her aunt, and the support she receives from her. Mary explained,

My aunt was the first person I came out to. . . . She’s a very chill aunt. She’s very young. So, she’s in with the times and she also has a gay friend, so I knew she wouldn’t care and she’d be very accepting of me, and she would help me through my journey.

Mary went on to explain how she receives different types of support from different family members. She stated,

When it comes to anything that doesn’t correlate to my sexuality, I usually go to my mother, but if it does correlate to like who I have a crush on like if it’s a girl I would have a crush on, I would either go to my brother or my aunt.

Mary then gave a more specific example of the type of support her aunt provides:

I was talking to her about this girl that I liked and I’m like, “I don’t know how to proceed with her. Like, what should I do?” And she’s like, “Well, obviously I’ve never been in your shoes, but from what I’ve heard from my friends, from what I would have want from your uncle, I would. . . .” And she would, like, tell me how. She’s like, “Just be yourself, just. . . .” She would just gimme advice on how to pursue it and everything. She’s very supportive and she’d always check in on me and ask me how it’s going.

Like Biscuit and from this emotional support she had already received, Mary felt her aunt would also materially support her if needed. Mary said,

And my aunt is also very like, she’s like, “If you ever need a place to stay, like after like a hard day and you don’t feel like you wanna be with your mom or your dad, because it has to do with like LGBTQ and all that, you can always stay here, and I would not mind.”

Studies have shown that aunts can make ideal confidantes for youth who do not wish to discuss sensitive issues with their parents (Ellingson and Sotirin 2006). For some LGBTQ youth, aunts can engage in the aunting practice of being a queer-supportive confidante: someone LGBTQ youth can disclose their gender and sexuality to and discuss their queer dating life with. Although Mary can go to her mom for most support, Mary’s aunt serves the role of providing gender and sexuality support, and again, this emotional support materializes into anticipatory material support as Mary also feels she can rely on her aunt if she needs a place to stay, especially if having conflict around her gender and sexuality with her parents.

### *Material Housing Support*

Youth also talked about living with their aunts and the impact of this type of housing support on their queer and trans lives. Nae (she/her) was a 19-year-old, African American, lesbian, cis woman from San Antonio, Texas. Before the interview, Nae was living with her aunt in Philadelphia to get away from family members in Texas who were not accepting of her sexuality. During the interview, Nae was back living with her grandmother in San Antonio. Nae talked, though, about living with her aunt in Philadelphia. Her aunt told her,

“Nae, you can come down here and live with me, you and your girlfriend,” and I was like, “Wow.” Because we [Nae and Nae’s



girlfriend] both needed a fresh start because it's been really rough since 2020. . . . And I still say it was worth it because I needed that getaway to get my mind just straight and process things because it was a lot going on, too much for me to handle at the time. . . . And I just feel like growing up, just only being 19 years old and dealing with these type of things, with coming out and your family not really supporting you nor accepting you, it's hard. It's hard to just find your way because we're young.

Nae recently moved back to San Antonio to try to fix things with her family. She said, though,

So, I'm here with my grandma, but I don't want to be here. I never feel comfortable, never feel acknowledged that I'm even here and honestly, I never feel safe. It's like, "Dang, I wish I had the money to get an apartment." I think about that every day but right now, I know I don't and I know I'm not ready for it right now.

At the time of the interview, Nae said she was thinking about moving back to Philadelphia with her aunt again.

In Nae's case, the aunt not only serves as a buffer for the parent-child relationship but also the grandparent-grandchild relationship. Serving as this support buffer and providing housing could be some of the most crucial ways to not only keep youth safe but to support and acknowledge LGBTQ youth. In a homophobic and trans-antagonistic society, the aunt steps in to provide shelter, housing, and safety – the unpaid labor in a moment of crisis (Hong, Lau, and Sharma 2021) that affirms queer and trans lives.

The story of Milo also really captures the fullness of this study and how aunts can step in to provide housing and other types of queer and trans support and how that support impacts LGBTQ youth's mental health. Milo (he/they) was a 19-year-old, African American, queer, bisexual, gender-nonconforming youth from Cibolo, Texas. They had conflict with their mom about their gender nonconformity and changing their name and pronouns. They eventually moved in with an aunt who married into the family but had become divorced from Milo's uncle. As Milo explained about their current living situation:

It's way more affirming. My aunt has four children, and they're all below the ages of 12. . . . And so, they all are. . . . because, you know, children are raised with homophobia, but they're not. So, they've all been able to call me Milo and use my pronouns and things like that, so it's been nice.

Milo went on to connect this support and affirmation to his mental health:

So here, I feel like I can be myself. I'm able to have my own room, and I feel a lot more like I have a lot more of mental stability. During that time of me leaving home in October, I then went to a mental hospital just because things were kind of getting worse, but I was able to get medication, which my aunt supported me through. She's now my emergency contact. She's

a member of my support system and things like that and yeah, it's just better to be here.

Milo concluded, "I feel comfortable because my aunt treats me like another adult and feels less of a need to parent me. I appreciate those things and being seen more as an equal."

Like other youth in this study, Milo also finds affirmation in their current home with their aunt, where the familial practices in this home challenge cisheteronormativity by recognizing and using Milo's correct name and pronouns and by educating the children in the home to do the same. Milo connects this affirmation and their current housing situation, including having their own room, to their mental stability, highlighting how gender affirmation and housing support can affect mental health (Evans, Wells, and Moch 2003; Fontanari et al. 2020). Housing itself and housing support can both be gender affirming. Finding housing that is gender affirming can improve youth's safety and mental well-being.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Aunts and othermothers play a critical role in the lives of LGBTQ youth. For the LGBTQ youth in this study, aunts provided gender-affirming and queer and trans support, along with anticipatory support for housing and actual housing support for their niblings. Like Black othermothers, aunts of all racial backgrounds brought an ethic of care and social responsibility toward the well-being of their LGBTQ niblings. Aunts acted as a buffer between the youth and other family members, especially parents, and provided consistent loving and affirming support. Scholars need to take seriously aunts, othermothers, and other nonparental relatives in the lives of youth, especially LGBTQ youth. A great deal of familial dynamics, including dynamics of care and support, are missed if scholars only focus on the nuclear family and parent-child relationship.

This study adds, then, to the growing family and social scientific literature on extended family members. Research has begun to document how sibling support can be beneficial to LGBTQ people and can operate differently than parental support as sibling support is more horizontal than vertical and can be the longest bond in a person's life (Bosse et al. 2023; Reczek et al. 2022). Other work has generally documented the importance of extended kin in LGBTQ people's lives (Doty et al. 2010; Johns et al. 2018; Lavender-Stott and Allen 2023; McConnell et al. 2015), though this work often does not examine specific family members and their support practices. This study builds on this work by focusing specifically on aunts and othermothers and their aunting practices to capture how nonparental relatives may play a critical role in providing support, housing stability, and safety for LGBTQ youth. Indeed, research and theories about families and LGBTQ youth homelessness still disproportionately focus on the parent-child relationship and on parental rejection (Robinson 2018b, 2020). There is little to no scholarship



on the role of nonparental relatives such as aunts and othermothers in prevention of youth homelessness. Filling this gap begins to show how this support from nonparental relatives such as from aunts may prevent youth from living on the streets or in shelters. In focusing on the role of aunts in LGBTQ youth's lives, this study intervenes by moving beyond parental rejection, beyond the parent-child relationship, and beyond "families of choice" to examine how aunts' support can shape LGBTQ youth's experiences of housing stability and sense of safety.

Moreover, this study contributes to understanding the importance of othermothers in the lives of LGBTQ youth. Othermothers and aunts already queer or destabilize the heteronormative nuclear family by expanding the family beyond the parent-child relationship (Gumbs 2016; hooks 1984; Khubchandani 2022). As already outside of the nuclear family—where cisheteronormativity may be enforced most strongly (Stacey 2021)—othermothers and aunts can also actively challenge the homophobia and transphobia that may occur in a youth's natal home. Othermothers and aunts can become an essential support system for LGBTQ youth. Indeed, when one decides to take on a parenting role that helps and supports LGBTQ youth, they are opening a new pathway to meet the needs of the youth (Scott and Deutsch 2021). This new pathway can include providing housing stability.

Aunts, othermothers, and other nonparental relatives, then, may be in a unique position to combat LGBTQ youth homelessness, particularly for LGBTQ youth of color. One major form of aunting support in this study was anticipatory and actual housing support for LGBTQ youth. This support can be a major prevention of LGBTQ youth homelessness and housing insecurity. In general, anticipatory support about housing may be an important part of perceived social support. Generalized perceptions of support (Thoits 2011) are beneficial for people's well-being and sense of security (Bolger and Amarel 2007; Uchino 2009). If people perceive that others will provide appropriate assistance, they are less likely to view a situation as stressful (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Thus, anticipating that an aunt may support them in a housing crisis may help LGBTQ youth feel less stress in their current housing situation. Aunts provided material housing support as well. This type of aunting support—extending one's house to one's nibbling—can work to buffer against not only parental-child conflict (Milardo 2010) but also help with the youth's mental health (Evans et al. 2003).

These aunting practices can also have larger implications for understanding gender inequality within society. Aunting practices can come with substantial care work and kin labor for aunts, who may be taking on the housing and support of niblings without the affirmation of their broader family. Moreover, providing aunting support for LGBTQ youth may not have the same community approval that othermothering practices do. Aunties also normally tend to take on the othermother or parental role more than uncles because it is

expected of her as a woman to take on more care work (Davis-Sowers 2012). Aunting practices can reinforce, then, patriarchal expectations and beliefs that the caregiving of children be done by women. However, although the aunty is often imagined as a middle-aged cisgender woman, queer and trans people and people of various genders can be aunties and engage in aunty practices (Khubchandani 2022). These practices are often just gendered labor of kin work and other care practices that disproportionately fall on women and femmes to do. Notably, poor families and/or families of color may be more likely to rely on aunts to deal with the structural failures of society; therefore, these aunting practices become a form of both gendered care work and racialized labor. Indeed, as critical aunty studies theorizes, it is precisely in the face of decimated kin structures and social safety nets that aunties become urgent workers at the boundary of the home (Khubchandani 2022). This labor, of course, means that aunts of color are shouldering a large burden caused by the failures of a larger homophobic and transphobic society.

As for limitations, this research does not include interviews with aunts themselves and thus may not fully capture the complexities of othermothering and aunting practices. Furthermore, the participants in this study reported having cisgender aunts. Future research should explore the role of queer, trans, nonbinary, and other people who are also doing the kin labor and care work of aunties. Moreover, our preliminary analysis of the longitudinal data shows that for many youth in this study their understanding of gender and sexuality can change in a year, which in turn can reshape their relationships with their relatives. Many youth also went off to college, which allowed them to find more LGBTQ resources and to have more freedom and independence to explore their gender and sexuality, which also reshaped their relationships with family members. Future studies should continue longitudinally capturing gender, sexuality, and family dynamics as these support, rejection, safety, and stability processes are not static or one-time events.

Nonetheless, this study has several methodological, theoretical, and empirical interventions and implications. This research compels methodological changes in how researchers study housing. Research that only studies people who are currently unhoused and on the street is an inadequate methodology for theorizing about pathways into homelessness or into housing stability. A main methodological contribution is how we recruited LGBTQ youth with low or ambivalent ties with their parents but who were not already living on the streets or in shelters. This intervention allowed us to see aunts as providing important resources and support and serving as a potential stopgap for some youth from experiencing homelessness. This study is also an intervention to social scientific research and the family. Rather than assuming that parents are the most significant figures in youth's lives, this research builds on Black feminist theorizing about othermothers to understand the complex role that aunts play in the

lives of LGBTQ youth. This study moves us beyond the focus on the parent-child relationship to examining the important roles of aunts within the family and with providing support. Furthermore, this study examines how cisheteronormativity is constituted and challenged within the family. This study shows how aunts and othermothers can disrupt the cisheteronormativity of the home and family by actively working to resist cisheteronormativity in the family and through supporting their LGBTQ nibling. Aunts expand the home and the family beyond its cisheteronormative limits and constraints without requiring LGBTQ youth to retreat from the natal home. Tapping into the potential of aunts, othermothers, and other nonparental relatives can be a path forward in challenging cisheteronormativity and in supporting LGBTQ youth, including keeping LGBTQ youth housed and safe.

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