<u>A SPACE OF OUR OWN: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS</u>
<u>OF BLACK QUEER VOICES AND EXPERIENCES</u>

by

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A Thesis
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A Space of Our Own: An Intersectional Analysis
of Black Queer Voices and Experiences

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of
Arts at George Mason University

By

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Bachelor of Arts
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DEDICATION

To my father for raising me to be radical in my thinking.
To my mother for never letting me forget that it is a privilege to have a voice.
To my niece for bringing me back to reality.
And to Roxy for holding my hand through the darkness.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

A SPACE OF OUR OWN: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF BLACK QUEER
VOICES AND EXPERIENCES

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This auto-ethnographic study investigates the question of "Why do we gather?" where

"we" refers to Black, queer, gender minority populations. Specifically, this research is

focused on understanding why these individuals seek out similar others with whom to

congregate and "hold space." Twelve individuals, located in the DC, Maryland, and

Virginia area, who attended one of three separate virtual meeting groups agreed to

participate in one-on-one interviews and comprised the study population. Concepts of

Blackness, queerness, and gender are specifically explored here as a means to better

understand how they come together to inform the experiences of individuals whose lives

are lived at the intersection of all three marginalized identities and who seek spaces in

which those identities are shared. Using the lens of intersectionality and Foucault's

concept of heterotopia to analyze these interviews created a further focus on identity,

gathering, and community. This work demonstrates how societal rejection can be

exceedingly damaging to these individuals in ways that lead them to seek out others with

similar experiences to create a space of safety.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

"I think that if I can still speak to a 'we,' and include myself within its terms, I am

speaking to those of us who are living in certain ways beside ourselves, whether it

is in sexual passion, or emotional grief, or political rage. In a sense, the

predicament is to understand what kind of community is composed of those who

are beside themselves"

– Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (2004, 20)

Those of us who reside along the intersections of multiple marginalized identities

often exist beside ourselves. We struggle for societal recognition, which is, as Melissa

Harris-Perry pinpoints, "the nexus of human identity" (2011, 1). However, societal

recognition is not always achievable, so we find recognition with others who experience

this same longing. Support groups and discussion groups form and create a space in

which similarly identified people feel that they can be their whole authentic selves

without fear of being made to feel othered or invisible.

This auto-ethnography investigates the research question: "Why do we gather?"

More specifically this research seeks to understand why "we" as Black, queer, gender

minority identified individuals seek out similarly identified people with whom to

congregate and "hold space" that is, interact in a social environment without fear or

judgment rooted in marginality. What is the purpose of this? What is gained in the

process? What is distinct about this cultural space that differs from other groups such as friends, family, and co-workers? What is achieved by delimiting membership to these spaces based on multiple intersecting identities? As a means to delve into this and related questions, this research explores the concepts of queerness, Blackness, intersectionality, and Michel Foucault's theory of heterotopia as it relates to the three groups being studied.

As Ellis et al. define, "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (2011, 273) in this way "autoethnography allows researchers to draw on their own experiences to understand a particular phenomenon or culture" (Méndez 2013). While my own life experience and identity is interwoven with this research, it is set up as an anthropological not an auto-biographical study. Interviewing is the primary method of research and is important as a means to disentangle the personal from the professional so that the voice being heard is that of the respondent in each case.

In Chapter 2: The Literature Review readings for this thesis are organized along thematic lines, including, for example, queer theory and Black feminism; intersectionality, and space. The historical context of the LGBTQ rights movement and Black feminism provides a brief overview of the identities of Blackness, gender minorities, and queerness and the development of the disciplines that theorize about these concepts. Stereotypes are an important facet of how race and gender have been historically constructed in the United States. In regard to Black women, the stereotypes of the "mammy," the "jezebel", and "Sapphire" date back to representations of African-

American women during slavery and their virulence continued with the rise of scientific racism and eugenics, into the Jim Crow era, and through to the civil rights era in national political examples such as the "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" also known as the Moynihan Report, and later the Reagan era concept of the "welfare queen" (Harris-Perry 2011). These enduring stereotypes made it seem as though the overlapping systems of oppression Black women were experiencing were a direct result of their own actions and inherent nature (Mullings 1994, Harris-Perry 2011). As Harris-Perry states, "Jezebel, Mammy, and Sapphire are the angles in the crooked room where Black women live. They do not reflect Black women's lived experience; instead, they limit African American women to prescribed roles that serve the interests of others. It is hard being misunderstood" (96).

Stereotypes are impactful when thinking about gender and sexuality as well, particularly in how gender is socially constructed and the assumptions that are made about an individual's gender identification. Within the last decade many queer people have come to recognize and relate to this distinct understanding of gender and thus identify as existing outside of the gender binary or as being non-binary or agender. For the purposes of this study, I will be considering any person who does not identify as a cisgender man to be a part of a gender minority. As Butler states,

> To assume that gender always and exclusively means the matrix of the "masculine" and "feminine" is precisely to miss the critical point that the production of that coherent binary is contingent, that it comes at a cost, and that those permutations of gender which do not fit the binary are as much a part of gender as its most normative instance. To conflate the definition of gender with its normative expression is inadvertently to reconsolidate the power of the norm to constrain the definition of gender. Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well

be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized (2004, 42).

Intersectionality, which has been a subject of discussion in and among multiple scholars representing multiple communities who have responded to the idea initially set out by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is crucial to this study. The critical use of the framework of intersectionality shaped the methods used in this research, the analysis of results, and the conclusions that were drawn.

Chapter 3: Methods, lays out the methods used throughout this study. Autoethnography and the lens of intersectionality are discussed in terms of how their applications served to benefit the research and posed methodological challenges. The process of how this research was conducted and analyzed is also detailed in this section. As well as a discussion about the interview questions that were posed and how they were designed to elicit intersectional answers about identity in addition to a better understanding of the three meetings groups being investigated.

Chapter 4: Results utilizes the methods described in the previous chapter to analyze the responses of 12 interviewees as participants in this work who met the original criteria for inclusion that is: Black, queer, gender minority individuals, and who regularly attend one of three meeting groups: Queer People of Color Support Group (QPOC), the Black Lesbian Support Group (BLSG), and the Black Lesbian Book Club (BLBC). While each of these groups is distinct in the topics of conversation and the individuals who attend, the specified demographics for each overlap. Though the QPOC is a broader in terms of demographics, each group requires that individuals who attend be Black or a person of color and queer. Topics presented in the results chapter include Blackness,

queerness, gender, intersectionality, the groups being investigated, authenticity, and the concept of heterotopia as it applies to the three meeting groups.

Chapter 5: Conclusion sums up the most salient points made throughout this thesis and draws conclusions based on the analysis of the results sections. Here I tied together the theoretical analysis and the results of the answers provided by the participants of this research in order to highlight the significance of intersectional communities and the function they provide their members.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Queer Studies and African American or Black Studies both exist as codified areas of scholarship. They possess their own frameworks, models, methodologies, and theories (Bravmann 1991, Butler 1990, 2004, Crenshaw 1989, 1991, McCall 2005, Zinn and Dill 1994). However, these scholarly interests infrequently overlap, which is useful for purposes of better understanding the intersection of Blackness, queerness, and gender. Here, I will highlight the relevant scholarship that has been done on queerness; scholarship on Blackness derived from Black feminist theory; and scholarship on intersectionality.

This literature review will provide an overview of the scholarship relevant to understanding the groups that are being studied in this research. It is necessary, also, to understand the importance of gathering and cultivating a shared space, even an online shared space, for these groups to be able to flourish and provide for their target demographics.

Historical Context of Queer Studies and Black Feminism

It is of the utmost importance to understand the historical context and shaping of the LGBTQ movement and Black feminism in the United States, as both movements have had a vast impact on the way Black queer people are perceived by society and each

other. This historical progression has also had a significant impact on the language used discursively within and about the community.

There has been a push to manufacture and contextualize a collective past for LGBTQ individuals within the paradigm of queer studies. Though this essentialist idea of the queer community existing as collective has become a well-accepted notion in mainstream discourse; prior to the solidarity necessary for the Gay Rights Movement to flourish, modern queer communities in the United States were often very disparate. Lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender individuals all had, and continue to have, separate communities, which are often further divided along racial and class lines. However, a shared need for civil rights formed what we now think of as the queer, gay, or LGBTQ community (Bravmann 1991).

Despite the obvious problems with the essentializing of a queer past, it is true that we usually think about "rights" and "discrimination" as pertaining to individuals or a particular group or class of individuals, therefore, in order to secure our civil rights and protections we must first delineate ourselves as a legitimate community before the law (Butler 2004, 20). This ensnares us in an imprecise or apocryphal definition of what it means to be a part of the queer community. As Pierre Bourdieu states, "Similarly, in starting their personal identity, they may give themselves a name which includes them in a class sufficiently broad to include agent occupying positions superior to their own," (1985, 207) pointing out that there is a usefulness to the broadly defined "queer community." The combining of the lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans individuals, and queer people lends political power to a plurality of disenfranchised minority groups. However,

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the flaws in essentializing a disparate grouping are easily revealed when faced with groups of LGBTQ individuals, who immediately separate themselves into their respective letters.

Essentialism, in this context, seeks to lend legitimacy to the LGBTQ community through the supposed uncovering of the origins of contemporary lesbian and gay communities in an attempt to demonstrate that they are not novel and are instead rooted in the past (1991, 83). This presumption forces a universalized version of sexuality onto modern queer communities by attempting to link them directly to historical queer identities (83). While the use of essentialism does not necessarily achieve the intended goal of humanizing queer people and instead draws cross-cultural parallels that do not hold up as evidence, it is true, that historically queer gender and sexual identities have been maligned, ignored, and declared a product of mental or physical illness; and thus, the rich history of queer communities has often gone undocumented (Rich 1980, Bravmann 1991).

This erroneous need to anchor modern queerness to more accepted social roles from the past, or to show an idea of evolution from past queer identities to the present has the added effect of contributing to the erasure of the struggles and successes of modern Queer activism or work that was done in the recent past. The AIDS epidemic is a perfect example of this erasure. The further we are removed from the AIDS crisis the more the vast impact it had on the gay community is seemingly forgotten and dismissed. In addition, the events that stemmed from the epidemic have become skewed and as Bravmann points out, the literature available on the AIDS crisis and common conceptions

of it all contributed to "an essentialist historical imagination," particularly in regard to white gay men. This idea that the AIDS crisis brought together the gay community snowballed somewhat into the myth that this solidarity culminated in the Stonewall Riots, also widely thought to have been started by white gay men, when, in reality, the riots were begun by trans women of color (1991, 90).

In unraveling the tenuous history of the gay community and its retelling, Bravmann touches on the idea that someone identifying as "gay" is distinct from someone who is homosexual. While homosexuality is a particular sexuality, being "gay" requires a "conscious identity" (1991, 85). This idea of being gay versus homosexual can be expanded outward to delimit the difference between identifying as gay and being a part of the gay community. The participants involved in this study are all individuals who are a part of the queer community, in that they actively seek out other queer people and queer events in which to participate. To be queer is an identity, to be a part of the queer community requires discursive and performative acts that engage you with other queer people. Gender, as well, requires a level of intention and performativity.

Bravmann also touches on the dilemma of gender pointing out that, "In spite of considerable disagreements then, and perhaps even greater disagreements now, about the conceptions of gender and their particular relevance to homosexuality, the legacy of these earlier medical categories concerns the centrality of gender roles vis-a-vis sexuality in a broadly defined lesbian and gay politics" (1991, 84). The delineation of "gender as the domain of feminist studies, and sexuality as the domain of queer studies" is frequently reified within each discipline (Weiss 2016, 168). This approach views gender as an issue

for feminism because women are a gender minority and therefore directly impacted by sexism whereas queer theory is thought to be concerned with the innerworkings of sexuality (Weiss 2016, Butler 2004).

Despite the intent to ascribe gender as a category to the framework of women and gender studies, Judith Butler is, nonetheless, widely considered to be the originator of queer theory as set out in *Gender Trouble* (1990). Butler's point in relation to gender is that the subject of "woman" is "discursive in nature," and we as subjects seek to fit the existing notion of predefined gender in order to be legible under the laws and hegemonic structures governing our society (1990, 3). Here, Butler both critiques feminism (then and now) for espousing the "category of women" as both inherent and stable. Butler argues that a better outline for an understanding of gender is one where it is recognized that gender is a social construction, one that is highly unstable and constantly redefined and delineated by changing cultural constraints (1990, 2004).

In *Undoing Gender* (2004) Butler defines gender as an act of "performativity" where gender is likened to a "masquerade;" stipulating that gender is itself a construct because without "acts of gender" there is no objective ideal of gender (2004). Gender understood as performative, i.e. "an act of doing," is a "stylized repetition of acts," at the same time that the performance is governed by regulatory practices (1990, 2004). As Butler puts it, "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (1990, 186).

Butler thus offers a roadmap for gender and sexuality noting how gender is at once performative, socially constructed, and a social norm. Because the gendered self is something that comes into being through repetitious acts, over time this construction becomes a norm distinguished by various characteristics (1990, 2004). The act of opposing social constructs requires and enables agency, but in order to contest existing constructs, subversive repetition is required. In that way, the reality and persistence of social norms allows gender to become legible to others while allowing us, to imagine ourselves. From this perspective, without existing norms there are no possibilities upon which to base ourselves, for even existing outside of the norm implies some relation to existing social norms (Butler, 2004).

Butler also explains that in knowing what norms exist, the power is gained to subvert and resist existing social norms. In this way, the norm becomes politicized and "The question of how to embody the norm is thus very often linked to the question of survival, of whether life itself will be possible" (217). For this reason, existing as a transgender or non-binary person restrained by gender normativity can be very dangerous. Understanding this danger, it stands to reason that the constructed category of "woman" is not the only gendered category that is in the minority, or that experiences gendered violence.

Along these lines, Evelyn Blackwood's ethnography *Falling into the Lesbi World* (2010) argues that highlighting gender identity in the queer community necessitates contextualization. Blackwood seeks to understand how "lesbi" in Indonesia "produce gender, how it becomes the cement of their relationship, and how ideologically defined

categories of normative gender, of man and woman, are only starting blocks for the

production of gendered and sexual selves" (2010, 1). Blackwood explores the

relationships "lesbi" have with their kin and community, unravelling their daily practices;

the discourse surrounding their lives and existence; and how they utilize language within

their communities and with those outside of their communities. Blackwood refused to

situate ("lesbi") neatly in the social categories of men, women, lesbians, transgender, or

masculine females. Instead in every chapter she offers a different perspective on the

multiple and apparently contradictory ways in which they position themselves. (2010, 1).

This rich consideration and description of gender identity and gender roles infuses a

degree of depth to this ethnography; and has served as a guide in the course of my

research for discussing gender identity in the way in which participants are most

comfortable.

Blackwood also highlights various issues with using universal signifiers for

gender by emphasizing that these issues influenced her choice to use the terms preferred

by the individuals she interviewed. She points out that "butch lesbians, masculine

females, and transgendered individuals throughout Southeast Asia and Asia more broadly

express a range of masculinities informed by particular sociocultural and historical

specificities as well as by global media and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender

(LBGT) movements and discourses" (2010, 2). Blackwood engages with a Foucauldian

argument regarding norms and production of power, as she writes,

> Normative social categories may generate a practical sense of reality, but their
> material and social effects are critical to their power. Normative gender sets the
> condition for the subject position that people take up, yet in order to account for
> the appearance of non-normative genders I draw on Foucault's notion of power as

productive. The social rewards, or in Foucault's terms, the pleasures associated with normativity, include family and community approval, social access and status, a self-consistent with others, a future, a family, sentiments of cultural belonging, and a certain ability to act and make decisions that are valued and recognized by others. These pleasures move one toward the subject position culturally assigned to one's body, race, or class. Challenges to normative categories risk social disapproval and loss of material or social benefits, but at the same time they provide other social or material rewards. Those who take up alternative or subordinate subject positions may see themselves, and may even be seen by others, as brave, individualist, scandalous, provocative, or desirable, depending on the particular dispositions available (24).

Blackwood's breakdown of both Foucault's and Butler's arguments provide a clear example of the importance of the need to subvert expectations of gender and identity, an important point for this research.

Meanwhile, Harris-Perry (cited in the Introduction) uses the analogy of "the crooked room" in order to describe the experience of a Black woman existing in a world that places her within a matrix of pre-conceived negative stereotypes. Post-World War II psychological studies were conducted to investigate an individual's ability to align themselves vertically if they were placed in a crooked chair in a crooked room:

When they confront race and gender stereotypes, Black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some Black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion… To understand why Black women's public actions and political strategies sometimes seem tilted in ways that accommodate the degrading stereotypes about them, it is important to appreciate the structural constraints that influence their behavior. It can be hard to stand up straight in a crooked room (29).

Naturally, from a certain perspective, the stereotypes, the misrecognition, the social shaming, all serve a purpose. As duCille (1994,282) put it: "Ideologies that stigmatize women of color have been central to maintaining class, race, and gender inequality. By masking social relations, by constructing them as "natural" rather than

social and historical, these representations justify the continued oppression of African Americans and support gender subordination by stigmatizing women who would challenge the patriarchal model" (Ibid.).

Black women are equally as complex, emotional, and human as anyone else, but often run themselves into the ground, never accepting help, trying to live up to this image, if for no other reason than an attempt to dodge the other, seemingly more damaging stereotypes. (Zinn and Dill 1994, Harris-Perry 2011). Despite some of the negative side effects Black women continue employing strategies for counteracting the angles of the crooked room and in doing so have enacted change for the entire Black community. The building of a Black feminist political theory paved the way for the unravelling of harmful stereotypes and led to the theories that became the foundation for intersectional theory. Though the misrecognition continues, there exists a distinguished Black feminist tradition and we now possess the means of explicating new research with an epistemological body of work behind us (Smith 1978, Zinn and Dill 1994). According to Zinn and Dill (1994) "The experiences of women of color have challenged feminist scholarship to rethink the relationship between race and gender for everyone" (3), because "Women of color, however, are not merely acted upon by oppressive social relations but are also shapers of their own lives" (6).

Without the wealth of Black feminist scholarship that exists today, studies such as this one would not be possible. Black feminist theorists originated the theoretical discussions around the intersection of race and gender.

Intersectionality

　　"We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously" (Combahee River Collective 1982, 62).

　　This idea of the interlocking aspects of identity politics described by the Combahee River Collective is later molded and formed into a model for understanding the "multidimensionality of Black women's experience" and theorized as "intersectionality" by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 139). In developing this framework for understanding the experience of Black women, particularly in but not limited to the United States, Crenshaw highlights that: "Black women can experience discrimination in any number of ways and that the contradiction arises from our assumptions that their claims of exclusion must be unidirectional" (1989, 149). Using the image of a traffic intersection where along one road runs Blackness and along the other road runs womanhood, Crenshaw describes the experience of a Black woman as lying at in the intersection of the two. "I am suggesting that Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those experienced by white women and Black men" (1989, 149). Since Black women experience discrimination due both to sexism and racism, Crenshaw (Ibid) argues that the ways in which this occurs are not "additive" but the result of the unique experience of being a Black woman in the United States, framing her analysis through the lens of the criminal justice system, based on how antidiscrimination law is defined and how that definition

leaves vast gaps and a lack of consideration for those who exist within multiple

intersections of oppression (1989, 150), leaving the intersectional experience unaddressed

(140). Crenshaw posits:

> Unable to grasp the importance of Black women's intersectional experiences, not only courts, but feminist and civil rights thinkers as well have treated Black women in ways that deny both the unique compoundedness of their situation and the centrality of their experiences to the larger classes of women and Blacks. Black women are regarded either as too much like women or Blacks and the compounded nature of their experience is absorbed into the collective experiences of either group or as too different, in which case Black women's Blackness or femaleness sometimes has placed their needs and perspectives at the margin of the feminist and Black liberationist agendas (150).

Crenshaw's work emphasizes that intersectionality is not an additive approach to

understanding how Black women are subjugated, and if the intersectional experience is

not considered in its entirety, it is possible different aspects of what Black women as a

group experience are not being addressed (1989, 140). One of the most significant and

valuable aspects of Crenshaw's research is that she provides the reader with evidence in

the form of specific examples of how criminal justice has played out because of the

failure to address questions of intersectionality. For example, the impact of stereotypes

about Black women also plays a role as Crenshaw points out, the myths of the jezebel

make it difficult for rape victims to be believed and the narrative of Sapphire or the angry

Black woman make believing and sympathizing with victims of domestic violence

difficult for the criminal justice system and general public (1989).

Since Crenshaw coined the term in 1989 many scholars have engaged with the

framework of intersectionality with acclaim, and expansions or extensions of the idea, but

it has also had its share of critics. In "Intersectionality, Black Feminist Thought, and

Women-of-Color" Carastathis (2016) addresses some of the criticisms lobbed at intersectionality by discussing the school of thought that led to its creation citing multiple earlier sources from which Crenshaw's ideas were drawn. Carastathis touches on Beal's "double jeopardy," D.K King's "multiple jeopardy," The Combahee River Collective's notion of "interlocking oppressions," Spillers' "interstices," and Collins' "matrix of domination," while noting that all of these are "distinct concepts, each deserving of careful analysis" (17). But as Carastathis points out, "…in the literature on intersectionality, Crenshaw is often said to have merely 'coined' a term for a preexisting concept. This is not only to diminish her philosophical creativity but also to elide intersectionality with an additive theory of "double jeopardy," or to a now accepted "truism" that racism and sexism "interact" in lived experience…" (2016, 18).

Carastathis explains how the jeopardy models (i.e. double jeopardy and triple jeopardy) referred to in other works are additive models and "fixity is assumed in the conjoining of categories of race, class, and gender" (35). Additive models function less effectively, particularly in the context of this research, as they ask individuals to separate out their identities into their component parts, diminishing the ability to understand a community in its entirety.

Critics of intersectionality also express concerns over the depoliticization and the overly broad application of intersectionality, but both Carastathis (2016) and Puar (2011) acknowledge that in certain cases the criticism has merit but reject the idea that this is the fault of Crenshaw or her theory of intersectionality. Specifically, Puar (2011) notes that intersectionality "produces an ironic reification of sexual difference as a/the foundational

one that needs to be disrupted—that is to say, sexual and gender difference is understood

as the constant from which there are variants." Puar suggests that intersectionality has put

forward "women of color" as being different and that this emphasis on difference

categorizes women of color as the "Other" (2011).

Examples from the work of Carbado (2013) and Degnen and Tyler (2017)

validate some of the criticisms of intersectionality. For instance, Carbado presents the

ideas of "colorblind intersectionality" and "gender-blind intersectionality," intended to

highlight whiteness, heterosexuality, and maleness as he claims they are rendered

"invisible or unarticulated as an intersectional subject position" (817). From this point of

view:

> We might think of white male heterosexuality as a triply blind
> intersectionality of which gender-blind intersectionality is but a part. That
> is to say, white male heterosexuality provides three axes—whiteness,
> maleness, and heterosexuality—against at least one of which the rest of us
> are intersectionally differentiated. These axes of differentiation construct
> not only a code of conduct; they construct a high-status intersectionality
> whose conduct is already normative (818). I would argue that this serves
> to depoliticize the idea of intersectionality as this use veers away from an
> analysis of marginalized and politicized identities and is being used to
> merely understand normative identities from a different perspective, which
> seems an unnecessary and redundant addition. (Ibid).

Degnen and Tyler also arguing that intersectionality should be applied to class

identity and whiteness, while criticizing intersectionality for merely being a

representation of negative aspects of oppressive forces.

Though it is not the case that to be white is to be without intersections or without

experiences of social inequality, the intention of intersectionality (to which Carbado

(2013) and Degnen and Tyler (2017) concede) is to center and foreground groups of

people who are oppressed or othered in ways that go often unacknowledged by society at large.

Alexander-Floyd (2012) and Jordan-Zachery (2007) question the usefulness of imposing of categorizations onto intersectional analysis. Alexander-Floyd claims that McCall's methodology is an example of the "bait-and-switch" in which, "Black women are focused on, but only to make visible white female suffering" (2012, 9). Alexander-Floyd states that, "intersectionality research must focus on illuminating women of color as political subjects and the gender, racial, class, and sexual politics that impact their lives" (19) she adds an important point and one that contends Puar's point,

> Some might argue that focusing on women of color in general or Black women in particular renders a determinist or essentialist argument about intersectionality and/or women of color; but although racial categories like "Black" are racial formations and therefore constantly shifting, this does not mean that having the identity of Black does not have real material effects. We can talk about intersectionality without reifying these categories, acknowledging that intersectionality is a tool that allows individuals pertaining to a particular racial group—for example, Black female—to contest the meanings of these categories and refashion them (19).

Though it is often classified as a framework for studying differences, intersectionality can also be seen as a framework that can be used to study how our differences bring us together and illuminate similarities across subcultures. intersectionality is "a way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power" (2013, 795). Intersectionality can and has been expanded to encompass topics outside of Black womanhood, such as immigration and Muslim womanhood. In these instances, intersectionality was applied effectively because the analysis presented was aimed at "decentering normativity" (Jordan-Zachery 2007).

According to Jordan-Zachery the liberatory ability of intersectionality is principally important, stating, "It seems to me that intersectionality was used not only to discuss and understand the positioning of Black women but also as a means of liberating these women and their communities. In essence, intersectionality articulates a politics of survival for Black women" (2007, 255-256). Audre Lorde wrote that oppression stems from, "an inability to recognize the notion of differences as a dynamic human force, one which is enriching rather than threatening to the defined self, when there are shared goals" (1984, 45) but in these groups individuals benefit from that exact form of enrichment, one that is infrequently seen by outsiders and even less frequently described.

Queer Black Studies

There is a long and rich history of Black feminist theory and criticism. There is also, as I've shown, a wealth of queer theory applicable to this research. In both fields of study, I have barely scratched the surface of the existing literature. There is less written on the subject of Black queerness, but the field of queer Black studies is expanding, and Audre Lorde is an obvious jumping off point for examining queer Black feminist theory.

Audre Lorde wrote and spoke about a myriad of topics pertaining to Black queerness, Black feminism, and Black liberation. Her own experiences informed much of her writing and only served to make them more powerful, granting them a longevity that will persist for ages. In *Sister Outsider* (1984), a collection of her essays and speeches, she discusses the feeling of isolation as a Black American, stating in her essay "Notes from a Trip to Russia" (1984), "I came away with revolutionary women in my head. But I feel very much now still that we, Black Americans, exist alone in the mouth of the

dragon. As I've always suspected, outside of rhetoric and proclamations of solidarity, there is no help, except ourselves" (30). In "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving" (1984) Lorde offers concise and heuristic definitions of both racism and sexism:

> Racism: *The belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and there by the right to dominance.*
> Sexism: *The belief in the inherent superiority of one sex and thereby the right to dominance.*
> Heterosexism: *The belief in the inherent superiority of one pattern of loving and thereby its right to dominance.*
> Homophobia: *The fear of feelings of love for members of one's own sex and therefore the hatred of those feelings in others* (45).

She goes on to discuss the tensions that form when one is the nexus for all of the above "forms of human blindness." Lorde points out that, "For Black women as well as Black men, it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment" (45). In *Sister Outsider* Lorde discusses how lesbianism, and queerness in general, should not be seen as a threat to Black men or the Black community as a whole, though it often still is. As Lorde writes, "The Black lesbian has come under increasing attack from both Black men and heterosexual Black women. In the same way that the existence of the self-defined Black woman is no threat to the self-defined Black man, the Black lesbian is an emotional threat only to those Black women whose feelings of kinship and love for other Black women are problematic in some way" (49). Lorde goes on to give an example from a Black literary conference she attended in which a heterosexual Black woman stated that, "To endorse lesbianism was to endorse the death of our race" (51). Lorde comments that, "This position reflects acute fright or a faulty reasoning, for once again it ascribes false

power to difference. To the racist, Black people are so powerful that the presence of one can contaminate a whole lineage; to the heterosexist, lesbians are so powerful that the presence of one can contaminate the whole sex" (51).

In contrast, Lorde talks about eroticism and harnessing the erotic as a form of power. She unpacks the ways in which the erotic has been weaponized against women as a way of leveraging inferiority upon those who engage with it, but Lorde paints the erotic as a source of power and information stating, "The erotic functions for me in several ways, the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (56).

Lorde discusses the important distinctiveness of Black feminism, stating, "Black feminism is not white feminism in blackface" adding that, "Black women have particular and legitimate issues which affect our lives as Black women, and addressing those issues does not make us any less Black. To attempt to open dialogue between Black women and Black men by attacking Black feminists seems shortsighted and self-defeating" (60). Lorde highlights that Black woman in the U.S. have traditionally had to have "compassion for everybody else except ourselves" adding that "We have cared for whites because we had to for pay or survival; we have cared for our children and our fathers and our brothers and our lovers. History and popular culture, as well as our personal lives, are full of tales of Black women who had "compassion for misguided black men." Our

scarred, broken, battered and dead daughters and sisters are a mute testament to that reality. We need to learn to have care and compassion for ourselves, also" (62).

Lorde always grounds these statements in the reality of living in a capitalist society and how class and power are directly involved in the subordination of marginalized people, though unlike most white feminists of the time, she adds, "… in no socialist country that I have visited have I found an absence of racism or sexism, so the eradication of both of these diseases seems to involve more than the abolition of capitalism as an institution" (64). In her essay, "Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" she posits the idea that our society lacks the tools for relating across our human differences, and "As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion" (115). Lorde articulates that it is "our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation" (115). Lorde's conceptualization of difference emphasizes the importance of utilizing intersectionality as a lens for understanding difference; it must be named and recognized for what it is before it can be accepted or used to combat oppressive forces.

On a positive note, Lorde states that, "Increasingly, despite opposition, Black women are coming together to explore and to alter those manifestations of our society which oppress us in different ways from those that oppress Black men," referencing the many Black feminists contributing to the field at that time who were engaging in the discourse that resulted in concepts such as intersectionality and largely served to broaden the way we think about race, gender, and sexuality (46). Because of her attention to

issues of race, Audre Lorde is less often thought of as a queer theorist outside of Black feminism or Black queer theory, though she was actively in conversation with Adrienne Rich, Even Sedgwick, and many other queer theorists of the 1980s and 90s. However, the field of Black queer studies, sometimes referred to as "Quare" studies, has expanded, with the appreciation that the experience of being a queer person of color can often be incredibly different from that of a white queer person.

Cathy J Cohen presents just such an example in "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" (1997). She states that, "Because of my multiple identities, which locate me and other 'queer' people of color at the margins in the country, my material advancement, my physical protection, and my emotional well-being are constantly threatened. In those stable categories and named communities whose histories have been structured by shared resistance to oppression, I find relative degrees of safety and security" (34-35). Cohen points out that, "… even within marginal groups there are normative rules determining community membership and power" (35). The failure on the part of queer theory and queer activism to engage with the ways in which race, class, and gender impact the lived experiences of many queer folks, serves only to reify existing modes of power (43). As Cohen states, "The alienation, or at least discomfort, that many activists and theorists of color have with current conceptions of queerness is evidenced, in part, by the minimal number of theorists of color who engage in the process of theorizing about the concept" (35-36). Johnson and Henderson echo this sentiment stating, "Thus, we hope that the interanimation of these two disciplines— Black studies and queer studies— whose roots are similarly grounded in social and

political activism, carries the potential to overcome the myopic theorizing that has too often sabotaged or subverted long-term and mutually liberatory goals" (2005, 6).

E. Patrick Johnson elaborates on this issue in ""Quare" Studies, or (almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother" (2005). Noting that while "queer" can be used to engender solidarity the term can also be falsely unifying by ignoring other important aspects of an individual's identity. According to Johnson, ""Quare," on the other hand, not only speaks across identities, it articulates identities as well. "Quare" offers a way to critique stable notions of identity and, at the same time, to locate racialized and class knowledges" (127). Though this project will be using the term "queer," it is important to acknowledge the ways in which queer theory has historically failed to incorporate intersectionality into its conceptualization of gender and sexuality, particularly in the service of the Black queer community. Johnson also points out that, "The tendency of many lesbians, bisexuals, gays, and transgendered people of color is to unite around a racial identity at a moment when their subjectivity is already under erasure" (139). One motivator for that response is that in the case of the modern gay rights movement white gay men and lesbians have determined the path toward equality often ignoring the needs and concerns of the LGBT people of color (Dudley 2013, 190). Richard G. Dudley Jr. points to this dilemma as a reason for why Black LGBT folks form alternative subcultures as a way of manifesting support systems (2013, 191). This point demonstrates the importance of the research being conducted through this study, these subcultures often go under-studied because they are extremely difficult to access if one does not already identify as Black and queer.

In her article "Queer Black Feminism: The Pleasure Principle" (1996) Laura

Alexandra Harris makes the case for queer Black feminism as a liberatory practice. Harris

illustrates, through the experiences that the women in her family had with feminism and

her own experiences with queerness and feminism how white feminism can silence the

realities of desire and how it seemed that feminism demanded the banishment of desire in

order to reap the benefits of agency. For Harris, queer Black feminism includes an

understanding that desire can be equated with agency, as she states, "For me, queer Black

feminism should have a complicated history of bodies and desires; it has to be able to

acknowledge these complications to further resist the shame and oppression some of

these bodies are made to be silent about" (18). Naturally, Harris poses the question, "So,

with all these problems, why not toss feminism and be queer?" She concludes that, "One

cannot toss feminism for queer, they are inextricably bound together historically as social

theories" (19). For this reason too, despite the lack of representation for individuals who

identify outside of the gender binary within feminism, this thesis continues to employ

both queer theory and Black feminism in the interest of intersectional analysis and the

value the concepts brings to understanding the multidimensionality of identity.

Space

The desire to come together is, of course, neither original nor unique. Human

beings have always felt a need to come together to share space and resources with others

who have things in common with them. Alan Fiske, in "The Four Elementary Forms of

Sociality: Framework for a Unified Theory of Social Relation" (1993), describes

"communal sharing" as one of the four forms of sociality. Fiske describes communal

sharing relationships as being "based on a conception of some bounded group of people as equivalent and undifferentiated. In this kind of relationship, the members of a group or dyad treat each other as all the same, focusing on commonalities and disregarding distinct individual identities" (691). Fiske adds that, "Communal sharing does not just shape how people behave in a group; it is also the basis for constituting a social group" (697). Fiske posits that people engaged in this form of relationship are "naturally united by a common identity" which "crystallizes a collection of people into a group or a dyad, and at the same time gives members a sense of self in relation to the group. Selves are merged into a whole that transcends the particularity of each individual, and people identify with the collectivity" (698). As Fiske illustrates in his case study "Relativity within Moose ("Mossi") Culture: Four Incommensurable Models for Social Relationships" (1990), communal sharing relationships create "a sense of unity and wholeness, of being at one with the other, of making the other's needs and concerns one's own, of empathy and caring, of the primacy of the collective welfare" (186). This concept of communal sharing can easily be applied to meeting and support groups; everyone gathers with a common identity to discuss things they are going through in their lives and be in a space in which others relate to their experiences, thus creating a sense of unity.

In thinking about what brings together marginalized persons, we now approach the question of how space factors into the study at hand. The communities being investigated in this research have, for a significant amount of time, been carving out space for queer people of color to gather and feel safe together and to feel a sense of community. In the time of a global pandemic, these same groups have been forced to

maintain that safe space in a more virtual sense. Out of necessity, out of survival, they have created a space for escape, for sharing, for safety, for pain, and for joy.

Even within the confines of the DMV (District of Colombia, Maryland, and Virginia) area, there are vastly different social groups of queer people that infrequently overlap and have a variety of subcultural aspects. It is essential to first consider how space is defined and produced. One way to think of space is the physical locality being occupied by a group of people. Another way to think about space is the social space occupied by groups. While this thesis is primarily concerned with social space—the way social space is created and embodied— and with the idea of individuals gathering together as a group, the research on which it is based is confined to the DMV area. Therefore, locality also constitutes a variable in this analysis.

As Arjun Appadurai states in "The Production of Locality" (1995), "I view locality as primarily relational and contextual rather than as scalar or spatial. I see it as a complex phenomenological quality constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of context" (52). He asks the question, "what is the nature of locality, as a lived experience, in a globalized, deterritorialized world?" (1991, 196). The ethnographic work on which this project is based intends to confront, as Appadurai states, "the changing social, territorial, and cultural reproduction of group identity" (1991, 191). In thinking about locality in this sense, its importance can still be conceptualized, even in a virtual or online space. According to Appadurai, locality must be maintained, the boundaries constantly shifting, never in a truly fixed state (1995, 53). This is particularly relevant to a virtual space

which people from areas outside of the DMV have begun to enter and which was not previously accessible when groups were meeting in person.

Though the individuals from other states are not subjects of this study, it is interesting to note the ever-changing nature of locality and the sharing of experiences within what Appadurai terms a "virtual neighborhood" (1995, 67). Though Appadurai expresses concern that such "virtual neighborhoods" lack "face-to-face links, spatial contiguity, and multiplex social interaction that the idea of a neighborhood seems centrally to imply" between applications such as Zoom and the extremely prevalent use of social media, many of those hurdles have been cleared, though the experience is still vastly difference from in-person interaction, as we have re-discovered as a society over the course of the pandemic.

One way of managing the "space of relationships" is through "the names of groups" or "personal identity," as Bourdieu explicates (1985, 198, 207). Though Bourdieu approaches the space of relationships from the angle of materiality, he also highlights the importance of symbolic production within social spaces. Bourdieu points out that those in dominant positions within a social space possess the "instruments of symbolic production." We can extract from this the idea that one might seek out other similar people with whom they could embody symbolic production on their own terms thus forming a "collective identity" (1985, 214). He later defines what constitutes a social space, stating, "Just as a physical space is defined by the mutual externality of parts, social space is defined by the mutual exclusion (or distinction) of positions which constitute it, that is, as a structure of juxtaposition of social positions" (1991, 106). While

Bourdieu is, on the whole, discussing how physical and social spaces are dominated or appropriated through the use of capital, it is also clear in his explanation how valuable space is to social groups and how space and place directly impact social identity (1991).

Setha Low uses the concept of "embodied spaces" or the "material and experiential intersection" to explore the sort of questions posed by Appadurai and other theorists (2014, 19). "I have called this material/conceptual intersectionality embodied spaces. These understandings require theories of body and space that are experience-near and yet allow for linkages to be made to larger, social, and cultural processes" (2003, 10). Low critiques the anthropological approach to spatial analysis pointing out that it tends to "neglect the body because of difficulties in resolving the dualism of the subjective and objective body and distinctions between the material and representational aspects of body space," but claiming that the idea of embodied spaces conjoins the two (2003, 10). Low states that, "Adding embodied space to the social construction and social production of space solves much of this problem. The person as a mobile spatial field—a spatiotemporal unit with feelings, thoughts, preferences, and intentions as well as out-of-awareness cultural beliefs and practices—creates space as a potentiality for social relations, giving it meaning and form; ultimately, through the patterning of everyday movements, the person produces place and landscape" (2011, 392). This self-production of space is key to conceptualizing how the body functions in a social setting, theorizing embodied space means understanding that human experiences can take on spatial form.

Elizabeth Keating points out that, "space is central in the creation and communication of status and power relations in many cultures" (1999, 234). Keating

states that, "Space and location influence the discursive production of identity, including local identity and other forms of identity" (2015, 249). Much like Low, Keating elucidates reasons why identity is key to the production and maintenance of space and locality (2015). Keating also touches on virtual space "and how this space constrains and enables new forms of discourse and interaction" (1999, 236). Keating underlines how the introduction of computers into private homes has shifted the "dichotomies of public and private space" (2015, 248-249). It is useful to consider here the ways in which the spaces being occupied by the Black queer individuals who are involved in this study are, in certain ways, interacting in both public and private. Perhaps more private than public, likely due to tension described by Keating that causes white public space to be very othering for non-white queer people (2015, 248).

Gill Valentine conceptualizes sexuality and sexual identities in relation to space, particularly regarding lesbian communities. Having interviewed lesbians from a location that was considered to be a "lesbian neighborhood," Valentine illustrates the subtleties of lesbian communities in contrast to gay male-oriented communities stating, "The lesbian community tends to be smaller, less materialistic, less promiscuous and more politically orientated than the gay male community" (1993, 238). This conceptualization of gay male neighborhoods versus lesbian spaces seemed to be a predominant contrast with respect to gender-minority uses and occupations of space, until later work was done exploring "lesbian informal networks and institutions" (Binnie and Valentine, 1999). Valentine also discusses public versus private stating, "Although our public and private lives are separated in space, socially the two overlap and the way we represent our private

situation is crucial to the external sexual identity we create in the public sphere" (1993, 242). Valentine explicates that, "lesbians therefore consciously seek out other gay people in heterosexual environments to affirm their own identity and right to be there, but also to relieve their physical and social isolation by creating pockets of gay time/space" (1993, 244). These "pockets of gay time/space" or "lesbian-defined space" allow for a space to feel safe and the experience of freedom of expression without the fear of repercussions (1993, 245).

"Lesbian-defined space" is important due to its ability to drastically lessen the degree to which one experiences misrecognition. As Marta Olasik states, "Though silenced and evaded as sexual beings, lesbians may as well be locally active and recognizable – as couples, as parents, as citizens. It is thus vital to include the significance of geo-temporality and spatiality in any project regarding sexual and gender minorities. Lesbian geographies provide just this" (2015, 201). This desire to withdraw into lesbian spaces extends also to Black people in Black spaces. As Audre Lorde states, "I feel the want and need often for the society of women, exclusively. I recognize that our own spaces are essential for developing and recharging" (1984, 78), she continues on to say, "As a Black woman, I find it necessary to withdraw into all-Black groups at times for exactly the same reasons—differences in stages of development and differences in levels of interaction. Frequently, when speaking with men and white women, I am reminded of how difficult and time-consuming it is to have to reinvent the pencil every time you want to send a message" (1984, 78).

Nikki Lane, a cultural and linguistic anthropologist conducted an ethnographic study of Black queer women in Washington D.C. In "All the Lesbians are White, All the Villages are Gay, but Some of Us are Brave: Intersectionality, Belonging, and Black Queer Women's Scene Space in Washington DC" (2015) Lane utilizes an intersectional framework in order to make sense of, "the ways BQW (Black Queer Women) talk about their experiences of race, gender, sexuality and class in 'urban gay space'" (219). Lane argues that the "dominant spatial orders which help to define the cosmopolitan urban landscape effect the way BQW 'do' race, gender, sexuality, and class" (220). One key point made by Lane is that "race, gender, sexuality and class are felt unevenly across various kinds of social space" (220). Lane points out that even though DC exists in the "Black queer imaginary" as a "Black Gay Mecca" there are, in fact, no Black lesbian bars or clubs in DC (which is still the case today), "Rather than taking place in gay bars or venues, most often BQW scene spaces are carved out of what might normally be read as mainstream or heterosexual space" (221). But in the same vein as what Audre Lorde mentions Lane states that, "By not having to explain your experiences of the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in BQW scene space, there's literally the space to talk about all of the other things. That's what feels good about being in BQW scene space" (226).

Lane points out that scholarship about Black queer people and space is still rare. Lane posits that the reason for the dearth of literature is due, in part, to the fact that "the sexual geographies literature is rarely interested in the ways that sexuality, gender, race, and class are co-constitutive and thus simultaneously affect both the experience and the

production of space; an omission corrected if critical attention were to be given to the theory of intersectionality" (223).

Bailey and Shabazz discuss the concept of "the space around the corner" which they describe as a liminal space "out of site" in which "those on the margins of gender and sexual normativity" participate in transgressive behavior without disrupting the appearance of heteronormative desire (2014, 317). The example from which they derive "the space around the corner" emerged from a situation in which men in drag at a hip hop convention were being subjected to the homophobic gaze in the form of insults, shouting, and cruel jokes, but those same men throwing out homophobic slurs would be just as willing to engaged in sexual activity with the men who are presenting as openly gay, as long they go around the corner or out of sight of others.

Here Bailey and Shabazz reference Foucault's concept of "placelessness" and his theory of "heterotopias" (2014, 317). In "Of Other Spaces" (1986) Foucault breaks down the unreality of utopias and the real sites that are "outside of all places" which he terms heterotopias (24). Five principals define a heterotopia: (1) They are present in all cultures or human groups, (2) they can function differently over time, (3) they bring together contrasting sites or places, (4) they are most often linked to a particular point in time, (5) and they are not freely accessible but rather can be entered through either compulsion or through rites of passage or purification (1986). Bailey and Shabazz view heterotopias as, "'counter-sites' where in which the dominant culture is represented, contested, and inverted" such as the space around the corner (2014, 317).

Though Black queer meeting and support groups are often not sexual in nature, they do exist "around the corner" in the sense that they exist on the margins of society. As Bailey and Shabazz point out, "Although Black bodies are always read as outside the framework of whiteness, Black gender and sexual minorities are rendered as outside the spatial formation of Black communities. If Black spatiality is excluded from the white world, then Black queer space, for example, is placeless, a space without geographical coordinates" (2014, 318).

Conclusion

Foucault outlines this idea of "crisis heterotopias" (privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc.), though he states that these crisis heterotopias are diminishing in number and instead we have "heterotopias of deviation" or spaces in which those who are considered to be deviant are placed (1986, 25). I suggest that, as Bailey and Shabazz explicate, there are heterotopias that function through gender and sexuality. The groups I am analyzing here have created virtual heterotopias which existed as spaces without place and which lie in the space between a "crisis heterotopia" and a "heterotopia of deviation." These spaces are in a crisis of misunderstanding and illegibility and are considered deviant by the norms delineated by our society.

I believe the concept of a "safe space"—what Foucault would consider to be a utopia—does not truly exist. Rather, it is an idea of feeling comfortable and safe in a society where, by and large, this is impossible. Instead, heterotopias, as close to this

fantastical utopia as is possible, form through the isolation and exclusion of those who either do not understand or are engage in outright violence against marginalized communities in order to alleviate some of feelings of social isolation and exclusion. These heterotopias are currently being created through the use of digital space, allowing these shared digital spaces to be function as a subversive tool of resistance, survival, and healing.

As Judith Butler states, "To find that one is fundamentally unintelligible (indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find one to be an impossibility) is to find that one has not yet achieved access to the human. It is to find oneself speaking only and always as if one were human, but with the sense that one is not. It is to find that one's language is hollow, and that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in one's favor" (2004, 218) In these small groups individuals who would not normally meet in the context of their regular social circles come together, we become legible, our language has meaning, we are intelligible to each other.

Though identity politics has been somewhat maligned, in recent years, by the social sciences, in order to understand why identity is such a driving force we must understand the Combahee River Collective's statement on identity politics, "This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression" (1982, 61-62). As Crenshaw states very concisely, "This process of recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual has also characterized

the identity politics of African Americans, other people of color, and gays and lesbians, among others. For all these groups, identity-based politics has been a source of strength, community, and intellectual development" (1991, 1242). Ultimately, as Black queer people, our differences may set us apart from society, but our sameness brings us together in a unique form of unity and community that bears studying and understanding.

CHAPTER 3. METHODS

<u>Introduction</u>

In exploring the research question at the heart of this thesis: Why do we gather? Specifically, why do Black, queer, gender minority identified individuals seek out similarly identified people with which to congregate and hold space? This study used the method of one-on-one interviews with individuals who attended three discrete meeting groups in order to gain insight into this query.

Using intersectionality as a tool of study poses its own methodological challenges. As Julia S. Jordan-Zachery (2007) states, "While the growing use of intersectionality is exciting and should be encouraged as part of our larger efforts aimed at decentering "normativity," we should be careful in our use of the concept. Researchers employ the term in myriad ways and oftentimes inconsistently and ambiguously" (255). Jordan-Zachery faced several challenges in utilizing intersectionality as an analytical tool including, "… a) the challenge of compartmentalizing the personal, the political, and my intellectual curiosity; and b) the challenge of telling the story of a marginalized community — in my research this is primarily Black women — in terms of what method and methodological approach would be useful" (257). Ultimately Jordan-Zachery highlights the importance of the application of intersectionality in avoiding asking people to separate out their experiences of race and gender.

As Melissa Harris-Perry states, "A basic assumption of Black feminist scholarship is that researchers need not be personally removed from the issues we investigate. Black feminist scholarship assumes that experiential knowledge has equal weight with empirical evidence drawn from more traditional sources of social scientific and humanist research" (2011, 173). I have employed this assumption in this case, in order to study a specific intersection of identities which have great depth of meaning to me, and which go under studied, at least in part, due to a distrust of outsiders. The interviews I conducted provided me with the ability to articulate ethnographically the purpose these groups serve and have allowed me to create an analysis and draw conclusions.

It is characteristic of the anthropological method of autoethnography to combine tenets of autobiography and ethnography, making it method that combines "both process and product" (Ellis et al. 2011, 273). Autoethnographers have the job of using their own personal experience to investigate cultural phenomena (Ellis et al. 2011). This method has been particularly useful in this research because the wealth of information provided by participants would not have been accessible had I not identified as a part of the community being studied. Ellis et al. explain how the generalizability of autoethnographies flows from the respondents to the reader, as opposed to how generalizable research is typically thought of, and though this can appear unscientific the method of autoethnography challenges the assumptions that "erroneously position art science at odds with each other" (283).

<u>Sample Size</u>

As this is a phenomenological study, participants were selected based on whether they experienced the phenomenon of existing within the intersection of queerness, Blackness, and being part of a gender minority group, and also regularly attended one of three specific virtual meeting spaces.

These participants all currently reside in the DC, Maryland, and Virginia area; individuals who attended these virtual meeting spaces but live outside of the DMV were not considered for this study. Appadurai defines a neighborhood as, "life-worlds constituted by relatively stable associations, by relatively known and shared histories, and by collectively traversed and legible spaces and place" (1995, 63). Our shifting understanding of what constitutes a neighborhood could encapsulate individuals joining the group from other states (and in a few cases other countries) as they are a part of the "virtual neighborhood" (1995). However, despite the drastic shifts in what can be considered locality due to the predominance of the internet and social media, this study is still limiting itself to physical parameters in order to better contextualize the experiences of the participants through similar geographical associations.

I ended up changing the original language of my recruitment script and overall approach because I initially stated that I was looking for anyone who is "femme aligned, or female identified" and there were non-binary individuals interested in participating but who did not themselves identify as "femme" in any way. I used this language because I originally proposed that I would study the myths surrounding Black womanhood, and Black lesbianism in particular, to understand how we conceive of ourselves as a group.

However, it became clear to me that I was deploying the construct of "myth" more as a heuristic device, rather than as it was literally defined. Nevertheless, the kinds of stereotypes or what Melissa V. Harris-Perry refers to as "myths" about Black women in *Sister Citizen* (2011) remain relevant to my research in the ways that individuals who identify outside of the gender binary exist in these spaces.

While I do agree that "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression" (Combahee River Collective 1982, 64) it has also become abundantly clear to me that identifying as non-binary is often illegible to people, certainly those outside of the queer community, but also, often, to those who identify as a part of the community. If more researchers within queer theory and Black feminism were to come to this conclusion, both fields would likely gain a great deal of knowledge in regard to race, gender, and sexuality

As Judith Butler states, "To be not quite masculine or not quite feminine is still to be understood exclusively in terms of one's relationship to the "quite masculine" and the "quite feminine" but in a way that does not correspond with cultural intelligibility" (2004, 42). The lack of understanding and current exclusionary climate that exists around non-binary and trans persons makes their experiences extremely relevant to this study because they too experience gender-based discrimination. In this context experiencing gender-based discrimination, in other words, not being a cisgender male, produces a unique experience that often comes up in conversation in the groups being studied. For this

reason I arrived at the term "gender minorities" as a way of being more inclusive for those who do not identity as women or feminine individuals.

Ultimately, I interviewed twelve participants whose ages ranged from 26-68 and who existed along all three axes of intersections. Five individuals attended the Queer People of Color Support Group; three attended the Black Lesbian Support Group; and three attended the Black Lesbian Book Club meetings. The QPOC Support Group, which was meeting weekly, now meets twice a month, the BLSG meets monthly, and the BLBC meets monthly, as well. Though each of my participants attended one of the three groups listed above and currently reside somewhere in the DMV, their backgrounds differed in almost every other aspect. While they all sought something similar in the communities they belonged to, notably, only one of the participants has attended meetings held by one of the other two groups.

Data Collection and Procedure

Beginning on 10/02/2020 when my Institutional Review Board proposal (1501731-2) was approved, I started regularly attending meetings hosted by all three groups. The two support groups (QPOC and BLSG) are hosted through the DC center. I had attended meetings at the DC Center in person prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is how I originally arrived at the research question driving this study.

Due to the global pandemic, I had to alter the methods I was using. I continued to attend meetings for the QPOC, the BLSG and the BLBC, but all of the meetings moved from being in-person, to being hosted over the telecommunications application, Zoom. Instead of engaging in participant observation, I used my attendance in these group

settings as a way to recruit participants for one-on-one interviews. These changes

required me to resubmit my thesis proposal for IRB approval, I also adjusted my consent

forms and recruitment script accordingly, but ultimately my current methods proved

beneficial to the research.

In the context of the support groups, it felt much more natural to proceed in this

manner. Participant observation in a space that was meant to be a "safe space" or a space

in which people are able to speak freely without fear of repercussion or the chance their

words might be used outside of that space felt like a breach of ethical boundaries. The

idea of encroaching on a space of openness made the choice to conduct interviews with

those who enthusiastically consented to their words being used for research purposes a

much easier decision.

There were also several benefits to conducting interviews over Zoom. Zoom

includes a function that allows the host of the meeting to record the meeting and creates a

rough transcript of the dialogue, as well as video and audio recordings of the meeting. I

used this feature to acquire transcripts and recordings of the interviews. Zoom

automatically deletes saved recordings from its server after a week.

Taking an ethnographic approach through one-on-one interviews involved asking

a core set of questions regarding self-identification, personal narrative, and reasons for

being a part of one of the groups in question. After asking for participants during a

meeting, I scheduled a Zoom call with the participant through e-mail, and also took the

opportunity to send the link to the Zoom meeting, and the consent form to review and

sign. Once we sat down to the Zoom call I double checked that the interviewee was

comfortable with recording and then activated the transcription function and started the recording. I would then ask if they had any questions about my research or the process before we began the questions. I would then ask questions while taking notes on the conversation. Subsequently I would listen back to recordings in order to edit the transcripts produced by Zoom.

When drafting questions, I made an effort to keep in mind the lessons imparted by Lisa Bowleg in her article, "When Black + Lesbian + Woman ≠ Black Lesbian Woman: The Methodological Challenges of Qualitative and Quantitative Intersectionality Research" (2008). Bowleg discusses the difficulties of asking non-additive questions while conducting intersectionality research, stating "At issue is how to ask questions about experiences that are intersecting, interdependent, and mutually constitutive, without resorting, even inadvertently, to an additive approach" (314). I have attempted to avoid questions that would illicit additive responses about identities such as "... 'If someone dropped in from another planet and asked you to tell them about your life as a Black lesbian woman. First, what would say about your life as a Black person?; Woman?; Lesbian?; and Black lesbian woman?' It is obvious now in retrospect that a truly intersectional question would simply ask the respondent to tell about her experience without separating each identity" (315).

For this study I structured my interview questions to be more in line with questions such as, "What are some of the day-to-day challenges that you face in terms of your race, gender and/or sexual orientation?" In order to get a better picture of the experience of the intersectional existence that comes with being Black, queer, and a

gender minority (315). As Bowleg points out, "Yet, different answers to the same

question demonstrate, there is no single reality about the experience of one's intersecting

identities, only multiple constructed realities about one's own experience of

intersectionality" (317). It seemed that in this case, with the interest of intersectional

analysis in mind, broader questions that invited participants to speak at length about their

experiences yielded fuller and more intricate answers.

<u>Data Analysis</u>

The data analysis portion of this project involved analyzing qualitative data using

coding to apply a multi-disciplinary approach and intersectional framework. As Anna

Carastathis concisely states, "Intersectionality as a research method may capture the

irreducibility of experience to any single category by using multiple categories of

analysis, even if these are distinguished categorially from one another" (2016, 59).

Bowleg emphasizes the importance of not falling into an additive approach while

analyzing data. Bowleg claims that "Intersectionality research demands that researchers

who employ an intersectionality perspective broaden their analytical scope beyond the

collected data to become intimately acquainted, if they are not already, with the

sociohistorical realities of historically oppressed groups" imploring other researchers to

be more multi-disciplinary in their methodology (318). This study provides an example

of how "employing the insights of other fields of study" can prove quite beneficial as a

strategy for understanding intersectional identities (318).

Bowleg recommends coding as an "initial analytical step" stating:

> Pursuant to grounded theory analytical strategies, my coding typically involves
> three stages: open, axial, and selective coding. During the open coding phase, I

would broadly code Bowleg's aforementioned passage using multiple and overlapping codes. Thus, there would be a code for heterosexism, another for violence, another for sexism, and a fourth for intersectionality. In the axial and selective coding phases, I would refine each of the separate codes (i.e., sexism; violence; etc.) into more distinct codes (e.g., intersections of sexism and heterosexism, intersections of racism, sexism, and heterosexism, etc.). During the selective coding phase, I would further refine the codes to reflect a specific dimension of an intersectional experience to highlight, for example, how Black lesbians' experiences of violence reflect intersections of racism, sexism, and heterosexism (319).

I have used a very similar method of coding for this research, beginning with boarder codes to do with identity and gathering, and then creating more specific codes for individual identity categories such as queerness, gender, Blackness, intersectionality, safe spaces, authenticity and heterotopia, which then became the categories for analysis and contextualization in my results chapter.

As Bowleg posits, "For intersectionality analysts, the key interpretative task is to derive meaning from the observed data on the one hand, and to on the other, interpret this individual level data within a larger sociohistorical context of structural inequality that may not be explicit or directly observable in the data" (320). It proved valuable to proceed with an analytic strategy that accounted for the way identities overlap differently for different individuals in different circumstances. In this case many of my respondents described their experience of being a part of the queer community as it correlates to their Black identity, but also in relation to their socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds.

Conclusion

This research has attempted to encapsulate and analyze several ideas to do with identity and gathering in the context of specific meeting groups in which individuals have formed a sense of community. The use of autoethnography as an anthropological method

and the utilization of intersectionality as a framework of analysis resulted in a

multidisciplinary and multidimensional approach allowing me to effectively tell the

stories of the participants and demonstrate the importance and significance of the

meetings groups being studied more effectively. While the experiences of the participants

differ greatly in many aspects, the commonality of identity that they share results in a

plethora of overlapping and interrelated experiences that will be captured and unpacked

in the following two chapters.

CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

Introduction

It is important to put into context the societal and global conditions in which this

research was undertaken. We have been in a global pandemic since January of 2019. Two

years later, we are still trying to navigate the impacts COVID-19 has had. Throughout

this research there was a lot of civil unrest occurring in the United States, specifically to

do with racial injustice. Black people across the nation were protesting, in an effort to

make our voices heard, and to bring to light the type of violence, police brutality, and

racism we face on a day-to-day basis. This is important to note because all of the

participants of this study identify as being Black, African American, or a part of the

African diaspora, and therefore were dealing with and processing not only the stress,

anxiety, and feelings of uncertainty to do with the pandemic, but also dealing with

feelings around the violence and injustices perpetrated against our communities. While

this research is not concerned specifically with current events, it is relevant to the

mindsets of those participating, and my own mindset when thinking about and writing

about these topics and ideas. Additionally, the pandemic itself completely altered the

methods used to complete this research and likely impacted the conclusions that will be

drawn.

<u>The Groups</u>

Three individual meetings groups were involved in this study, the Queer People of Color Support Group, the Black Lesbian Support Group, and the Black Lesbian Book Club. The QPOC and the BLSG were both hosted by The DC Center. The DC Center describes itself as an LGBT community center that, "educates, empowers, celebrates, and connects the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities. To fulfill our mission, we focus on four core areas: health and wellness, arts & culture, social & peer support, and advocacy and community building" (2021). The Black Lesbian Book Club is listed on a website called "Meetup," and prior to the pandemic would meet in the home of the host of the group. I had attended meetings in both of these locations prior to the pandemic, and they each held very distinct atmospheres, but the way space factors into each group changed significantly when they all had to be hosted through Zoom out of safety and necessity.

While the BLSG and the BLBC inherently suggest that individuals who attend are both female identified and queer (though lesbian is in the name of both groups they welcome any women loving women). The QPOC welcomes anyone across the LGBTQ+ spectrum who is impacted by racial inequality. As Kody (27), one of the facilitators for QPOC said, "With QPOC we are more explicit about saying, if you're here you should be a queer person affected by systemic racism, which I think is really good because it creates a safer space where you know no one there is like, not one of that community, but that being said, it is still like everyone's different in that community, and so like we don't necessarily politically aligned or anything like that." Adama (34), another QPOC

facilitator, told me, "Yeah, I feel like with the QPOC the topic[s] that we talk about help us connect at a deeper level, because I don't know if you've noticed, but at the QPOC support group, most of the time we talk about our race, we don't talk about gender or sexual orientation, it's because the things, especially here in the US, the aggressions that are more often, that we faced, more regularly link to our race." Kody added, "The other thing I will say about that group is it's changed over time, but it is primarily Black, which is interesting, and I love that. But I do think there may be times where like, perhaps, there's been a couple Asian-American folks who come through who maybe felt unsure of how to fit into that dynamic… But again, I'm like if Black people are like the social norm here, I think that's perfect, I don't think that's like something we need to change." Mayowa (28), another member of the QPOC echoed this feeling saying, "And really the queer POC group almost feels like the Queer Black Group, because I feel like most of the people there are like, either Afro something or like just like Black or like African something like that… Why I mentioned that it's really more like the Queer Black Group or like queer diaspora group or something like that, because even Asian people can make a Black person feel alienated because they, sometimes their behavior is akin to what I've experienced with white people." It's interesting that though the Queer People of Color Support Group is open to people of all oppressed racial and ethnic identities, several of the people interviewed voluntarily mentioned that it was often a majority Black group without prompting.

The origin of the BLSG is interesting because even though it is run by the DC

Center it is hosted by an outside organization for Black lesbians. As Jamie Lee (44), one

of the main facilitators, states:

> So, we would volunteer at the DC Center, from time to time and we also use the
> DC centers space for like events, we've had meetings there, different things…
> And it was a person there who's no longer on staff, and she was asking us you
> know, she had seen us there before and she was like, "Hey you know, I want to
> get you all more involved, you know, the DC Center is great, but as is often in
> queer spaces, it's very white male centric," and she was a Black trans woman, and
> she was like, "You know I really want to get you all involved I want to see more
> Black faces here," and we were like, yeah, and I brought up the support group
> because I had seen it online, and I think it had met once and then I didn't see it
> anymore and I was like what what's going on? This was before Covid, so, we
> were in person. And I was like, "What's going on with that?" and she was like,
> "Well the people that we got to host it like they basically flaked out," and I was
> like, "Oh, well, we could host it!" You know, it took some time and like I said she
> no longer works there anymore but, yeah, so it was something that the DC Center
> had started on their own, they just did not have a host. And so, we proposed, well
> why don't we become your hosts, and that way you're not just dependent upon
> one person to do it.

The BLBC is very distinct from the other two groups, as it is not a support group;

rather it is a book club that meets monthly, thus the discussions are dictated by what book

is being read that month. For those who attend, the draw is not only getting to meet with

and hold space with other Black lesbians, but also reading books that are relevant to their

identities. As Kara (46) says, "So, I am a pretty avid reader, or at least I usually am, these

days work is so busy that that falls by the wayside a little bit. And again, wanting to read

books and be in connection with people who share my identities. And I think, in

particular, like being in a space where reading about and talking about Black queer

identities felt, especially important. I'm in another book club, I'm in actually a few other

book clubs, with just like Black women primarily, and even that is just very different to

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like be in a book club with like Black women generally and then Black queer women specifically."

Interestingly there does not appear to be any overlap in the people who frequent each of these meeting spaces. While some of the individuals involved in this study attend multiple groups or meetings related to their personal identities, none of them attend more than one of the groups being investigated here, and I personally have never seen anyone who, for instance, attends both QPOC and BLSG meetings. This is likely due to the demographic differences, while those who attend the QPOC meetings are often in their twenties and thirties, those who attend the BLSG and BLBC meetings are more often in their thirties or older. Even the move to Zoom over in-person meetings did not appear to spark an overlap in who attended each of the three groups.

Virtual vs. Physical

The circumstances in which this research was conducted were heavily influenced by the global pandemic that was unfolding at the time, and that has continued to impact all aspects of our daily lives. The shift to Zoom transformed the atmosphere and purpose of the meetings themselves.

Some feel as though Zoom takes away from the overall experience. As Ashley (32) told me, "I feel like it minimizes the experience. I know for me, Zoom, and just like virtual meetings, they're just overwhelming at times. And it's the, it's the minor things that make it overwhelming like the fact that some people don't take it serious, so they're being distracted in their background, or, you know, the, can you hear me, can you hear me? And, you know, that is what makes it overwhelming, especially when it's all of the

time. I feel like it minimizes the experience because a lot of people just don't want to. I don't know why, even though we've been in this for a year or going on a year, people are still apprehensive of doing the things, virtually."

As Adama (34) articulated, "The ones who used to attend in QPOC in-person. Most of them didn't come to the virtual. I think it's because it's a different type of need and energy than when people are in person. I feel like also because of the pandemic in the virtual we felt more at ease to open up, I feel like we actually spoke more about that than in person. I think it helped the fact that they were always like two or three conversations happening at the same time, also in the chat, which is not something that you can do in person, when somebody is opening up their heart in person, you cannot be like, oh, did you see that movie? While people are opening, people are doing their own thing in the chat which is not, but in person you can't really do that and so the energy's different." In almost the exact opposite sentiment, Kody told me, "I do think with Zoom cross talk is really difficult. So, like if two people are talking you really can't have multiple people chiming in at the same time like you could in person." They add, "We've definitely had people join the group from different states and that is really nice. And I imagine that in-person meetings, you're actually getting a sense of community of oh, this person lives nearby we can meet up in person, we can do things. Whereas, virtually it's more just like we're all just in this space and yes, some of us live in, in the DMV but like some people are just joining from wherever and you kind of can't know."

For others on-screen interaction is a preference at times. As Carol told me, "No, no I'm not really huge on socializing, I will do it, but it is in support of someone

generally. And then, you know, depending on how big the social activity is, it's a very

big social activity I'm setting my timer for an hour, and I'll be gone, if it's small and

comfortable, I'll start enjoying myself and it's fine, but generally I'm not going to go out

of my way to like be in a group, a bigger group… And it's a screen, so it's like I'm not

actually having to engage with all of these individual people. By the time things open up,

feeling connected to people would be a motivator to go outside of my comfort zone."

Muido (26) agreed with the importance of the online accessibility, "Honestly, now that I

found queer POC group. It's sort of been like, I only have so much energy, and like so

much interaction in me. So, once a week, meeting with everyone on Zoom for a few

hours, sometimes I can go for several hours, sometimes I tune in for an hour, but it's been

enough, definitely. And so now that they're going to have in person ones, which I'm not

going to be able to go to, and then have less online ones, I'm now sort of trying to line up

things that sort of give me that community."

     While Kara articulated the importance of both virtual and in-person spaces, "I do

think there's a difference. And I think for me, again being the introvert that I am, it's

been sort of nice to find community through these virtual spaces. Sometimes in ways that

would not be accessible to me otherwise, so people from different parts of the country or

different parts of the world. And also, there's value in getting to physically sit with

someone, to be able to hug people, to be able to share a meal that is not through a

computer screen. And so, I think, I definitely have an appreciation for both."

Until recently many meeting places for the LGBTQ community were bars and clubs, but with the advent of the internet that trend started to shift, this is perhaps beneficial because as Vivian (68) points out,

> Yes, I would say, a lot of it was clubs and, yes, probably club related. And now all those clubs are gone, so other ways of getting together have taken their place but also just being twenty-something, a club was a great idea, was a great place to go. But you can't take care of all your business in the club. Even your spirituality is, you know, is just not a club thing. So being able to grow community which is what we were able to do through Sapphire Sapphos, was no way we could achieve that in a club, because you can mostly only find acquaintances in a club or bar. Whereas, if you're making friends and building community you actually need quiet spaces that are dedicated to and conducive to being able to sit down and have conversations.

Though Vivian is describing a group called the Sapphire Sapphos, which she helped found in the late 1970s, her description illuminates that having queer spaces outside of a bar or club is of the utmost importance. QPOC, the BLSG, and the BLCB are all geared toward giving and receiving support and community building, which have clearly always been a necessity for the queer community.

Queerness

As I explicated in the literature review, outside of queer essentialism there can be a usefulness in broadly defining the concept of the queer community. Queer theorists have used discursive tactics to subvert narratives such as the reclaiming of the term

"queer" which did not come into use until the late 1980s and early 1990s (Johnson and

Henderson 2005). As Cathy J. Cohen states, "Theorists and activists alike generally agree

that it was not until the early 1990s that the term "queer" began to be used with any

regularity" (1997, 22). Cohen goes on to point out that, "For many of us, the label

"queer" symbolizes an acknowledgement that through our existence and everyday

survival we embody sustained and multi-sited resistance to systems (based on dominant

constructions of race and gender) that seek to normalize our sexuality, exploit our labor,

and constrain our visibility" (24).

I asked participants their perspective on the term "queer" itself. Given that the

term has been reclaimed recently by the queer community, not everyone feels

comfortable using it. As Ashley explained, "I don't understand it honestly. So, I don't

have a feeling. I still try to understand it, it still doesn't make sense to me why we need

another term, but I don't knock it because I know some people actually identify with it,

but I just personally don't understand it." Some feel indifferently toward the term, as

Vivian told me, "I don't mind it. I don't have any charge on it. I've been identified as so

many different things even Black people have been identified as Colored, Negro, Black,

you know, so I'm accustomed to being able to adapt to terms that are used in a different

context, but it pretty much still means the same thing." A point that serves as an

important reflection on how our identifying terms are not static and are subject to change

over time.

However, most participants felt that the term queer was useful as an "umbrella" or

all-encompassing kind of term, applicable beyond the separate categories of gay, lesbian,

bisexual, pansexual, transgender, etc. Adama stated, "I feel like the word queer and the queerness, depending on where you go, has different meaning. And because of that, I personally just decided that it makes more sense for me to use it as an umbrella, especially because from time-to-time LGBTQAAIA2S… That's long. So, saying queer is just like, you know what I meant. I feel like when I say "queer" people understand better that I'm actually talking about the whole umbrella, all the rainbows." Muido agreed stating that, "I think of the term queer as, basically it encompasses being lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, but what I like about queer is that it's more ambiguous. And it's less… It's sort of accepting the otherness. And it's like reclaiming the word that has been used to other people who are part of the LGBT like community. So, for me it means a closeness of the community where we're not separated into letters and categories. It's just like, we're queer and we're here and all that stuff." Em (27) echoed this perspective saying, "I like the fact that it's kind of encompassing… And it's kind of like taking back the power from the people who turned queer into a bad thing. And originally it just meant you're not like the norm and you're weird and I'm like bro, when people tell me I'm weird, I'm like oh my gosh, thank you, that's such a huge compliment. I'm not cookie cutter and I don't ever want to be, I was forced to try to be, and it was horrible. And so, now I'm just like fuck the box." Kara felt similarly stating, "Yeah, and that's actually also why I identify as queer, rather than lesbian, or bisexual. I've had relationships and experiences with men. I think at this point in my life I'd never date another dude. And yet, bisexual didn't feel like the label that fit for me, lesbian didn't really feel like the label that fit for me, queer kind of did, um, just because it felt a little bit more expansive,

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and I think it's also more inclusive of sort of politically the way that I think about myself. And, and attempt to navigate things."

One reason one might prefer the term queer over other signifiers is that there is a level of judgement that comes with identifying as bisexual or pansexual in the queer community. There exists a stereotype amongst gay men and lesbians (straight people as well) that people who identify as bisexual or pansexual are not really a part of the LGBTQ community or simply have not chosen between being gay or being straight. As Kody (27) told me, "I've been using [queer] since before I even wanted to narrow down my terminology more. And I think that's a lot of people of color's experiences that I've known, like in college and post-college a lot of them are like, I don't know what word I want to use but queer works. I'm honestly talking probably about a lot of bi and pan people who were just kind of like queer feels better." They added that, "There's also [a lot of] bi discourse about who's really bi or what counts as being bi or, oh, there's so many bi women who only really date men and stuff like that. And I think that there's like a lot to unpack with that."

The broadness of the term queer seems to feel more comfortable to some who might be attempting to avoid the problematic assumptions that are associated with bisexuality and pansexuality. Muido resonated with this concept, saying, "I think there's definitely… The idea that the whole bi people in het relationships thing, that it's like, are they a part of the community? Do they now become allies instead of queer people? And it's like, my identity doesn't change based on who I'm with, and my quote unquote allegiance to the queer community isn't lessened by being with someone who isn't queer,

or doesn't identify as queer, I should say… Being bi or pan and then dating someone who is [of] the opposite gender and [who] is cis and heterosexual themselves isn't an exit out of the community." Leon (32) agreed saying,

> Yeah, when I first came out, and even before I came out as non-binary, I wasn't really comfortable with the term lesbian, cuz apparently, I'm like really into gender fuckery, that's who I'm interested in, and so I love masculinity in women, but not toxic, and femininity in men. A lot of the guys I had crushes on growing up turned out to be gay and I was like, ooohhh, you know? And, you know, I came out as gay, initially, not lesbian and I refused to be called lesbian and then eventually, as language evolved and as words evolved, I heard people using queer and it was kind of like, oh okay, that's like anything. And so, I'm somewhere in between queer and pan, I guess, because I am kind of like anything goes except for cis men, I've never dated a cis man, unless you count a two-month boyfriend high school.

As Leon pointed out, the term "lesbian" can be somewhat limiting at times because it implies that the user of the term identifies as female as well as homosexual. Jamie Lee elaborates a little bit on the impact of that expressing some discomfort with the exclusivity inherent in having a group specifically for Black lesbians:

> I will say that, that is my one kind of, like it makes me feel some kind of way to say the group is for Black lesbians, because what about the bisexuals, what about the pansexuals, what about all the other identities of people who, women, females who might be Black who don't identify as a lesbian, are they being left out? And the answer inherently is, yes, they are. And at what cost, right? Could the majority of the people in the group feel as safe and get as much benefit if it were slightly more open? I don't know the answer to that question, I have thought about it.

Adama makes the point that, as someone who identifies as a lesbian, there is a lot of lesbian erasure and invisibility, stating: "Well, being a lesbian, of course, it comes with having to deal with the erasure, mainly the erasure of lesbianism, and having also to navigate the fact that, because I have this [feminine presentation] I sometimes have to justify being a lesbian, which is kind of frustrating, but at least it means that it gives me,

identifying as a lesbian gives me an idea of how I should act with others."

Though Adama identifies strongly with the term lesbian, her experience growing

up queer was unique from most other participants in this research. While discussing

lesbianism as an identity, Adama said: "I discovered the existence of homophobia when I

was 12 years old." I asked what happed and she told me:

> I was in Cameroon and a magazine published, it was in 20, eh, it was in 1999, and
> a magazine in Cameroon, publish[ed] a list of 100 names of people that were said
> by the magazine, to be gay or lesbian. Which in Cameroon is a big issue because
> Cameroon condemns homosexuality by years of prison and some not negligible
> fees. So [everyone] went crazy, people started talking about it because a lot of
> those names were politicians and people in the music industry, so famous people.
> So, people started talking and that's actually when I discovered that
> homosexuality is punishable by the law in Cameroon which I didn't know before
> that happened. And that's also where I learned that some people are not okay with
> homosexuality, which thankfully up until then I hadn't clearly experienced,
> because I [had] shared my interest for women. And the first time I remember
> doing that I was seven years old, and I told my stepmother that when I grew up, I
> will marry a woman and the way she looked at me, I understood that I said
> something wrong, but she didn't say anything, so I didn't know what I said
> wrong, and then we just continued talking.

Muido, also from West Africa expressed similar feelings when growing up in The

Gambia:

> Um, I think that I'm always either trying to go against a certain identity or
> embody a certain identity. I think, being queer in Africa is… Hard. And it sort of
> turns you into an empathetic alien, where you're used to being othered and used
> to being outside'd. And so, you sort of have empathy for other people who go
> through that." While the experience of facing violence, legal consequences, and
> condemnation by the government does not impact all queer individuals, there is a
> level of fear and trepidation that comes with accepting one's own identity and the
> feeling of being othered that is widespread across the LGBTQ community, this
> likely adds to the comfort provided by the all-encompassing word, queer; within
> this term we stand together as a community, even if our experiences vary greatly.

<u>Gender</u>

Gender plays many roles in the queer community. From gender roles and dynamics in relationships, which Ashley discussed saying: "I strongly believe in and I'm trying to change my perception, but you know I feel like I still believe in gender roles, even though I'm a lesbian. And I know that's a myth for a lot of lesbians because we're both women, but I still like having our separate responsibilities." To navigating womanhood and female identity, which Adama describes as, "A lot of stress, haha. For me it's like, each of them help me kind of navigate the world, that we're living in… Okay, I'm a woman, which means this is what is expected of me. I know because I identify as a cis woman that I am seen as a cis woman and therefore, that means there are things I cannot do. For example, going out late at night, in a random place, because I'm a woman. I know because I identify as a woman, that's something that I cannot do."

Some in the study population feel less strongly about gender associations. As Muido explained: "Identifying as a woman, sometimes I feel like it's a political identity more than anything. I'm ambivalent about being a woman, but one of the reasons that I call myself a feminist and I call myself a woman, and I'm an advocate for women and women's issues, is because I do feel that women are marginalized. And so, I feel like calling myself one is more a political issue, like a political stance, than one that is sort of labeling how I really feel." Muido added:

> I grew up in a very patriarchal society where I was very uncomfortable with my femaleness because, I would describe myself as maybe cis by default, I think, where I don't really have dysphoria, but I don't greatly identify with being female. It's an identity that I was socialized into, and I guess one of the reasons why I don't identify as agender is because there's friction. I like to call it friction, like social friction with trying to move into that space and having people use

they/them pronouns for me and things like that. It creates social friction that I'm not… I guess brave enough or comfortable enough with dealing with. So, I just sort of identify as female and I sort of tried to find people who don't really ascribe stereotypes to me based on that, and to treat me as a person first and being female is just another characteristic. And those are the people that I'm most comfortable around.

Judith Butler would likely agree with Muido's understanding of gender and "social friction." Butler (1990) describes gender as being discursive and relates a level of illegibility that comes with not identifying with the binary concepts of maleness and femaleness, though the terms used by Muido and Butler differ, the ideas run parallel.

Amongst those who are a part of the queer community, not identifying with the gender binary has become more widespread as the concept becomes better understood. As Kody explained:

Since I was fairly young, I felt like my experience with gender is very open. My mom will quote me from when I was a kid being like, "I like being a girl, because girls are great," but I remember, I literally remember my logic at the time, I was like, girls can dress girly, but they can also address boy-ish, and that's fine. I can be a tomboy and that's fine as a girl. And I think that was the freedom I was really excited about. I thought, yeah being a girl is cool, I can be like boyish and a girl at the same time and that's like totally okay and that was being encouraged in the early 2000's, to some extent. Then I do remember a time in college when I wasn't fully out to myself, but I had a few experiences with just dressing a little bit more masculine and just really feeling good about that and feeling really affirmed by that. And I had met some non-binary friends then and I kind of started to open my mind a little bit about that… Then a while later, I was like, "You know what, I'm going to just start putting they/them on things like my email signature at work and things like that," because my job has email signatures and usually people have pronouns in them. And it just became a thing. [Then] I moved into an all-queer household, and I was able to just say I wanted to be called by they/them and that was great. Eventually my boss noticed my email signature and asked me about it and then I kind of came out at work as using they/them exclusively.

But everyone experiences gender differently, and there are a variety of gender identity terms outside of male, female, and non-binary. As Kody went on to explain, "I identify as

non-binary in an umbrella sense, because I feel like I don't fit like, I'm not in a binary

category and I'm not cis, but at the same time, lately, I felt more alienated from the term

[non-binary]… I just feel very gender-full and feel like there's times where I like being

very girly, and there's times where I like being more masc, and there's times where I like

just kind of not thinking about it so, that's why I go with fluid gender… Oh, I also really

like the term genderqueer… It is a term I like because I'm not non-ing my gender, but I

am queering my gender, if that make sense."

Leon, who identifies as being non-binary, chooses to use a first name in lieu of

pronouns entirely. As Leon described,

> I tried they/them, and so, I did it with the job I had, white people are terrible, like
> these two women who were just like, "We're English majors and 'they' is not a
> singular," and I was just like, "Can you just stop your transphobic nonsense?" So,
> one of them, when she wrote up my performance review, or whatever annual
> review, refused to use they/them. Just used my name throughout the entire thing,
> and it was actually a little bit weird. First of all, I recognized that as a fucking
> microaggression. But also, I recognized that they/them hadn't been feeling like
> really fully me. And I've always loved my name, I'd never had any plans to
> change my name, I love the origin of how my mom picked out my name and so I
> was just like, "Oh, maybe I'll do that then." So yeah, I was like, I will no longer
> be using they/them, I'm going to go by [Leon] and here we are. I think it's been
> six years. I want to say 2000…5 years? 2016 is when I think I came out as non-
> binary."

Em also expanded upon the experience of identifying as non-binary, "I identify as

non-binary not trans, which is weird to a lot of people, I realized. I was like, no, it's a

thing, because I've never felt like a girl and like, I'm not a guy." They explain that

though there are struggles related to identifying in this way, such as being misgendered

over the phone, ultimately, they feel more comfortable identifying as non-binary. Adding

that things have gotten a little better since they received what they've termed their 'non-

binary' top surgery." Though they pointed out that, "The biggest thing is with a lot of

POC it's really kind of hard for us to be like "Yeah, I'm gender queer," because we get so

much shit for just even being different from the binaries and then when they find out you

don't want to be in the binaries, even if you're trans, it's just like you're, it's doesn't

exist, so there's a lot of like… Not flack, but it's very discouraged within the POC

community."

Mayowa also described this same feeling of discontinuity when it came to race

and an understanding of their own gender. Despite their own discomfort with the gender

binary, they have struggled to feel comfortable identifying as non-binary. They

explained,

> I'm a Nigerian-American, I don't know if you know that, but yeah, I'm Nigerian-American and so, one of my friends was telling me about the person they were dating who's non-binary, and I kept referring to them as "she" and then eventually they were like, 'Oh, this person uses they/them pronouns.' And I think I met them and I realized that they were white and in my head I was just like, "This is like a Western concept." And then years later, I saw some folks on my Twitter timeline were coming out, and they were talking about how they think it's violent to be misgendered and they weren't white or Black, and I was like, Oh wait, let me learn more about this thing, because clearly it's not just white people. This is not like a white folk's thing. I didn't have anyone to explain it to me, so I just googled like the millennial that I am. One night I just stayed up all night googling a bunch of stuff, and that's how I discovered that I was non-binary, actually. I was like, 'Wow here's this term to describe what I've been feeling all these years.' But I didn't identify as that because I still didn't feel like I had permission to do so.

These accounts demonstrate vividly that race factors into a person's

conceptualization of their own identity as much as gender and sexuality do. When you

are a person of color, being a part of the queer community in U.S. looks very different

than it does for white queer folks.

<u>Blackness</u>

As discussed in the literature review, misrecognition based on racial stereotypes can make one feel as though they are constantly attempting to stand upright in a crooked room (Harris-Perry 2011). Some of the stereotypes named earlier were referred to by participants while recounting their racial identities. The idea of authenticity will feature prominently later in this chapter, but as I explained above, in order to understand the relevance of authenticity we must first understand the systemic stereotypes and biases that embracing of authenticity actively subverts. Kody referenced the "angry Black woman," or "aggressive Black woman." They added "the tragic mulatto" and they elaborated, "it's very loaded, I think, for me" because Kody's racial origins are half Black and half white, being mixed factors into their identity and thus that stereotype is particularly damaging in their case. Leon explained, "I constantly try and point out at work that people's unconscious bias and implicit bias, or whatever, are getting in the way of people hearing me. I was definitely called a liar today, like not in so many words, but in a, "You're saying that, but I wasn't there," and I was like, "You're calling me a liar." They just assume that I'm lying, I'm lazy, I'm angry, I'm stupid, and when I say all those things I am thinking about my Black identity."

Jamie Lee cites the experience of being grossly underpaid for most of her professional career. She pointed out: "I'm not unlike many, I think, Black women earn on average 67 cents on every dollar that a white man earns. So, I'm not alone in that, but there was a time when I just was blind to it. I didn't even want to look, I didn't even want to know, and I'm a federal employee, so all the data is there, I could have known, but I

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didn't want to know because I felt powerless to do anything about it." Thankfully that is no longer the case for Jamie Lee, but that instance speaks volumes to just one of the many experiences of racial inequality endured by Black people, particularly Black women, in the United States.

Muido's experience of Black identity is different due to being born and raised in the Gambia, "Growing up surrounded by other Black people, being Black wasn't really the most salient thing about my identity… So, I've lived in Canada, I've lived in England, and now I'm in the US, living in sort of white centric spaces re-contextualizes my identities to where it pushes being Black to the forefront, because that's how people see me first, I think." Muido went on to tell a story of an experience with outright racism in the United States:

> When I was interning at the Library of Congress, me and a friend, she was also Black and African, we were interning together, and it was after the internship it ended around five o'clock. Everyone was at [the] Metro waiting to get on the train. And a group of Black young students, like high school students, come in and are making a bunch of noise or singing and all that stuff. And I'm just like, wow, look at all these Black kids having fun. And this lady just looks completely disgusted and upset. And she like turns to me and looks at the big stack of books I'm holding. And she's like, "Well at least you read." And I was just like, I literally laughed in her face. I'm so glad that that was my reaction, that I didn't get it, like literally the absurdity of it.

For Muido, this experience only served to highlight the differences from where they grew up in the Gambia, where Blackness was nearly universal, but in the United States it becomes what they described as their "most salient identity" as a part of a minority group in this country, making this encounter all the more shocking.

Vivian, who was born in DC, but has spent a lot of time in Ghana, also reflects on the contrast of how race is constituted in West Africa compared to in the U.S.:

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Being in Black in Africa wasn't an issue that was even really talked about. But we talk about it all the time. We talk about it ceaselessly because of our situation. So, that would be a part of my background and my upbringing. Whereas little Black kids running around in Africa don't have that same upbringing. I remember, maybe being eight or nine years old and going to the library and being confronted, walking in front of this little old white lady. And I was looking at her thinking she looked kind of like, you know, I was thinking she looked like a grandmother, the grandmother in some fairy tale or something. And I was just looking at her as I walked up to her, and she looked at me and she said 'Get outta my way you Black nigger.' That's not an experience that most African kids would have.

The confrontations faced by Muido and Vivian are clearly motivated by a level of

misrecognition so severe as to be violent. While these experiences are singular, the

sentiment behind them and what they represent is common. Misrecognition from a racial

standpoint can be felt in many other ways, for many other reasons as well.

Carol, for instance, explained that her reasoning for preferring to move in Black

spaces is because she has been confronted with more casual racism than casual

homophobia in her life, stating, "This is a highly educated area, I think the problem with

intelligent people, it's easy for them to be racist and not know it, most intelligent people

are more aware if they're homophobic, or those kind of things."

Lissette, who is a light-skinned Black woman, described the opposite experience:

I always had kind of a difficulty navigating when I would go into more Black spaces, because it was like, "Oh, you talk like you're white. You think you're this, you think you're that." And then you had colorism, that was also part of that which was very foreign to me… So, moving here has been the most amazing thing. I mean, it was probably more repressive than any other experience I've had moving in Black spaces. I'm like, there isn't just one way to be Black in this world. And that's part of what makes us so beautiful and dynamic, you know, we are everything. But I have been met, professionally, even, I've been harassed on my job, I've been denigrated by principles and other people in authority because I don't fit the Black mold, I don't fit the Central Maryland PG County, Black prototype.

Mayowa also described feeling discriminated against by people who perceived her as not

fitting into the correct mold of Blackness.

> I've been made to feel by African-Americans that I am not American. And I don't understand, I've never understood the desire to hold on to and fight for one's American-ness, this country barely wants you… I remember I was in like freshman year of high school and we're learning, it was a US history class, and I just remember being, everyone, like the kids in the classroom, they're like, "I'm not African," and I was like you realize your identifier is African hyphen American, have you ever asked yourself why the only people who get to consider themselves native to America are literally Native Americans, and everyone else has another identifier? They're like "I'm not African" I'm like, what? You're literally descendants of Africans like, "I ain't from Africa, I ain't African." I get it, you can't relate to being directly from there, but the desire by some African-Americans to sort of, what's the word I'm looking for? Disconnect, yeah, kind of like disconnect themselves from their African-ness.

Mayowa added "But I would literally say to Black people like 'You realize that we would all be hanging from the same tree?' There is not a special tree for you, it's not gonna be made out of gold because you're the "real African-American," you know, we would all literally be hanging from the same tree, we need to unite and allow people to take up space that deserve to have the fucking space. And go about our days because we have bigger shit to deal with then paper bagging each other."

Despite these feelings of not "fitting the Black mold" or experiencing prejudice within the Black community, everyone participating in this research specifically chooses to seek out majority Black or POC dominated spaces. Adama explained:

> As people of color, we have experienced, not only as people of color but also immigrants, depending on the region that you live, the culture, the work culture can be different. And if you keep having experiences where you're in spaces where every time you try to speak, they shut you off. You will learn not [to] speak because, guess what? They're going to shut you off, they're not gonna listen to your ideas. And I think that's the experience of Black people in general. In most of the white centric countries, we are taught very early not to speak up because when you speak up they will always find a way to shut you off or pretend that they didn't listen to you.

And on an even more basic level, as Kara put it: "Being in spaces with other

[Black] people there, the cultural references are similar, identity markers are similar. So, that just felt really important and again, especially in the past, I don't know, five to ten years when there's been so much more visible societal unrest and focus on ways that Black communities are under attack, in a way, being in spaces where I can share that, I can just kind of be connected with other folks who know what that's like." With this exceedingly portentous point we can begin to understand the value of being around others with similarly intersecting identities.

<u>Intersectionality</u>

As outlined earlier, Kimberlé Crenshaw heuristically describes intersectionality as a traffic intersection of identities (1989). According to Crenshaw, "The point is that Black women can experience discrimination in any number of ways and that the contradiction arises from our assumptions that their claims of exclusion must be unidirectional" (149). The argument presented here runs counter to an additive approach to the study of identity, in which one might ask a person how they would rank the relevance of each of their identities or ask them to explain their experiences with different identity categories separately (2016). This research employs a non-additive approach to understanding identity with the express purpose of exemplifying the relations between identities from the subjective perspective of individuals who embody a multitude of intersections. The importance of an intersectional approach to understanding identity becomes abundantly clear when participants were asked the question, "What does holding this identity mean to you?" As Vivian told me,

> I suspect that my identity and my experience are so intertwined that it's difficult
> to separate them. Being a woman, a Black woman in America is a unique

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experience. And so, that has certainly shaped who I am. Identifying even as a middle-class person, because after having lived in Ghana where people were seriously deprived of economic stability, I really got to experience how middle-class we are even though we might not identify that way. Being queer shapes my identity because I see the world through that lens, even though it doesn't block me in to not feel loving to other people who are not in that queer circle. And I think that identity is important. And that [identity], actually, can shift a little bit in some areas. You know, for instance, I've worked in HIV and AIDS for 25-30 years, so identified myself as an AIDS activist. Well right now, I'm not necessarily identify myself that way. So, some identities come and kind of drop out of our lives. Or I identify myself as a person who's very interested in my health and holistic ways of eating and doing things, so you know those things can shift, or they can remain the same. Certainly, things like, who we are, male, female, Black, those things don't shift, but a lot of our identities, it appears to me, can shift, change, grow, or be depleted over a period of time.

Kara answered in a similar manner stating:

So, it's sort of interesting. I almost can't separate queer Black woman, right? Because it feels like they're all kind of rolled up into one, in part because the Black part, I mean people could make assumptions about what my race or ethnicity is, but that's a pretty visible identity, similar to my woman identity, again people could make assumptions about what particularly that might be or mean, but it's relatively visible. My queer identity is a hidden identity that I, for the most part, choose to make open and known to other people.

It is this interconnectedness of identity and experiences that makes intersectional analysis all the more valuable. In light of these examples and self-explanations it is clear how asking a person to separate out these interrelating understandings of intersectional identity and experience, or believing them to be inherently disconnected, can result in a great deal of misrecognition. The full picture will never form, and the subject will never be show as three dimensional, they will remain divisible into normative constituent parts.

Kody described their intersectional identity as being a lens that allows them to better contextualize their own existence and deconstruct binary ideas, stating, "It's both a lifelong journey but also a framework through which I can see the world. You know,

everyone has their own particular way of seeing the world and a lot of my coming of age

I feel like was me trying to understand and breakdown dichotomies and understanding,

like how binary thinking can be really not a whole picture. And existing in gray space in

terms of race, but also gender and other things.”

Lissette portrayed her identity very poetically saying:

 “Well, there are layers to it. Wow. That identity is… Lush and rich, there are

many layers to it. Like I said before, the intersectionality of being Black and what that

encompasses, whether it’s contextualized or not. Along with being a woman in this

society, at this time, and all that that encompasses in terms of my own personal lived

experience. And then as a lesbian, this, it’s kind of like an inter-woven tapestry that kind

of supports me. That’s the best way that I can articulate that.”

Asking people existing within the intersection of queerness, Blackness, and being

a part of a gender minority to separate out their individual identities is particularly

problematic because society often already chooses discrete aspects of complex identities

to make judgements upon, often ignoring the whole person, looking only at one layer of a

multifaceted tapestry. There is a deep level of invisibility and unintelligibility that comes

with existing within that cross-section. As Adama pointed out:

> The thing is, lesbians are kind of invisible. Black queerness is invisible as
> well. So, unless you’re [a] stereotype you will not be seen as being part of
> the LGBT community. I don’t count anymore how many times people
> involved me in conversation thinking that I was against homosexuality.
> Just because I’m Black… Because unfortunately even now in society
> [people] equate being Black against being queer.

Kara provided an example of when this preconceived notion influenced her

lack of comfort with her multidimensional identity around her peers:

So, one of the things that I think about. Or maybe not often, but I reflect on it sometimes is [that] growing up in New York City, I went to a very snooty private school where I was one of four Black kids in my grade… There were a very small handful of us, right? And so, kind of feeling like if I'm going to have Black friends, I can't also be queer, or openly queer and feeling that way in college as well, I went to the University of Pennsylvania. It was like, oh Black people, yay! Well, will I still have these Black friends if I present as queer? And so, kind of really struggling through how do I do that? How do I kind of navigate being myself in ways that feels safe for me?

Leon described an opposite, but related experience in which a co-worker in an employee resource group (ERG) essentially asked Leon to stop making everything about being a person of color. As Leon stated:

I was in a queer group because I'm the new intersectionality director for our ERG. And during that meeting someone on our ERG board said that she felt erased by a lot of last year's programming. And she's like, 'Yeah, like I think it's important for us to realize that we're the LGBTQ ERG not the Black ERG,' or she said the people of color ERG. And I was just like, I'm both, though… So, what? You tellin' me I gotta take off my Blackness when I come here and then put it back on and go to the AAN if I want to be Black? Like what? It's just like, come on, I'm in a fucking queer space, and I'm still facing this nonsense because it wasn't a queer people of color space! So, it's rare that I feel like I can be like everything that I am.

Situations such as these illustrate the importance of having access to intersectional spaces in order to embrace one's full identity and have it, in turn, be embraced by others. Mayowa explained the experience of going to a group at the DC Center for WLW and then going to a QPOC meeting:

That desire for community led me to the queer POC group because as that excitement of just having queer community wore off it's like I need folks who understand where I'm coming from. And I make a comment at a table about how the Good Hair Act got passed in California and I'm outraged. Or I'm outraged about police brutality. I need to see that outrage reflected. One thing we do as people of color is literally like, I don't know, we echo each other's feelings a lot, and to be in spaces where your passion and frustration at how people who look like you are treated unfairly is being

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received with like, "Oh, you're so intense" it's like, yeah, I need to be with my people, and y'all ain't it." They added, "There are white queer people, yes, but there are white, racist, queer people. And so, you can be in these other spaces and it's kind of like you have to water yourself down. And that's literally the point of coming out is like, I don't want to do that anymore. So, if I have to water myself down or reduce a part of myself then I can't be here.

Kara described a similar feeling of not being full represented in a space that is designed for only one aspect of one's identity in explaining the three different book clubs she attends:

One of my book clubs is with some friends from college, so that, that kind of turns into yeah we're reading the book we're talking about the book but also where it's just a time and space to catch up with one another. And then another book club is a group of Black women that I didn't know prior, and that when I feel like a little bit more hit or miss. And I, interestingly, it feels like the Black lesbian book club has ruined me for that group, cause I'm like, 'But it doesn't feel like this!' Or we don't read things that are like more fully reflective of the different pieces of who I am.

Vivian found herself in a situation in which she was not fully representing her myriad identities, in the interest of safety. When her sexuality came to light, it was met by misrecognition, which Vivian chose to meet head on,

There is a certain amount of being… Of not sharing or being closeted in a place where you know that there's a huge amount of homophobia, for instance. And if you're in that space then it's a safety issue to decide of this is not something I'm making an issue. However, while I was there, serving as the president of the African American Association of Ghana, which was a very high position for the Africans in the diaspora position, I was outed. And my sexuality became an issue. So, then I did have to stand up and say, I'm proud of who I am, I'm not ashamed. This is who I am, I'm not denying it, it's all over the web. It's not a secret. All you gotta do is put my name in and all this stuff comes up, everything that you could ever want to know about me comes up. I'm a public person in that regard. And so no, I wasn't trying to deceive anybody… And that was an area where my racial identity intersected with the sex— with the queer identity, and where it wasn't very comfortable.

She added, "But that I had to stand in both of those things. Because I'm still Black, I'm still a lesbian, and I'm not ashamed, and I have done quite a bit of work so that we could all be free, so I'm not hiding it." Some people benefit from the privilege of not having to put part of themselves away in order to be in different spaces safely. For queer people this is rarely the case, for queer people of color bringing their entire selves into any space is rarely possible, the intersectional nature of our identities prohibits us from always being able to present all aspects of ourselves.

Thus far I have intentionally presented some seemingly contradictory experiences described by the participants of the study for the express purpose of demonstrating one of the most important aspects that is key to understanding intersectional identities. Our experiences are vastly different across the board. Though all of the individuals involved in this research have overlapping identities, their experiences cover an expansive range; no two people experience or express their identities in the same way, but we all deal with some level of societal oppression, discrimination, feeling of being othered, or being rendered unintelligible, which draws us together. We all approach both Blackness and Queerness very differently due to our varied backgrounds and circumstances. Intersectionality as a lens offers a way of examining not only similarities, but important differences as well.

Adama describes relating more strongly to issues affecting French people than issues impacting African Americans because she is not originally from the U.S.

> You know, [at work] every time they talk about the activities, everything
> that's been put in place to further reach out to African Americans, I'm
> like, yeah, that is not me, but every time they talk about everything that is
> being put in place to reach out to French Francophones I'm like, yeah,

that's for me, thank you! Which is weird when you think about it, because I know that when most people think about [the] French and Francophones they think about white people, and then the African Americans are Black and I'm Black so I should be feeling more connected, I should feel more like oh they are talking about me when they are talking about African Americans, but I do not feel that at all, because I am not. But I'm French, so when they talk about it, I'm like oh okay, now you're talking about me.

While Lissette explained that her experience of Blackness, even though she identifies as being African American, differed greatly from the expected narrative:

This whole day we're doing this whole bias training thing, PG County, and it was such bullshit. I was like, you know, everybody does not have this monolithic experience. That everything is about the first time somebody called you the N word or whatever, I'm like okay so can we talk about the homophobia? We got the racism down, we're Black people, we're living in a country now as descendants of our people being stolen from our countries and being brought here. Let's talk about how Black people perpetuate homophobia because I'm keenly interested in that, because as a Black person I don't feel safe. And most Black spaces are not welcoming to me. That is probably one of my primary concerns, not white folk. I got that, I know where we are with that. But the fact that I am still more likely to be violated or victimized by a Black man because I am a gay woman than I am anyone else. And the verbal violence that goes on towards me, and other gay and lesbian people, other queer people period. That needs to get dealt with as well, they didn't want to, you know, it's like, well this isn't the right platform. I said no, we're talking on anti-bias.

Adding that, "So, when I moved here, I didn't care what people think about me, I am who I am, and being Black is a state of being. It's a state of mind, it's not just cultural stuff, right? And it looks different. We don't come in one flavor."

This multitude of experiences with race, gender, and sexuality, is what comprises the entirety of a person, and this variance is often ignored when discussing identity. As Jamie Lee stated, "That's one thing that I have found very interesting about the group is that… I see so much individualism, in the group, and it reminds me that while yes, we do have a shared theme in our lives, at the end of the day, humans are very much

individuals, you know, and that theme does not define, in any way, [the] totality of who

we are, we're so much more than those two identities Black and lesbian. But I do think it

creates the space for some really interesting conversations that can't always occur."

Muido echoed this notion telling me,

> I think it's just like a practical concern for one, because if it was just a
> queer group, then it would be majority white. And it's sort of like
> recreating my youth for me, but like what I wish it had been. When I was
> in Africa and growing up African and didn't really have to think about my
> Blackness as the most salient identity, it's sort of like that for me. I don't
> have to think about my Blackness as my most salient identity in the queer
> POC group… It's like a break from being in the US. It's like our own little
> country where we're all people of color and we're not the minority
> anymore. And I think it allows us to focus on our differences as well,
> because it's okay, we all agree that we're people of color, we all agree that
> we're queer. So now, what differences are there that we can talk about?
> Let's talk about this show, or let's talk about this book, and let's see what
> we agree and disagree on without having to have that conversation about
> race and queerness and justify it. I think all of that, all those layers are
> gone. We don't have to focus on those because everyone is queer,
> everyone's a person of color. And all that's left is our differences, which
> we can just sort through because they're usually trivial.

Muido added, "We do have our own differences and stuff, so I feel like it's kind of

healthy to see that, just because we're queer doesn't mean we're the same. At the very

like bottom of it all we're just people who can disagree and agree and support each other

and all that stuff."

Lissette echoed this notion stating, "I mean, we are not a monolith, and we come

together as this quite diverse collective of women and yet. It's like, I don't really have to

know you to honor you and hold space for you. And that takes the whole emotional labor

part, away from it. It's a time to just be able to just unfold, and be, and it's like, yeah, I

know my sister, she's got me. Outside of this space, we may not have anything else in common, but we have this."

Gathering

Lissette also points out that:

> We really have to seek them out, we have to, we have to create and curate those spaces." Because even within the queer community there is a lack of understanding of what it is like to be Black in the United States. Lissette added, "No, but they don't understand that because that's that privilege again. And then, part of that privilege [means] they come from a standpoint that the whole world is constructed for them. I mean, because it is, all the systems that we have in place are for their benefit and their enjoyment. And so, they take that into every other aspect of living… So, they don't understand, because they don't understand the phenomenon of marginalization." When you occupy the margins, you must construct and carve out your own spaces and your own sense of belonging.

Certainly, there are other things that draw people to these groups and meetings such as loneliness as Jamie Lee described, "When I moved here in 2011, I left a pretty established community of friends and network of people in St. Louis, so then moving here was… I was very, very lonely, and it was a really rough transition, and I was trying to make friends. I just had that longing and seeking for relationships and community, specifically Black lesbian community. I had found some community, but it wasn't that kind of community." Or being an introvert as Muido explained, "I think, I'm sort of an introverted person. I tend to be kind of reclusive. I'm a little shy and yeah, I'm kind of an introvert. My hobbies are very introverted, they revolve around reading and writing and stuff that I can do on my own. So, definitely creating a community was something that I had to do deliberately because I'm just a very introspective individual person."

There is often a driving need to find a community where you have more aspects

of identity in common with others, as Ashley described:

> I definitely felt a need to connect with other lesbians, especially because at the time I was attending a church that was very gay man heavily populated and operated. So, you kind of want it. You know, I seen other lesbians, and I knew of some, but I still didn't feel like I could approach them on some, I need advice or, you know, I'm struggling with something, or I just didn't feel like I can approach them on that level. But I've always loved community

A sentiment echoed by Kara, "But in terms of if I am looking to build new friendships and communities more likely than not, I'm looking for Black women or Black queer women."

In reference to the Sapphire Sapphos, Vivian highlights an important difference about the spaces we carve out in the Black queer community. The way we go about gathering and embodying space often diverges from the white or mainstream queer community,

> It brings an opportunity for us to focus on our issues as same-gender loving, as some women who, you know, women who came out of families and communities and interesting enough, see in Washington, I'm always found of saying that Black people don't create gay ghettos and we don't necessarily move into gay ghettos, gay ghettos being places like what Dupont Circle used to be or what the Castro in San Francisco used to be or even what the Village was in New York, where people surround themselves with like-minded people, many of them leaving their own communities to come into those communities, but us as same-gender loving people of African descent, we were mostly home bread and born here in Washington, and had a whole different set of issues. We weren't necessarily running from our families, we were running towards each other, to make some sense of it.

Authenticity

Though not originally a part of my research question, multiple participants in this study brought up the concept of authenticity unprompted. It is clearly of profound

significance and an important component in understanding why people with intersecting identities seek to gather with others who have similarly intersecting identities. As Muido described, "I think the thing that drives me is wanting to see myself more in other people. Also, not wanting to have to explain myself as much, wanting to be with people who have had the same experiences. And it's not a search for sameness as much as search for similarity, important similarities." As Leon explained, "There's places where I feel like I can be my full self, or places where I feel like I can be one or two of my identities, and then there are places where I'm like, people just are like, I need you to go."

To Mayowa, being in these spaces allows them to be their authentic self, "I am learning to accept myself. I'm finding a way to love myself that's not predicated on me fitting like these rigid cultural boxes. Like I mentioned earlier, a word that is important to me is authenticity, like I am being my true self and being authentic. And I think we get one life, and we get to figure ourselves out and do what we want to do and it's important that we do just that, and not worry so much about other people's opinions."

Vivian's work as an activist has led her to being able to be her authentic self even when circumstances were not conducive to others accepting all facets of her identity, "I had to stand in both of those things. Because I'm still Black, I'm still a lesbian, and I'm not ashamed. I have done quite a bit of work so that we could all be free, so I'm not hiding it." Kara's work has allowed her this same access to authenticity, "In the work that I do in particular, I'm a psychologist, I am very open about my identities, in part, because a lot of the clients I work with are people of color and queer identified, and so having that representation feels important both to me and to them, from what they've told me. So,

just kind of being able to be authentic and to bring my full self into whatever spaces I'm in. So, that may be that I am verbally saying what my identities are, or it may be that I'm not, but I'm also not hiding it, it just hasn't happened to come out in conversation." Kara continued on to articulate what authenticity means to her, "Not having to leave or feel like I have to leave any of my identities, outside, or just kind of having that centered, right? So, even if I'm not leaving [my identities] outside, having that front and center, as opposed to, not spoken about or marginalized in some kind of way."

This notion of authenticity, as expressed by several participants of this research, is predicated on the ability to expressed and acknowledge a majority of one's intersecting identities all at once, without fear of repercussion. Authenticity can, perhaps, be viewed as the act of expressing's one multitudinous intersecting identities. In being authentic an individual is able to fully embody their own identity within a space and around others without shame or unease, and through this gaining some additional capacity to accept themselves. These acts of embracing authenticity actively resist and subvert marginalizing and oppressive social norms.

Safe Space

So, what kind of spaces allow a person to embody their authenticity? Several group members described the groups in question as "safe spaces." These safe spaces are embodied spaces, a self-production of, in this case, virtual space in which one feels comfortable believing that they know they are out of harm's way within the confines of said space. As Vivian defined, "A safe space is just where we can come and relax and feel unguarded and where I can just be myself and not have to censor what I'm saying.

And where honesty exists, as well as people's integrity is on the front line instead of the on the back line. So those are safe spaces. Just places that embrace us and where we feel comfortable and that we can create a sense of home inside of ourselves."

For Leon a safe space is palliative, "I think it brings a sense of calm, like a feeling that you can just like be your full self. I know that occasionally I do have to correct people on my pronouns, but it's one less thing than having to be an advocate for every single other identity I hold." To Carol a safe space means physical safety, "I feel safe in just, in spaces that feel like Black women. Black intelligent women. I feel physically safe and physically relaxed in those spaces and just not on edge." For Lissette a safe space provides the ability to move and speak freely, "I like the discourse, I like the dialogue. It feels pretty much like a safe space for me. So, I feel like it's okay for me to, you know, be verbal and say things. I took a little hiatus from the group for a while, but then when I came back, I was like, yeah, I like this space, I think I can move in this space."

As Jamie Lee and Ashley, both members of the BLSG, explained, the closed nature of the group allows for it to be a safe space. As Jamie Lee articulated, "[You have to be] Black, and a lesbian, or are questioning, and I consider that one in the same. So, I love that because it's not age specific. I love to see younger people, older people, a mix of both, people who, like myself, might be Black and something else, you know? I think it's very inclusive, but at the same time closed enough to create a safe space for people… And the "L" I don't think is celebrated enough in LGBT, and I definitely don't think Black lesbians are celebrated enough, so anywhere that we can be visible through having a group like that, but then also have it be something for ourselves cause Black lesbians

spend so much time giving to the community." As Ashley put it, "I think it gives us a safe

space… And sometimes you just want your own space because the struggles of a white

lesbian are not the same [as those] of a Black lesbian. So, it gives us our own space and

we don't have to pretend like we don't matter or that our struggles are not ours, you

know, because we're in a room with some other people who don't have those similar

struggles. So, I like it. I definitely think it allows us to just talk, there's no expectation

that you have to be a certain way, that you have to appease a certain demographic, is

really that we just here to talk, you know like, let's talk about it."

This notion of a safe space falls in line with Valentine's theory of "gay

time/space" in which queer individuals consciously seek out other queer people to relieve

their physical and social isolation by creating pockets of space and time that allow for an

individual to feel safe and express themselves freely without fearing backlash (1993).

However, I believe what we, as a society, have come to understand as a "safe space" is

closer to a utopia than a reality. This feeling of comfort and safety is not ever-present, not

even in these groups. As described above, there are still some feelings of discomfort and

apprehension, even within these closed spaces. Which leads us to the idea of heterotopia.

Heterotopia

These groups function as a space of safety and community, they bring together the

often-contrasting social sites of queerness and Blackness, and they are accessible only to

those whose identity fits within certain parameters. I suggest that the groups I am

analyzing here have, during the pandemic, created virtual heterotopias which exist as

spaces without place, and which lie in the space between a "crisis heterotopia" and a

"heterotopia of deviation." These spaces are in a crisis of misunderstanding and illegibility, and the intersectional identities of those who attend render them outside of what is considered to be the norm (Foucault 1986, Bailey and Shabazz 2014). Bailey and Shabazz articulate this as, "the space around the corner" or a liminal space "out of site," in this case, closed off from the rest of normative society by the barriers of identity requirements and restrictions.

As Adama articulated:

We are with people who understand our struggle, and it's more just friendly, it's like (*deep sigh of relief*) space where I can just be. And finally express my struggle without that feeling that I'm overdoing it. You know, we can talk about all the things that happened at our work or the microaggressions that we have [experienced] without people being like, "No, they meant well, that's not exactly it," at least within the QPOC we don't have that issue.

She added, "Anyway, all that to say that when I'm with QPOC I feel like I can say [things] without having that person pushing my experience and making it so that [I] feel like it's my fault, I misunderstood a thing. When I'm in an environment with a lot of white people, I'm pretty sure if I bring up those issues of race, which is very much part of my everyday life, they will not understand, they will dismiss it. And I don't have time for that. That is why I think POC spaces are very much important."

As Emmet imparted:

It's the one place that everybody can just be themselves without having to worry about masking, which is what a lot of us are stuck doing on the day-to-day, whether it's when we go to the store, or at work; and it's just a free place to vent, and other people will be nodding along and agreeing with you, or giving you advice and building you up, or hyping you up about a situation… And it's much needed because of the society and the time that we're in, especially everything that happened last year, not only with COVID, but with the murderers and the riots and everything. We all just

needed a place where we could feel like we could breathe.

Jamie Lee affirmed this feeling saying:

I think it's just like in the rest of American culture, white men just
dominate. I mean, that's just been my experience, there's just more of
them, and they take up a lot of space given the opportunity, and white
women do it too. I think that sometimes people don't feel as comfortable
to speak as freely about whatever it is that's going on, if they think they're
in front of people who might not understand them. Now, could those
people who don't look like them, and don't share similar identities,
understand them? Sure. I'm not saying that they can't. I'm just talking
about a feeling that people have, especially when they're dealing with
people that they don't know. I think that we all come together with some
of those kinds of preconceptions and pre-judgements and when you're
dealing with people who are foreign to you it's comforting to have a
common shared experience, and a common identity, and one that's visible,
like in the color of our skin.

Kara echoed Jamie Lee's perspective telling me:

Educationally and occupationally, I tended to be in pretty white spaces…
[But] just wanting folks who look like me, folks who, like we watch the
same TV shows, being in spaces with other people where the cultural
references are similar, identity markers are similar. That felt really
important, especially in the past, I don't know, five to ten years when
there's been so much more visible societal unrest and focus on ways that
Black communities are under attack, being in spaces where I can share
that, I can just be connected with other folks who know what that's like…
Where all the different facets of my identity that feel really salient are
centered, right?

As Lissette described:

I think, going back to that sense of safety and being honored. Your
presence being honored and your perspective or your worldview being
honored. I think that we are always, as black women, we generally move
in spaces that are not safe for us to show up. And aside from whatever
differences we might have, we're all from different walks of life, we have
different lived experiences, but there is an affinity that we share with one
another because afterward we're all moving back into those spaces that
typically do not see us, and do not honor us. I think that commonality
helps to create this kind of vortex of acceptance and warmth and even if
we don't agree there's a certain gentility to how we handle one another in

that space.

As Muido explained:

We live in a cis-heteronormative patriarchy. And so definitely, deviations from the quote unquote norm are punished to a certain extent, even if it's not through violence, it's through misgendering, through alienation from other people. Sometimes people might not wish harm on to you, but they just stop understanding you. And so, there's this social friction, where instead of going in the direction of the waves you're sort of fighting against the current. And I think that bravery does have something to do with that, resilience, strength, bravery. I think you sort of have to be brave to go, "Yeah, I don't care that I'm deviating from other people's expectations, and the expectations of society as a whole, this huge thing that is larger than me, and it's systematic and individual at the same time. But I'm going to go against it because I want to be true to myself." I think that that is something that's very brave to do. And it's something that I sort of haven't done, because I think that… I mean, I try to find places where the current is less strong, if that makes sense. So, with my African, like heterosexual, patriarchal, family members, there's a very strong current of, "This is the right direction to go in," and then around my boyfriend who is also sort of ambivalent about his gender and doesn't really ascribe certain like stereotypes or like femaleness to me [the current is less strong].

The experiences recounted in this chapter highlight the necessity of spaces where the normative current does not pull as strongly. The existence of heterotopias allows for the creation of a divergent and deviant current, and a level of intelligibility, and thus a space for communication and understanding that cannot be achieved elsewhere. In these spaces recognition flows in abundance and here we can feel that we have "achieved access to the human" (Butler 2004).

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

The variety of experiences of the individuals involved in this research

demonstrates the inaccuracy of essentialist historical arguments regarding the LGBTQ

community, as presented by Scott Bravmann (1991). Even among communities of people

with three intersecting axes of identity their experiences and beliefs differ greatly.

Additionally, everyone who was interviewed for this research conveyed some level of

feeling othered, even within the wider queer community. However, the rise to

prominence of the reclaimed term queer has allowed persons using the term to identify

more broadly in terms of gender and sexuality, as several individuals described above.

The ability to use the term queer allows those who choose to identify in that way an

added strategy for avoiding misrecognition within and outside of the queer community.

Harris-Perry (2011) lays out several strategies used by Black women in order to

combat the crooked room, the misrecognition, and the shame. I would argue that the

meeting groups I studied and the responses I received from the participants of this

research demonstrate that they are an effective strategy in helping to combat the

misrecognition faced those who seek out and attend the groups.

While it is clear that the participants of this research have all faced their own

struggles, the way we come together, the way we form communities, the ways we learn to

understand ourselves and our identities can be catalyzed by unhappy or difficult

circumstances, but they can also be joyous and fulfilling. The act of coming to terms with who you are and embracing that is one of the most beautiful functions of humanity.

As Adama described, "One other thing that I've said several times and I think that is one of the reason why I like so much the word lesbian, and that I like saying it so much, and that I am very comfortable with it despite everything that [comes with it] is, in truth, being a lesbian saved my life in so many different ways. If I was straight, I may not be here right now. If I was straight, I may actually may not be alive." Adama attributes being un-married and without kids, in part, to her lesbian identity. These factors allowed her to get her Green Card faster than she would have otherwise. She went on to explain:

> Being a lesbian also saved me, like I told you, I was 10 years old, hanging out with 14, 15 years old. And who even put me into [a] relationship, if I was straight, I'm pretty sure, there's a strong possibility that I would have gotten pregnant at 13, 14. And then from there, your life just go… So, I felt that if I was straight, I would end up in the street with a kid, and probably would of died at some point. So, yeah, being a lesbian saved me in many, many ways, and it's definitely why I am who I am right now. I definitely will not be, if I was not a lesbian. My life would have sucked or ended early or both.

For Adama her sexuality represents a level of protection and safety for her, which is a narrative that is infrequently represented. Overall, the individuals who participated in this study all expressed happiness or a sense of freedom in embracing and being open about their identities. As Audre Lorde puts it: "For Black women as well as Black men, it is axiomatic that if we do not define ourselves for ourselves, we will be defined by others—for their use and to our detriment" (1984, 45). All of the participants represented here have chosen to define themselves and seek out others who are actively electing to do the same. As evidenced above, being misunderstood can be extremely damaging, when

your entire existence is constantly being misunderstood and misread by the rest of society, or even just by the social groups within which you already exist, it can seem overwhelming and inescapable. It is for this reason that support groups and discussion groups exist.

The importance of intersectionality to this study demonstrates how the use of queer theory and Black feminist theory in conjunction with one another allows for a deeper understanding of queer and non-white people. As Cathy J. Cohen states, "At the intersection of oppression and resistance lies the radical potential of queerness to challenge and bring together all those deemed marginal and all those committed to liberatory politics" (1997, 24).

The importance of intersectional analysis in understanding a group of people such as Black, queer persons who identify with a gender minority has been shown through narrative examples to be of great significance. As Kimberlé Crenshaw states, "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (1989, 140). It is important to have forms of representation that acknowledge intersectional identities. As Kara explained,

> I think what's been beneficial is me being able to fully embrace who I am in ways that I was not ready or able to when I was younger. And I think, when I was in high school, and even college to a certain extent, it was very hard to be out, and to be yourself, and there weren't really models for how to do that, certainly not in the ways that there are currently. So, kind of having to figure out the intersection of that with my personality as a "I care very much about what people think and I want to make everyone happy" [kind of person] and realizing you can't do that and still be you, so you're going to have to be you, and the chips are going to have to fall where they lie. But I think the other piece now, is the joy that I find

through my work, and being able to work with queer Black women, I love being able to do that. And I love that most of them have said, "You know, I'm really glad that I get to work with someone who shares my identities," because that's not always easy to do. And just to have that sense [of being] that representation for folks, and to provide access to a space that historically has been closed off, and where even holding a queer identity was pathologized, holding a Black identity *is* pathologized. Being able to tear that down and open space for other people feels pretty great.

Not only is representation of intersectionality important, but so is having the space in which to express one's intersectional identities, as Foucault posits:

The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another" (1986, 23).

Jamie Lee illustrated this importance, telling me:

[In these groups] we never sit around and talk about how we're lesbians, or how we're Black people, that never is a topic of conversation, and you notice it's not in the support group, either. Like we talk about that. I mean, I guess it comes up indirectly, but we basically just are living our lives you know, I'm talking about my wife, [and] she's talking about her wife, that or you know her girlfriend or whatever… But even in that it's like some kind of safety when that is the norm. When that doesn't feel strange or, I don't have to have that thought in my mind like, "Okay, have I come out to this person yet? Okay, let me get ready for that." You know what I'm sayin'? It just is. And that's such a benefit, I think, to have that I'm so grateful to have that in my life. But it's interesting how we don't really talk about lesbianism or even being Black women, we just exist, but within a space where everyone feels very normalized… There's so much comfort there.

As Bailey and Shabazz state, "Heterotopias are 'counter-sites' where the dominant culture is 'represented, contested, and inverted'" (2014, 317) and the value of these spaces for persons who exist within multiple axes of intersecting identities is

extremely high. Authenticity is the result of feeling safe and comfortable with one's surroundings. The ability to bring one's authentic self into a space holds great value on an individual level, but on a communal level as well, as this is how communities are forged and maintained. We as individuals are irreducible, we cannot be boiled down and separated into our composite parts. We are whole, we are three dimensional, and each aspect of our identities and experiences have amalgamated to form who we are and how we move through the world. Without acknowledging the value of these composite experiences there is no way to truly understand these forms of communities. To again borrow Melissa Harris Perry's analogy of the crooked room, we surround ourselves with others with whom we share identity markers, so that we might erect walls around ourselves, in the hopes that we are constructing upright walls within the confines of which we ourselves gain the ability to stand upright, despite the angle of the crooked room.

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Leila Martinez-Bentley receive her Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology from George Mason University in 2017. She continued on to receive her Master of Arts in Anthropology from George Mason University in 2022. After initially studying zooarchaeology she shifted disciplines to cultural anthropology, completing her master's thesis by conducting an autoethnographic, multidisciplinary study into how individuals who exist within the intersections of Blackness, queerness, and identifying as a gender minority choose to gather with other people of similar identities.