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PARADISE FOUND?

BLACK GAY MEN IN ATLANTA: *An Exploration of Community*

by

TOBIAS L. SPEARS

Under the Direction of Layli Phillips Maparyan

ABSTRACT

This study examines the ways in which Black gay men in Atlanta create and experience community and culture every day, notwithstanding those discursive sources that situate life for Black gay men as particularly troubled. Drawing on ethnographic methods, including participant observation and interviewing, I attempt to show the complexity of Black gay men by exploring their world in Atlanta, Georgia, a city that has increasingly become known as a Black Gay Mecca. Qualitative research examining the ways Black gay men create and experience community has the potential to broaden academic discourses that have increasingly medicalized the Black gay male experience, and complicate popular social sentiment which (when recognizing the existence of Black gay men) often posits their life as one dimensional or dimensionless.

INDEX WORDS: Black, Gay, Community, Atlanta, Men, Culture, Black Gay Mecca

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TOBIAS L. SPEARS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2010

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Tobias L. Spears

2010

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BLACK GAY MEN IN ATLANTA: *An Exploration of Community*

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the men of Atlanta who took part in this study, the always curious youth at Youth Pride community center in Atlanta, and the students I work with at Tech, who have shaped me in ways words cannot describe.

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I sit in front of this computer with a million names running through my mind. But, I must start out by saying thanks to God. It is because of God that I sit here with the privilege of having so many people to be thankful for; I am truly humble. During this project, God also sat me down, cleared my mind, and allowed me to focus. God said to me “read, re-read, write, and re-write, then trust.”

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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

While some scholars have centered research on Black gay men and their experiences with HIV/AIDS, the "down low," pervasive mental health issues, sexual racism, and homophobia, only a few have offered analysis of the ways Black gay men as a whole create and experience culture and community every day, despite those discursive sources that cast life for Black gay men as a tangled web of pathologies.

This thesis seeks to add to qualitative research, drawing on ethnographic methods to consider the question "How do Black gay men experience community in Atlanta, a so-called Black gay Mecca?" A close examination of the ways in which Black gay men create and experience community has the potential to broaden academic discourses that have increasingly medicalized the Black gay male experience, and complicate popular social sentiment which (when recognizing the existence of Black gay men) often posits their life as one dimensional or dimensionless.

Although this study focuses on Black gay male subjectivity to elicit group sentiment, I do not mean to diminish the reality of subjective experience or trivialize the lives of Black gay men living with HIV/AIDS, as one diagnosis affects us all. Instead, this research serves to illuminate the culture of Black gay men by showing the complexity of the group and its members.

Significance of the Problem

In a cursory review of academic themed search engines, designed to be used by scholars and students alike, a search of the term "Black gay men" yields some not surprising, but very interesting results. In the interdisciplinary search engine JSTOR, the anthropologist's online research tool Anthropologyplus, the sociological collection at EBSCOhost, the psychology search engine Web of Science, and even Women's Studies International also at EBSCOhost, all

return query results that seemingly reduce academic work about Black gay men to the following categories: public health studies, usually about HIV/AIDS; articles around down-low sexuality; studies on hyper-sexuality; the effects of homophobia; and narratives describing Black gay men as having warped perceptions of self due to lacking the ability to integrate queer sexuality with Black skin.[1] Articles returned in this search speak also to the climate outside the academy, as popular culture often portrays limiting ideas of Black gay men. Cultural media rely on the overbearing caricature of the effeminate Black man who in an attempt to gain acceptance becomes the cunning comedian and site of comedy; or the self-loathing Black gay male caricature who is hyper-masculine, down-low, confused, and at any moment returning to "straight" (Nero, 2005; Robinson, 2009). That some Black gay men have even begun to internalize these limiting character tropes and invent additional figures like the "homothug" shows that Black gay men themselves have become complicit in their own negative characterizations (Walcott, 2007).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how Black gay men in Atlanta create and experience community. The secondary purpose of this research is to provide further qualitative data that speaks to the lived experiences of Black gay men, including the ways these men navigate day to day, despite the negative imagery pervading discourse around their race and sexuality.

[1] This was a survey of the first 25 query results relevant to the search term "Black gay men."

The City of Atlanta

Recently, the *Advocate* dubbed Atlanta 'The Gayest City in America.' The black gay culture in Atlanta figured into that decision. Raymond Duke (In The Life Atlanta)

This study is situated in Atlanta, a southern metropolis in the state of Georgia. Popular culture and news sources have increasingly located Atlanta as a gay haven and more applicably a "Black Gay Mecca" (Albo, 2010; Brown & Bagby, 2010; Jarvie, 2006; Levs, 2005; Miami Times, 2005).[2] Other anecdotal sources have also claimed Atlanta to be a Black gay enclave, using Atlanta's Black Pride Celebration (the largest in the country) as catalyst to their claims, reporting that thousands come to this pride celebration in early September and hundreds never leave (www.inthelifeatl.com). In the Life Atlanta (ITLA) is the official group that coordinates Black Gay Pride during Labor Day weekend; they also host numerous programs during Martin Luther King Jr. day, these forums are a part of another, smaller Black pride celebration that happens in January.

A major reason for Atlanta's "Mecca" status can be attributed to its numerous entertainment companies and club venues that cater to Black gay men. According to their websites, companies like Wassup-in-ATL, Rockstar Productions, RT Parties, Boi-Nation, and stand alone clubs like Bulldogs, Phaze 1, The Jungle, Traxx, Atlanta Live, and Chaparral, offer Black gay men a party or social outlet every night of the week, giving Atlanta a thriving nightlife. Atlanta has garnered fame and notoriety because of the Black gay men that reportedly reside within its borders, making it an ideal place to conduct ethnography to complicate its Black gay male community and culture.

---

[2] According to the 2010 Brookings Institute report "The State of Metropolitan America," the city of Atlanta has one of the highest Black populations in the United States, second only to New York City. Though Atlanta's Black population is steadily growing, the city has been known as a "Black Mecca" since the 1990s.

Black Gay Men

In this study Black gay men are defined as: 1) Black men who self-identify as gay or queer, meaning they accept these popular labels; 2) Black men who identify as same gender loving. These men oftentimes do not label themselves by society's definition of queer, but have romantic and social relations that they reference as same gender loving; and 3) Black men who seek social and romantic relationships with their same gender. This trope is defined as Black men who do not label their sexual orientation through any parameter, but actively seek romance and social relations with other men.

Research Questions

The overarching question guiding this thesis asks: "How do Black gay men experience community in Atlanta, a so-called Black gay Mecca?" The supporting questions are (a) what kinds of social formations support or impede the experience of community, and its many dimensions, among Black gay men in Atlanta; (b) are there specific cultural features of Black gay men in Atlanta, or of the city of Atlanta itself, that assists or plays a role in Black gay men's creation of and experiences with community, or lack thereof?

Summary

This chapter introduced the study being proposed, and highlights the rationale behind the research topic. In the next chapter I review literature themed around Black gay men and their communities, and also elaborate on the theoretical framework for this study.

Chapter 2: SURVEY OF LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an in-depth review of the literature that provides a foundation for this study. This extensive review analyzes and synthesizes literature themed around Black gay men and community. I have intentionally chosen narratives, peer reviewed journals, and theoretical scholarship that is qualitative and sometimes ethnographic. I have done this because it largely reflects the methodology I have chosen for this study- qualitative ethnography. In this review I examine the Black gay male experience within three distinct corpuses: personal narratives and anecdotal writings, social science empirical research, and the theoretical literature of Black queer studies. At the beginning of each section I give a brief definition/ overview of what the section encapsulates and at the conclusion of each segment I offer a summary of how the surveyed literature connects to my research.

Personal Narratives and Anecdotal Writings

Anecdotal discourse serves as one of the main channels through which the Black gay male experience has been understood. Personal narratives, poetry, scholarly articles, and fiction reflecting struggle, happiness, anxieties, knowledge, love, and life's complicated experiences, permeate this body of literature and film pertaining to Black gay men. This mode of creating discourse offers a unique perspective because it is often autobiographical and poignantly emotional. Research has revealed many themes in anecdotal discourse. Below, I group together five of these themes, illustrating their important points in sections titled belonging to a community; identity; negotiating Blackness; and sexuality and homophobia. These individual sections are not mutually exclusive of each other and together they show a unique Black gay male subjectivity.

Belonging to a Community

There's nothing in me that is not in everyone else, and nothing in everyone else that is not in me.

James Baldwin

In 1986 Joseph Beam, Black gay cultural worker, pieced together the groundbreaking text, *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (ITL). ITL hosts a compilation of articles by academicians, activists, and Black gay male writers. The contributors of ITL discuss their personal issues with self-hate, family, and identity. Despite having only one section of the book called Creating Community, a central theme of Beam's entire collection chronicles the ways communal belonging is yearned for by Black gay men.

> I cannot go home as who I am. When I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire Black community: the Black press, the Black church, Black academicians, the Black literati, and the Black left. Where is my reflection? I am most often rendered invisible, perceived as a threat to the family, or am tolerated if I am silent or inconspicuous. I cannot go home as who I am and that hurts me deeply. (Beam, 1986, p.180)

From calling on "Sister Lesbos" to trying to understand why the talents of Black gay men are not better utilized in the Black community, contributors like Donald W. Woods and Stephan Lee Dais concern themselves with making Blackness whole. These authors/poets see the stability of their own lives resting on communities (straight, lesbian, and gay) coming together. In ITL's concluding article, Beam suggests that silence often shrouds the Black heterosexual community from the Black gay community. This lack of language fosters a sense of loneliness in Black gay men, as they naturally look toward the larger Black community for a home. Beam believes this lack of language has permeated Black gay culture as well, as he describes a scene where he and a fellow Black gay man avoid eye contact because of what he believes is silent anger and shame.

In 1988, in the midst of editing his next anthology, Joseph Beam died of AIDS complications. Continuing in Beam's footsteps, poet, activist, and gay cultural worker Essex Hemphill charged himself with co-editing the follow up to ITL, an anthology titled *Brother to*

Brother: New Writing by Black Gay Men. *Brother to Brother* (1991) continued in the tradition of ITL, giving Black gay men a forum to talk through their pain and happiness in ways that did not require them to be invisible. One such example comes through the literary work of author Calvin Glenn, in his title "In My Own Space." Glenn's piece reflects the story of a young Black gay man named Chris. Chris is having mixed feelings about his college choice, but to make himself feel more at home, Chris decides to decorate his residence hall room. One of his decorations, a poster of a male model tacked to the door, causes a stir among his roommates; they begin to speculate about his sexuality. Glenn writes of the exchange between Chris and his roommate Sam:

> He looked at the picture and gave it a few nervous taps. Pointing at the poster, he said, "You can't have this picture up." His plea was in vain. He looked at me with desperate eyes as though I had physically abused him. "Why can't I have it up?" Sam paused to search his fear for coherent reasons. "Look, Chris, when people see this up here they'll think you're homosexual." "But I am gay." (p. 65)

Chris's four words "But I am gay" are symbolic. Not only is Chris unapologetic about his identity, but in his skin he is okay with it. This represents the overall mood of *Brother to Brother*, through prose and poetry, the anthology indexes Black gay men's unapologetic identities.

Identity

Weaving together the sentiments of both *In The Life* and *Brother to Brother*, Marlon Riggs' documentary *Tongues Untied* explores the world of Black gay male identity and community. Riggs does a great job employing Black gay vernacular and various cultural forms like snapping, vogue dancing, fierce humor, and poetry. Seeing this shows how Black gay men have formed subjugated styles and knowledges around their marginality. While *Tongues Untied* highlights identity, it does not romanticize the Black gay male experience, as it keeps central to

its theme- the realities of AIDS, homophobia, and racism. But, while these themes are present, Riggs does not limit Black gay reality to them. Riggs's documentary does not spend time defending Black gay men's presence; instead it showcases Black gay men as the complicated humans they are, now ready to end their silence.

A literary work that touches closely on the idea of identity and community comes from Gil Gerald (2005). Gerald's article, "The Trouble I've Seen," follows his experience working as the executive director of the National Coalition of Black Gays (NCBG). In 1983, Gerald began a campaign to include Black gay and lesbian community groups in the 20th anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington. Not surprisingly, Gerald faced opposition. Steering this opposition was Washington, DC, delegate Walter Fauntroy. Fauntroy reportedly felt that Black gay rights had nothing to do with Black civil rights, or in particular- gay rights did not correlate to the march's theme of "Jobs Peace and Freedom." Despite the reluctance of some, it was agreed that Black gays and lesbians could be part of the march.

The controversy heightened when Gerald inquired as to where gay and lesbian constituents would be placed in the march and if gay and lesbian groups would be allowed a speaker. When Gerald repeatedly did not hear back from march coordinator Donna Brazile or other march representatives about his group's status, he summoned other gay organizations to protest and contacted news bureaus to expose march organizers for their lack of inclusiveness. The increased media coverage led to Gerald being granted a conference call with civil rights leaders Coretta Scott King, Benjamin Hooks, and Joseph Lowery. Gerald would discuss the gay communities concerns with these notable figures. Although this represented progress, Gerald would have to represent every Black gay and lesbian voice to these civil rights pioneers; whatever the outcome, it would all rest on his back.

In describing the call, Gerald writes about his attempt to justify Black gay and lesbians place in the march. This comes across as a step backwards, since Bayard Rustin a Black gay man, some 20 years earlier, pieced together the original march, which so many deemed as a pivotal turning point for Blacks in the United States. Gil Gerald's work speaks to the indignation that is so often associated with Black LGBTQ people, and the ways Black gay and lesbian issues are not seen as Black issues, so much so that a place for gays and lesbians needs to be justified, even to canonized civil rights figure-heads who fought so hard for equality for all.

Negotiating Blackness

In, "Are you Black First Or Are You Queer?" Gregory Conerly (2000) provides a historical account of how Black LGBTQ people navigate the often-conflicting identities of sexuality and race. Conerly's article highlights how homophobia in Black settings often pits the two identities (queer and Black) against each other, ultimately forming two groups of Black LGBTQ people, ones who identify more with their sexuality and others who cherish more their Blackness. Conerly asserts that Blacks who choose to prize their queer sexuality over their Blackness tend to live among White LGBTQ people and are more open to interracial relations, while Black LGBTQ people who identify more with their Blackness tend to stay in homophobic communities and are less likely to assimilate. Ultimately, Conerly's point is that Black LGBTQ people have multiple layers of identity, including (race, sexuality, and gender), these make ups are complex and inseparable. He feels that in trying to divide your identity you lose identity, and belonging to one community that highlights/values only part of who you are, you lose agency.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson (2000), talks through his perceptions of homophobia and the Black gay male experience in his article, "My Gay Problem, Your Black Problem." Hutchinson, a Black- self identified heterosexual, contends that Black men in America, have succumbed to the

racist belief that they are less than men, and “In a vain attempt to recapture their denied masculinity, many Black men mirror America’s traditional fear and hatred of homosexuality” (p. 3). Hutchinson further argues that hegemonic notions of masculinity are epitomized through White men. Black men, in an attempt to maintain fragile manhoods, mimic heteronormative behaviors found in larger America. In accordance with this normalizing, Black men question, abuse, and even enact violence against other Black men who stray from the prescribed paths of hegemonic masculinity. Hutchinson calls on Black men to respect complex differences, engage in conversation, incorporate each other in political efforts, and work together for Black empowerment. He urges Black men to not continue in the co-opting of America’s heteronormative obsession, because America’s roots in homophobia relies on the same discrimination that often denies Blacks full citizenship.

In a separate argument, Hutchinson alludes to another important point; it is about the ways that gayness is often equated with Whiteness. Called a feature of European influence, homosexuality is often described as a remnant of colonization (Welsing, 1991). Gates (2000) argues that Black Nationalist and Afrocentric rhetoric (emerging post civil rights) has increased homophobia in Black America. In line with race-survival consciousness theories are the essentialist ideas purported by Afrocentric scholars like Asante (1980) and Fanon (2008). These ideas most often position Black women as child bearers and Black men as soldiers pitted against European symbolism, each gender with a central purpose to procreate.

Nero (1991) concerns himself with Asante’s lambasting of Black queer sexuality, arguing that Asante’s relegating of the Black gay experience to European influence specifically denies Black gay men a place in Black communities. Gates quotes Asante: “we can no longer allow our social lives to be controlled by European decadence” (p. XIV). As a communication scholar,

Asante's words and beliefs influenced much of contemporary African American intellectual discourse, as he has helped pioneer one of the first doctoral programs in African American studies in America (Asante, 2008; Nero, 1991).[3]

Dwight McBride (2000) in his text "Can The Queen Speak? Racial Essentialism, Sexuality, And The Problem Of Authority," also takes issue with the essentializing of Blackness, while questioning the use of the term "Black community." One of McBride's arguments is that African American intellectuals often position themselves (or their political platforms) inside romantic narratives of racial oppression and discrimination; they do this to authenticate their Blackness, as if only having hardships relating to race is what gives you credibility to speak about Blackness. According to McBride, this phenomenon has bigger implications because, it assumes that only certain Blacks can speak on behalf of Blackness and it perpetuates essentialism, naming only certain issues reflective of Blackness. But, McBride contends, what about the complexities of sexuality? Are they not reflective of the Black race? Why, he asks, is race so often over utilized in defining Black community, particularly when the term (Black community) often has implications of exclusion "evidenced by the way we always speak in terms of the relationship of Black gays and lesbians to the Black community or how we speak of the homophobia of the Black community, etc" (p.26). Further McBride says, "Speaking truth to black people, we must begin the important process of undertaking a more inclusive vision of black community and of race discourse" (p.26).

Kendall Thomas (2001) argues that jargon around authenticity often paints Black history as particularly heteronormative, relegating LGBTQ experiences as foreign. Thomas's work

[3] Though I use Dr. Molefi Asante's thoughts on Black queerness to historicize Black homophobia, it is important to note that Dr. Molefi has since changed his position on queerness. In a transcript from a radio interview conducted in May of 1995, Dr Molefi told Pacifica radio host Verna Avery Brown that he no longer views Black homosexuality as a matter of choice or as a subscription to European decadence.

"Ain't Nothing Like The Real Thing": Black Masculinity, Gay Sexuality, and the Jargon of Authenticity," is similar to McBride's critique of monolithic Blackness. Thomas uses several examples to how attempts are made to keep contemporary Black identity and Black history insulated from LGBTQ discourse. One example is the way Black intellectuals quickly came to the defense of musical group 2 Live Crew's misogynist and violent lyrics against women. Black intellectuals labeled the rap groups banter as signifying and "cultural genius." Thomas asks, where was the rallying when Marlon Riggs's documentary *Tongues Untied* was being demonized by right wing conservatives or when that same stir produced legislation to abolish the National Endowment for the Arts, one of Riggs's funders (Thomas, 2001)? Thomas later puts forth a brilliant critique involving his observations of the ways Black intellects treat the life and legacy of James Baldwin. Baldwin, Thomas reports, often becomes desexualized in order to promote his legacy as a Black historical figure and cultural worker. This neutering becomes tragic since Baldwin's legacy has the potential to teach Black gay men and women that their reported conflicting identities can in fact live in harmony.

Sexuality

By the early 2000's, news stories began to surface surrounding a trend of married or committed heterosexual Black men, engaging secretly in sex with other Black men. In particular, *New York Times Magazine* published a story in 2003, describing a secret world where Black men who were publicly "straight," were organizing around having gay sex with each-other (Denizet-Lewis, 2003). Adding to this reported emerging phenomenon, Oprah Winfrey in April of 2004, invited guest speaker J.L. King to her show, the topic: "A Secret World of Sex: Living on the Down Low." King, a self proclaimed specialist on the "Down Low" (D.L.) (as evidenced later by his writing extensively on how to spot D.L. behavior) appeared as a guest, as well as new author

of a book/memoir that supposedly traced the last 25 years of his life as a secretly bisexual man (Sandfort & Dodge, 2008). On the show, King's story resonated with many Black women, who for a number of reasons, had seen a decline in the number of potential Black male partners, and who were also seeing and hearing about rising HIV/AIDS transmission rates (Robinson, 2009). The purported new D.L. phenomenon announced by King coupled with Oprah's multi-million viewership rocked the Black gay community.

Black gay cultural workers like Keith Boykin, James Earl Hardy, and the late E. Lynn Harris, all from varying backgrounds, took issue with King's universalizing his bisexual narrative and his correlations linking increasing HIV rates among Black women to Black straight men sleeping with men. Opening his book, *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America*, Keith Boykin demystifies the D.L., calling it not only a lie, but a way to anchor Black gay men as the cause of the rising AIDS epidemic in Black America, a phenomenon that has had no concrete roots. In his narrative, Boykin talks of his own dealings with supposedly straight men who also engage in sex with men. However Boykin's accounts do not seek to vilify Black men, instead he complicates monolithic narratives of Black sexuality.

At a conference hosted by the CDC, Boykin writes, "I suggested that we create a culture that destigmatizes homosexuality and bisexuality so that men will not feel the need to enter into duplicitous relationships" (Boykin, 2005, p. 148). Boykin's work does not seek to deny the existence of same sex romance among Black men who are "straight," what it does is help situate it, as he takes it out of the medical context and asks that we look at our social climate as Blacks, and then we may be better equipped to talk through issues of trust, understanding, tolerance, and sexuality. If we continue to push homosexuality in the closet, there will be both Black men and

women who negotiate their sexuality by suppressing it publicly and exposing it privately, leading to deception and denial.

Boykin's anecdotal work also offers suggestions for helping bridge the divide that has happened as a result of the D.L. One suggestion stresses the importance of understanding that HIV transmission is not spread through identity but through behavior. Therefore it is crucial to practice safe sex no matter who your partner (Boykin, 2005). There is also no evidence that substantiates the mass practice of D.L behavior among Black men, as it is in essence a secret. Therefore it is counter-intuitive to listen to supposed "experts" explain this behavior as if it were a verifiable science.

Homophobia

Delroy Constantine-Simms (2000) asks "should the Black community use the Bible to sort out its confusion around homosexuality?" In his article "Is Homosexuality the Greatest Taboo?" Sims argues that society has placed sins in hierarchical order with homosexuality being seen as the greatest abomination. In comparing and contrasting sins and old customs like infidelity, prostitution, and Levirate Marriage; Simms exposes the contradiction in using the Bible to shun homosexuality but not other sins. In a trenchant example that highlights supremacist notions of heterosexuality, Simms talks about divorce. Despite Jesus condemning divorce, Simms asks "Why then, do some of these very people [divorcées] consider themselves, but not homosexuals, eligible for baptism, church membership, communion, and ordination" (p. 82)? Simms explains that taboos themselves are specific to cultures and times, as history moves forward things that are considered taboo change. In sum, Simms does not offer a revisionist attempt as a way to dismiss scripture; instead he offers a reading of the Bible that the religious right has often not promoted, which involves a love ethic:

> Approached from the point of view of love rather than law, the issue is at once transformed. Now the question is not "What is permitted?" but rather "What does it mean to love my homosexual neighbor?" Approached from the point of faith rather than works, the question ceases to be "What constitutes a breach of divine law in the sexual realm?" and becomes instead "What constitutes integrity before God revealed in the cosmic lover, Jesus Christ?" (p.85)

This alternative reading also revolves around self-judgment and the idea that we as people can make decisions for ourselves and this self-actualization is supported in Scripture. "In a little remembered statement, Jesus said, "Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right" (p. 85)?

Joining Simms in advocating for a more complex understanding of Scripture is Horace Griffin (2000). Griffin's piece "Their Own Received Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches" demystifies several myths often associated with Black homosexuality. The author problematizes the idea that homosexuality was introduced to Blacks by White colonists. In fact, Griffin asserts, "European Christian missionaries and slave traders who went into African cultures were more prone to condemn homosexual practice rather than condone or encourage it" (p. 113). Griffin insists that both anthropologists and sociologists have concluded that homosexuality is part of human sexuality, thus, it does not belong to a specific group and cannot be situated in a specific time period (Griffin, 2000). One of the reasons why Blacks see homosexuality negatively argues Griffin, stems from the idea that joining mainstream society in ostracizing gays and lesbians frees Blacks from being labeled sexual deviants (Griffin, 2000). Falling in line with acceptable American social views will ultimately help Blacks look more conservative and civilized.

The reviewed personal narratives and anecdotal writings provide a foundation to build my study. These works show the ways Black gay men have claimed agency, formed communities around their unique lives, and been conscious of how their sexuality conflicts with ideas around their race. This reaffirms that Black gay men are not unaware of the perils of their

sexuality and because of it have managed (consciously and unconsciously) to form bonds with each other, making them, as a collective whole, resilient and unique.

Social Science Empirical Research

Much of the scholarship in academia about Black gay men comes as social science empirical research and public health data. According to Monteiro and Fuqua (1994) these types of studies become viable to both the academy and Black gay men when they take into account Black gay men's race, culture, and sexuality. Further, Monteiro and Fuqua write "development of a meaningful understanding of one's race, culture, and sexuality are all critical aspects of the developing self concept of young African American gay men" (p. 74). These assertions imply that there is a correlate between how Black gay men understand themselves and the ways in which research about Black gay men needs to be developed. In this next section, I review social science/public health research which looks at Black gay men within the intersecting categories of race, culture, and sexuality. To do this, I review empirical scholarship that is centered on Black gay male/ Black queer subjectivity, investigates the ways Black gay men develop a sense of community, and lastly, research that look at Black gay men's relationship to their larger communities and cultures, and the social forces that impede such relationships.

Although my intention in doing this research is to center the experiences of Black gay men outside the plethora of studies that focus on disease and pathology, there is no getting around the ways HIV/AIDS has impacted Black gay men's community. In fact, most topics covered in this section focus on discourse that is often used to relegate Black gay men to inherent pathologies. To mediate this, I situate my review of social science and empirical articles mostly through the scholarship of Black gay male social scientists. These men work at contextualizing

discourse around Black gay men's cultures and experience. These scholars act as a bridge between the lived experiences of community and the research.

Combating HIV/AIDS with Cultural Competency

According to Centers for Disease Control (CDC) data, Black gay men are disproportionately affected by HIV and AIDS. In fact, in a 2004-2005 study, a CDC HIV prevalence report on five U.S. cities (Baltimore, Maryland; Los Angeles, California; Miami, Florida; New York, New York; and San Francisco, California), reports that within these regions, 46% of African American men who have sex with men are infected with HIV and 67% of these men are unaware of their status (Centers for Disease Control, 2005). These data have prompted social science researchers and public health officials to identify reasons for such statistics and ways to curtail the evident spread of HIV among Black gay men.

> I think that since my involvement with men, my fear of doctors has just skyrocketed. I can't just be "sick" anymore. I can't just have a common cold. Everything has to be HIV. (Malebranche, Peterson, Fullilove, and Stackhouse, 2004, p. 102)

Malebranche, Peterson, Fullilove, and Stackhouse (2004) argue that the HIV/AIDS epidemic is compounded by perceptions Black gay men have about healthcare. In a research study from December of 2000 to February 2001, Malebranche et al. (2004) conducted eight focus groups in Atlanta, Georgia, and New York State consisting of Black gay men. An initial theme of this research revealed that Black gay men experienced oppression in larger communities due to homophobia in Black settings and racism in White settings. These feelings of alienation in the larger world impacted Black gay men's perceptions of healthcare. Black gay men either looked toward their doctors for unmet solace or they looked at medical care as if it would simply be an extension of the discriminatory treatment they received in society. Two other

important themes were that Black gay men felt their doctors were impersonal, and that their status as Black gay men yielded an immediate pathologization from medical workers.

While these themes may not point to the sexual behaviors that most often spread HIV among Black gay men, the authors argue that they do shed light on why Black gay men may not be honest with practitioners about their sexuality, sexual partners, and even why these men might stay away from healthcare facilities all together, leading ultimately to ignorance around HIV. The researchers insist all of these trajectories limit the ways medical facilities can effectively address the HIV epidemic and therefore deductively speak to why Black gay men have disproportionate statistics when compared to other groups of gay men. In conclusion, the authors assert that if Black gay men are looking toward doctors for comfort and understanding, then doctors must be trained in cultural competency so that they can create meaningful relationships with Black gay male patients and have a diverse understanding of sexuality and cultural practices around sex. Secondly, if Black gay men perceive the medical setting as an extension of racism and homophobia then not only is cultural competency important but also the employment of minority healthcare providers who can reduce racial and sexual barriers.

In similar research, Wilson and Moore (2009) conducted a study of AIDS program directors, health department staff, and leaders of community-based organizations in an attempt to assess what phenomenon these practitioners perceived as general obstacles to responding to the HIV/AIDS crisis among Black gay men. Respondents reported capacity building and cultural competency among both staff and intervention programs as the main barriers to effective HIV prevention among Black gay men. Capacity building, which tied to the recruitment of African American staffers, surfaced as a major concern among health department workers. Health department workers stressed the importance of having staff at all levels who looked like the

communities they served. Lack of cultural competency in prevention measures trickled down into health care networks and community-based organizations.

> What happens is when the dollars switch over to [the] African American community, the programs that have traditionally been working in the White communities, they take those same programs and…put kente cloth on it and call it Black….And I've always had a problem with that. The cultural sensitivity is just not there. (Wilson & Moore, 2009, p. 1017)

This comment highlights two things, first, even with a population of minority staffers organizations struggled to resituate HIV prevention methods because the funding was tied to certain types of prevention paradigms. Second, there is a working assumption that prevention methods are "one size fits all." An example of this is venue-based outreach programs. Though useful in White communities, the researchers argue that venue outreach is not as effective for Black gay men who may not typically network in traditional establishments like gay bars or clubs.

Arnold and Bailey (2009) assert the importance of cultural competency as well. These researchers use two ethnographic studies to argue that the Black LGBTQ ballroom community can serve as a vessel through which HIV/AIDS education can be disseminated. The ballroom community or gay houses/ gay families, are intricate networks of LGBTQ people of color who form familial ties with each other and often compete in competitive balls against other houses with similar familial ties. In general, these houses offer LGBTQ youth unique modes of "home and family" in a society built on heteronormative standards. These families offer a structure similar to what is considered traditional, having both a house mother and father. Parents are typically older and more experienced LGBTQ community members who act as nurturers or personal developers of younger community members.

Arnold and Bailey suggest that public health researchers tap into the relationships that exist between house parents and children. Their ethnographic research indicates that LGBTQ youth of color identify their house mothers as nurturers, care takers, and as the person they would go to for advice about being gay and sex.

> Mothers help children "come of age" in the ballroom community. This reflects a larger notion of the ballroom life cycle, where, upon entering the scene, people can be sexually exploited unless they have the proper guidance and mentorship (which often took the form of parents or older siblings in a house). (Arnold & Bailey, 2009, p. 182)

According to the researchers, equipping house-mothers with resources to talk about safe sex and networks to promote HIV testing and healthy sexual decision making, can help educate young LGBTQ house members. Similarly, house-fathers are said to be concerned with the personal development of their children, helping out with their education and abilities to get a job. According to the father in the San Francisco House of Davoucci, house members had to be "actively bettering themselves," pursing careers or educational goals (p. 183). House fathers promoted a lifestyle that reduced their children's susceptibility to HIV by encouraging them to further themselves through education and employment.

I chose Malebranche et al. (2004) because as social scientists they promote the understanding of Black gay male culture and sexuality among healthcare providers as a way to combat the spread of HIV, instead of assuming some inherent pathology. Similarly Wilson and Moore (2009) advance the idea that prevention programs are not universal and again competency about Black gay male culture is a necessity in developing HIV prevention methods. Arnold and Bailey (2009) use existing ethnographic studies to provide a framework for promoting discourse on HIV/AIDS within Black gay communities. All authors agree that additional research about Black gay men needs to be created, supported, and conducted. By arguing that a cultural

understanding of Black gay men is imperative, all of these social scientists further Monteiro and Fuqua's sentiments.

The Black Church and Navigating Stigma

The ways in which Black gay men manage their religious and church affiliations is another phenomenon that comes under the purview of social scientists (Peterson, Stokes, &Woodward, 2000; Ward, 2004). This is because the Black church serves as a place of empowerment and liberation for all Blacks (Billingsley, 1992), yet this same place is where theologically-driven homophobia and heterosexist sermons are orated (Fullilove & Fullilove, 1999). Scholars have concluded that Black gay men have high church participation rates, similar to that of heterosexual Black women (Sherkat, 2002). Understanding how Black gay men navigate church has implications to help social workers understand how Black gay men manage the every day realities of having conflicting identities. The studies examined argue from two fronts. In the first study, it is not just theologically- driven homophobia that drives the participants (Black gay men living with AIDS) away from the church, but mostly AIDS-phobia. In the second study, cognitive dissonance allows Black gay men to remain active in churches by mentally shielding themselves from anti-gay religious rhetoric.

In Miller (2007), 10 Black gay men living with AIDS were asked to talk about their religious affiliations and how they navigated the Black church and its plethora of phobias. The men revealed that the Black church brought them to a personal spiritual enlightenment. Through church, participants learned to pray, were introduced to gospel music, experienced the Holy Ghost, learned the importance of the Bible, and 8 of the 10 men reported learning through pastoral sermons that their personal relationships with God is what would get them into heaven. This is important because though theologically-driven homophobia was present, so were

messages of Jesus' redeeming love and personal responsibility in establishing a relationship with God. These messages were not predicated on a religious "order" but on spiritual formation, once participants felt their relationships with God were present, homophobic rhetoric could be discredited or depersonalized.

Spiritual formation initiated through church membership helped many of these Black gay men living with AIDS externalize religious homophobia. Still, it is important not to romanticize the roles of the Black church, as one of the participants reported never being able to reconcile his sexual orientation with his religion due to heterosexist church rhetoric. Although some of the men were able to continue, for a while, with active church memberships, all respondents reported leaving the church specifically due to the Black church's response to AIDS. Respondents reported being castigated as deserving of the AIDS virus because of their sexuality and that pastors/churches often looked at AIDS as a consequence of homosexuality. For these men homophobia was ever present but the church's ostracizing them due to AIDS was enough for them to discontinue their church memberships (this is not the same as discontinuing their religion, faith, or spirituality).

> The participants experienced homophobia as demeaning and painful. They described it as "diminishing their humanity and dignity." However, the religiously sanctioned homophobia was not the factor that extinguished their church affiliation; the churches response to the AIDS crisis made all the men sever their church affiliation. (p. 57)

Miller's research reveals that the Black church's position toward AIDS was not meeting the needs of the participants and therefore they left. The study also highlights how the Black church helped these Black gay men develop senses of spiritual selves despite religious homophobia. The development of the spiritual self is what helped 9 out of the 10 men reconcile their sexuality with their religion.

Pitt (2010) argues that Black gay men who remain active in churches use modes of cognitive dissonance to reconcile theologically-driven homophobia with their sexuality. Pitt's thesis, based on interviews with 34 Black gay men, details a strategy that critiques church pastors and orators rather than religion or scripture. Pitt contends that Black gay men have reduced their internalization of homophobia in Black churches using four rationales. The first exclaims that Black gay men look at homophobic pastors and church administrators as having a flawed knowledge base. Pitt's justification for this came when respondents reported that church leaders tended to speak about homosexuality without knowing any specific Biblical passages that condemned it. Black gay men who cited this method of rationale primarily worked in churches. The second mode used by Black gay men to ease dissonance was the belief that some pastors themselves were morally flawed, and thus ranted about homosexuality as immoral to deflect criticism from their own sins. Respondents who critiqued pastors for being morally flawed talked about pastors who they knew were closeted or involved in extramarital affairs. In this mode of rationale respondents focused not on the pastor's condemning of homosexuality but on his/her ability to speak on behalf of being moral.

Study respondents talked about pastors being judgmental in mode three. Participants who used this mode of critique argue that if the pastor is preaching about homosexuality being wrong then he/she is condoning the judgmental, which is not "of God." They contend that love is the overarching theme of the Bible and therefore the pastor's sermons should be about a love ethic since no one is without sin. Lastly, some Black gay men criticized the pastor's motivations, arguing that oftentimes pastors only preached about homosexuality as a way to appease churchgoers. For example, pastors often used Black gay men as scapegoats for single Black women's hardships with finding a partner. Black gay men utilizing this mode of dissonance

talked about pastors having great relationships with gay churchgoers (including themselves) when they were not preaching and or in the pulpit.

Although these modes were used by Black gay men to reduce the dissonance of having a stigmatized sexuality in a religious setting, Pitt argues that Black gay men also forged networks and alliances with other gay men in the church, like mini-communities, often-times aiding in their ability to rationalize one of the previously reviewed modes of reconciliation. These networks allowed the men to talk about their concerns with homophobic pastors. This speaks to the multitude of ways Black gay men navigate stigma in the church. Perhaps the real difference between Miller (2007) and Pitt (2010) is that Miller's participants all identified as men living with AIDS. According to the research, Black gay men living with AIDS may have reconciled their dissonance by discrediting the pastor, but ultimately their AIDS-phobia prompted them to leave the church. This indicates that AIDS stigma on its own can shift the ways Black gay men deal with homophobia in the church.

Mental Health, Homophobia, and Life Chances

Social scientists have made interesting connections between mental health issues and the lived experiences of Black gay men (Cochran & Mays, 1994; Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, & Soto, 2002). It has also been concluded that Black gay men are disproportionately affected by mental health issues such as depression and anxiety disorders when compared to other racial and ethnic groups (Graham, Braithwaite, Spikes, Stephens, & Edu, 2009). In a study conducted in Atlanta, Georgia, Graham et al. (2009) hosted eight focus groups involving Black gay men to explore the factors and determinants that potentially led to mental health issues among the group. According to the study, mental health issues like depression, anxiety, sadness, and low self esteem were prevalent among Black gay men in the sample; this was caused by a lack of

relationships of support, ostracizing by persons close to them, having challenges developing healthy identities, discrimination and violence, and society's promotion of monolithic sexuality and masculinity. From this article I conclude that Black gay men have challenges self actualizing due to the ways society teaches them to be Black, gay, and male.

To provide a broader picture on the Black gay male experience I correlate Graham et al. (2009) with a research project done by Brown (2008). Brown's study is about Black gay men's experiences with racism and homophobia and the ways these occurrences impact their life chances and opportunities. In an effort to find out what lives Black gay men want to live, Brown asked 15 men about their experiences with factors such as racism, homophobia, popular culture, and masculinity. Brown then asked if these men thought their opportunities or life chances were impacted by these themes. Many respondents reported that they thought homophobia in the Black community was strong, while not many (two) respondents reported racism in White gay settings as particularly restrictive. Brown concluded that because Black gay men face homophobia and racism, they are selective about their networks and about their behaviors, and thus do not live as openly as they would like. This is restrictive. Brown's respondents expressed conflicting identities in which they had to balance "who they were and who they were told they were" (pg. 75).

Looking back to Graham et al. (2009), I can understand how contradictory messages Black gay men are forced to decipher can lead to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, as Black gay men feel like their life chances are restricted due to social forces outside of their control. In general, Brown's respondents felt like they could not live the life they wanted, Graham et al's. (2009) participants spoke about something similar, they talked about the

same restrictive aspects except they identified these themes as reasons for mental health issues, which in essence also restrict Black gay men's life chances.

The surveyed social scientists have focused on creating culturally-relevant research. Refocusing HIV/AIDS literature to talk about how medical and social entities should be trained in cultural competency to help reduce Black gay male HIV susceptibility is but one example. While other researchers have looked toward the specific culture of Blacks (like the church) to help situate the ways Black gay men deal with conflicting identities, others have looked at U.S. culture in general as discriminatory, ultimately causing Black gay men's mental instability. As previously stated, many of the research studies reviewed in this section are created by self-identifying Black gay men. These social scientists have created empirical studies that work on behalf of the Black gay male experience because they assume levels of agency for Black gay men and their communities. Still, the apparent gap is that Black gay men are not being asked to talk about the ways they continue to create and reshape their own communities and lives, in spite and despite- of the tangle of pathologies that loom. There is a dearth of social science empirical research that talks about the ways Black gay men are living and loving everyday.

Theoretical Literature of Black Queer Studies

The final section of this survey examines some of the ways the Black gay male experience is interrogated within the theoretical literature of Black queer studies. According to Johnson and Henderson (2005) editors of the first anthology dedicated solely to Black queer studies, their text "serves as a critical intervention in the discourses of black studies and queer studies" (Johnson & Henderson, 2005, p.1). This intervention is a necessary one, as queer studies has not particularly focused on issues of race and class and African American / Black studies has not spoken for complex understandings of sexuality and has elided critiques of a heterosexism

(Phillips & Stewart, 2008). It is also important to note that those who do work within Black queer studies are trained in a variety of academic disciplines, from anthropology, African American studies, Black studies, cultural studies, performance studies, psychology, to sociology, yet it is these diverse viewpoints that work to form the corpus of the multidimensional Black queer studies. The variety of perspectives make Black queer studies truly insightful, and also make it necessary to take a thematic approach in explaining how the Black gay male experience is articulated within the literature.

Images of Black Gay Men

Within the discourse of mainstream queer politics, the Black gay male community is often minimized to being underdeveloped or is described as being full of frauds and impostors (Johnson, 2003; Nero, 2005). An insightful critique of how popular culture keeps these ideas circulating is examined by Nero (2005). Nero's work focuses on gay America's racially homogonous neighborhood enclaves, despite the employment of terms like multiculturalism as selling points. Nero makes connections between why gay enclaves are mostly inhabited by White men, with both historical racism and controlling images that pervade media depictions of Black gay men. Nero uses several media examples, including the popular television show *Six Feet Under* and the film *Six Degrees of Separation*. Borrowing a framing from Patricia Hill-Collins (1999), Nero argues that controlling images are used to make ideas like Black gay men are oversexed, backwards, fraudulent, or imposters acceptable to believe.

In *Six Degrees of Separation*, Nero writes "Paul (Will Smith) is a sociopathic Black gay man who gains entry into the house of upper-middle-class Whites by pretending to be the son of Sidney Poitier. Eventually, he is found out and exposed as just another Black gay hustler" (Nero, 2005, p. 237). In the HBO series *Six Feet Under*, the character Keith (whom I myself looked at

as a positive media representation of a Black gay man), according to Nero, becomes a controlling image as well.

> As the show developed over four seasons, Keith seemed to become "Blacker." This transformation is significant for Keith's character for two reasons. First, Keith's Blackness seemed to mean an incompatibility with gay-ness to the shows writers and creators. Second, the show presents Blackness as savage and unredeemable. (p. 239)

Nero goes on to explain that during one of the episodes in a later season, Keith is depicted as lacking gay sensibility because he is unfamiliar with gay camp, yet Nero reminds the reader that in the first season it was implied that Keith belonged to a sizable network of gay folks, and he was active in queer circuits, this is an apparent contradiction. Ultimately Nero's argument is cogent, popular discourse situates Black gay men as particularly troubled, fraudulent, or as not able to reconcile race with sexuality. These ubiquitous depictions make normal Black gay men's exclusion from mainstream gay culture, i.e. gay neighborhood formations.

Sticking with Hill-Collins's term "controlling images," Walcott (2007) offers similar insight into Black gay men and the formation of what he calls the Black Queer Diaspora. This Diaspora is a boundary-less space, based upon shared sexual practices, and an intermingling of cultures, ideas, and expressions (Walcott, 2007). Walcott argues that while controlling images have bound North American Black men in general to monolithic modes of masculinity, there are indeed men, particularly Black gay men, who in their everyday lives live contrary to these prevailing images. Their very existence offers a critique of the universalized heterosexual narrative presumed about Blacks and the often promoted "gay equals White" trope that pervades media culture. This Black queer Diaspora, Walcott argues, is carved from Black LGBTQ people's subjugated knowledges, and is a direct result of their oppression from racism and homophobia. Interestingly, it is this marginality that has allowed Black queers in general to fashion unique modes of culture and style that doubly act as resistance to their oppressions.

Walcott complicates his argument when he exclaims that even while Black gay men remain Othered, they are still cultural tastemakers. In particular, Black gay men fashion gay culture, directly from their social locale. Walcott highlights Black gay men's invention of both Disco and House music as examples of how Black gay men's invented style(s) resist homogeneity but is often co-opted by mainstream culture and reassigned as White. The author then offers a case study as an example to affirm his point.

> In the Toronto queer economy of pleasure, and in this specific case, music culture, two black men – Rolyn Chambers and Gairy Brown – dominate and operate in a very interesting fashion to produce queer community as essentially white, which leads inescapably to the irony of black men offering to white men ways of performing white queerness. (Walcott, 2007, p. 242)

Art as a Weapon

For Muñoz (1999) both the performances of diva and drag queen, often found within the Black gay male tradition, work as ways to re-appropriate majority culture. Black drag queens and male divas use performance as modes of politics. Muñoz argues that these types of performances embrace the tactic of disidentifying; these men do not necessarily align themselves with or against majority culture, instead they take this culture and use it to advance their own politics and realities: "disidentification resists the interpellating call of ideology that fixes a subject within the state power apparatus. It is a reformatting of self within the social" (Muñoz, 1999, p. 97). In this instance, drag queen performers enact their own modes of femininity, race, and reality, using the current world as a catalyst to imagine and perform a new one. Muñoz's example is Vaginal Crème Davis, an African American and Mexican drag superstar. Davis's performances range from White supremacist, naughty school girl, to staunch critic of White homonormativity. In her performances lies a critique of the discourses that work to oppress and suppress queer bodies. "Disidentificatory performances opt to do more than simply tear down the

majoritarian public sphere. They disassemble that sphere of publicity and use its parts to build an alternative reality" (Muñoz, 1999, p.196).

In "Looking for Trouble" (1991), Kobena Mercer examines the ways famed photographer Robert Mapplethorpe creates ambivalence through his racially and sexually charged images. Though he started out at a staunch critic of Mapplethorpe, because of the photographer's use of Black gay men's nude bodies, Mercer now rereads the images using his own social location as a Black gay man as a lens. From his pensiveness, Mercer argues that because the images display his sexual object choice, he himself has a direct role in the fetishism and fantasy of the photographs. Thus, Mercer changes his initial critique of Mapplethorpe, arguing now that the Black gay male bodies laid bare create a self-troubling, challenging him, and others, ultimately to think about their own constructions of racial and sexual difference and identity. This self-reflection, Mercer argues, happens all through the use of Black gay male bodies within the photographs.

Muñoz (1999) shows the ways Black gay men's traditions like diva and drag queen, can work to destabilize, critique, and challenge hegemonic culture. I would argue that this destabilizing affords Black gay men the potential to be agents of social change, simply by existing or creating communities. Black gay male bodies are walking sites of disidentification. I use Mercer (1991) because he shows the ways Black queer male bodies can be used to trouble identity, specifically when they are used in the traditionally White discourse of fine art.

Modes of Being

According to Marlon Ross, the foundation of the gay and lesbian movement rests on the notion "coming out of the closet." This closet paradigm has also been adopted as an epistemology of sexuality by cultural workers who develop and fashion queer theory and studies

(Ross, 2005). In essence, coming out has been equated with liberation, while its contra is reduced to backwardness and primitiveness. The closet ideology functions as a universal narrative of progress and modernity within mainstream queer politics, and those who do not adhere are left out of its discourse. Black queer theorists problematize using the closet as a means to assess both queer politics and one's sexuality development. One reason for their reluctance in embracing the closet paradigm is its lack of cultural relevance. For instance, Black gay men often do not announce to their families or communities that they are gay; these men do not necessarily see their lives as closeted either. Ross (2005) argues that there are many Black gay men who never consider their sexuality hidden and thus do not need to adopt this narrative of coming out. They see coming out as overkill, or like telling people something they already know.

In his series of interviews with Black gay men of the U.S. South, Johnson (2008) also sheds light on this point. Johnson reveals that sexuality itself is seen as a taboo topic within the Black community, and because of this, many Blacks, particularly gay men, refrain from talking about their sexuality. For Black gay men, this silence does not mean they are closeted, or hiding, in-fact these men are often partnered or dating, and even active in the Black gay community. For these men, silence around sexuality falls in line with their cultural teachings, like valuing privacy, and a desire of keeping one's "business" to oneself; their silence does not necessarily indicate that their family and community members are unaware of their sexuality.

Situating "coming out" as the right of passage for queer people shows that queer theorists have under-theorized the cultural experiences of Black gay men. Similarly, Phillips and Stewart (2008) argue that psychological and queer theory based models meant to articulate how queer people experience identity also fall short of their putative claims at universality. Psychological models on queer identity are limiting, advancing the idea that people mostly define themselves

through singular social address categories like Black, White, gay, lesbian (Phillips & Stewart 2008). While queer theory is more nuanced it also underdetermines identity as it is experienced by people of color. Queer theory uses the closet paradigm as both a marker of personal development and progress (Ross 2005). Through the lens of "coming out," queer theory attempts to destabilize normalcy through the production of non-normative identities like out, gay, lesbian, and queer. However both the articulated psychological and queer theory models fall short when thinking about people who understand themselves through multiple identities or those who define themselves outside existing frameworks.

I use Phillips and Stewart (2008) and Ross (2005) to highlight the ways Black gay male identity is often understood through queer or raced-based discourses and how these frameworks work to demarcate the lived experiences of Black gay men, asking them to choose between being Black or being gay. Phillips and Stewart elaborate further, arguing that Black queer people have historically defied queer identity categories and gender paradigms, embodying sexual and identity liberation in ways queer politics only aspires towards. For example, both articles talk about the Black gay male diva and drag tradition. How do identity theories speak to the experiences of Black gay men who wear dresses and mini-skirts, particularly when some of these men still embody modes of what society deems as "masculine," like the bearded and halter-top wearing Andre J, who once graced the cover of *French Vogue* and is part subject of Phillips and Stewart's article? Further, Ross asks, "what does it mean for a drag queen to be in the closet- or to come out of it- wearing a dress rather than a suit and tie" (Ross, 2005, p.183)?

Black Masculinity (A New Mode of Community)

Theorists have paid particular attention to masculinity, locating it as a site where universal ideas of Black manhood originate and become contested (Alexander, 2006; Byrd,

2001). In particular, Byrd (2001) offers a re-situation of masculinity for Black people all together. In his article he asks Black men to embrace a mode of masculinity that is themed around “being a good man, rather than being good at being a man” (Byrd, 2001, p. 22). Byrd utilizes African American folklore as a basis for his discussion, arguing that Black men must transcend outdated molds of masculinity and look toward the example of High John De Conqueror. Though tales of John appear in various versions of African American folklore and history, Byrd’s High John De Conqueror is a specific character taken from the writings of Zora Neale Hurston. In Hurston’s words, Byrd insists, Black men can find the tools to create a new mode of masculinity. John is about the community, concerned with the good of both Black men and women. John is also a “trickster” who uses his cleverness and wit to fool “old Massa” (Byrd, 2001, p.3), all in an effort to protect the integrity and humanity of African Americans. Byrd further explains that Hurston does not focus on physical characteristics or John’s sexual orientation, instead she pays attention to John’s deeds and what he means to his community.

Byrd problematizes modes of Black discourse that define manhood through sexual orientation or corporeal masculinity. Embracing John’s mode of masculinity has implications for both the Black church and Black Nationalist movements. If these entities promoted John’s tradition, they would focus on the good of all Black people, foster conversations that complicate hegemonic notions of heterosexuality, and seek the guidance and support of gays, lesbians, and transgendered Blacks. Black institutions, like the family, must not allow the politics of “coming out” to project in them fears or prompt concerns over respectability. Following Byrd’s call, the worth of a Black man would not be centered in his sexuality; it would rely on his deeds, love, and contributions to his community.

To sum up the theoretical literature of Black queer studies, I rely on the words of scholar Roderick Ferguson in his description of what he calls “a queer of color analysis.” As a unit, Black queer theory suggests that “African American culture indexes a social heterogeneity that oversteps the boundaries of gender propriety and sexual normativity [To this, I would also add homonormativity]. That social heterogeneity also indexes formations that are seemingly outside the spatial and temporal bounds of African American culture” (Ferguson, 2004, p.2). Black queer theory finds its dynamism through an examining of social forces using simultaneously marked sexual and racial lenses. This examination attempts to do away with hierarchical epistemologies, suggesting that all knowledge is equally worthy of research, scholarly attention, critique, and love.

Survey of Literature Synthesis

Personal narratives and anecdotal writings are about Black gay men (using no particular academic framework or theoretical tenet) claiming agency and visibility through their writings and films, ultimately portraying their lives and unique cultures unapologetically and without censor. Community becomes the fulcrum of organizing as writers talk about their reliance on each other for survival. This section also features cultural workers elaborating on some of the impediments to building a Black gay community; these writers discuss racial and sexual identity politics, particularly highlighting questions around which identity marker one resonates with most, being Black or being gay. Also, writers like Keith Boykin see the “down low” as detrimental to community as it tries to tie Black gay men to closeted sexuality and disease.

Black gay social scientists are creating an alternate path to looking at some of the dilemmas the Black gay male community faces. By creating research that is sensitive and relevant, these scholars resituate discourses on HIV/AIDS, homophobia, and mental health.

Because these self-identifying gay scholars have created research on behalf of their communities, they are enacting levels of care and responsibility to the groups of men they share much of their social locations with, which is a level of community building. These scholars insist that the cultures and experiences of Black gay men must be taken into account when creating social science research.

The theoretical literature of Black queer studies takes a more nuanced look at many of the same trajectories reviewed in the previous sections. For example, Black queer theorists are examining the ways racism and homophobia have affected the inclusion of Black queer men in neighborhood formations and also elaborating on the ways marginalization has forced Black queer people in general to invent styles and languages that not only make then unique but also act doubly as their resistance mechanisms to oppression. But, and just as important, is the way Black queer theorists are moving beyond identity paradigms and queer theory politics. I would argue that Black queer people have always been resilient and fashioned themselves through their marginalization and communities. This has moved the Black queer experience beyond the scope of queer theory, and as evidence, Black queer performances and disidentification practices remain within realms no current identity theory captures.

Although I have attempted to do an extensive job in reviewing articles that work to frame the Black gay male experience in a culturally relevant light, keeping their humanity intact, and portraying Black gay male epistemology as worthy of scholarly attention, there are still gaps in the literature when thinking about the cultural experience of Black gay men. There is a dearth of scholarly attention given to the ways Black gay men make meaning of, and establish their own communities, despite the negative attention given to their lives. This research work is about helping fill this void, using ethnography to explore the ways in which Black gay men are

creating community in light of their bodies and lives being castigated as the site of HIV/AIDS, the down low, and numerous pathologies. This ethnography delves into the experiences of Black gay men incorporating all three of the reviewed literary genres. I seek to create a document that is as grassroots as personal narratives, while also employing scientific method, resulting in new ways of looking and thinking about the Black gay male experience and community.

Theoretical Framework

Because the survey of literature tells me that community has been so instrumental to how Black gay men understand themselves, I chose a theoretical framework of community to guide and strengthen this study. This theory of community informs the interview protocol used to establish conversations with the study's research participants, as well as gives me as the ethnographer parameters to work within when conducting fieldwork.

The framework suggests that community "can be defined as a group of people who have a sense of common purpose(s) and/ or interest(s) for which they assume mutual responsibility, who acknowledge their interconnectedness, who respect the individual differences among members, and who commit themselves to the well-being of each other and the integrity of the group" (Woods & Judikis, 2002, p. 12).

For clarity, Woods and Judikis list six tenets:

1. a sense of common purpose or interests
2. an assuming of mutual responsibility
3. acknowledgement among members that there is an interconnectedness
4. mutual respect for individual differences
5. mutual commitment to the well being of each-other
6. commitment by the member to the integrity and well-being of the group

I chose this theoretical framework because it speaks to how the individual's experience can enhance or deter feelings of community, rather than assume a unidirectional relationship, privileging the group's impact over its members. For instance, having Black gay men in Atlanta talk about mutual respect, commitment, and common purposes, among other things, challenges them to think about their role in relation to enacting social formations, ultimately fostering feelings of agency.

This theory can also help me privilege a Black gay male experience. Woods and Judikis's framework complicates the popular trajectory that often assumes membership in a specific race or sexuality yields community. Cultural work ascribed to Black gay men often blankets them under generalizations about sex, their Black race, or queer sexuality, seldom centering their multiple identities or experiences. It is my hope that this theory will help unearth a kind of queer citizenship specific to Black gay men, adding to the bourgeoning body of Black queer studies, a discipline created around the experiences of Black queer people.

Woods and Judikis's theory also speaks to a type of community argued for in my literature review. Scholars like Joseph Beam, Essex Hemphill, and Marlon Riggs have all organized through common purpose. These cultural workers have been interested in creating networks of inclusion and decreasing homophobia in their larger Black communities. Beam, Hemphill, and Riggs theorized a stronger Black gay community resting on love and acceptance from their larger Black units. The literature also reveals that the assumption of mutual responsibility is seen as pivotal to community. My social science and empirical research section is about this phenomenon. Social scientists who are members of the Black gay community are taking the responsibility of situating research through the lens of actual community members, themselves.

This enhances the social science and helps provides a transparent picture to the group actually being studied.

Rinaldo Walcott argues that interconnections are also important to community, in-fact his theories on the Black queer Diaspora rely on the Black queer community embodying difference but acknowledging their connectedness- meaning, that although we are not all the same, our sexuality links us in shared sexual practice. We have intermingled cultures from this shared practice, forming a diverse and extensive queer Diaspora. When thinking about a commitment to the integrity and well being of the group, queer theorists have problematized generalizing the experience of Black queer people, as they see attempts to read Black queer identity through majority lenses as detrimental to a unique lived experience and community.

Despite this theory being a definition of community, the goal of this study is not to measure Black gay men's sociality in Atlanta against the theoretical construct. In this work, Woods and Judikis's framework is used as a guide to thinking about how community develops, flourishes, and is sustained. My aim here again, is to highlight the culture of Black gay men and the theoretical framework gives me a starting place.

Summary

This chapter reviewed pertinent literature about Black gay men and their community. Using three literary genres I described the ways the Black gay male experience is articulated within personal narratives and anecdotal writings, social science and empirical research, and in the bourgeoning field of Black queer studies. Lastly, I introduced the theoretical framework for this study, which is a community theory.

Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

The overarching question of this thesis asks: "How do Black gay men experience community in Atlanta, a so-called Black gay Mecca?" In the previous chapter, I surveyed the literature about Black gay men to provide a multi-layered foundation for this study. The survey shows that there has been little attention given to the ways Black gay men create community and experience their culture, despite their status as marginalized subjects. In this chapter I describe ethnography, the methodology for this study. This chapter also highlights the research design and methods, sample population, methods of data analysis, and how I address validity.

Ethnographic Design

> Ethnography is not a prescribed set of methods – it is a methodology that acknowledges the complexity of human experience and the need to research it by close and sustained observation of human behavior. (O'Reilly, 2005)

As a women's studies graduate student, much of my training has incorporated womanist frameworks, one of these concepts tells me that, as a researcher, value is found in the everyday lived experiences of people (Phillips, 2006). For me, this means that data is collected not only when you meet and talk with people, but also when you go to the places they go and see the things they see. In essence, the researcher merges into (or emerges out from) culture. In Clifford and Marcus (1986) ethnography is described as "an emergent interdisciplinary phenomenon. Its authority and rhetoric have spread to many fields where 'culture' is the newly problematic object of description and critique" (p.3). Together, my training and my quest to do research about Black gay men, speak to why I have chosen qualitative ethnography for this studies research paradigm.

Using ethnography, this study explored Black gay men in Atlanta and their sentiments around community and culture, to see if their notions, ideas, and experiences correlate to Woods and Judikis's (2002) theory of community. As the ethnographer performing this study, I was

open to “iterative-inductive research to produce a richly written document that acknowledges the role of theory, consists of a family of methods, respects the irreducibility of human experience, recognizes my role as the researcher, and involves direct and sustained contact with humans” (O’Reilly, 2005, p. 3). I used participant observation, interviewing, and reflexive writing as the three methods for this study.

Population and Sample Selection

To take part in the interview portion of this study, participants were required to be of age 18 or more and be Black men who self identity as gay, recognize their queerness, or acknowledge their same gender loving orientation. All participants lived in Atlanta, Georgia or within five miles of the city, and had to have maintained residency here for at least one year prior to the interview. Using already established networks among known associates in Atlanta, I selected the initial three interview candidates. Two, I met at a conference in March 2010 at Spelman College, and one I met in the local Atlanta community in April 2010. Starting with these three men, I used a snowball technique. This is “a sampling method in which the researcher samples participants based on referral from prior participants” (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008, p. G-8). This means I used my already established networks to suggest other Black gay men who would be suitable for the study. In addition, during participant observation in Piedmont Park, I solicited one interviewee.

I interviewed men until I reached a point of data saturation. Saturation in qualitative research happens when after interviewing multiple participants, the researcher finds no new information or findings in the assessed data (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Although there has been much debate about how many interviews need to be conducted to reach data saturation, Guest et al.(2006) contend, based on their work in field research, that six to twelve interviews

will reveal meta-themes and saturation in homogenous samples.[4] The researchers also argue: "the more similar participants in a sample are in their experiences with respect to the research domain, the sooner we would expect to reach saturation" (p. 76). I considered the Black gay men in Atlanta that I interviewed to be a homogenous sample.

Reflexive Writing

I wrote the findings section of this study using the technique of reflexive writing. In anthropology, reflexive writing is similar to auto-ethnography. Auto-ethnography is "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 733). Auto-ethnography is complex and as a method could capture this entire study, this is why I use reflexive writing. For me, reflexive writing is about acknowledgement of self; in this study, I merge my own experiences, with, critical thought, to create a product that is rich and relevant in content. As a researcher who is also a part of the community being studied, it is important for me to incorporate what Richardson (1994) references as narratives of the self. This helps give my study a shape; it will hopefully allow readers to see that the research is coming from some "body." Through the lens of the self, I explore the personal feelings I have around community within the city. My goal in being reflexive is less about promoting this study as research of myself, which would be a singular account of what life is like, instead, within this thesis, reflexive writing is about placing my own experience into the cultural, as a way to highlight the culture that is being studied.

Participant Observation

Participant observation is said to be the basis for ethnographic work (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002). Agar (1996) argues that interviewing and observing are part of the process of participant

[4] Homogenous refers to the men having similar social locales, Black, gay, and male.

observation. Observing participants specifically calls for the researcher to become part of the lives of the people being studied. Since I am a group member, this was relatively easy. Cultural familiarity is said to enhance ethnographic data (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002). Being a member of the population being studied, I had greater potential to produce a rich and relevant document. Scholarship on cultural research indicates that the more familiar one is with a culture the more he/she can make intuitive judgments about what specific cultural data is revealing (Angrosino, 2002). This familiarity afforded me insights, like where to seek out participants and at what times of the day, also because I am a Black gay man, my fellow group members were less apprehensive about participating in general.

To manage the scope of this study, I chose two locations to do participant observation, Piedmont Park and El Azteca, which is a Mexican eatery. Both sites are in Atlanta. As a member of the community being studied, I know that these are places many Black gay men in Atlanta frequent. I visited Piedmont Park twice a week during the late spring and summer of 2010, from May 16th to September 5th. Although I write mostly about spending my weekends in the park, I did visit on other days, but Sundays proved to be the most active. I became a weekend regular at El Azteca, visiting the establishment twice a month during the summer of 2010.

Interviewing

I conducted semi-structured interviews. O'Reilly (2005) describes this interview style as a way to explore the ideas participants have while also having some questions pre-determined to meet criteria. I told my interviewees that I was a researcher interested in learning about Black gay men, community, and culture. I introduced my type of study first, because my experience as a Black gay man in Atlanta told me that when researchers come around to talk to gay men, there is a high probability the research is related to a health or epidemiological study, this can cause

apprehensiveness. This does not mean that health as a topic did not come up during interviews, it in-fact did, but I let the participants lead the conversation in that direction. Before interviews, I sought consent from participants, and asked if I could record the conversations while taking notes. They all agreed. I also asked participants to chose pseudonyms; let them know that our conversations would be kept confidential to the fullest extent of the law; and that at anytime they could withdraw from participating in the study.

I briefed participants on my background as well, including my sexuality, I did not ask the participants to tell me anything I would not tell them. I asked the participants the questions listed in Appendix A; these questions connect to the theory of community I used to ground the study. These questions also facilitated the conversation, and naturally other questions and comments surfaced.

Data Analysis

To analyze the information gathered, I first looked at and examined my own experiences in Atlanta. Second, I transcribed the interviews so that I could read and listen to the information my participants provided. I worked from a sample of seven interviews, over 60 pages of data. Using the interview protocol as the source of major themes and analytical categories, I matched participants' statements to themes of interest, a basic narrative analysis approach. Field notes were used as the third method of analysis. Together I use these three methods to triangulate my data (Flick, 2006). According to Love (2008), who conducted ethnography about youth and rap music, keen insight into one's study happens as a result of using multiple data sources.

Validity, Questions, and Peer Debriefing

To ensure that my interviews and interpretations reflect what participants are saying and experiencing, I asked interviewees to go over my notes with me and to read their transcriptions

once they were ready. Because this study consisted of planned and non-planned interviews of men who vary in age and knowledge, field notes, and reflexive writing, threats to external validity were reduced. To help the interview feel more like a conversation, I met with participants in the spaces of their choice, where they felt comfortable. I encouraged interviewees to ask me questions at the end of the interview. I also asked my research subjects to tell me about things they felt my interview protocol left out.

The final way I worked toward reducing validity threats is by having peer debriefings. Working professionally at an institution of higher learning and being a graduate student has its benefits, I do/am both. Two of my colleagues, my supervisor who is working on a PhD in education at the University of Georgia, whose cognate is in qualitative research, and my co-facilitator at the organization where I volunteer, who recently completed her PhD in education at Emory University, sat down with me and did peer debriefings as I conducted my research.

> In peer debriefing, researchers meet with one or more impartial colleagues in order to critically review the implementation and evolution of their research methods. The role of the peer debriefer is to facilitate the researcher's consideration of methodological activities and provide feedback concerning the accuracy and completeness of the researcher's data collection and data analysis procedures (Spillett, 2003, p.1).

The purpose of these debriefings was to make sure that I accurately interpreted interview transcripts and that my collection and analysis of data was justifiable and complete. I used these meetings to reflect on my study and talk about how the process was evolving. These peers did not take the place of my advisors; they were used as an ear and critic, to make sure the research formed with clarity.

Summary

In this chapter I described the research methodology. Under qualitative ethnography, I used interviewing, reflexive writing, and participant observation, as ways to conduct this study

about Black gay men in Atlanta. The study is grounded by a theory of community, and data was organized through a basic narrative analysis.

Chapter 4: INTERVIEW FINDINGS

To explore notions of community and culture for Black gay men in Atlanta, a reported Black gay Mecca, I interviewed seven self identifying Black gay men. These men all considered themselves to be part of Atlanta's Black gay social networks. Using a prescribed interview protocol, I attempted to establish discourse that would elucidate the following research questions: "How do Black gay men experience community in Atlanta, a so-called Black gay Mecca?"; "What kinds of social formations support or impede the experience of community, and its many dimensions, among Black gay men in Atlanta?"; and lastly, "Are there specific cultural features of Black gay men in Atlanta, or of the city of Atlanta itself, that assists or plays a role in Black gay men's creation of and experiences with community, or lack thereof?"

Theoretical Framework

As stated, the framework for this study articulates community "as a group of people who have a sense of common purpose(s) and/ or interest(s) for which they assume mutual responsibility, who acknowledge their interconnectedness, who respect the individual differences among members, and who commit themselves to the well-being of each other and the integrity of the group" (Woods & Judikis, 2002, p. 12). I approached this research knowing my participants would have varying definitions of community. To foster cohesiveness, I asked questions that tied directly to Woods and Judikis's theory of community, so that in the end, despite my participants varying definitions I would have a central locus. In the conclusion, I use this framework for guidance when thinking about community among Black gay men in Atlanta.

Research Participants

Interviewees for this study ranged in age from 19-46. Though they had varied levels of education, all had high school diplomas. Participants' social classes ranged as well, for instance, one research interviewee was unemployed while another owned a large home in suburban, Georgia. Six out of the seven men were employed, although not all at full-time status; two interviewees were full-time students. I met with most of the men in Midtown Atlanta, however only two of them lived within this area.

Christian is 34 years old and works in the entertainment and television industry in Atlanta. Christian is originally from Manhattan, New York, but has lived in Atlanta for more than 10 years. In addition to being a member of Atlanta's "exclusive" Black gay social scene, as he described to me, Christian considers himself part of several other Atlanta communities, including arts, music, and entertainment. I met with Christian at my apartment in Midtown Atlanta.

Rico Sauvé is a 19 year old college student. Rico is also a native New Yorker and he moved to Atlanta from Harlem, New York, midway through his high school career. Rico is the son of a pastor and cites his religious and moral values as central to his being. In addition to being a self identifying Black gay man, Rico considers himself part of Atlanta's modeling and young college student community. I met with Rico at the clubhouse of his boyfriend's high rise condo in Midtown Atlanta.

Iruland Rasheed is a 26 year old poet and community activist. Iruland is originally from Gainesville, Florida, and has lived in Atlanta for over 5 years. Iruland enjoys creating poetry and writings about Black gay life. Along with his membership in Atlanta's Black gay social scene,

Iruland is also a member of Atlanta's art and activism community. I met with Iruland at Jason's Deli, a popular eatery in Midtown Atlanta.

Pierre West is 31 years old; before living in Atlanta he lived in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Pierre works in Atlanta's community outreach sector, specializing in HIV and AIDS issues. Pierre is involved in music and considers himself a community activist. I met with Pierre at my apartment in Midtown Atlanta.

Brandon is a 27 year old former college athlete from Miami, Florida. Brandon is entering into a new phase in his life as he has recently revealed to his friends and family his queer sexuality after residing in Atlanta for 3 years. Brandon recently completed his master's degree in social work and has enrolled into a PhD program. Brandon considers himself a member of various social networks in Atlanta, including what he calls a thriving community of young professionals. I met with Brandon at Whole Foods supermarket in Midtown, Atlanta.

Marc is a 46 year old Atlanta professional who works in healthcare management. Marc is originally from Sacramento, California. Marc has a separate business where he organizes and plans entertainment events. Marc's company promotes some of Atlanta's biggest parties and venues catering to Black gay men. I met with Marc at his home in College Park, Georgia.

Sergio Valentino is a 23 year old Atlanta native. He is a student at the Atlanta University Center and enjoys reading and posting blogs online. Sergio is interested in politics and considers himself a contemporary philosopher. Sergio says he stands in solidarity with the Black gay community in Atlanta. I met with Sergio at Jason's Deli in Midtown Atlanta.

Community

I first engaged my study participants on notions of community. Here are their seven responses when asked to talk about what community was to them. “Well, a community to me is a group of people who have a common interest and they come together and commune.” (Iruland)

> Community is basically an area in which you live that you call home. It’s a collective group of people and or things that make up the community, your space. You know, where you reside. For me, it’s like the people that make up where I live and spend most of my time. (Brandon)
>
> Hmmm, I guess when I think of community I think of like…I immediately think about a group of people who probably reside or function in the same common area. They do not have to be from the same nationality or background but they just interact on a continuous basis with each other. (Christian)
>
> Community to me? That is such a broad type of question but, uhh…A community to me is a group of people who have a common, some type of common purpose or motivation and hopefully they work together for that common goal (Marc).
>
> Community I think is a group of people who share the same space, who share the same, some of the same values probably. Could be a group of people who share the same religion, or group of people who share the same sexuality, sexual preference--just a group of people who could probably identify with the same things, for whatever that means for that. (Pierre)
>
> Community means, its support, it’s a support system. It is a group that is around you that you can depend on. Community means informed. You know people that are around you that know about you or that can help you. (Rico)

Sergio replied with a more particular answer and although he attempted to bifurcate his notion of community, he actually provided three nuanced definitions.

> I think community can be two things. I think you can have like a political community, where the aim is solidarity for some political end, right. So there’s togetherness for some goal and usually the goal is beneficial to the community, right. And then I think there’s like physical community, there’s like, we walk together home from the club because we don’t wanna get bashed or we don’t wanna get raped or you know whatever that can be. Then there is like community that nourishes the soul, like we’re friends because you give me something that I can’t get from anywhere else and there is a similarity between us. (Sergio)

Knowing that most of my research participants had very general ideas about community, I was curious to know to which communities they felt they belonged. When I asked Iruland, he responded "I'm part of a community of same gender loving persons and I'm a part of the arts community. Yeah, those are just some examples." Pierre exclaimed "I identify as belonging to the gay community, the African American community, the agnostic community, and probably the community of activism as well." Brandon answered similarly "I belong to one, the African American community, and two the African American gay community, and I would say now a community of working professionals." Marc's answer centered his neighborhood community.

> I belong to my little community here in my cul-de-sac and we communicate quite a bit about just keeping up our homes and our yards. We also… it's like having the cul-de-sac as a common denominator, we also have our best interests be on the real estate, you know, we hear about each other's personal well being. If a neighbor, like my neighbor up the street was out of a job so I tried to help him find work. You know when there's positive things coming I can take part in, they share it with me. (Marc)

Of all the responses solicited, Marc was the only member who did not immediately locate himself within a community of Black gay or same gender loving men. Though Marc did not list his membership in a Black gay community organically, he did recognize an affiliation later in the conversation. I asked "Do you consider yourself a member of a community of Black gay men? Where and Why?

> I do believe I'm part of that community. Where? Here in Atlanta. Why? - uh, because I am Black and because I am gay (he laughs). And, probably even more than that, because of the type of work I do in that group or in that community, with doing a lot of the entertainment piece and the night clubs and promotions. A lot of what I do is catered for the community. (Marc)

My probing was intentional, as I was interested in knowing if residing in the space of Atlanta impacted the ways my participants identified the communities to which they belonged, for some it did. In the comment below Brandon talks about why he cannot stay away from Atlanta for too long.

> If I leave town to go to another city to visit or like hang out, I can only stay but so long because I feel like we [Atlanta's gay culture] are our own. Even though we are like a city in a big nation, I feel like this is the only city that you can be yourself, do what you want to do, not be ashamed of it, not be scared of the ridicule or the punishment after. You can just do what you want and not have that backlash to look forward to. I definitely think Atlanta is number one for me. Even in my own thought processes, I don't have the hang ups, I don't have the cautions I do outside of Atlanta while in Atlanta. (Brandon)

Sergio implies a trickle-down effect as he talks about how Atlanta's culture has shaped his friends and in turn how they have shaped him.

> Atlanta has helped me, but it's *really* [participants' emphasis added] helped friends who have helped me….So, I think it has been minimally influential for me but very influential for my friends and they've been very influential for me. (Sergio)

I asked the men to rate how comfortable they were with their sexuality, 1 being completely uncomfortable and 10 being most comfortable. Christian uttered a quick 7, the lowest of the group. Pierre and Sergio exclaimed 8; Brandon felt he was an 8 ½. The rest of the men answered completely comfortable, 10 in Rico's case; in the conversation with Iruland, he shouted "I'm an 11," Marc quickly asserted "200." The men reported high levels of comfort with their sexuality.

After collecting data around sexuality and comfort, I asked my participants if the city of Atlanta played a role in how they rated themselves. An intense Pierre uttered:

> Absolutely, absolutely! Because you feel…for me I don't feel like the minority here. I think that makes a huge difference. You feel like there is a representation of the person you are no matter where you go or no matter where you are, what environment you're in. Whether it be work or church or just among friends, anywhere in the community you can see a reflection of yourself.

Pierre's sentiments were echoed throughout; other participants also reported that Atlanta helped them develop and shape their identities.

> To be honest with you, I think it plays a big role because it really helped me with my metamorphosis as a Black gay man. Again, being from a small town you know. I was always out, if you didn't know you were just blind. But, I think Atlanta has shaped me

> and has refined me. It has really allowed me to uhh, to work on having my voice and in the community so, yeah, it did play a big role. (Iruland)

> Atlanta plays a big part. I think if I lived anywhere else outside of Atlanta I don't think I would be as comfortable. I probably would not, well living here, before that, I never went to gay clubs and I probably would never have gone, but Atlanta you know, it makes you more comfortable to do that, so it plays a big part.(Christian)

The youngest of the men, Rico, did not feel Atlanta played as strong of a role in his "10" rated comfort level. He connected coming out to his family with him being so comfortable.

> Not at all…I actually decided to come out before I came down here. In New York the areas I had to conquer were not necessarily acceptance by outward influences but it was acceptance from the people who mattered to me, which is my family, which were close friends and that was it. After those were conquered I didn't care about what Atlanta, New York, Chicago- I didn't care about what anybody else had to say.

The men reported relatively high levels of comfort with their sexuality and in general they spoke highly of Atlanta, they felt that as a whole, the city had great energy for Black queer people. After individual conversations engaging their ideas on community and comfort, I began a discussion with each of the participants that asked them to talk about their fellow Black gay men. In particular, what were some of the ways they felt Black gay men in Atlanta engaged and experienced community, and also, how did Black gay men in Atlanta connect to each other? I was interested in knowing if my participants felt there were specific ways Black gay men in Atlanta communed. Their answers spoke candidly to their feelings on Atlanta's community and culture. In the following section participants talk about Black gay men in Atlanta experiencing and creating community.

You Can Find it in the Club

"The things that link us together are our clubs!" (Marc). Marc's comment speaks to a major theme that surfaced among my participants, this was the idea that Atlanta's Black gay night life and social gatherings were the ultimate space for communing and experiencing culture.

As I delved deeper into how Black gay men in Atlanta interacted, the men engaged me deeply when it came to Atlanta's night life.

> Yeah, I think we don't do enough supporting of each other outside of clubbing and things that are surface. You know you get occasional charity events from people who do certain things but I don't think it's enough. I think there are a few who do these things consistently, we get that a lot, so we have that replace other stepping up. But I think I'm interested in having our community step it up, and be known for more than just partying and being super hot guys, you know, things that have more meaning. Even within my own little crew, I get on them all the time about supporting each other outside of okay we are going to hang out at 10 to 3 in the morning, and then that's it, like no. If you have a member that's graduating from college or doing something really spectacular in the community, show up in the same amount of numbers you show up to go out, show up in the same amount of numbers you show up to go to this house party or you know to play cards, you have to have that, I think numbers are big. (Brandon)

> I would have to go back to the social events. To me that's the only time I see where Black gay men come together and are somewhat pleasant and enjoy each other, in that type of environment.(Christian)

> The club! On a whole it's going to be the club. We will come together in masses for a party; let it be something of substance, not so much. Again when I think about how I'm going to pull together some things for my charity, in support of that community, I keep thinking, you know, "gotta bring in a celebrity component or you gotta bring in something that touches them somehow mentally, physically, emotionally to get them engaged." (Marc)

Although nightclubs and other social events mentioned did not have the most positive connotations, this was not the consensus among the group. Pierre talked about social events in a more uplifting way, also, here Rico talks about Pride and community on the streets of Atlanta.

> Pride! Things like that. When it doesn't matter who you are everybody just comes out and celebrates being different and acknowledges that that's okay and that's something to celebrate. I never feel as connected to other gay Black men as I do during Pride. Or, like on a Sunday at, what's that place called? El Azteca, or something like that. There is a spot everyone will go, if it's not that maybe in a few months it will be another spot. But, I think those kinds of settings are where Black gay people gather for some great times and a great setting to feel comfortable and be connected. (Pierre)

> Pride…Where everybody from every doggone state comes here….one beautiful part about Atlanta itself is that when you are in a successful relationship or when you are in a beautiful relationship you can walk down the street and hold their hand in hand and you will get "Yeeees" or a honk on the horn or " I Love it."(Rico)

Social venues, particularly night clubs, proved to be places where participants saw what they thought was communing and connectedness among Black gay men. In Rico's case, he experiences community on the streets of Atlanta, as he feels Black queer people support each other when they show public affection to their same-sex partners.

Friends Equal Everything

The second theme that emerged spoke to the ways Black gay men experience community with their friends and with creating new friendships. Throughout most of my interviews, the men held their friends in the highest regard. Here are some of the men's comments related to friendships and family.

> As I said earlier, I graduated with my masters in May and I invited my close friends, who are mostly gay but some who are not. I was happy to see that they came out for something so early so far, so non-personally benefitting. They came out to support a fellow brother, a fellow friend in his accomplishment. Me coming out is another example. In the gay community we have what we call families. You might hear somebody say "oh yeah that's my brother, that's my child, that's my sister, or that's my uncle or auntie." What we are saying is not that that person replaces my mother or aunties and brothers, because that could never happen for me. But, at the same time they're there just to fill in the gaps for the things that maybe my mom or maybe my brother or maybe my dad is not ready to totally walk over with me with. They are just there to stand in to say hey I know that it's tough but I'm here if you need me and I could provide that ear or that advice because I've lived that or I'm living that now. (Brandon)

> For friends I would say few and far between and then I would also say very very important. And, I say that because in the Black community once you decide to live your life as an openly gay Black male you lose a lot of your family so your friends kind of now become that family that you don't have (Christian)

> My big thing is being genuine. You will find someone who will give you good advice and tell you not to do this but they still have their ill motives…they want to date you themselves. So it's always about being genuine. Just someone that's there for you just because...I would even go as far as to…you asked about one of the things that link us. We talked before about the whole house scene. That is something that is linking. Everything has negativity in it. Does it have negativity…yes, but I mean at the end of the day those are support systems that bring Black gay men together and they participate and they compete with each other over who's the prettiest, the strongest, who's the most masculine, face, body, sex siren. But at the end of the day they call each other families,

> houses, whatever they call each other by, they identify as brothers and sisters. And they go to each other when they have issues and problems and you come from being fresh and new to Atlanta to now you go to the club… [they, members of houses say] you're my brother…let me show you around. And that is a linking factor and in all actuality that is a support system. (Rico)

> Beyond my neighbors I have a group of friends that I'm very close to and like my neighbors we share in positives and negatives, uh, the goods and bads of each other's lives. If there is wealth to be made from what we share, that type of thing. (Marc)

Marc ended another one of his comments simply by saying: "you have a caring about those people in your network or in your circle." These comments indicate that my participants saw relationships with close friends as how Black gay men in Atlanta often engage community.

I Live in a "Black Gay Mecca," a Reproducible Phenomenon

Atlanta and its nickname "the Black Gay Mecca," and assumptions about what that means and how that feels, informed the perceptions and realities of my participants. This leads me to believe that for some Black gay men, being a resident of Atlanta by itself, produces and creates feelings of Black gay culture, comfort, and connectedness, making them feel like community and culture exists simply because they are in a space that has been deemed their "home." In other words, because popular discourse has located Atlanta as a hub, enclave, and Mecca for Black gays, many Black gay men have come to believe and experience it as such, and in their everyday lives reproduce this idea. The following comments lead me to this theme.

> When I moved to Atlanta I got a little bit gayer. Because it's so comfortable, it's the Black gay Mecca, you're able to be yourself and not worry about the stigma attached to it, or what somebody's going to say, or how they may react to you. You don't have to have that fight mode, you just be yourself. (Brandon)

To Christian, Atlanta's Mecca status indicates a level of comfort and positivity.

> I think it's a positive statement that it's a Black gay Mecca. I think that statement says that Black gay men can be comfortable, somewhat comfortable, with their sexuality, and having a life and having a comfortable life at that, in their own space. I think it's positive. (Christian)

Iruland reports the beauty in seeing so many Black gay men.

> Right! Well for someone who comes from a very small town, definitely. I think it is to me, versus someone who is like [from] a metropolitan [area] such as like a NYC, or California, they may look at it as different. But for myself I think it's true, because I've never seen so many of us running around just all in one setting, just being us. I think that's beautiful. (Iruland)

For Pierre, Atlanta becomes synonymous with being free and honest about sexuality.

> People have been made to feel like Atlanta is a place where they can be themselves, where they can be honest about who they are and it's okay, because there is a lot of other people who also identity as being gay or bisexual. Here is a place where people have been made to feel comfortable to be that person; or its okay to express that part of their sexuality. (Pierre)

Rico feels Atlanta is close knit and because of this Black gay men are more visible here than in other places.

> Very true … I realized that there is a huge Black gay community there [New York] but we don't know each other….Where as in Atlanta you go to a stop light and you meet a gay man. You go to the parking lot you meeting a gay man. You go to the gas station you meeting a gay man. (Rico)

The men speak to a theme in which psychic formations help create and keep the idea of community in place. Because Atlanta has been so highly regarded as a cultural center for Black gays, community and connectedness get assigned to the space and experienced as such.

Black gay men in Atlanta experience community and culture where it exists. From my interview conversations, community exists in Atlanta's night life social venues, of which Black gay men attend in large numbers; second, Black gay men in Atlanta engage community amongst friends, particularly Black gay friends, who are often considered family. Also, according to the men, community and culture exists in the very idea that they are Atlanta residents; in this sense, community is fostered through a psychic-to-social process around what it means to have a city believed to be a Black gay Mecca.

Impediments to Community

While my research interviewees tended to think long and hard about the factors that link, connect, and join us, it was relatively easy for them to offer feedback about the things that divided us. This I will not attribute to them lacking feelings of connectedness, instead I would argue that negative imagery about Black queer sexuality has been so pervasive to our psyches, that at any moment we can become ready to recount the "bad" or the divisive. Here are some of the themes unearthed when I spoke with each of the men about what inhibited community among Black gay men in Atlanta.

No Respect for Identity Variances

Being out, closeted, masculine, feminine, handsome, dark skinned, light skinned, old, young, negative, or positive- those are just some of the things uttered by the men when talking about factors that kept Atlanta's Black gay male population separated.

> Go on at some of these sex sites "no fats no fems." Or you know, if you too big- or my favorite one "if you too Black get back." We have this whole thing about lighter is better and darker is worst. If you brown stick around. It's definitely that mentality that kind of keeps us separated. Speaking from experience, having that repeated to me so much, that I am not a value because I'm too dark and I'm feminine. Having that said to me, having that repeated to me you know. At one point I was convinced that I was inferior to the glorious light skin guy with the wavy hair. He was superior to me because he was the catch of the day or he was the next best thing, he was the trophy. So yeah, that's something that definitely goes on even to this day. I think that's why it's important that you have to build yourself up, so that when that comes your way, you are assured that you are of value. (Iruland)

> I think a large majority of gay Black men here don't have an identity, or they're scared to have an identity. I don't know if that's the right way to say it but I think, again, going back to those three choices, either I'm going to be this extreme masculine "top" dude, or I'm going to be this "thug", or I'm going to be this ultra feminine guy. I think everybody's kind of like struggling to fit into one of these boxes because if you don't, people don't understand. (Christian)

> I think there are a lot of differences that can become cliquish- like, these are the light skinned boys, these are the brown skinned boys, these are the tops, these are the bottoms, these are the masculine guys, these are the feminine guys. I think that last one, like the

> masculine guys-the feminine guy, that runs real deep you know…. Yeah I think those are definite differences, I mean education like you know…I'm educated you're not..but like [think about] the serious implications that that has. (Sergio)

> That's another important thing to realize within our community, there still are biases within the community. There are cunts that will talk about trannies [transgendered people]. And there are trannies that will talk about masculine boys saying that you are not being yourself. Even though they are at the end of the day, born Black, born males, identify their sexuality with the same sex they identify entirely different. (Rico)

> I think we still have our issues with getting accepted by other groups and even with ourselves. But overall I think there is a much better acceptance of gay people even within the Black community. I think that unfortunately there is not enough representation from all the different types of Black gay men, that kind of push us through. It's always been the more flamboyant characters within our community that kind of push things through. They have more reckless abandonment, they show their face. So that's why, when you look at television you'll see more flamboyant characters, drag queens, things of that nature. Those of us who are masculine, the more masculine types of our community blend in so much more they don't really show themselves so you can't tell them from a straight one from a gay man so I wish there were more- less flamboyant people kind of uh making a statement or presenting themselves as being Black and gay so they can see that diverse look. It kind of puts that whole kinda DL stigma on us as well because we're not showing ourselves we are kinda playing double roles or things of that nature. (Marc)

The preceding comments indicate a level of division within Black gay circuits, these separations happen both because of the ways people identify and due to a lack of respect paid to diversity among Black gay subjectivities. For participants like Pierre, the lack of respect for diversity within the Black gay group is no different than other social locales.

> People in general, and no different for a Black gay community, have a hard time understanding what respect means and how to express that among each other, and I see that as the same issue in the gay Black community. That definitely happens. (Pierre)

No Semblance of Purpose

It was challenging for participants to postulate a common purpose(s) among Black gay men in Atlanta. Interestingly, this idea that we had no unifying purpose tied heavily to the first theme of no respect for identity variances. Below, Christian and Marc talk separately about the need to come together for more community dialogues.

> No, we don't have a sense of common purpose unfortunately. I think a small pocket of us do but those people involved in small pockets aren't influential enough to push them to the heights that are needed. There are people in the community who are able to do that, but they're caught up in their own objectives and their own purpose. That conversation has been had, its needs to be brought back to the table and kind of worked out. (Marc)

> I think there's not a sense of common purpose because of the fact that we don't -- well I don't think that we get together as gay Black men in Atlanta to sit down and talk about what a common purpose that we all might have is, like I don't think we do that. So, I'm pretty sure there's individuals like myself and my friends who have the same concerns and want to see different changes and different growths but, again, we don't have that outlet to get those like minds together and come up with a common purpose or goal. (Christian)

Here, Pierre argues that there is a lack of common purpose because of the vast differences among Black gay men. Even the ways we identify our sexual orientation, he insists, keeps our purposes separate.

> No. I don't think they have a sense of common purpose, I think because everybody is so different. Everybody's agendas, mentalities, and backgrounds are so different. I don't see any kind of consensus on what we should be doing or where we should be headed, or what Black gay life is about. Because people who are same sex attracted of course you know identity in all different sects. Everybody doesn't consider themselves being gay so I don't see a consensus for what the mission is or what the purpose is.

In the following comment Iruland mixes the sentiments of Marc, Christian, and Pierre.

> I mean we can't really control anyone's intentions and I think it's about your intention. As far as us as a collective I don't think we have a common purpose. Because of the simple fact that you know what matters to some people may not matter to another group of people. The club heads may like this, the activists may view it differently you know, I mean it really varies. I see the level of urgency when it comes to, when there is a desire to build community, I hear a lot of talk about having a more unified community, but the issue with that is, the numbers of people who are actually interested and actually want to make it happen it is not as prominent or as big versus the people who actually say "we want to have this happen."

Rico too, insisted that our differences prevented common purpose.

> Do they have a sense of common purpose? No I don't think we have a sense of common purpose. Everybody has their differences. You have those who want to look the best. They want to be the baddest in the club. Then you have those that want to break the mold and succeed and exceed be better than all the straight people and white people.

The men reported that Black gay men in Atlanta lacked a common purpose. Either it was the idea that we lacked numbers and/or a forum to talk about a mission, or it was because our differences were so strong they supplanted our commonalities.

Capitalist Constructions of Community or We are not like White men!

In separate conversations with the men, there was a reoccurring theme that pitted Atlanta's White gay male community against Atlanta's Black gay male community. Participants felt White gay men owned property, specifically in Midtown which is home to Atlanta's gay enclave. This property ownership allowed for a type of spatially visible community, where White men owned businesses and property, aiding in their community formation and culture. Several participants felt Black gay men in Atlanta lacked this type of capitalist community.

> I take like Juniper and 10th, the Gayborhood here in Atlanta. I see more community when I go there. I see lots of White gay men who have… intentionally taken over an area and made it something that they can be proud of. Who own the shops, who own the stores, who walk the streets, who own the property around it, who have, you know, fought hard to hang the rainbow signs and declared this a gay extended piece of Atlanta. They have marked this as their territory. I think about the activism and the efforts that it takes to make those things happen, I don't see us making those kinds of strides and maybe we are and I'm just not aware or connected to that reality. But, that's not something that I see. They are much more visible, I can see the mark that they are trying to make, the newspapers that they have. You look at these things and say "these are white people, white gay people!" I just think they, from what I've seen, they do a better job of being connected and doing so intentionally and accomplishing things as a result of that connectedness or those joint efforts they make. It may be because of more resources or a different kind of culture, different kinds of mentality. Maybe it's some sort of unity they feel for being White? I don't know. They may feel like they can accomplish more, they may have some sort of confidence that we don't have, maybe some additional dynamic because of who we are and what our history is, but I just think they do a better job of presenting more a community as opposed to a group. (Pierre)

> When I think of the word community I think of, first of all, an environment where we all coexist or reside with each other and it's our own. It's our businesses, it's our restaurants, and it's our casual environments. I think that our white counterparts have a community in Atlanta. I don't think we have a community in the sense of where we come together and discuss issues that affect us as gay Black men in Atlanta. I don't think we have our areas where we have business or different things that we can go and support. I think we're more of a group here. (Christian)

Marc too argues that we do not have the community Whites have. He asserts that we lack centralized leadership and spokespeople.

> I don't think we are united enough in that way. I think it would take something major or catastrophic to kind of bring us together and put us on one page. I think we're just really out there kinda wondering on our own. I think White gay males do it a lot better. Again, I won't say it's a negative thing on our part, I think we just don't know how to do it. There may be a great desire to but some of us know how some of us don't know how, some of us are better at leading a pack and some of us aren't as good at leading a pack but, I just don't think we have a strong enough leadership amongst the community to kind of drive it. You know we use to have like Keith Boykin's, he's not as vocal as he use to be, or Phil Wilson, those types of leaders out there trying to give it some direction. There is different little social groups or community groups that support that community. It's just not enough of us concerned; we're only concerned about just day to day things. (Marc)

In further conversation with Marc, he mentioned wealth.

> We'll probably talk about this more, but when we really sit down and look at what the community of Black gay men brings to the table, we haven't done that. There hasn't been a synergy that kind of says okay we have great value and great wealth, let's make that do something for us, so that's where it's lacking. (Marc)

When it came to the things that impeded community among Black gay men in Atlanta, intentional conversations ensued. My sample population felt strongly that no respect for identity variances, the first theme, kept Black gay men from the second theme, having a common purpose. Also, some of the men talked vividly about Black gay men having no particular spaces to invest in and call their own in Atlanta, especially when it came to neighborhood formation. These men felt we lacked ownership of property, preventing the type of community White men had, which to some participants kept the Black gay community in Atlanta fragmented.

The Atlanta Experience

My participants offered extensive feedback when we began to talk about the specific cultural features of the Black gay community in Atlanta. I again look at their comments in groups of themes.

Sex Over Love

"The generalization of Black gay men in Atlanta, I can say that they are interested in sex" (Rico)

When it came to culture, interviewees exclaimed similar comments, arguing that a specific feature of the Black gay community in Atlanta is sex, and the often circulated idea that Black gay men are oversexed and do not have "safe" sex. In this next comment Pierre, an HIV/AIDS community worker, talks about some of the irresponsibility he sees when it comes to sex.

> I see that… all too often, sexual pleasure is more important than responsibility or commitment towards responsibility for another person's well being, and the spread of disease, all kinds of disease. And then also, I see a lot of irresponsibility as it relates to commitment and emotional devastation, there is a lot of that going on. That is definitely a part of an individual's well being and there is a lot of sort of irresponsible selfish, immature behavior going on, which is probably part of the youthful colorful culture Atlanta presents to Black gay men.

Marc talks about misguided love.

> I think love is abundant in the community, I think its misguided love to some degree. I think that love means many things and I think that we love each other in the general sense but when it comes down to truly loving then we would do a whole lot better in some of our practices sexually being safer and loving in that way.

Iruland talks about a personal experience.

> Well…I'm laughing because I think sexuality plays a big role. Again, it's very much individual you know, I've encountered some Black gay men who wanted to fuck me raw and that wasn't happening. I've had men who wanted to have sex with me or wanted to be with me and still have boyfriends or they still have lovers that they were "committed" to.

Sergio shares his philosophy.

> Black gay men in Atlanta can be overly concerned about sex and like physical appearance or like you know vacuous kinds of things. Not that they're unimportant but they can just be vacuous when they consume your life; you know what I mean, like if all your concerned about is sex, that's probably a problem you know.

Christian talks about a resituating of our foci.

> Every year for gay pride, I think that so much emphasis is put on the fun entertainment part of it, but there's no emphasis that I'm aware of that's put on again, the education, the sitting down in the forums to talk about AIDS in the community, to talk about any type of disease, even if you want to go to sickle cell, whatever. They don't focus on that. They don't even have, you know like- business forums, to sit down and talk to people, everything is on entertainment, everything is on the outer, the sexual, the tangible stuff…

The men recanted similar thoughts, insisting that a cultural feature of Black gay men in Atlanta is the idea that we like to have sex, that we do not always have safe sex, and at times we prefer sex over love and friendship. In Christian's argument, we promote entertainment and sex over a progressive politics. The comments indicate that Black gay male culture and community in Atlanta is coterminous with sex.

Value Systems

I asked each of the interviewees about Black gay men in Atlanta and our common values. The men were excited to talk about what they perceived them to be. In this arena, participants asserted that Black gay men in Atlanta continually strived and progressed, and as a group desired the same things as any other group. What was similar is not that the men listed all the same things as our values; but that they felt as a group we indeed had values, making this the second theme.

Brandon and Rico insisted we are no different than any other group when it comes to our values.

> We all want to be successful as I said earlier. We all want to attain those things that everybody does. We want education; we want the money, so it's all a chain, everything that we ultimately want is nothing different than any other orientation. I don't think, not in Atlanta at least. (Brandon)

> I think in a general consensus you can say that we do value, no matter who you meet or whatever they're in everybody wants love, everybody wants commitment. We're just not all on the right avenue to get it. Everybody wants those things. (Rico)

Christian shared similar sentiments.

> I think we do have common values, I mean if you just start from the personal, if you ask any gay Black man; their ultimate goal is to be in a healthy successful relationship. Their goal, business wise, is to be able to have a successful career and live a comfortable life financial and whatever family they start. I think another common goal is just within their community, allowing them to have that community and for it not to be threatened and not for people to tell them that them having a community is wrong, or anyone trying to take that away from them.

Marc felt we had similar values when it came to race, family, and church.

> I think we have some common values. Just like with anyone, especially being Black, I think there's always debate about what am I first? Am I gay first am I Black first? I think we grow up being Black first and then as we kind of figure ourselves out we then we figure out what we like sexually, so I think we're always Black first. And I think that with that our values in common most times would be family, church those are like our common values.

Pierre feels we have a common value around privacy.

> I think we do have some common values. One of those common values is the respect of privacy. I think that is something that is kind of unspoken in the Black gay community. You don't out people; you don't do that. I think that's sort of a common value that everyone shares and is aware of and does a pretty good job of respecting in general.

My sample population felt that Black gay men in Atlanta had values. Their feelings tell me that Black gay men in Atlanta strive for things in the same ways any other group does, despite our marginalization. Black gay men in Atlanta have a culture of wanting success, in relationships, in love, in employment, and in health. But, as Rico asserted "we're just not all on the right avenue to get it," or are we?

Individual Ethics of Care

One of the most enjoyable moments in each of my interviews involved hearing participants talk about the things they do, in their everyday lives, to take care of themselves and the group of Black gay men they felt they belonged to. Here, the men talk about how they as individuals assist the bigger community, something they say is a trend among some Black gay

men in Atlanta. Iruland talked about making sure he is honest about all things, including his status.

> Individually, I tell them my HIV status. That shows that I'm committed to ensuring your well being and safety, I'm protecting myself. As far as the community, the work that I do, it's not for myself. I want to show those who aren't familiar with our community that we're more than just the stereotypical aspects in which the media has perpetuated. The way that people have viewed us for a long time, I really want to show that we are so much more than that. So that's my commitment to the community. (Iruland)

Pierre talks about his honesty policy as well.

> I think that goes hand in hand, or is sort of parallel to the commitment I have to everyone in my life in terms of their well being. I wouldn't single it out. But, that commitment would be honesty and constantly challenging myself to be an honest person. Honest in all my interactions with other gay Black men. With communicating regularly, in all of my relationships whether they are intimate, friendships, or whether they are co-workers or whoever they are, just being honest with those people. Sharing that policy with openness, which I think is directly tied to all of our well being. And then two, just my commitment to again, HIV and AIDS, the epidemic and the epidemiology of it, which definitely affects the well being of this group. (Pierre)

Sergio talks about standing in solidarity with Black gay men; he also mentions being a role model.

> I feel like I'm politically committed; I feel like I stand in solidarity when I can. I try to be there like physically, if there's a rally, or if there's you know I try to support where I can, not as much as I probably could. I think "could" is important because depending upon who you are there's a lot of resources you can pull from if you have those resources available and I don't think I do as much as I can. I think it's important because you don't realize the way in which you intervening in someone's life or just being there like as an example. You may not even know this person, but just being there as an example of someone who is okay like emotionally okay, you know I can pay my bills I can do this kind of stuff is very important to someone else. If you are not there what are the deleterious consequences that may follow in that person's life. You may not even realize so you know its very matrix-y. You kinda have to be there to know that you have an effect.

Christian reflects on role modeling too, and being nonjudgmental.

> Besides the occasional statements or quotes on my Facebook page, I think for me it's more of like a personal decision for me, as I mentioned before, like dealing with myself to learn how to respect the diversity in our community, to realizing that although I consider myself to be just a man, and I don't feel like I'm too far to the left or too far to the right, I just feel like I'm just naturally a man. I do realize there are other people who

> connect themselves a different way or express themselves a different way, and just because they may be a little more flamboyant, which I would not be and I may not even have an understanding how it comes to that point, at the same time I can't show them the same level of disrespect or criticism that they get outside of the gay community. So it's more of me trying to make a personal commitment to not be judgmental, its more me making a personal commitment to just be a better example of a Black gay man, you know--to be able to go into a working environment and be professional and handle situations professionally and not be the stereotypical Black gay male that instead of handling issues or conflicts in a professional way, I'm going off on people, or different things like that. So, it's more of just me making the decision to use my life as an example.

Rico asserts that mentoring is needed in our community and talks about his commitment to younger generations, even at his young age.

> I'm entirely committed to making sure that we succeed. I really feel like a wake-up call is needed for our community especially for the ones that are older and more mature in this community and know the ends and outs of it. I think it's our duty just as it is the elderly's duty to foster children, or in teachers to teach kids. It is our duty as being more experienced in this community to reach the youth, those 17 and 18 year olds sneaking into the club and tell them they need to keep your pants on. You need to keep your shirt on. You need to chill out...you're a lil hot in the pants right now and also realize they may be sexed they may be cute but at the end of the day they are young and immature and don't know what the hell they're doing. And don't touch them. Leave them the hell alone. Get them together and let them know you know that they have time to figure out love and relationships. Tell them to stay in school like we do everyone else. American values are values in general. Let these kids value love in time. Let them get their education. Give them a shot at life. Make sure if they are having sex and if they can't calm down make sure that they are using protection.

Brandon exclaims that he will stand up for fellow gay man.

> There is no way I'm going to sit in the same room with somebody listening to some words they are saying about a fellow community member or just talking ignorance. I'm not going to just shut up or kind of join in to keep the heat off me. If it means me stepping up and saying… even me just interjecting and saying "O," you know challenging it. When you challenge something like that they're going to do two things, either a, think you're that person or that kind of person or b, feel like you're just that passionate. I don't go around walking with the flag and saying "this is who I am." But, I don't allow people to come in my house, as I say, and hurt my family. I'm going to stick up. If it means you knowing that I'm gay that's fine.

Although I interviewed only a small sample of the Black gay men that live in Atlanta, my participants' narratives speak to both a fervor and commitment for the well being of Black gay men by Black gay men. In the comments, the men talked in various ways about their ethics of care, making this arguably a cultural feature of some Black gay men in Atlanta.

In Atlanta, I Can Just "Be"

If some of the late gay cultural pioneers were alive today, they would be happy to know that my participants felt that in Atlanta they could live just like everyone else. Participants' did not feel a need to bifurcate their Black gay identity. The following are the comments that led me to this theme.

Christian talks about Atlanta having gay identified areas.

> We have certain areas here, like, you know like areas like midtown that are known for a lot of gay patrons. It makes you more comfortable cause you have your own little areas. It's almost like people who are not gay come into that area; they already know what's going on. (Christian)

Marc insists that there is a low level of homophobia in Atlanta.

> Homophobia, in Atlanta? I remember moving here and I thought the South would be just very challenging to me especially coming from the West Coast where you see people walking hand in hand or walking in some chaps with your butt out. But here you can see them walking down the street in high heels and a dress or holding hands or you know taking over Lenox Mall and its all facets of the community in there so. There is a low level of homophobia amongst us also.

Brandon asserts his love for Atlanta, his city.

> Atlanta is number one. This is where I feel like I woke up. This is where I got to know who I was. So I don't think there is a comparison. There are other cities like New York, D.C., and maybe Chicago, San Francisco that are very gay friendly. You can probably be yourself there. But I don't think everything from lifestyle to life choices there is no city that matches Atlanta, I don't think.

In sum, the culture of sex reported by my participants impacts the community greatly, as Black gay men have disproportionate rates of HIV/AIDS and their community is sometimes

trivialized and typecast because sex is so pervasive. Having common values has added to the development of community, as Black gay men organize around networking events that promote health, education, employment, and of course finding romantic interests. Because my participants assumed a level of care about both themselves and the group of men they belonged to, I argue that there is an ethic of care that Black gay men in Atlanta have around their community/group. Lastly, the men interviewed felt that the city of Atlanta was an anomaly when it came to being your Black gay self, as they felt they could live freely here, just as any other social group. For the men, Atlanta was a space where they could see others like them and feel a unique connection to a city that in many respects was known as their home.

Final Thoughts on Atlanta

At the conclusion of each interview, I asked the men to tell me if Black gay men in Atlanta had what they perceived to be a community or group; responses varied but still were similar.

> I think there is a little bit of both. I think there is both. I think we have community and I think there's a lot of groups. Again, I think it's a community that could be much stronger but I think if something again of some magnitude were to come about, we'd become community very fast but I think maybe we're more a group than we are community. (Marc)

> A community is building but at the end of the day we are still in groups. I mean can I say that there is I mean because you're saying one or the other. But I think there is a huge gay community however there are groups within this community that are entirely different. I mean they identify entirely different, they do things entirely different, they think entirely different. (Rico)

> Again, it's tough. Because again we're all over the place like, when I think of community I think of common people who are unified and we're not. So I think we're a group. (Iruland)

> A group! We have different groups. We are a community that is made of different groups. I say that because again, it is. We know the overall picture but it's many groups close together. On the day to day it's more so groups. (Brandon)

> I would say gay Black men in Atlanta have more of a group. And, the reason why I say that is, again, when I think of the word community I think of, first of all, an environment where we all coexist or reside with each other…(Christian)

> I think there is definitely a community, but I think that the community, and there are definitely pockets. I notice my answers have been seemingly very negative, but I think there are positive aspects to the community but there are also very negative aspects. There is a community, it's a dysfunctional one for sure but I think every community is dysfunctional. (Sergio)

> I would have to say that it definitely is a group. I say that because with the definition of community being the interconnectedness and the mutual responsibility and those things, it seems like that is something a group a people agree to and then become a community because they all agree to those things and abide by those principles. But, I think that because Atlanta is so diverse, I mean just because there is a lot of Black gay men does not mean they are the same kind of people. It's so diverse that it has to be a group in that there is no agreement or commitment to interconnectedness and mutual responsibility. I don't see that. Not as a whole enough to call it a community, like the Amish or the Mormons, those would be communities of people who are functionally connected, purposefully connected, intentionally connected and move lock step. I don't see that in Atlanta. (Pierre)

According to the men I interviewed, Atlanta's Black gay male population consisted of groups of men living together; to some, these groups spelled a sort of community, to others we were indeed community, just in a dysfunctional sense.

Summary

This chapter disclosed the major findings of this study, and organized the research questions in groupings of themes and comments. Black gay men in Atlanta experience community and culture in many dimensions. As the researcher, I was able to hear that interviewee's have different yet similar narratives, revealing individual tensions that tugged mostly around the ideas of common purpose, lack of respect for variances of identity, and no community property.

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Chapter 5: WORDS TO OUR NOW (a Thomas Glave Motif)

In this chapter I use my insight on two particular spaces in the city of Atlanta to conduct participant observations. These sites are Piedmont Park and a Mexican eatery named El Azteca. My observations here focus on how Black gay men in Atlanta interact with each other and use physical spaces for the purposes of creating and experiencing community and culture.

Sundays in Atlanta or What are Piedmont Park and El Azteca?

Piedmont Park in Atlanta should be referred to as the symbol of the Black Gay Mecca, specifically on Sundays.[5] Having moved to Atlanta seven years ago, there were two ways my then boyfriend introduced me to Atlanta's gay culture, the club and Piedmont Park. For this research I knew right away that I would do participant observations in the park, how could I not, as this was a place where all types of Black gay men came to relax, talk, and be around each other.

For some of us, Piedmont Park was that home away from home. Driving down 10th street (the street the park borders) I'd see Black gay men by the tens getting off the MARTA Subway line, hiking down to the park. We leave the subway in one outfit and appear in the park in another, maybe something tighter, more colorful. We were ready to see those that were like us, show off our latest pair of sneakers, flirt with each other, or go to Willy's for some Mexican food. Some of us just showed up to escape the perils of (straight) life. Most importantly, we were coming to the park to just "be."

In the park, there was never a dull moment. From observing, it seemed as though we all felt a sort of pleasure from being around each other, that pleasure however manifested itself in various ways. For instance, I'd notice that we enjoyed showing off for each other and we liked to

[5] Piedmont Park is a "public" space in Midtown Atlanta, Georgia. The park spans some 200 plus acres. According to the website, www.piedmontpark.org, in 1989 a group of citizens concerned with potential dilapidation of the space, formed the Piedmont Park Conservatory, which is a private-public partnership to maintain the park's grounds.

give shade (giving a sassy attitude to a specific person or group). We also enjoyed being close to our friends, walking like them, using similar jargon, dressing like them, sitting on their laps, or holding their hands. I theorized the reasons we are so close and possessive over our friends in the park and in general, I concluded that it's because we want you to know that our friends belong to us and they're not yours. Having friends or "Judies" (which is another term for friends- "Judy" in the singular form) as a Black gay man is important, it's almost as coveted as being "boo'd up" (having a steady romantic partner). Having friends, signals to the Black gay world that you are legitimate.

There was also a few of us who did not come to the park in packs, we toured the grounds individually, often talking on our mobile-phones or listening to music on our I-Pods. In general, we looked like a happy, energetic, eclectic people, although we may have exhibited a mean or frowned face to boost masculinity points, as we often associated meanness with masculinity and masculinity as desirable.

Being around each other didn't necessarily mean we communed. We often separated ourselves with our friends and simply walked through the park looking at each other and not speaking or speaking and not looking at each other. When we did know each other, which was frequently, we stopped and hugged, sometimes excitedly sometimes not so much (there's that shade). We had our own vernacular. As we walked pass each other we whispered or asserted things like "she's cute" even when we were talking about a man. We often gave the female pronoun to things we referenced. I once overheard two young men sitting on a bench, they were looking for something in a book bag. One young man said to the other "there she go" pointing to the other side of the bench at a cell phone. The cell phone was a she and she was on the other side of the bench.

While some may argue that the park is not a refuge for those Black gay men who considered themselves to be in higher class brackets, I could not support the dissent. I'd never met a Black gay man in Atlanta, rich or poor, who had not been to Piedmont on a Sunday at one time or another. To be honest, I'd never met a Black gay man who visited Atlanta with frequency, who had not heard about Piedmont Park. This of course is not to say that all Black gay men in Atlanta frequent the park, but it is to say that many Black gay men in Atlanta do, so much so, it's become part of Atlanta Black gay life, like the symbol of the a Black gay Mecca.

From looking around the park, I remember the nuances between the patrons, it looked as though the members of us sitting around in the front of the park (near its Piedmont Road entrance) were not going anywhere, it's like that sect of us would sit there in the same spots, perched atop the low rising stone fence all day, while others would, in groups, circle the park, walking laps and talking. If there was a look to having money and a job (which in Atlanta I'd argue there is) then some of us in the park didn't look employed. Some of us looked and were homeless, or tired, probably from life outside the park. Other members looked affluent, fully accessorized with a dog, texting on I-phone 4's, fancying a strategically placed Mercedes key fob dangling from a side pocket (I actually saw this quite often).

During my visits in the summer of 2010, I did see some of the same folks weekly, but each visit brought with it something new and exciting. I remember in particular, watching and listening to these two older gentlemen; they wore signs around their backs and insisted that HIV did not cause or lead to AIDS. They marched through the park, warning people of certain medicines and mindsets, arguing that we as a population are not the site of disease, but have been taught to think so. Interestingly enough they were met with both cheers and opposition.

Another exciting time was seeing the park turned into a rehearsal hall and show place. I say this because I'd see groups of people or what we call houses (friends organized in familial structures) doing dances and acting out scenes for each other. We in the Black gay community have invented styles of dance like voguing or reinvented types of dance like J-setting. J-setting is a type of step and repeat dance in which a group leader does moves that the members standing behind him or her follows, it comes from a type of dance invented at historically Black colleges. These are two different styles of dance that, just by watching, I knew required some type of athleticism. The beauty of these types of dances is that we could partake in them no matter what size we were, big or small. You may hear rumblings in the community that the types of gays who do these dances are ultra-gay or "queens." We call men who are outwardly flamboyant with their gay sexually queens.

What I noticed about our name calling, besides it being divisive, is that there is a reliance on it. We tend to rely on the person that is our perceived antithesis for our own stature and worth. What I mean is that, in the park, the men who appeared "straight" and/or what we call "butch," would not be so valuable or prized if the men who appeared to be queens were not there. If we all thought of each other as masculine or butch, ideas around masculinity would change drastically and so would the gay hierarchy (femininity at the bottom, masculinity at the top) we often find ourselves in conversations about.

My participant observation in Piedmont Park concluded with the annual Black gay Pride celebration that happens every year in Atlanta during Labor Day Weekend. On the Sunday of Black Gay Pride Weekend, all roads led to Piedmont Park. Each year that I attended Atlanta's Pride celebration I was astonished at how many Black gay people, Black gay men in particular, gathered in Piedmont Park. If I was asked why, I would not have a fancy answer, other than it's a

meeting of Black gays from across the world to show our Pride. It is indeed beautiful. It's almost like our own parade or showing of diversity.

At Black Pride 2010, I had the pleasure of welcoming back my best friend who still resided in New York, my hometown. We enjoyed the park during Pride, although we often complained of how crowded it was. During this celebration, I noticed that Fulton County (the county in which Atlanta sits) ran a booth where they were conducting HIV tests. I remember thinking about this, not that it was unusual, typically the only consistent booth you'd see in Piedmont Park during Black Pride was geared towards HIV/AIDS. This tent however read "The Early Test." I have not researched more about this test, but it sounded interesting. I was used to the mouth swab tests, and was surprised that at this booth they were actually taking blood. In return for being tested, you'd get a $20 dollar gift card.

It is a bit romantic of me to locate Piedmont Park as the symbol of the Black gay Mecca. I only argue this because of how amazing it felt and continues to feel seeing so many Black gay people together in one place, so regularly and openly, and the ways we convene there by the thousands during Black Pride. Every Black gay person I've spoken to outside of Atlanta, talks about experiencing or wanting to experience Black gay Pride of which Piedmont Park plays a major part, like our own miniature Hajj. Piedmont Park was a place to experience Atlanta's Black gay culture and even take part in it.

El Azteca

While many Black gay men in Atlanta flocked to Piedmont Park on Sundays to spend time just being, there was another late weekend tradition. At 6pm, anybody who was anybody could be found at El Azteca, a Mexican restaurant in Midtown Atlanta. Here we sat in close quarters, at tables maybe one and a half feet apart. Not minding proximity, we came out with our

friends squeezing maybe five or six people at a table. We were here again, to be around others like us, show off our gym bodies, white smiles, trophies (partners who mean more to us because they are desired by others) and drink what some of us considered the best margaritas in Atlanta. It's important to note that many of us did not have gym bodies or trophy partners but in this space, we were still accepted and for the most part participated in activities at the same rate as the buff men. We all enjoyed this atmosphere.

El Azteca workers, who most often were Mexican-Americans, enjoyed the Black gay patrons too, some have even flirted, while of-course keeping the drinks coming. I myself have never been a big drinker, and thus wouldn't be a good margarita barometer; however I've found myself bearing the bittersweet taste of El Azteca's drinks just to fit in. I drank and of course enjoyed the eye candy. I also liked the food; I ate the chips and salsa while waiting on fish tacos. My friends usually drank more than I did and because of this I was often designated as the driver whenever we ventured there. At the cantina, it was of utmost importance that you sat outside to enjoy the breeze or the beautiful sun light, wearing your sunglasses and this season's style of tank t-shirt. Of course, just by observing, sitting outside had nothing to do with weather; it had more to do with being seen. If I were looking in from the outside I'd say, "those Black gay men in Atlanta sure love to be seen." Although the summer months in Atlanta can be enjoyed outside, I personally liked to sit inside, the patio left me sweating and feeling like I was packed into a meat market since there was no air conditioning or personal space. But, my friends often wanted to hang out in the sunlight, so for them, and a little bit for me too, I endured the sweat and heat for the chance to be seen.

Summary

My vignettes on Piedmont Park and the Mexican restaurant El Azteca serve to highlight intra-group dynamics among Black gay men in Atlanta. My observations show how the space of Piedmont Park in itself becomes a site of Black gay life and culture. The park becomes for many, a place in which the heteronormative world that plants itself atop our shoulders daily can be uprooted and left at the gates. Black gay men specifically create community with each other by going to the park and using the park's space for their own private purposes. El Azteca, a business, also becomes a community space for Black gay men on Sundays. Here though, Black gay men enjoy libations, buying frozen margaritas for ourselves and each other, using food and drinks as a guise to sit close, be seen, and feel wanted. There is both pleasure and safety in knowing there will be across the patio stares and whispers by those who are just like you. In these spaces it is clear, at least to me, that notions of community exist, from solidarity, connectedness, to respect.

Chapter 6: DISCUSSION

This thesis explores the ways Black gay men in Atlanta create and experience community. In the previous chapters, I reviewed literature pertinent to the culture of Black gay men and introduced the findings from seven interviews and two Atlanta sites from which I did participant observations. In this chapter, I discuss the results of this study by tying in the theoretical framework and making connections between the study's findings and previous research and literature.

The Many Dimensions of Community

The men I interviewed for this study held consensus around the idea that their fellow Black gay men in Atlanta lacked a common purpose. The participants exclaimed that Black gay men in Atlanta had a tendency to be caught in their own objectives and/or focused on things in very individual ways. Because of this lack of common purpose, the Black gay men reported feeling as though they belonged to a divided community, made up of different groups.

Though my cohort of Black gay men did not clearly see common purposes among their group in Atlanta, they did recognize shared interests and values. Most of my participants felt, that like themselves, other Black gay men were interested in being successful and having relationships that were built with love and care. While relationships and love were important, the men felt that as a culture, Black gay men tended to focus too much on sex and have interests in things like entertainment, which overshadowed a unified progressive politics.

Proudly, my sample of men each reported feeling a sense of responsibility for the group of men they belonged to. They also talked about a level of mentorship and care that some Black gay men in Atlanta exhibited when it came to being responsible for each other. The men noted things like charity events and a shared a sense of consciousness around HIV/AIDS. Though the

men were hesitant to generalize all of their group members as responsible, they did feel that for the most part Black gay men in Atlanta cared for one another.

Participants insisted that Black gay men in Atlanta shared interconnectedness in social venues and night club events, which in some cases is why Atlanta is deemed so Black gay friendly, because of the sheer numbers in which Black gay men produce, host, and turn out for social events. Atlanta's nightlife for Black gay men is described as the best in the country and the number of venues is noteworthy. My observations in Piedmont Park and El Azteca support this assertion, as Black gay men appear to connect with each other in social venues the most. In Piedmont Park, Black gay men looked unified in that they all enjoyed being around each other, there was a pleasure and safety in togetherness, even if they/we did not commune. El Azteca, similarly, allowed Black gay men to show themselves to each other, and even though there were differences, what was evident was that everyone in the space was Black and queer, this social locale overshadowed other types of identity markers that tended to divide the group in non-social settings.

In the planning stage of this study, I had many thoughts about how Black gay men would talk about respect for differences. While one of my participants felt that Atlanta was home to a group of Black gay men who did respect difference, most other participants felt it was lack of respect for variances in identity that divided the group the most. For instance, interviewee Marc, reported an acceptance of varying identities, but would not go as far as to say there was respect.

Much like their thoughts on a shared sense of responsibility, the Black gay men I spoke with felt many men in Atlanta exhibited a commitment to the group. However, respondents also felt that much more could be done to show intra-group solidarity and oneness in general. While the men in my sample were committed to each other and the group of men they talked candidly

about, they also spoke of other experiences where they saw members lacking a commitment to each other, particularly around mental and sexual health.

Though the men expressed tensions around lack of common purpose, identity variances, and property ownership, and ambivalence about the Black gay community and sex, there was still evidence of community. When thinking about common purpose in particular, it is important to realize the trickiness of this idea. First, it would be difficult for any large social group to clearly articulate a common purpose (besides maybe an NGO). With that said, individual Black gay male community members not being able to talk cohesively about a common purpose does not indicate lack of community. I would also add that because Black gay men are a marginalized group, they make interesting connections to having or feeling like they need a mission or common goal. Still, despite interviewee feedback, I would argue that the participants did talk about and see purpose, their thoughts I contend, meshed with more broad and accessible questions about community responsibility and values. Here I use a comment by Sergio as an example.

> Everyone wants to be like successful, or relatively successful, umm but I think as far as what's specific to Black gay men- safety is a big like value. I think also you know wanting to… stay HIV negative and if you're not, keeping your health, take advantage of the services that are available. I think you know being there emotionally for people, younger people like Youth Pride [a community center in Atlanta for GLBTQ youth] that kind of thing. I think, yeah, so I think it's like both those kinds of values that are specific to Black gay men and also values that everyone has, everyone wants to be you know successful like Trey Songz you know.[6]

I offer Sergio's comment because it shows how his thoughts could easily be applied to a question on common purpose. Staying HIV negative and physical safety are two very specific ideas that speak not only to values but also purposes. Group members valuing staying HIV negative is for a purpose, similarly there is unifying purpose in caring about physical safety.

[6] Trey Songz is a popular R&B artist who has a song entitled "Successful."

Lack of respect for identity variances and sex were two tropes that respondents felt weighed negatively on community, even possibly disrupting it. I have a different take than most of my research interviewees, particularly around sex. For me, sex, or the erotic, to use Audre Lorde's words, is important to the culture of Black gay men, in fact a "sexual way of life," is one of the things that make the Black gay male community culturally unique, and often serves as a unifier. I specifically think about the way we use our sexual energies to create music, fashion our styles of dress, walk, and talk.[7] Sex, is pivotal to Black gay men because as a marginalized people it is one of the only things we can control. I think my respondents questioned the "positivity" of sex because as a society we have begun to see queerness through a homonormative lens. This outlook places value in appearing and being more like "straight" people thus, in an effort to make ourselves fit in line with dominant society, we have quelled and critiqued uses of our erotic, or sex, not realizing that our sexual energies (and their many dimensions) are what make us who we are individually and collectively.

Homonormativity also plays into our ideas of identity, the strongest of which seems to be the appropriateness of a "mans" behavior. Is "feminine" behavior acceptable? Would you date a man who is effeminate? These questions continue to be talking points among Black gay men. I have developed a more nuanced take on masculinity and femininity in the Black gay male community. I believe there is both a respect and disdain for those members of us who embody and behave in effeminate ways. While we often try to fit into society's definition of what a man is our more effeminate community members have increased our visibility and challenged dominant discourses on manhood, from this we have all benefitted. So perhaps, there would be

[7] Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic: The erotic as Power." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches.* Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1984. 53-59.

no gay community if identity variances did not exist to disrupt monolithic trajectories of manhood.

Property ownership and material capital is a dimension of community interviewee's felt Black gay men in Atlanta lacked. Surprisingly, none of the interviewees made the connection to how Black gay men in Atlanta have established our gay enclave in a "free" space, Piedmont Park. My notes on the park tell me that Black gay men use the space for the purpose of coming together and being around each other. The park, specifically on Sundays, and during Black Pride, is the Black queer community space.

Connections to the Survey of Literature

The findings of this thesis are similar to the implications in chapter two's survey of literature. In the survey, the ideas- belonging to community and identity are said to be the basis for Black gay community and culture (Beam, 1986; Hemphill, 1991; Riggs, 2000). The reviewed literature and film contends that the perils of a stigmatized sexuality bring together and allow Black gay men to successfully organize around their marginalization, producing culture, families, friends, communities, and unapologetic identities.

This study reports a similar phenomenon, as the Black gay men interviewed privileged close relationships and alliances with other Black gay men, as they felt these people had similar life experiences because of their sexuality. These close friends often became family. The participants also argue that the space of Atlanta, with its population of Black gay men, fosters feelings of belonging and culture, which helps them develop unapologetically into their Black gay identities. Thus, interviewees felt belonging was essential to crafting a Black gay identity.

While there is a dearth of empirical scholarship that centers Black gay men outside of a health lens, in the survey, I intentionally highlighted social science research that takes into

account Black gay men's culture in its methodological design. In particular, using ethnographic data, Arnold and Bailey (2009) argue that Black and Latino ballroom and house communities can be channels through which Black gay men are educated about HIV/AIDS. Similarly participants in this thesis often spoke about a culture of friends, the ways in which friends become family and also how friends are those people you go to for advice and guidance. In the findings section titled "Friends Equal Everything," research interviewee Rico talks about the ballroom community being a place where young men and women can go when they first enter the "gay scene." He argues that gay families are a place where one can go to seek advice about problems, supporting Arnold and Bailey's argument.

Connections also exist between how participants talked about their life experiences in Atlanta and what scholars have theorized about Black gay life in general. One of the closest connections comes from Nero (2005). When it came to gay neighborhood formations, three of my participants felt that even though they themselves (and other Black gays) frequented Midtown Atlanta, it was still not a Black community. Like Nero, they felt Black gay men were left out when it came to property ownership and running businesses in gay enclaves. They argued that this dearth of business opportunities within gay ghetto's hindered Black gay men from developing and sustaining capitalist constructions of community.

Finally, interviewee's felt similar to Ross (2005) and Johnson (2008) who talk about the over use of a coming out narrative. My participants did not emphasize notions of "coming out," especially in relation to an epistemology of their sexuality. Most Black gay men assumed a level of "you just know" and felt they could be gay without a necessary outing process. Brandon, a participant who said he recently came out, mentioned that officially coming out was shocking to his family even though there was some semblance that he was gay.

Implications

While much of this study's findings support the reviewed material in my literature survey, there are dissenting and new implications as well. Specifically, the role of Atlanta proves to be a crucial one, and is evidently instrumental to how Black gay men engage a "queer" citizenship. My participants argue low levels of homophobia and racism, and the ability to live freely in Atlanta. In the case of participant Iruland, who moved to Atlanta from the much smaller city of Gainesville, Florida (which he references as a small town) thoughts of Atlanta produce defining binaries like rural/urban modern/post-modern as he talks about Atlanta being a place where he metamorphosed into a productive gay self. Later in the findings, Iruland also juxtaposes his small town upbringing to the mindset of someone from a big city, arguing that Black gay men have a visibility in cities that that they do not have in rural areas.

These metronormative assumptions proved common, as five out of seven participants shared how Atlanta somehow conscientized them to their sexuality in ways other places did not. Take Brandon's narrative for example; he exclaimed "when I moved to Atlanta I got a little bit gayer." Although not all the research participants were from small towns or cities, many of their narratives implied an essential Atlanta. While I am not trying to discount the role Atlanta plays in creating a unique Black queer subjectivity, as this thesis is partially about showing and highlighting just that, I do want to make note of the ways Atlanta has the potential to become thought of as this universal home for Black queer people. Normalizing Atlanta as a Black gay utopia could unconsciously cause Black queer people to elide critiques of the ever-present homophobia and racism (that still pervade Atlanta) ultimately reproducing their staying power.

Black gay men also argue that Atlanta's queer culture comes partially from the city's thriving night life. In Atlanta, participants say, Black gay men can find a social venue or night

club open for business any night of the week. Not only are these spaces open and catering to Black gay men, but also, Black gay men patronize these venues in large numbers. This implies that Black gay men are visiting what can be thought of as traditional style gay themed venues, making these locations ideal to distribute information around health and wellness. As an example, during interviews, participants were asked about Black gay men demonstrating commitment to each other, Christian answered:

> I would think as far as the small groups that do focus on HIV awareness. I mean even to the points when you do go out to clubs those groups that will take the time to send someone out through the crowd and hand you condoms, or hand you some type of pamphlet that's telling you where you can go get tested, or giving you the latest statistics on the rate of HIV in the gay community, the Black gay community. I think that would probably be the only consistent thing that I see. It's not as big as I would like it, but at least it's something.

Christian's feelings around seeing these types of activities in the club were shared by other Black gay men, who talked also about the space of the club being used to promote health messages in the community.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the ways Black gay men experienced community in Atlanta, a so-called Black gay Mecca. Using interviews of seven self identifying Black gay men and data collected through participant observation in two local spaces, I researched the answers. In conclusion, Black gay men in Atlanta experience community through social venues and nightclubs, with their friends who are often considered family, and through their perceptions of what it means to be in a city deemed a "Black gay Mecca." Social formations like Sundays in Piedmont Park and the Mexican restaurant El Azteca help enhance the Black gay community's sense of oneness, as these places are outlets for Black gay men to express their culture. Black gay men also use these spaces specifically to create community, as they meet their

friends in the park and use the “free” space for their own private purposes. At the park, Black gay men dance, celebrate, walk with friends, and show off their style. At El Azteca, the men come with their close friends too and sit, relax, talk, and enjoy each other.

There were also factors that some research respondents reported as impediments to community, like a general lack of respect among Black gay men for identity variances, individual member’s over-emphasis of sex, and lack of ownership of community property. However, participants talked about their personal pledges in doing things to combat these obstacles, like being less judgmental, honest about HIV, and putting money into charity events.

Though not all the interviewees called their group of Black gay men in Atlanta a community, my chosen theoretical framework has guided me to seeing them as such. The men expressed vivid descriptions of shared interest, purpose, responsibility, and a general caring for one other. There are also specific cultural features of Atlanta that are emblematic of community, like Piedmont Park, a free space that Black gay men have turned into their own cultural hub; thousands gather here during the Sunday of Labor Day Weekend, this is a city tradition. The men also talk about Atlanta having an emerging consciousness around HIV/AIDS; hitherto community members did not talk about the perils of sex. In Atlanta, club promoters are walking through the crowd distributing “survival kits” with condoms and handing out disease statistics, this all in an attempt to lead Black gay men to make better decisions around sex.

There is still and will probably continue to be great perplexity surrounding the experiences of community among Black gay men in Atlanta. As additional Black gay men give their rendition of the community’s culture, stories and experiences will continue to vacillate. While a community member talks about lack of responsibility in one breath, in another breath he talks about a great experience he had attending a Black queer charity event to raise money for

Black LGBTQ youth. Another member will walk through Piedmont Park, surrounded by hundreds of men like him and still speak of a desire for communal space. These ambivalences and contradictions are human and help a qualitative study like this flourish. These kinds of contradictions also show a people who have been taught to see themselves through certain lights. Interviewees were steadfast in giving me impediments to community, but, and as reported in my findings chapter, participants often became pensive when I asked them about the "good" in being a member of the Black gay community in Atlanta. However, in the end, the good outweighed; participants only needed a small amount of reflection time before they began to talk about the dynamism of their community, their ardor for friends, who most often were Black and gay. Participants left the conversations, but only after telling me that they had never thought about the ways their community was responsible or culturally unique. And like them, neither did I. Like them, I thought about the Black gay community in Atlanta as separate from myself. For example, I somehow did not think that my passion for wanting to be a scholar or my fervor for social justice could be reflective of a larger group. It was. It is.

The critical responses from the men who partook in this study indicate that future research centering the experiences of Black gay men must be done. As a social group, Black gay men have been underdetermined in academic research and their complexities de-emphasized in popular discourse. The continuance of research that privileges their voices over theories and paradigms is paramount, particularly as an ever evolving medical industrial complex continues to look at solving "queer issues" through medicine. Further research should be done to historicize the "Mecca" Atlanta has become. How did this city become so popular to Black queer men? Research should also explore what social issues Black gay men feel impact them the most, these

kinds of questions can further elucidate the culture of Black gay men. Helping them see themselves as people who do not have to be split into one of their identities to be relevant.

The aim of this research was to highlight the culture of Black gay men, looking specifically at community. Community to Black gay men in Atlanta is fluid, it changes day and day and feels different in various circles, but it is indeed felt. Importantly, these men have taken steps to move past interpreting their lives and experiences through monolithic lenses that dichotomize identity into race or sexuality. The Black gay men I talked to have showed me that they understand themselves in whole ways; I suggest that academia and popular discourse take note.

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Appendix A: PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interviewee:
Interviewee Pseudonym _____

Here I am going to ask some questions about you.

1. Please tell me about yourself, including your age and where you are from?

2. What is a community to you?

3. What are some communities you belong to?
    a. Do you consider yourself a member of a community of Black gay men? Where and Why?

4. Atlanta has been described as a "Black Gay Mecca." How do you feel about this statement?
    a. On a scale of 1-10 with 1 being "very uncomfortable", 5 being neutral, and 10 being "very comfortable", how comfortable are you with your sexuality?
    b. Does the city of Atlanta play a part in how comfortable you are with your sexuality? If so, how or why?

Here I will ask you questions that relate more to your thoughts on Black gay men in Atlanta.

5. What are Black gay men in Atlanta interested in?
    a. Which of these things are you interested in? Are there any major interests that you have that you don't feel are reflected in the larger Black gay male group/community of Atlanta? If so what are they?
    b. Do you feel that Black gay men in Atlanta have a sense of common purpose? If so, what is it? If not, why not?

6. How do Black gay men in Atlanta show or demonstrate mutual responsibility and care for one another and for ourselves as a group or community? Can you think of any ways in which Black gay men do not show responsibility or care for one another or their community or group? If so what is it you've observed or noticed?

7. In what ways do Black gay men in Atlanta show their interconnectedness?
    a. What are the things that link Black gay men in Atlanta together and how do we show it?
    b. Do we have common values? If so, what are they and how do we show it?

8. What are some of the differences you observe among Black gay men?
    a. Do you think these differences are respected? Why or why not?

9. In what ways do Black gay men in Atlanta demonstrate commitment to one another's well being?
    a. Can you describe some of your personal experiences in this regard?

10. To what extend are you personally committed to the integrity and well-being of Black gay men in Atlanta (both at the level of individuals and the level of the group as a whole)?

11. How does the Black gay community and culture in Atlanta compare to other places you've lived or traveled?

12. Thinking about Black gay men in Atlanta, tell me in a sentence or two about what comes to mind when I say the following prompts.
    a. Church
    b. Money
    c. Friends
    d. Love
    e. Homophobia
    f. Stigma
    g. Race
    h. Looks
    i. Images of Black gay men
    j. Masculinity
    k. Identity

13. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B: INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Interviewee	Age	Hometown	Highest Level of Education Completed	Current Occupational Field
Christian	34	New York, New York	High School	Television and Media/ Student
Rico Suave	19	Harlem, New York	High School	Model/ Student
Iruland Rasheed	26	Gainesville, Florida	High School	Community Activist/ Poet
Pierre West	31	Colorado Springs, Colorado	Bachelors	HIV/AIDS Outreach
Brandon	27	Miami, Florida	Masters	Social Work/ Student
Marc	46	Sacramento, California	Bachelors	Health Care/ Special Events Management
Sergio Valentino	23	Atlanta, Georgia	High School	Student

Appendix C: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND EMERGING THEMES

Research Question	Themes
How do Black gay men experience community in Atlanta, a so-called Black gay Mecca?	"COMMUNITY EXISTS" Social venues like the Club and the annual Black Pride celebration With Close Friends (considered family) Perceptions of "Black Gay Mecca"
What kinds of social formations support or impede the experience of community, and its many dimensions, among Black gay men in Atlanta?	"IMPEDIMENTS TO COMMUNITY" Lack of respect for identity variances (top/bottom, light skinned/dark skinned, feminine/masculine) No unified purpose or mission No centralized gay enclave like White men Black gay men in Atlanta are a "community of groups"
Are there specific cultural features of Black gay men in Atlanta, or of the city of Atlanta itself, that assists or plays a role in Black gay men's creation of and experiences with community, or lack thereof?	THERE IS AN "ATLANTA EXPERIENCE" Atlanta has "culture of sex" "Free" space- like Piedmont Park, helps build community Black gay men go to El Azteca, a Mexican eatery, to be around each other Atlanta has a large population of Black queer people, there is safety in numbers Shared value systems "we want to be successful in all we do" Sense of personal responsibility for the community In Atlanta "I can just be"/ low levels of homophobia

Appendix D: CONSENT FORM

Georgia State University
Women's Studies Institute
Informed Consent

Title: PARADISE FOUND?
Black Gay Men in Atlanta: An Exploration of Community

Principal Investigator: Layli Phillips Maparyan
Student Investigator: Tobias Spears

I. Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to learn about the social formations of Black gay men in Atlanta to determine if "community" exists. You are invited to participate because you are a gay identified Black man who has lived in Atlanta for at least 1 year. A total of 7 participants will be recruited for this study. Participation will require 2 hours of your time.

II. Procedures:

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to meet with the researcher Tobias Spears twice. The first meeting is a 1 hour interview. The second meeting is for a follow up conversation to review the written transcript of the interview. The interview can take place at a location of your choice. The interviews will be audio taped. You will not be personally identified in the work. You will choose an alternate name.

III. Risks:

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life.

IV. Benefits:

Participation in this study may not benefit you personally. However, we hope to gain information about the Black gay community in Atlanta. This information can add to the literature that looks at Black gay men community and culture.

V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:

Participation in research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be

in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

VI. Confidentiality:

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. Tobias Spears and Layli Phillips will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly like the GSU Institutional Review Board and the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP).We will use alternate names rather than your name on study records. The information you provide will be stored in a locked cabinet. The audio recordings will be destroyed after October of 2010. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally.

VII. Contact Persons:

Contact persons are Layli Phillips Maparyan at 404 413-6587 or through her email: Layli@gsu.edu; and Tobias Spears at ( ) or at his email: @gmail.com. Please contact the researchers if you have questions about this study. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this research study, you may contact Susan Vogtner in the Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or svogtner1@gsu.edu.

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject:

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research and be audio recorded please sign below.

_____ _____

Participant Date

_____ _____

Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent Date