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**“Rethinking the ‘Unusual Type’: Black Queer Women and the Spatial Politics of Belonging
in Twentieth Century America”**

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Introduction

“Only the BLACK WOMAN can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me.*”¹ – Anna Julia Cooper

This text seeks to center the lives of Black queer women in the United States prior to the Stonewall riots of 1969 while incorporating a geographic study of race and racism in order to analyze how such women’s queerness manifested itself in the spaces they subversively navigated—considering the dominant society’s insistence on such spaces excluding Black queer women.² Black queer women could inhabit and move within what were often marked as spaces that they *could/should not* inhabit due to their abject positionality. I use Katherine McKittrick’s concept of the “ungeographic” Black body and analyze Black [queer] women’s bodies under physical and mental oppression. I employ Marlon M. Bailey and Rashad Shabazz’s concept of “anti-black heterotopias” as it closely aligns with the reality of a white heteronormative society dictating the *who* and the *where* regarding human movement and space occupancy.³ The two concepts, which will be elaborated on in the following chapter, are integral in comprehending how Black queer women occupying spaces deemed uninhabitable for them is innately rebellious as they disrupted their heteronormative atmosphere through merely *existing*. These theoretical

¹ Anna J. Cooper, *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library, 2017), 26.

² Within this text, there are three different definitions for the term “queer.” Queerness relating to gender and/or sexuality connect to the common conception of sexual orientation, such as homosexuality, bisexuality, transgender identity, etc. Queerness in positionality denotes a stance in which an individual possesses a nonnormative identity or defies the social norms. I would like to emphasize that contemporary notions of queerness are often considered as an identity while, during this period, queerness was akin to a practice of non-heterosexuality. Through this conception of queerness that considers this historical context, one can better understand how queerness was deemed as an active defiance of heterosexuality and, therefore, normativity in a larger twentieth century American society that adopted a reformist attitude towards non-normative individuals and groups.

³ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xiii; Marlon M. Bailey and Rashad Shabazz, “Editorial: Gender and Sexual Geographies of Blackness: Anti-Black Heterotopias (Part 1),” *Gender, Place & Culture* 21, no. 3 (March 16, 2014): 316.

frameworks supplement the gaps in the existing archive regarding Black queer women's movement due to their widespread invisibility in the public's historical imagination. These women inhabited and moved within these "uninhabitable spaces," despite their subjugation.⁴ Black queer women's existence determined how their queerness shifted and adapted to conform and/or subvert within their (intentional or unintentional) struggle for liberation outside the matrix of power.

An examination of the existing literature surrounding Black women and Black queer women provides historical context with which one can better understand the central objective of this text. These different texts explore Black womanhood, Black women's sexualities, Black queerness, and Black geographies. Such texts offer a foundation I employ to support the historical, case study-based analysis of Black queer women's lives as they worked to escape the systems of oppression.

To focus on the Black public sphere, it adopted different ideologies that were subsequently inculcated within the minds of a larger Black society. These ideologies at the time tended to pertain to Western notions of modesty and Black racial uplift. The ideological orientation of Black society materialized itself through the ostracization of those deemed the Other. The Other as a Western construct permeated into the Black public sphere and heavily impacted how the Other would be subsequently treated. Although the Black body itself *is* the definition of the Other, within the Black community, Black queer women were even more so.⁵ The Black public sphere perceived their queer identities and lifestyles as sexually deviant and,

⁴ In this thesis, "uninhabitable space" is defined as space hostile to Black queer women. It is characterized as space that is metaphorically *prohibited* for Black queer women to occupy. These spaces are largely heteronormative and/or anti-Black in nature.

⁵ Black women, more specifically Black queer women, are the foremost Other as queerness inherently opposes and fissures Western conceptions of humanness. These Western conceptions of humanness will be explained further in the following chapter.

therefore, threatening to the Black social order at a time in which Black people at large were attempting to assert themselves as “proper” members of society possessing a level of competency that would essentially be their entrance ticket into a larger white society—normalizing them. Furthermore, in order to achieve this “ticket,” those othered within the Black community were to be condemned and hidden. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham writes of the ways late nineteenth to early twentieth century Black Baptist women cultivated what she deems to be “the politics of respectability.”⁶ Within these politics, Black Baptist women expected Black people to collectively participate in what can be considered a form of the popular racial uplift rhetoric of the time promoted by different popular Black figures, such as Booker T. Washington.

Higginbotham argues that respectability politics primarily impacted other Black women, as sexuality and generally deviant/questionable behaviors considered outside of respectability were policed and condemned as harmful to the mission of combatting racism through refuting racist stereotypes and advocating for a conservative vision of African American self-determination. While Higginbotham does not directly speak to the experiences of Black queer women, this discourse was even more damaging for them. Higginbotham writes of the ways that pressing “respectable behavior” upon Black women was a means to negate Patricia Hill Collins’s concept of “controlling images” of Black women at the time.⁷ This attempt at negation relates to larger themes of self-reinvention and self-definition among Black women and exposes a way certain Black women acted in self-naming.⁸ Black women were at the forefront of this movement, but these were a specific type of Black women. Their adherence to the

⁶ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “The Politics of Respectability” in *Righteous Discontent: The women's movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 186.

⁷ Higginbotham, “The Politics of Respectability,” 191; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*, (NY: Routledge, 2009), 7.

⁸ “Self-naming” can be defined as an act in which one personally determines and asserts their sense of Self.

heteronormative spoken and unspoken laws at the time compelled them to enforce heteronormativity and homophobia through intracommunal policing—specifically that of Black women and their sexuality.

In the policing of Black women's sexuality, movement through space was an influence. The Great Migration marked a period in which an astounding population of Black people migrated North, to different major cities, in the hopes of escaping the Jim Crow South and its inhumane practices. Darlene Clark Hine's "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West" details the movement of Black women from early twentieth-century South to the Midwest through examining the motivations of these Black women as being heavily influenced by a desire to escape, negate, and subvert racialized and gendered sexual violence and economic exploitation. These Black women were intranational, historical refugees in both a literal and metaphorical sense. They were running from something: violence—and its many iterations both tangibly and intangibly.

Hine has a similar conception of the Black public's social norms as Higginbotham. Hine uses the term "culture of dissemblance" (which she claims was widely accepted by Black women in 1896) to describe an unspoken practice of secrecy that was intended to protect Black women's interior selves—especially surrounding their sexualities and reproductive health.⁹ Hine posits this culture of dissemblance as being an act of defiance against the harsh criticism and negative stereotypes of Black women at the time—all under the façade of willing participation in larger society. Hine writes:

Because of the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions, gender role differentiation, and regional economic variations, Black women, as a rule, developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives. The dynamics of dissemblance involved creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma...The

⁹ Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," *Signs* 14 no. 4 (1989), 912.

inclination of the larger society to ignore those considered 'marginal' actually enabled subordinate Black women to craft the veil of secrecy and to perfect the art of dissemblance.¹⁰

In other words, the culture of dissemblance was a protector of sorts. However, in reality, it manifested as the public repression of Black women's sexualities and selves.

Moreover, a significant sector of this migrating Black population was that of young Black women. These Black women posed a threat to the social strata of Black society as the expressions of Black women's sexuality in a broader sense was externally perceived by this larger Black society as harboring the capacity to topple the already fragile pyramid of Black social life. The "respectable" Black middle class closely monitored these young Black women, and this surveillance did not lead to the intended outcome of change on behalf of young Black women, but, rather, it resulted in the intense anxiety of this Black respectable population that scholars describe as its "moral panic." Hazel V. Carby's "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context" explores the urban societies in which Black women resided during the first half of the twentieth century. The migration of Black women to these cities and their exertion of their own agency created this moral panic in the surrounding society, Carby argues.¹¹ Carby analyzes these societies through a largely gendered, racialized, and classed lens that discusses Black female sexuality and how institutions and the societies these Black women resided within policed their sexuality. Carby utilizes social, political, and cultural overarching themes (such as employment, laws, leisure, etc.) as a connector between different case studies. Carby states:

The movement of black women between rural and urban areas and between southern and northern cities generated a series of moral panics. One serious consequence was that the behavior of black female migrants was characterized as sexually degenerate and, therefore, socially dangerous.¹²

¹⁰ Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," 915.

¹¹ Hazel V. Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4 (1992): 739.

¹² Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," 739.

The concept of "moral panic" generates thoughts and questions surrounding respectability as being perceived as an entity inherently tied to morality. Considering the bourgeois attitude rising in the 1920s that Carby cites, the tangible representations of these "panics" are present in a class, gender, and race-based analysis.¹³ In addition, "sexually degenerate" is tied to Queer Studies as the term was used (in conjunction with terms such as "sexually perverted") to describe queer people in the early to mid-twentieth century. Black women's queerness in locations that provided space for this so-called sexual degeneracy were exacerbators of these moral panics.

This thesis seeks to explore the nuances that exist at the intersections of Blackness, queerness, and gender. These identities correlate to respective systems of oppression that possess violent means of policing and forcibly repress these othered identities. This thesis is an example of Roderick Ferguson's "queer of color critique" in *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique* as it is a radical means of challenging the existing social order through a lens that accounts for the complexities of queers of color. A "queer of color critique" is more than solely a Black or person of color's criticisms of society, but, rather, it is a means to interrogate the functions of such society. Ferguson writes, "Queer of color critique approaches culture as one site that compels identifications with and antagonisms to the normative ideals promoted by state and capital."¹⁴ This unique form of criticism is rooted in the oppression of Black people and people of color and their subsequent reclamation of their power as a means to corrupt the ostensibly static oppressive operations of the state and its societies. "Queer of color critique" is also intersectional in nature as it accounts for the ways that different identities converge and reinforce each other in creating one's nuanced subject position: "queer of color analysis has to

¹³ Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context," 740.

¹⁴ Roderick A. Ferguson, "Introduction: Queer of Color Critique, Historical Materialism, and Canonical Sociology," in *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Critical American Studies Series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 3.

debunk the idea that race, class, gender, and sexuality are discrete formations, apparently insulated from one another.”¹⁵ Furthermore, Ferguson’s concept of “queer of color critique” is inherently nonheteronormative and, therefore, non-normative in its societal positioning as a form of discourse. “Queer of color critique” relates to the notion of Black Queer Space as a liberatory sphere existing outside of the matrix of power. Ferguson claims:

As queer of color critique addresses minority cultural forms as both within and outside canonical genealogies, pointing to the ruptural possibilities of those forms means that culture is not simply exhausted by its complicity with regulation. Inasmuch as minority cultural forms are eccentric to the normative and racialized properties of canonical formations, they suggest possibilities outside the normative parameters and racialized boundaries of those canonical structures.¹⁶

This type of critique gestures towards *a way out* of the white heteropatriarchal capitalist oppressive system. This thesis continues this “queer of color critique” by focusing on Black Queer Space, as will be explained in the following sections, as a step further in theorizing this exit from the matrix of power through a particular Black woman queerness that is specifically tied to the lived experiences of Black women and their various queer identities.

I argue that Black women’s queerness is the key to their own liberation—and thus the liberation of all—through an analysis of the spaces that they navigated. I suggest that Black queer women’s experiences and the locations and uninhabitable spaces they navigated throughout the twentieth century were how they practiced a form of ideological freedom and bodily autonomy—despite the fact that some spaces were constricting in their emphasis on heteronormativity and rendered the Black queer women’s body as unworthy of spatial occupation. Black queer women occupied sites in which “respectable” society deemed

¹⁵ Ferguson, “Introduction,” 4.

¹⁶ Ferguson, “Introduction,” 26.

unrespectable, and they demonstrated practices of freedom that continue to be built by Black queer women decades later.

I employ historical case studies to illustrate how Black queerness presented itself during the twentieth century and its larger implications and how these women resisted the dominant hegemony that rendered them abject. Though seemingly contradictory, their positionality as the Other granted them the breadth to move within society as *free* pariahs. Black queer women could move freely within spaces *underground* or unapologetically in the public eye—subverting traditional notions of respectability through (re)claiming sexual deviancy as a positive expression of one's identity and ways of being. To investigate Black queer women's lives and movements is to prove Black Queer Space to be *the* way to the other side of oppression: liberation.

A Space *Outside*: Theorizing Black Queer Women's Escape From the Matrix of Power

My discussion is aligned with the longstanding, theoretical debate regarding whether if it is *truly* possible to escape the intense, restrictive dominance of systems of oppression and their manifestations in different societal institutions. These contextual manifestations take the form of discrimination, violence (in various tangible and intangible iterations), as well as othering—all based on the identification of the conjunction of Blackness, queerness, and womanhood. I explore how siting Black queer women's spatiotemporal orientations is discursive in their rejection of dominating Eurocentric modes of enforcing hierarchy.

Conceptualizing Location

We lack archival information regarding the lives and interiorities of Black queer women. This absence in the larger societal imagination is partly due to the lack of existing archival information regarding such women, but it can also be attributed to the othering of Black queer women. The complex work of mapping Black women's geographies is complicated by their historical erasure and lack of currently existing archives surrounding their geographic placement. However, as Katherine McKittrick explains how Black people are constructed as “ungeographic” due to the hierarchical nature of the preexisting geographic frameworks: “If prevailing geographic distributions and interactions are racially, sexually, and economically hierarchical, these hierarchies are naturalized by repetitively spatializing ‘difference.’”¹⁷ McKittrick continues: “Racism and sexism are also spatial acts and illustrate black women's geographic experiences and knowledges as they are made possible through domination.”¹⁸ Mapping the locations of Black women has the potential to subvert these hierarchies. Within the Black Diaspora, Black bodies exist in liminality—their bodies are both read as human and the Other.

¹⁷ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xv.

¹⁸ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xviii.

As will be discussed further in this text, the two are oppositional in the Eurocentric spatiotemporal imagination. Furthermore, locations are the defining aspect of the *who* or, rather, the *what* of a Black body's identity. Black bodies float around the circumference of the *somewhere*. *Somewhere* is a place, and this place must be legible to the dominant society in order to receive recognition and, therefore, legitimacy. By positing Black women as autonomous and *geographic*, and by recognizing their non-normativity, "respatializations" can occur.¹⁹ That is, Black women are [re]oriented in the physical landscape. The tangible ground that Black women stand upon, then, is realized as a legitimate, legible space that is subdivided into different locations.

In what contexts are these "respatializations" evident, and how can they be applied to a Black queer woman context? One must look to the sites of Black women's inhabitation in order to theorize what Black Queer Space is in subversive "respatializations." Turning to the Black Diaspora provides contextual evidence into where the universally othered Black bodies and, more specifically, Black queer [woman] bodies took to. Rinaldo Walcott writes of a "black queer diaspora" in which Black queer bodies can tangibly be located. Walcott positions this Black Queer Diaspora as an amalgamation of locations that can be reduced to an all-encompassing "diaspora" in terminology. Walcott's contestations regarding Black queerness in the Black Diaspora gesture towards a cultural, distinctly identifiable entity that is rooted in Black queer location. Walcott states,

"The black queer diaspora is an invention that cuts across numerous boundaries. It allows for multiple and conflicting identifications based upon a shared sense of sexual practice and the ongoing machinations of racialization, especially anti-black racism. Significantly, the black

¹⁹ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xix.

queer diaspora functions as a network of borrowing and sharing of cultural expression, products, language, and gesture.”²⁰

This Black Queer Diaspora, then, must be in the *somewhere* in order for interpersonal interactions between Black queer people to occur—denoting the necessity for this text's analytical rendering of location when placing Walcott's concept in Black queer women's specific, metaphorical language. Black queer women's geographies lie in this greater understanding of diasporic relations and existence. Black culture works as a cross-cultural binding agent due to the othered Black body, but it simultaneously has the capacity to *unbind*. Queerphobia within the Black community forces Black queer bodies into the margins—a more distant, circumferential space than heteronormative Black bodies. Heteronormativity *literally* has the ability to force Black queer women into the shadows—leaving them the connotatively “deviant” spaces to inhabit as identifying as Black, queer, and woman outwardly or, rather, inwardly and privately among other Black queer women. Kinship is a theme that Walcott includes in his understanding of a Black Queer Diaspora,

This cross-border, outernational sharing and identification work to produce particular kinds of kinship relations that keep both in play and at bay suggestions that black queer practices are aberrant, anti-black, not as fully developed as Euro-descended practices, and so on. Thus the black queer diaspora is a counterweight to forces, both white and black, that position black queer sexuality as either non-existent or in need of spokespeople on its behalf. In this way, then, the black queer diaspora functions simultaneously as an internal critique of black homophobia and a critique of white racism.²¹

I intervene on Walcott's argument: the Black Queer Diaspora disrupts the dominant order—operating as a rejection of oppressive theologies and tactics. On a granular level of this intervention, Black queer women entering and exiting various locations, diasporically, is

²⁰ Rinaldo Walcott, “Homopoetics: Queer Space and the Black Queer Diaspora,” in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*, ed. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Adrian Woods (Toronto, Ont.: Cambridge, Mass: Between the Lines; South End Press, 2007), 234.

²¹ Walcott, *Homopoetics*, 234-235.

disturbing to systems of oppression. This is due, in part, to the fact that the premise of “diaspora” is collectivity, and collective organizing of the Other is unsettling and threatening to the dominant social order. In another fashion, Black queer women prove that space is not static by entering and exiting the physical realm as autonomous individual othered bodies. They live as kin but also as the singular, sentient human being. Furthermore, Black queer women site themselves through their active cross-cultural ties—whether that be in the confines of a single city or between countries. The Black queer woman is her own actor. With voluntary movement, she is who and where she wants to be within specific locations despite experiencing intra and interracial marginalization.

McKittrick helps frame the dominant hegemony and how Black women rebel through their locations, often through becoming (in)visible, through discussing location regarding Black women and (in)visibility. McKittrick writes of Linda Brent and the 9' x 7' x 3' garret she hid inside in order to escape the inhumane confines of enslavement. Within this discussion, she treats location as a means to disguise oneself from the public sphere. McKittrick states”

There is both a separation from and connection to the world outside the attic; she is both inside and outside, captive and free. The garret can be conceptualized as usable paradoxical space, which opens up a different way to observe slavery and underscores the geographic shape of mystery...The garret locates her in and amongst the irrational workings of slavery as a witness, participant, and fugitive.²²

Black women's fugitivity is a throughline in this text. Black women are natural fugitives. The location of the garret is a fugitive space in which Brent could be silent in the face of enslavement. This silence, in the name of survival, is a form of nuanced complicity to McKittrick. McKittrick's thoughts on silence in the location of the garret are twofold:

These multiple subject positions—formulated in the ‘last place they thought of’—gesture to several different geographic possibilities and experiences, such as places seen, remembered, hoped for, and avoided by Brent. At the same time, there is the constant reminder the ‘last

²² McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 42.

place they thought of' is also spatializing one realm of freedom through witnessing the terrible lives of other slaves, enforced family separation, and bodily pain. Her 'freedom' is arranged according to: the outer geographies of slavery, which remain life-threatening and violent; the tight and disabling garret; and necessary child abandonment.²³

Brent was both an actor and a bystander, but these two positions were informed by the location she occupied *voluntarily* based on her personal priorities under her specific circumstances. Freedom in physical inhabitation can be seen through varying lenses, but the lens most applicable to this context is one of Black woman subversion. Brent "quietly critiques and undoes traditional geographies."²⁴ These traditional geographies directly stem from oppressive systems. McKittrick continues, "While she is in the garret, Brent undermines the patriarchal logic of visualization by erasing herself from the immediate landscape."²⁵ She was in "the hidden [space] that [is] antagonistic to transparent space"—which is a form of Black women's fugitivity through her absconding into the location of the silent garret.²⁶ She was, predominately, subverting the politics of enslavement and holding privilege through the space she occupied. She was protecting not only her children, through her own means, but her sense of Self—intentionally. Therefore, the garret is a physical space of oppressive institutional undoing.

Occupying "Uninhabitable Space"

Black Queer Space can also be thought of abstractly—separate from understandings of space as pertaining to geography. "Uninhabitable space" also works to describe the spaces that Black queer women occupied through their senses of Self rather than their physical bodies. This section of the text seeks to understand how uninhabitable spaces within Black queer women's lives

²³ McKittrick defines the "last place they thought of" through analyzing Brent's hiding: "Brent is everywhere and nowhere, north and south, unvisibly present across the landscape, in the last place they thought of." McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 42; 42-43.

²⁴ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 43.

²⁵ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 43.

²⁶ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 43.

manifested themselves and such spaces' contributions in building a Black Queer Space.

“Uninhabitable space” enters the realm of the metaphysical. This text argues that specifically Black queer women's entrance, inhabitation, and exit of such space is innately tied to Black Queer Space and its potential to break the metaphorical chains of oppressive systems.

The most concrete way of comprehending such an abstract concept is through examining identity. Black queer women clearly possess the identities of Black, queer, and woman. Despite this, other identities (such as class) as well as various practices that coincide with identities (such as gender expression) demonstrate that uninhabitable space is not fixed. Stagnation is not a characteristic of identity: identities are fluid in some contexts. C. Riley Snorton argues that different Black people and Black transgender individuals inherently pass through different identities through their actions—transgressing the dominant concept of binary logic. In a contemporary case study, Snorton explores the ways that Black trans identity results in confusion and misrepresentation by the larger heteronormative public sphere.²⁷ A transmasculine individual describes being misgendered despite his gender identity and expression. He describes a Black transgender man named Blake Brockington who speaks of being called a “dyke” by transphobic and queerphobic people.²⁸ This begs the question: “Is dyke a gendered term?” Could it simply be that it describes a more general Other “butchness?” Or are transmasculine individuals still coded as “female?”

²⁷ Trans identity can also be viewed as (mis)recognized, highly surveilled, and policed by a hegemonic heteronormative society insistent on the established colonial Western male/female gender binary. This, then, results in the condemnation of non-binary identity—which is grounded in a refusal to conform to this gender binary that categorizes humans as “man” or “woman.”

²⁸ C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), xi.

Snorton's text provides more information into how one can interrogate this question in the context of other Black and Black trans individuals. Snorton's rendering of "passing" is imperative to understanding uninhabitable space and identity. Snorton writes:

As 'passing' became a term to describe performing something one is not, it trafficked a way of thinking about identity not only in terms of real versus artificial but also, and perhaps always, as proximal and performative. Like a vertical line with arrows on either end, passing is figuratively represented by moving up or down hierarchical identificatory formations.²⁹

Passing is the existence of the liminal. There, of course, is the stationary aspect of identity as in order to *pass*, one must stay in that identity long enough to be read as identifiably legible.

However, Snorton's vertical model requires a fluidity in identity that is predicated on movement.

Regarding uninhabitable space, this movement is non-physical. Snorton incorporates Blackness

to reveal the true nuance of "passing" as a Black individual under the dominant hegemony: "In

this vertical model, blackness functions as the possibility of distinction in which fungibility acts

as the requisite grounds from which distinction is forged. Here, blackness...points to a place

where being undone is simultaneously a space for new forms of becoming."³⁰ Black queer

individuals passing for different identities (i.e., race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.)—whether

that be intentionally or intentionally—have the capacity to *become* something (or someone) else.

This becoming must be done in a certain sphere, and that is done within uninhabitable spaces. In

this context, identities occupy the role of being their own respective uninhabitable spaces that

Black queer bodies can pass through. Black queer women, to contextualize, are inherently

transgressive through their possession of non-normative identities that are fluid in nature and

movement within this vertical spectrum of hierarchy.

²⁹ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 70.

³⁰ Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 70.

Another means to comprehend uninhabitable space is through Marlon M. Bailey and Rashad Shabazz's "anti-black heterotopias." The term, created by the two, refers to the space that Black queerness takes up in heteronormative society. They state:

If anti-black racism forces black people to live within contained landscapes that exist on the margins of whiteness, then black gender and sexual minorities, who are subject to violence and public ridicule, live in a placeless space, a location with no coordinates. In other words, the heterosexism/ homophobia toward black gender and sexual minorities that is expressed in socio/ spatial terms is complicit with the spatialization of anti-black racism.³¹

This "placeless space" is uninhabitable. "Anti-black heterotopias" are just another example of how Black queer bodies are circumferential and floating within an othered atmosphere. Bailey and Shabazz's term is simply another way of describing the dominant hegemonic society and the legible, normalized space it takes up as heteronormative and white. Black queer women's inhabitation of uninhabitable space is applicable to this conversation since Black queer women are Black and queer and thus are also subject to patriarchal violence. The heteropatriarchy functions solely to constrict the movement of the transgressive, and Black queer women (in gender and/or sexuality) are examples of transgression in being. Their expressions of sexuality and gender are transgressive, subversive practices that allow them to inhabit uninhabitable spaces as non-normative Selves that directly oppose heteropatriarchal norms.

Black Queer Space and Matrixial Escapism

Black Queer Space is its own *body*, or entity, in which Black women occupy as autonomous beings. Black women could not cultivate a Black Queer Space if it were not for their active participation in self-naming. Sylvia Wynter uses the term "descriptive statement" to define the ways in which the Other self-determines *what* or *who* they are. Wynter calls for a redescription of the human outside of coloniality to disrupt the "coloniality of power": "One cannot 'unsettle'

³¹ Bailey and Shabazz, "Editorial: Gender and Sexual Geographies of Blackness: Anti-Black Heterotopias (Part 1)," 316.

the 'coloniality of power' without a redescription of the human outside the terms of our present descriptive statement of the human. Man, and its overrepresentation."³² Wynter's argument that the "coloniality of power" can only be truly disturbed by redescription contributes to the larger concept of self-naming under the dominant hegemony. Wynter's "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom" states that a reconstruction of the "Human Other" is necessary.³³

This Other is considered by hegemonic powers to lack rationality and is thus illegible.

Hegemonic powers ignore queerness at its core, in all of its manifestations, as it is deemed inconceivable to normative society. It ventures outside this coloniality of power through transgressing its oppressive hierarchies through its innate fluidity.

The dominant hegemony limits the extent to which one can think of a world outside of its boundaries. Since Black queer women exist on the outermost area of these boundaries, it is Black queer women that are closest to escaping this oppressive dominant hegemony. Judith Butler's term "matrix of power" is applicable to this concept of the dominant hegemony.³⁴ The "matrix of power" complicates the simplicity of a pyramid schema of hierarchy. "Matrix" denotes a convoluted schema that one cannot navigate with ease. Black queer women are forced to navigate this matrix sans societal acceptance—adding yet another level of complication to their lives. However, the uninhabitable space of the matrix of power, though guarded by the heteropatriarchy, can be transgressed through the movement between different hierarchical identities. The practice of shifting identities brings its own troubles—mainly being that one should not *have* to shift identities in order to achieve liberation. If one's shifting is posited as a

³² Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 268.

³³ Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom," 282.

³⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2006), 42.

fluid movement, meaning giving one the *choice* to be open with their identities, then these troubles are obsolete. Furthermore, we must fight against the lack of *imagination* present in larger society. Black Queer Space is imaginative in nature: it allows Black queer women to live outside of imminent heteronormative danger. This conceptualization of a space may seem idealistic, or even quixotic, but if the imaginative work is to be done to transgress binaries and hierarchy, then the location and unhabitable spaces Black queer women enter and exit must be more than simply tolerant—they must be embracing. Only a Black Queer Space has the capacity to do this work and eliminate the need for Black queer women to be subjected to the hostilities of the matrix of power that exists due to the lack of an imagined alternative.

Siting Black *Queer* Women: The Black Press & Proximities of (Un)Respectability

An article titled “Have We a New Sex Problem Here?” is among the many articles on the cover page of *The Chicago Whip* issue from 27 November 1920.³⁵ The article details a “peculiar” divorce case in which a previously seemingly heterosexual woman abandoned her husband for her “girl friend [sic].”³⁶ Ida May Robinson, a queer woman, made the decision to pursue a lifestyle that aligned with her sexuality. The then Mrs. Robinson and her woman lover requested a room together, which became public information following the publication of the article.³⁷ Whether or not the room was granted is not mentioned, but the attempt to live a nonheteronormative life *away* from heteronormativity—despite being in a heterosexual marriage—attests to the importance of space in Black queer women’s lives as the newspapers (representing a larger Black Press) served as a conduit with which Black queer women were surveilled and perceived. “Have we a new sex problem here?” can quite literally be posited as an overarching question that the Black Press sought to solve. The discursive practices it employed represent a larger objectification and degradation of a Black queer woman's identity practiced through intra-communal policing and forced hypervisibility.

The Black Press was an apparatus with which a larger Black society could force Black queer women into hostile sites within the confines of a newspaper or magazine. The discursive work of the Black Press constructed Black queer women as not having a place in society. The Black Press reframed their lives and transformed the spaces Black queer women inhabited through text/language that was used by the Black Press to construct the spaces they inhabited in the real world. This chapter seeks to understand the ways the Black press rendered the Black

³⁵ “Have We a New Sex Problem Here?,” *The Chicago Whip*, November 21 (Chicago, IL), 1920.

³⁶ “Have We a New Sex Problem Here?”

³⁷ “Have we a New Sex Problem Here?”

queer woman abject and lacking a place through their storytelling practices. Abjection, in this sense, refers to the ostracization of a perceivably repugnant entity, body, or being. To be abject, then, is to exist in an isolated sphere separate from those deemed socially acceptable and normal. This positioning is best exemplified in the ways the Black Press reported on the spaces Black queer women occupied *voluntarily*—which led to the sensationalizing of Black women’s queerness or non-normativity in the papers.³⁸ The stories in the Black Press were often used as a conduit for exposing the Black public to taboo subjects or “open secrets,” such as homosexuality. The Black Press reinforced existing notions of respectability and bolstered the dominant view that Black queer women did not have lives to live—denying them their interiority.³⁹

Different scholars have theorized what Black respectability meant in this historical context and how it materialized in the lives of Black women. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s rendering of the politics of respectability, or respectability politics, captures a means of intra-communal policing of the behavior of Black people—especially Black women. The politics of respectability materialized within Black society in different forms, but perhaps the largest form it assumed was that of condemning actions of Black women occupying certain locations. While focusing on the church and street, Higginbotham genders space:

As both physical and discursive space, the church and the street constituted opposing sites of assembly, with gender-laden and class-laden meanings. The street signified male

³⁸ Black queer women’s voluntary occupation of both uninhabitable and non-heteronormative queer spaces is important when one understands that many of these spaces that Black queer women occupied on a quotidian basis were heteronormative—and therefore uninhabitable. Therefore, voluntary occupation of space is an act of subversion and rebellion against what was deemed acceptable and normative at the time. Reports of their voluntary occupation of space in the Black Press failed to acknowledge Black queer women’s intentions regarding this occupation. Moreover, their intentional actions of movement and presence in such spaces were inherently transgressive.

³⁹ Saidiya Hartman writes on her methodology in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* in a manner similar to the methodology employed within this chapter regarding reaching the interiority of Black [queer] women: “In writing this account of the wayward... I recreate the voices and use the words of these young women when possible and inhabit the intimate dimensions of their lives. The aim is to convey the sensory experience of the city and to capture the rich landscape of black social life.” Saidiya V. Hartman, “A Note on Method,” in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, First published as a Norton paperback (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), xiii.

turf, a public space of worldly dangers and forbidden pleasures. Churches and households, both rejecting the worldly attractions of male social space, signified female and also sacred space. Women who strolled the streets or attended dance halls and cheap theaters promiscuously blurred the boundaries of gender.⁴⁰

Black queer women inherently subverted the gender norms of the time by both rejecting heterosexuality (which was an aspect of respectability) and performing gender in ways that were unsettling to the “respectable.” Even Black queer women that were not necessarily “out” still practiced such subversion due to their existence as nonheteronormative and Black.⁴¹

As Darlene Clark Hine argues, that Black women would migrate to escape anti-Black woman violence (in a multitude of forms) is conjoined with this text’s larger examinations of demonstrations of Black women’s autonomy.⁴² Furthermore, this migration marked an influx of Black women to major cities (though Hine focuses specifically on the Midwest) which contained their own non-explicitly named social stratum.⁴³ These Black women were thrust into environments in which they needed to either conform to the social norms or deviate (and risk being named a pariah). Hine’s culture of dissemblance as framing the dominant society to ignore the Black women who practiced it connects to the concept of hypervisibility versus invisibility and how certain identities were disproportionately vulnerable to violence. Hine does not address queerness, but her text lends itself to queerness. Black women who did not hide parts of themselves—that is to be “out” in some way regarding their sexuality or gender—were left overexposed to queerphobic epistemic violence (such as “respectable” Black women’s forced implementation of respectability politics). Black queer women existing as openly queer were

⁴⁰ Higginbotham, “The Politics of Respectability,” 204.

⁴¹ In colloquial terms, “the closet” refers to an uninhabitable space that queer individuals inhabit while their queer identities (in gender and/or sexuality) remain hidden. In such terms, being “out of the closet” refers to a queer individual whose queerness is publicly known.

⁴² Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912–20.

⁴³ Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West.”

more susceptible to the negative reactions and consequences resulting from not participating in this culture. Both Higginbotham and Hine illustrate a Black public sphere in which policing, secrecy, and repression were central to its character.⁴⁴ Black queer women were forced to navigate spaces in their respective societies that constituted spheres in which their actions were meticulously surveilled. Those who strayed from social norms were deemed unrespectable and therefore a threat to the image and functioning of an enigmatic larger Black society.

Places deemed undesirable by the “respectable” were the places “unrespectable” Black women frequented—as these locations were hubs for their social and economic activity. The ways the Black Press reported on such cases of unrespectability regarding nonheteronormative Black women demonstrates space as being gendered (and sometimes sexualized)—therefore rendering those who occupied connotatively male spaces as sexually deviant. Streets and their corners, clubs, and alike were stereotypically sexually charged spaces due to the prostitution, flirtatious intermingling, etc. that took place in such locations. The archives provide evidence that the Black public sphere condemned these locations and the nonheteronormative behavior of Black women, who inhabited them, of how Black social norms were oppositional to a Black queer woman identity. However, the Black Press delved into the details of the stories behind Black queer women’s existence. Through codified language and comparison to the respectable,

⁴⁴ This chapter defines the “Black public sphere” as an oppositional, yet individualistic, conglomerate of African American opinions and behaviors stemming from a history of enslavement and post-emancipation acts of collective, autonomy residing in the notion of linked fate. The analytical argument grounding this definition: “The black public sphere can be seen as both a question and an answer. It is a question because it is not clear whether critical public spheres—and none is more critical than the black public sphere—can survive the contemporary political onslaught on compassion and public criticism in the United States. But the black public sphere is also an answer insofar as it is a transnational space whose violent birth and diasporic conditions of life provide a counternarrative to the exclusionary national narratives of Europe, the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa. Thus the black public sphere is one critical space where new democratic forms and emergent diasporic movements can enrich and question one another” (Black Public Sphere Collective, ed., *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*, Black Literature and Culture (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 1. The politics of respectability and the culture of dissemblance erased displays of sexuality from Black women’s public identities in a way akin to the concept of Victorian female passionlessness “Passionlessness” is a Victorian concept in which a woman’s sexuality is nonexistent, and the woman adopts a connotatively virtuous, chaste character.

sexuality in its different forms was brought to public attention. Stories pertaining to blatant acts of subversive sexuality were often, if not always, subject to sensationalizing.

Reporting on sexually rebellious behavior was enticing to Black readers. Kim Gallon writes, “As African Americans jockeyed for a place in American society, black newspapers envisioned a mass black readership that sought opportunities to vicariously experience pleasure through viewing, responding to, and debating sexual topics.”⁴⁵ The Black Press, then, was a non-material space in which Black readers could engulf themselves to receive such pleasure.

Respectability politics and the culture of dissemblance, along with the widespread heteronormative traditionalism that marked the period in the United States, resulted in a sexually repressed public discourse present in Black society. Sex prior to marriage, adultery, non-heterosexual sex, etc., were all taboo and simultaneously quite prevalent. There were social consequences to participating in such acts, and many did not publicly participate for fear of being socially ostracized. The Black Press entered this tension by providing room for Black readers to satisfy their sexual curiosity through readership. Reading the stories in newspapers afforded Black readers an opportunity to escape the confines of a morally constricting society through a quotidian deed. In an act of quasi voyeurism, Black readers satisfied their desires for sexual content in this way. There was an air of curiosity that marked Black readers’ minds as they were able to “dip their toes” into homosexual life without having to adopt it.

In Chandler Owen’s “Why the Press Prints Crime and Scandal News” (1925), Owen wrote of the reasoning behind the sensationalizing of certain stories and the emphasis placed upon scandal to attract increased Black readership. The article states, “A negligible number of people crave news of the good... Evil is chiefly alluring,; scandal is salacious: we are avid for the

⁴⁵ Kim T. Gallon, *Pleasure in the News: African American readership and sexuality in the Black press*, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 14.

worst: prurient for the pernicious: anxious for slime and filth and dirt.”⁴⁶ Gallon’s argument about the Black public seeking pleasure is most applicable here. There was a pining for what one could not have without social consequence. In this case: sex. Owen’s article points towards a desire to access the “underworld” St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton write about in *Black Metropolis*. Gallon’s statement regarding a passive participation in sexual topics through reading can be synthesized with Owen’s writing and *Black Metropolis* to illustrate a mass Black readership of sexually curious Black patrons desiring entry into the unknown sexual sphere, and the Black Press capitalized off this desire and printed scandal to appeal to such an audience.

Subverting Gender on Stage

The Black public sphere reveals levels of complexity in the Black Press regarding what *was* and what *was not* tolerable for Black gendered subjects who made the papers. The Black Press sensationalized cross-dressing. Cross-dressing was an action of performing gender in opposition to the ways that clothing determined how one’s gender was perceived by others. The tolerance that cross-dressing Black queer women received by the Black Press, and Black society, depended on the spaces these women occupied and the timing of such occupations. The Black Press, especially in the first few decades of the twentieth century, reported on cross-dressing Black women as scandalous and threatening to respectability.⁴⁷ However, there was also a degree of tolerance surrounding such scandal, depending upon the space in which it unfolded. Often an inherent assumption of heterosexuality was present in these newspaper articles—meaning queerness in sexuality was not assumed nor mentioned to any degree.

⁴⁶ Chandler Owen, “Why The Press Prints Crime And Scandal News,” *Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)* (Chicago, IL), April 18, 1925.

⁴⁷ “Women Run Wild Hallowe'en Nigh,” *Chicago Defender (Big Weekend Edition 1905-1966)*, (Chicago, IL), Nov 7, 1914.

An example of the assumptions of femininity and heterosexuality when Black women were adopting masculine traits is present in the concept of celebrity male impersonation. In this practice, cisgender women cross-dress and perform as men in an entertainment sphere. The story of Bert Whitman, a male impersonator, highlights one type of response to Black woman-performed masculinity of relative tolerance due to the idea of entertainment within a location: the stage. Bert Whitman (also known as Alberta, out of drag) performed with “his” sisters in a musical act that gained much popularity. In a 1929 interview with the *Baltimore Afro-American*, Whitman’s beliefs on her cross-dressing are portrayed as being on her own terms. When asked why Whitman opts for masculine clothing off-stage and if masculine clothing was a preference for her, Whitman replied, “No, I like fluffy things...But, of course, I went in for typically mannish styles because it was good showmanship, and now the public demands me in that type of clothes. I’m not Bert Whitman to them unless I’m as near a man in looks as a girl can be.”⁴⁸ Why was the public so insistent on a masculine-presenting Whitman on *and* off the stage? The reporter referred to Whitman as “Miss” throughout the article, and also Whitman explicitly self-identified as a woman in the above quote. Whitman’s persona as a man on-stage represents a certain type of queer gender performance on the stage, highlighting the contextual nature of performance.

The Black Press usually did not allow people to speak about their nonnormative identities, but performances provided Black women opportunities for alternative representation that were then printed in the Black Press. The stage granted Whitman the freedom to explore gender outside of classic Black (and white) public modes of respectability because it was an *act*. The public may have demanded Whitman’s adoption of a “masculine lifestyle” off the stage as

⁴⁸ Lulu, Garret, “Bert Whitman, Subbing for Man, Liked Role and Stuck,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, December 21, 1929.

they knew of this act and that Whitman solely pretended for entertainment purposes and not out of a natural desire to appear masculine (which would be coded as queer in gender and/or sexuality). The stage, however, represents a paradox in which the stage as a location was both liberating in the tolerance marking performance of an oppositional gender while simultaneously constricting the gender expression of such performers off the stage. The Black Press reveals this paradox through the story of Whitman, and Whitman's story speaks to the forced placement of Black queer women (in positionality and gender) into a metaphorical stifling corner that aligned with Black society's notions of respectability and its subsequent assumptions of who was *truly* queer in sexuality.

Black women already occupy a queer, oppositional stance in society, but Black women rebelling against Black society's social norms and the patriarchy's notions of gender are innately queer in positionality.⁴⁹ Kimberly Springer reiterates the queerness of Black women in the social strata: "Queerness, then, is not an identity, but a position or stance...The black woman is the original Other, the figure against which white women's sexuality is defined. Aren't we already queer? To queer black female sexuality means to do what would be contrary, eccentric, strange, or unexpected."⁵⁰ These Black women cross-dressing aligns with this sense of the contrary and unexpected. The ostensibly/assumed heterosexual Black women's subversive gender performance was already queered by them through their actions—if one follows Springer's contestation. Their sexual orientation and gender identity were not under investigation (meaning they were not assumed to be transmasculine). In fact, the Black Press desperately attempted to

⁴⁹ The transgressive nature of queerness is especially salient in this context due to the liberal framework with which the United States operated under during the time period that viewed queerness as a threat to this liberalist society formed by systems of oppression. These systems of oppression silence and enact violence those with non-normative identities as this perceived threat of non-normativity ruptures the very structure and operation of a liberalist society that benefits from white supremacy, capitalism, heteropatriarchy, etc.

⁵⁰ Kimberly Springer, "Queering Black Female Heterosexuality," in *Yes means yes!: visions of female sexual power & a world without rape*, (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2008), 86.

preserve their (hetero)sexuality, despite all the signs gesturing towards a type of queerness.⁵¹ The role of location is central in the case of Bert Whitman as Whitman was perceived as *performing* non-normative gender. This Black woman performance was for the purpose of entertainment instead of identity based. The stage renders itself to be a site of assumingly-heterosexual, tolerable gender subversion—even if it defied standards of respectability.

As Judith Butler has articulated, gender performance is an inescapable facet of everyday life. There are ways gender is rendered legible and intelligible, and these renderings are a manifestation of a heteronormative patriarchy that dictates what *is* and what *is not* acceptable for a gendered society.⁵² Within this heteronormative society, sex and gender are fused into one identity—leaving no room for queerness in gender, separate from one’s sex assigned at birth. Queerness in gender refers to the ways one might deviate from the social norm through performing gender in ways that threaten the very fragile infrastructure of the heteronormative patriarchy. When approaching gender with a historically grounded, Black Queer Studies approach, white supremacy cannot be excluded as a system of oppression that works conjointly with heteropatriarchy to oppress Black queer bodies. Black society’s gender norms were created by such systems of oppression, and the norms presented themselves in the Black Press as the standard with which all would be judged against.⁵³

⁵¹ Another example: the 1933 *Baltimore Afro-American* article titled “Many Actresses Have Worn Trousers” is self-explanatory in content, but it also emphasizes that the feminine sexuality of these actresses was not lost through their wearing of pants.⁵¹ The screen, then, functions similar to the stage in that heterosexuality was the assumption due to the aspect of entertainment.

⁵² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*, (NY: Routledge, 2006), 24.

⁵³ The *Chicago Defender* wrote the article: “The Third Sex” (1957) and “Aunt Ruth: Fears Female Teacher Is a Lover of Women” (1966). In “The Third Sex,” author Alfred Duckett writes in response to the Kinsey Report. Black women’s experiences with queerness, such as Gladys Bentley and Billie Holiday are highlighted. For example, Bentley, an openly queer Black woman whose gender performance was all but feminine, was placed under an obsessive microscope while Holiday, who sang about a lesbian’s fancying toward her, was treated as somewhat of an authority on lesbian ways—rather than the queer Bentley. Black queer women and/or nonnormative Black women being the center of an article on lesbianism was a marker of the shift in how homosexuality was viewed across decades as Black queer men tended to make more headlines in the first few decades of the twentieth century.

Streets, Sex Work, and the Proximity of (Un)Respectability

Newspaper articles in the Black press condemned the behavior of “unrespectable” Black women *in the streets*. The *Chicago Defender*’s 1913 article “Disgrace to the Race and the City” hints at the centrality and ubiquity of respectability politics in its title. “The prostitute women and their lovers line 18th street. Unmolested by the police they lounge along the sidewalk to the disgust of all the decent people in this town. They need to be cleaned up,” the article states.⁵⁴ This “breeding spot of evil” is present in different spots of the city as well, according to the author, and “every respected citizen should write to the mayor to have these holes cleaned out.”⁵⁵ This article suggests the presence of these women to have contributed to the perceived demise of Black society. The invocation of carcerality by Black people gestures towards the idea of intra-communal policing that was inherent in respectability politics.

In the *Chicago Defender* article “Women Run Wild Hallowe’ en Nigh,” published the following year, the author reveals the ways Black women could be seen as threats to respectability through cross-dressing without necessarily being considered queer/homosexual.

The article states:

It was no night for any respectable woman to be on the streets alone, and yet despite this fact and the fact that we are living in an age where decency should always prevail, we were more than disgusted last Saturday to see women and young girls parading up and down State street dressed up in man’s [sic] clothes... Women in men’s attire would deliberately undertake to get in the middle of the floor and dance. Some were thoughtful enough to have escorts, but others were not... Men will do almost anything, but we expect to see our women do better.⁵⁶

This shift represents the ways Black queer women were obsessed over and questioned while also revealing the complexities of a hypervisible versus invisible dichotomy that could be transgressed through the passing of time.

⁵⁴ “Disgrace to the Race and the City,” *The Chicago Defender (Big Weekend Edition) (1905-1966)*, (Chicago, IL), Sep 13, 1913.

⁵⁵ “Disgrace to the Race and the City.”

⁵⁶ “Women Run Wild Hallowe'en Nigh.”

This passage reveals the ways positionality is integral to the concept of queerness; the women mentioned were condemned for their denial of respectability politics by subverting traditional gendered rules of fashion and respectability, but there was no mention of the connection between gender and/or sexuality.⁵⁷ At the forefront of the paper's condemnation lies the women's denial of respectability politics instead of their subversive performance of gender. The *Chicago Defender* stated that such Black women did not belong in the described locations (i.e., the street or dance halls). At the same time, the paper posited them as objects of disgust for their inhabitation of the said spaces. In writing about respectability, Higginbotham interprets the street as a male sphere. These cross-dressing women were reprimanded for their rebellion against respectability, and issue was taken with how these women were rebelling through their presence in perceived deviant spheres at night (i.e., the street, dance halls) and their choice of clothing. However, it lacked explanation as to *why* such actions were perceived to be wrong. The article mentioned the women's lack of male escorts, but it did not state anything to the extent that these women were behaving *like* men; they were only behaving "wrongly" and occupying the wrong type of physical space (meaning an unrespectable space). It can be inferred that since the politics of respectability were a Black public societal norm, the Black Press assumed that readers would already know why cross-dressing in the streets was abhorrent.

There were other contexts in which this visibility of unrespectable spaces is present. There are texts that report on connotatively immoral locations through analyzing both the sites and the patrons/actors present in such locations—making them both visible. St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton Jr.'s *Black Metropolis*, written in 1945, is a comprehensive sociological observation of Black people living in Chicago in the 1940s. The chapter "Bronzeville," referring

⁵⁷ "Women Run Wild Hallowe'en Nigh."

to a predominately Black neighborhood in Chicago, employed language that posited materialized sexuality and respectability as being unconventionally interdependent:

In addition to these more or less legitimate institutions, 'tea pad' and 'reefer dens,' and 'buffet flats' and 'call houses' also flourish, known only to the habitués of the underworld and to those respectable patrons, white and colored, without whose faithful support they could not exist. (Since 1912, when Chicago's Red-light District was abolished, prostitution has become a clandestine affair, though open 'street-walking' does occur in isolated areas.) An occasional feature story or news article in the daily press or in a Negro weekly throws a sudden light on one of these spots—a police raid or some unexpected tragedy; and then, as in all communities, it is forgotten.⁵⁸

The authors cite “respectable patrons” as being participants in illegal trades. This patronage connects to the contestation that although there were sexual taboos, these taboo acts were still practiced—albeit in a secretive manner. Though the fact that different levels of the Black social strata were present in these unrespectable spaces, class privilege provided protection for the Black middle class to a certain degree. Drake and Cayton’s reference to “*legitimate* institutions” denotes respectability and are framed as oppositional to the “underworld” the authors describe. Moreover, the authors call upon the Black Press as a frequent disseminator of information regarding this clandestine economy.

One example of the Black press’ reporting on the clandestine sexual economy emerged when Black lesbian pimps became increasingly present in the Red-Light Districts of Chicago. Dan Burley’s 1959 article in the *Chicago Defender* details the presence of Black lesbian pimps in the streets. Burley argues that “The lesbians took over. Simple as that.” He was explicit about the rise in Black lesbian pimps that somehow dethroned their Black male counterparts.⁵⁹ He went on to state, “Judges simply refuse to believe that female homosexuals have grown so many in

⁵⁸ Drake St. Clair and Horace R. Cayton, “Bronzeville,” in *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1945), 381.

⁵⁹ Dan Burley, “Bares New Moves in Vice System Operating in City,” *Chicago Defender (National edition) (1921-1967)* (Chicago, IL), Jan 24, 1959.

number that they today control a vast segment of the prostitution racket.”⁶⁰ Burley employed the term “female ‘queers’” to describe the new reigning exploiters of poor Black women resigned to the streets to make a living. In this way, the piece not only ties sexuality to both an identity and an economic trade, but it also highlights the ways a queer positionality can be understood to be inherent to women operating outside the bounds of respectable behavior. Both the prostitutes and the pimps are queered by their positionality in the sex trade of the Red-Light District, but the pimps are singled out through terms like “veteran lesbians” and “lady panderers,” which were used in the article.⁶¹ Written much later than the previous articles, the change in terminology describing Black queer women is evidence of a shift in understanding, and revealing of the ways positionality works to queer those operating outside the bounds of respectability.

Mumford discusses the impact of African American culture and hostile race relations through Black queer people’s navigation of their settings and perceptions by those around them, both Black and white. Mumford specifically writes of Black queer women participants in prostitution that they were viewed as “illegitimate” due to their queer identities which also interacted and intertwined, blurring the boundaries of their Black, woman, and sex worker identities—further pushing them into the margins both figuratively and physically (into Red-Light Districts).⁶² Mumford’s contestations relate to the concept of belonging within a specific space—especially when considering Higginbotham’s argument that streets were deemed to be male spaces. The marginalization of Black queer women prostitutes was due to an intersectional othering as well as an existence in an oppositional, gendered physical space. Mumford’s text

⁶⁰ Burley, “Bares New Moves.”

⁶¹ Burley, “Bares New Moves.”

⁶² Kevin Mumford, “Interracial Intersections: Homosexuality and Black/White Relations” in *Interzones: Black/White sex districts in Chicago and New York in the early twentieth century* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1997), 88.

reinforces *Black Metropolis*'s notion of the "underground," or "Red light district" as a space that was, despite its chaos, contained, organized, and gendered.

"Outed" in the Black Public Sphere

According to Gallon, one way that Black queer women entered the printed newspaper space of the Black public sphere was through the idea of the "predatory lesbian."⁶³ The predatory lesbian stereotype was essentially a trope in which the Black lesbian sought to forcibly convert heterosexual women and girls into queers. *Pleasure in the News* connects the presence of those involved in scandal who were present in the news to the concept of hypervisibility:

"Newspapers, then, made specific people 'visible' and created an aura of notoriety around them that fed readers' growing interest in their private lives."⁶⁴ If the scandalized were hypervisible, and Black queer women were always represented in stories of scandal pertaining to crime (such as crimes of passion), the representation of Black queer women became that of a hypervisible, predatory criminal. This claim differs from Gallon's conception of the predatory lesbian in important ways as she deems them to have been *invisible*—therefore bolstering their role as one who discreetly preys upon the weak and vulnerable. Gallon accounts for the invisibility of the Black lesbian: "Because she was largely unseen and silent, the African American predatory lesbian was still dangerous. Paradoxically, her invisibility meant that she could materialize in the most innocuous contexts, such as churches and schools."⁶⁵ The predatory Black lesbian was silent and beast-like, but she could also be anywhere at any given time unbeknownst to heterosexuals.

⁶³ Gallon, *Pleasure in the News*, 95.

⁶⁴ Gallon, *Pleasure in the News*, 55.

⁶⁵ Gallon, *Pleasure in the News*, 98.

Although Gallon speaks of the hypervisibility of the sexual, African American lesbians were invisible in the sense that their existence in the Black public sphere was largely unknown to a heteronormative/heterosexual Black public—creating a paradox. Prior to this statement, Gallon speaks of the criminalization of Black lesbians and their association with violence in the Black Press.⁶⁶ Through this association, out came a Black moral panic (similar to that described by Darlene Clark Hine). The headlines that sensationalized the violence of Black lesbians, simultaneously rendered these same, seemingly invisible, lesbians hypervisible. However, their existence in daily Black life was unseen as many Black queer women were not “out” in their quotidian lives—rendering them, again, invisible. Black lesbians were invisible through their secrecy regarding their sexual and gender orientations. Nevertheless, they were hypervisible in that the Black Press reported on their existence similar to Owen’s conception of scandalizing news—positing these women in their articles as spectacle for Black readers to consume. Through this paradox, Black lesbians could be characterized as being invisible in locations (sites in Black daily life) and hyper(in)visible in one uninhabitable space (the Black Press)—an uninhabitable space in that they could not write their own stories. Black queer women’s queerness shifted and contorted to fit the spaces they were in. In this case, the Black Press’ sensationalizing of Black lesbians contorted their queerness into predatory criminality.

A 1954 article published in *Jet Magazine*, titled “Women Who Fall for Lesbians” illustrates this paradox. The article discusses the seduction of ostensibly heterosexual women by lesbians. Femininity, masculinity, and psychological manipulation are all themes. According to the article, lesbians have a “power of persuasion” which posits them as having some sort of Other power that is not present in the majority heterosexual population.⁶⁷ The seductor and

⁶⁶ Gallon, *Pleasure in the News*, 95-96.

⁶⁷ “Women Who Fall for Lesbians,” *Jet Magazine*, Feb 25, 1954, 22.

seduced are treated differently in the article as there are lesbians and ostensibly heterosexual women that are converted to lesbianism (and implicitly have the capacity to revert to heterosexuality). Lesbians are vilified and written to “stalk” and “be considered a dangerous person.”⁶⁸ The writer cannot make room for consensual lesbian experimentation and denies sexual and romantic agency between Black women. Further examples of Black queer women in Black news outlets are useful in understanding how the Black Press depicted how Black queer women inhabited allegedly normative spaces.⁶⁹

These Black queer women were surveilled and monitored by those around them and by *The Chicago Defender* itself. *The Chicago Defender* wrote of Black lesbians living in a hotel room and the social disruption it caused:

And everybody found out the business of two young chicks who once lived in a Southside hotel, until they were evicted. Seems as tho [sic] the manager got ahold of a book on lesbians. This added to a number of complaints from other roomers about three and four young girls sleeping’ in one bed in one room and them terrible fights they had during early morning hours—proved too much. You should have seen the dirty book they were reading about lesbians.⁷⁰

Their inhabitation of a location in which they occupied collectively was already taboo, but it became even more so when “lesbianism” entered the conversation. Their presence in the hotel room was queer and was a means for the newspaper to generate conversations regarding sexual relationships between Black women. This location served as a vessel through which Black

⁶⁸ “Women Who Fall for Lesbians,” 22.

⁶⁹ “Aunt Ruth: Fears Female Teacher Is a Lover of Women” was an advice column article written by a Black girl to the author, Ruth Gibbs, regarding a seemingly sexually charged encounter with her schoolteacher that caused her to believe her teacher was a lesbian. This text contains a controversial topic that is not at the forefront of the piece: potential pedophilia. Instead, the perceived lesbian identity of the teacher that supposedly is romantically/sexually interested in her girl student is the center of the piece. Such a taboo, [currently] criminal act is placed to the sidelines as lesbianism is treated as the main issue in this column. The school as a physical location is hinged on proximity to children. This column further illustrates how lesbianism was criminalized and viewed as an evil and a path to pedophilia—despite this article being a singular representation of lesbianism.

⁷⁰ Ol’ Nosey, “Everybody Goes: When the Wagon Comes,” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)* (1921-1967), February 17, 1962.

lesbian lives could be made visible by the Black Press by aid of an outside party: the hotel manager. The hotel in this case study, similarly to the introductory anecdote, was a private location for Black queer women in positionality and sexuality. As seen through these stories and the case study to follow, through “outing” in the Black Press by the Black Press itself and third parties, Black queer women’s private lives became public.

In 1954, James McHarris was “outed” as Annie Lee Grant—revealing the (probable) transmasculine identity of McHarris.⁷¹ Mississippi-residing James McHarris made national headlines after a traffic altercation resulted in the revealing of the sex assigned at birth to McHarris. McHarris was sexed “female” at birth but lived much of their life—beginning in their teenage years onward—as a man. *Ebony Magazine* wrote, “The unmasking of Annie Lee Grant laid bare the raw tragedy of her double-sexed life and spotlighted for public view an almost unprecedented story of a sex change without surgery.”⁷² The history of McHarris’ life contains stories of them working jobs typically reserved for men, including gas station attendant, short-order cook, and even a preacher. More to the point, McHarris worked these “male” jobs while maintaining ostensibly heterosexual relationships with women. McHarris moved around throughout their late adolescence and early adulthood—traveling to Chicago, Memphis, and other cities in the Midwest—which aided their transition into a transmasculine individual. This movement between geographic locations can be noted as a way in which McHarris utilized their anonymity to perform gender in a masculine way. Mobility allowed McHarris the freedom and latitude to craft and recreate their identity, projecting a desired masculine gender performance. In

⁷¹ As the archive does not explicitly state that McHarris was transmasculine (to use contemporary terms), it can be inferred that McHarris was most likely transgender. There is a difficulty present in ascribing identity-based terms to individuals as there are different understandings and terminology for gender nonconformity contemporarily that did not exist at the time of McHarris’s life. The pronouns “they” and “them” are used within this individual text to refer to McHarris as their gender identity is not completely known, and therefore a gender-neutral pronoun is the most appropriate means to refer to McHarris.

⁷² “The Woman Who Lived as a Man for 15 Years,” *Ebony Magazine*, November 1954.

other words, their preferred gender identity as a masculine individual was made publicly possible by their occupying of different locations. Through their traveling, they were partaking in the process of making themselves *seen* as a man. They intentionally executed this process which demonstrates autonomy on behalf of the Black queer individual—despite their ascription as a woman. The “male masquerade,” according to *Ebony*, was further cemented through their work, physical appearance, and relationships.⁷³ Gender performance as more than a source of entertainment is apparent in this case study of McHarris. They bound their chest (disguising their breasts), wore masculine clothing, and spoke in a low tone of voice consistently. A level of secrecy existed among those close to McHarris who knew them since childhood—hinting at an “open secret” in which McHarris occupied two different identities: a woman in the eyes of those close to them and a man to those distanced enough to perceive them as such.

To explore the complexities of McHarris’ “outing,” the story of their traffic altercation is central in understanding how the Black Press perceived their identity and how their queerness shifted in the discourse of the Black Press. Stopped for driving with improperly functioning lights and possessing alcohol, McHarris was arrested. Their outward masculinity resulted in a physically and verbally rough treatment—one that is associated with Black men in the carceral system. Upon being arrested, assaulted, and subjected to an attempted search, McHarris stated, “Take it easy. I’m a woman.”⁷⁴ The mayor of Kosciusko, M.S. became involved in the escalating investigation and McHarris willingly disrobed to reveal their bound chest—subsequently “proving” their sex assigned at birth to the law enforcement involved. In concordance with the previous case study, third parties—along with the Black Press—were involved in the “outing” of McHarris/Grant. The *Ebony* article then described McHarris/Grant as

⁷³ “The Woman Who Lived as a Man for 15 Years.”

⁷⁴ “The Woman Who Lived as a Man for 15 Years.”

a “fully developed, big breasted woman.”⁷⁵ This description is a stark contrast from the previous wording describing McHarris as a “mighty tough man with the ladies.”⁷⁶ McHarris/Grant employed femininity when it was most convenient and protective for them. They adapted their queerness to fit the carceral system and provided themselves with the protections afforded to [some] women at the time. This adaptation is a direct example of how Black queer women (or ascribed women) often had control over their perceptions and their queerness. McHarris/Grant could have remained a man, but they chose to reveal their sex assigned at birth to achieve a specific means due to the location they occupied at that given moment.

An intriguing aspect of this article is that McHarris was referred to using the pronoun “he” when the article first detailed the account (before the “outing”), but post discovery, McHarris became Annie Lee Grant, and “she” had been pretending to be a man for a significant period of time to “to earn more money” (in their own words).⁷⁷ Different newspapers and magazines reported on McHarris’ story, including the *Alabama Tribune* and *Jet Magazine*. These two other sources similarly describe McHarris in terms of their physique and behavior. The *Alabama Tribune* used the term “real sex” in reference to McHarris/Grant’s sex assigned at birth.⁷⁸ *Ebony* named McHarris as “husky.”⁷⁹ These pronouns and descriptive changes follow a chronological order of introduction of McHarris to the “outing” of Grant. However, they represent much more when placed within a Black Queer Studies lens that accounts for the importance of space in shaping one’s Black queerness. For example, the blatant change in pronouns could perhaps represent an attempt at tricking the reader, but the change in physical

⁷⁵ “The Woman Who Lived as a Man for 15 Years.”

⁷⁶ “The Woman Who Lived as a Man for 15 Years.”

⁷⁷ “Police Find ‘He’ is ‘She’.”

⁷⁸ “Police Find ‘He’ is ‘She’.”

⁷⁹ “The Woman Who Lived as a Man for 15 Years.”

descriptors present in all texts gestures towards a larger nuance present in the minds of the Black public. There is a sense of fluidity. If McHarris was to be seen as a woman, the articles would have started with naming them as a woman in its content instead of solely in the title. The Black Press assumed this internalized fluidity—unknowingly—which begs the questions: What is the source of this embrace of gender fluidity? Is it a manifestation of a tolerance towards the queer—in the sense that there is space allowed for trans identity so long as it is in a controlled sphere, such as the Black Press? Or is it simply confusion?

To reiterate, there was a strong need within the heteronormative Black public's minds to understand homosexuality. McHarris' acceptance by those around them that knew of their transmasculine identity perhaps contributed to the lack of outright slander in the news and unknowingly steered the Black Press towards sensationalizing instead. It could be that McHarris performed masculinity so well that they were seen as a respectable man, revealing a new nuance regarding how masculinity and femininity are not solely reserved for certain genders and sexes. The articles wrote of McHarris as a man and Grant as a woman. Although they did not view McHarris as transmasculine (but rather a woman in man's clothes), there was a distinct separation between masculinity and femininity that gave McHarris an identity—a *being*—in some sense. Annie Lee Grant was the "true" woman, but James McHarris *did* exist at one point. This coexistence suggests that there was a combination of a sort of tolerance fueled by confusion.

Gendering (Non)Physical Space

Tolerance in Black women's rebellion against feminine gender performance, however, had its limits. Performance as a source of protection for outward denial of respectability and gender norms was confined to locations like the stage denoting entertainment as the driving

force. Yet at the same time there were locations and actions that represent an outward display of queerness in proximity to spaces that were deemed unrespectable and therefore unworthy of protection. The Black Press' portrayals of Black queer and nonnormative women influenced the Black public's perceptions of such women. The newspapers and magazines that were bought on street corners and delivered to doorsteps, and subsequently consumed by respectable readers, were full of tales of crime and scandal. Black queer women provided such scandal as they were posited as abject, which threatened the very fabric of a seemingly respectable Black society. To this end Black queer women often represented what the Black public feared: subversion of stifling ideals of respectability and morally "right" behavior. The Black Press did not provide/create room for the defense of Black queerness in sexuality and/or gender, but queerness in positionality and gender for the purposes of entertainment was viewed as intriguing and socially acceptable. Black women played roles on the stage or on the screen in a way that aligned with masculinity or femininity—corresponding to one's sex at birth: male or female, respectively. They were deemed as exciting, and worthy of space in the creative imaginary. The tolerance granted towards Black queer woman performers that assumed masculine roles or appearances was because these performers possessed two important aspects: they were self-proclaimed and externally perceived as heterosexuals off stage, and they adhered to the gender binary (rather than adopting gender nonconformity or androgyny) within their performances.

When seemingly heterosexual women perform gender in a connotatively male way, they are still participating in heteronormative notions of what a man *should* be. Their performances were reserved for the stage and/or heterosexuality was very much an obvious sexual orientation for them. As the gender binary represents a strict delineation between the male and female, the masculine and feminine [genders] are attached to each sex, respectively, in a manner that allows

those outwardly performing the opposite gender to be tolerated and enjoyed. Such was the case in the life of Bert Whitman—or Alberta by day. Her performance in drag carried into her daily life but resulted from the high public demand for her to continue her act through her appearance. However, Whitman was perceived as heterosexual through her romantic relationships with men which validated her heteronormativity, despite acting as a man in the nighttime. James McHarris, however, was different in the Black Press as McHarris' life as a girl, to early adolescent woman, to adult man, to "outed" woman, to adult man again was a turbulent blurring of the sharp lines of twentieth century notions of gender and sex.⁸⁰ McHarris was a man *and* a woman in different places: in their daily life they were known as Jim, a hardworking ladies' man, but in the papers they were Annie Lee Grant. Annie Lee Grant was evidence of what the Black public considered to be "sexual inversion" at the time: "her" transition into being a man stemmed from somewhere, but, at the time, the Black Press did not clearly define where. This oversight is representative of the Black Press' attempts at defining and rationalizing homosexuality, but McHarris was an enigma. McHarris performed masculinity in a gender binary adhering manner, but their switch between gender identities demonstrates the ways gender can be transcended. They were the embodiment of transgression of the gender binary: they adopted two genders at once. They employed their differing gender identities in a way that protected them from the consequences of Black manhood in a carceral system. They revealed their queerness to navigate carcerality—one that is both physical (prisons, forced labor, etc.) and imagined societally. Their queerness presented itself as a quasi-protector that resulted in tolerance by the Black public sphere.

Black queer women's queerness in sexuality and/or gender as well as in positionality was much more than an identity. It was a means to express and embrace their senses of Self. Of

⁸⁰ After the publication of the *Ebony Magazine* article, it is stated that McHarris continued to live their life as a man.

course, there were consequences for being queer in sexuality and/or gender as the rampant homophobia at the time cultivated a hostile environment for Black queer women—which the Black Press both fed off and exacerbated through sensationalizing their stories and focusing on the negative in Black queer women’s lives, such as crime and scandal. Black queer women faced difficulty voluntarily representing themselves in the news as they were ostracized into abjection.

Dissecting Black Queer Publicity and Intimacy: A Bulldagger's Perspective

“You can’t hide if you’re a lesbian.”⁸¹ Mabel Hampton lived her adult life as an “out” Black lesbian in New York City beginning in 1920. The interwar period was the height of Hampton’s exploration of lesbianism in the public sphere. Hampton attended buffet flats and sex parties, Black lesbian marriages, and Black lesbian house parties. Hampton’s navigation of the New York City lesbian scene is but one glimpse into Black lesbian life in the mid-twentieth century United States. Mabel Hampton traversed through the public and the private, the masculine and the feminine, and the intracommunal and the intercommunal while living as a lesbian in the city. Examining Hampton’s life as well as the lives of other Black lesbians as presented through their own words counters the dominant narrative that Black lesbianism in the early to mid-twentieth century was largely underground and instead frames Black lesbians as ordinary community members who were *also* lesbians—shifting common notions of sexuality as being relegated to the secretive sphere.

The public and private spheres that Black queer women in the twentieth century existed within were both heteronormative and outwardly *queer*. The public, heteronormative locations where Black queer women resided were hostile towards their queerness, which subsequently resulted in the widespread disguising of their queer identities. These locations, such as dance halls, in which women were expected to dance with men (as was customary at the time) did not align with the interests of Black queer women. The private locations, such as apartments and houses, were somewhat places of asylum for Black queer women. In such spheres, they were able to express their Black queerness in a *collective, communal* atmosphere in which gender performance was able to be “inverted” and transgressed. These two types of spheres—public and private—had deep impacts on the interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships that Black queer women held.

⁸¹ Mabel Hampton, Mabel Hampton Interviews (Tape 1), 1983.

By examining the spheres that Black queer women occupied—both location and uninhabitable spaces—I explore how Black queer women chose to take up space in search for community.

The Public Heteronormative Grasp

Through splitting location into the public and the private, the different aspects of each space reveal the complexities of Black queer women's existence in the "outside world." The public sphere, on a molecular level, is defined as a given site in which others can view and subsequently develop perceptions regarding what/who they observed in that given site. These sites may not inherently be *open* to the public in the sense that they are intentionally inclusive of all people. However, a larger society has the potential to gain access to such sites if they choose to—making them public in nature. Access to public locations in which Black queer women are present led to the stereotyping of such women as well as the strategic movement of Black queer women to assert their Selfhood despite subjugation.

The confines of the women's prison were a public sphere, and in the eyes of the heteronormative society, lesbianism was a foremost characteristic.⁸² In women's prisons, the interactions between women, both Black and white, sometimes led to romantic and/or sexual relationships. These relationships were not private. Estelle Freedman's conception of the "prison lesbian" is that of a category that denotes sexual danger and Black stud predation upon the weak white femme.⁸³ Incarcerated lesbians developed a reputation among what were considered mental health professionals at the time.⁸⁴ This reputation, specifically regarding Black studs was that of a predatory, masculinized sexual deviant.⁸⁵ Moreover, this reputation was predicated on the

⁸² Estelle B. Freedman, "The Prison Lesbian: Race, Class, and the Construction of the Aggressive Female Homosexual, 1915-1965," *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 2 (1996): 397.

⁸³ Freedman, "The Prison Lesbian," 397.

⁸⁴ Freedman, "The Prison Lesbian," 400.

⁸⁵ Within this text, and in queer culture, the term "stud" denotes a Black butch lesbian. "Studs" can be butches, but other races of butch lesbians cannot be "studs" as it refers solely to Black butch lesbians; Freedman, "The Prison Lesbian: Race, Class, and the Construction of the Aggressive Female Homosexual, 1915-1965," 397.

dominant ideology of “sexual inversion” in relation to lesbianism in the 1940s.⁸⁶ Black lesbians, whether consciously or unconsciously, practiced *gender rejection* in the logic of the pathologizing discourse at the time. They rejected common notions of femininity, regardless of whether they presented butch or femme, through engaging in romantic and/or sexual relationships with other women.⁸⁷ Freedman states that there was a “fundamental inability” to adhere to gender norms while incarcerated.⁸⁸ Prisons are connotatively male spheres, and women’s prisons are somewhat masculinizing—even towards the perceivably *most* feminine woman. Within the prison, there were “true lesbians” (largely butches and studs) and women (largely white femmes) who were *temporary* lesbians/homosexuals (meaning that they would eventually return to heterosexuality post-incarceration). Mabel Hampton expands upon this concept of the “true lesbian” in an interview in which she states that “real lesbians” have no interest in men whatsoever.⁸⁹ The idea that lesbianism is a static state—despite what is contemporarily known about the fluidity of sexuality—gestures towards the notion that, at the time, lesbianism/queerness was more than an identity but a *lifestyle choice*.⁹⁰ This is not to claim that being queer is a simple decision, but as Hampton states that a common term to describe “out” queer women was “in the life,” queerness can then be viewed as an identity that one chooses to embrace or suppress in their own ways.⁹¹

Turning towards an explicitly public site: the street, Black queerness is posited as criminal and othering. Within the *Chicago Defender's* article “Arrest S. Side Mom As 'Female Impersonator'” (1965), a cisgender Black mother living on the South Side of Chicago was wrongly

⁸⁶ Freedman, “The Prison Lesbian,” 400.

⁸⁷ Freedman, “The Prison Lesbian,” 401.

⁸⁸ Freedman, “The Prison Lesbian,” 401.

⁸⁹ Mabel Hampton, Mabel Hampton with Joan Nestle (Tape 1), 1980.

⁹⁰ Presently, queerness as a “lifestyle choice” is commonly employed by conservatives who adopt a homophobic, reformist approach. Contrastingly, this text defines queerness as a “lifestyle choice” in terms of how Black queer women intentionally chose to be open with their queerness.

⁹¹ Mabel Hampton, Mabel Hampton Interviews (Tape 1), 1987.

arrested and searched for being a transgender woman/“female impersonator” whom the police believed had committed a crime.⁹² Darlene Adams, the woman detained, was not the suspect, but the police denied every possible detail that proved her innocence, such as her biological children, her physical body, etc. Adams was physically searched on the street, where her neighbors and passersby could view the spectacle. The police accused her of lying about her sex assigned at birth and asked her intrusive questions regarding her body and behavior. Adams asked the officers, “Do I look like a man to you?” to which they replied that “they did not know for sure what [she] was and that [she] would have to be searched.”⁹³ The employment of “what” to describe a perceivably queer human being only furthers the argument that queer individuals were dehumanized by the heteronormative public. In addition, if Black women are already the Other, as has been elaborated prior to this chapter, Black trans women are included in this othering. Adams, though not necessarily queer in sexuality, was ascribed a queer gender identity and, therefore, was forced to face the harsh consequences of such an ascription. Adams described the entire altercation as being “embarrassing.”⁹⁴ “I was humiliated and my neighbors were standing all around...I am sure I am not a man.”⁹⁵ The police report Adams filed was erased from police records.

The heteronormative public sphere extended to more than tangible sites in neighborhoods as it encompassed the political system and its satellite locations as well. A case study on Black women's queerness in the political world is that of the life of Barbara Jordan. Jordan (born 1936) grew up in the Black Baptist Church scene in Texas and eventually found her way into politics—climbing up the political ladder to become the South's first Black congresswoman in 1972.⁹⁶

⁹² “Arrest S. Side Mom As ‘Female Impersonator,’” *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973)*, July 7, 1965.

⁹³ “Arrest S. Side Mom As ‘Female Impersonator.’”

⁹⁴ Arrest S. Side Mom As ‘Female Impersonator.’”

⁹⁵ Arrest S. Side Mom As ‘Female Impersonator.’”

⁹⁶ “Past Out: Who Was Barbara Jordan?,” *Women in the Life*, August 2000.

Though a lesbian herself with a long-term partner, Jordan voted against pro-queer legislation—perhaps in an effort to protect her closeted identity.⁹⁷ Jordan existed in the larger society as a prominent political figurehead, but she kept her romantic life private. It can be speculated that Jordan's background as an avid churchgoer in the South—where conservative religion is widely valued—further supported her career as a Southern politician. This support would, most likely, be rescinded if her lesbian identity was *exposed* against her wishes. Jordan herself was not visibly feminine in her appearance. Jordan and her life partner, Nancy Earl, even owned land together where they would entertain as “close friends.” After Jordan's death in 1996, “the *Houston Chronicle* quietly outed her by running an obituary citing Earl as her ‘longtime companion’—common newspaper code for ‘lover.’”⁹⁸ Even after death, Jordan's private queer life was made public as she herself had been in the spotlight for the majority of her adult life—targeting her to be interrogated, even after death.

Another facet of the public sphere that some Black queer women chose to occupy was that of the lesbian bar/club. These bars and clubs were ostensibly tailored to lesbian/queer women audiences, but, in actuality, they were supposed to be for white lesbians/queer women. These bars and clubs were predominately white and therefore hostile towards Black lesbians. One can deconstruct the hostility aimed at Black queer women through different mediums in order to determine *where* Black queer women resided physically to receive the desired level of community and comfort. Rochella Thorpe contends that within the broader, interracial lesbian community—which was codified as white—there was an emphasis on bar culture (which has continued through lesbian histories over time).⁹⁹ These bars were public spaces in which *anyone* could enter, but they

⁹⁷ “Past Out: Who Was Barbara Jordan?.”

⁹⁸ “Past Out: Who Was Barbara Jordan?.”

⁹⁹ Rochella Thorpe, “A House Where Queers Go,” in *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, ed. Ellen Lewin (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 40-41.

were private enough that queerness was acknowledged. Despite their private nature regarding queer expression, for the purposes of this text, their role as being publicly known and perceived by the non-queer makes them public locations. Thorpe states that these bars and clubs were hostile towards Black lesbians in a multitude of ways.¹⁰⁰ Black women that frequented white lesbian bars often had preexisting connections to white queer women but were few in number.¹⁰¹ White bouncers discriminated against “non-queer” looking Black femmes.¹⁰² Also, in a similar realm of systematic anti-Black woman queerphobic violence, white queers assumed the lens of colorblindness and complicity when interacting with Black queer women/navigating their daily lives.¹⁰³ These white women believed that due to the fact that they were queer, they were absolved of all racism and prejudice.¹⁰⁴ Colorism also ran rampant in the public lesbian scene as lighter skinned Black lesbians received preferential treatment.¹⁰⁵ White lesbians fostered a violent atmosphere for Black queers to inhabit as there was a strong tension between white butches and studs. Studs were perceived (by white butches) as a threat—which demonstrated white masculinity’s emphasis on protecting white femininity.¹⁰⁶ Studs, then, possessed a charged Black masculinity in which their role as a perceived threat to white femininity was a result of the negative, dehumanizing stereotypes associated with Black men stemming from the period of enslavement.

A difference worth noting between Black queer and white queer women communal dynamics pertains to the roles that butches and femmes assumed in their respective racial communities. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy states that, unlike white lesbians, Black femmes were

¹⁰⁰ Thorpe, “A House Where Queers Go,” 49.

¹⁰¹ Thorpe, “A House Where Queers Go,” 47-48.

¹⁰² Thorpe, “A House Where Queers Go,” 48-49.

¹⁰³ Thorpe, “A House Where Queers Go,” 50.

¹⁰⁴ Thorpe, “A House Where Queers Go,” 50-51.

¹⁰⁵ Thorpe, “A House Where Queers Go,” 51-52.

¹⁰⁶ Thorpe, “A House Where Queers Go,” 52.

more at the forefront of lesbian community building.¹⁰⁷ Black femmes were largely associated with domestic work, and house parties (as will be discussed more in depth) were a place in which they could thrive and showcase their abilities.¹⁰⁸ Kennedy claims that studs were widely respected for their roles as defenders of the Black lesbian community.¹⁰⁹ Holistically among the Black queer community, Black lesbians honored and respected their elders to a larger extent than white lesbians.¹¹⁰ Black respect for Black elders, regardless of one's sexuality, is an extension of Black culture—elders within the Black community are considered to be worthy of the utmost respect and care—which reveals that Black queer women are not innately alienated from or foreign to the Black experience.

For Black Queers Only

Connotatively private locations are often viewed as spaces in which the happenings that occur within its bounds are out of the public eye and are solely reserved for those who exist within such a space. The private locations that Black queer women frequented during the twentieth century were “buffet flats,” Black lesbian-only gatherings, and households. Regarding “buffet flats,” or sex parties, Black lesbians were able to partake and/or view different sexual activities with and among queer people within the intimate sphere of an apartment or residence. In these parties, there was a relaxed atmosphere in which societal norms were clearly defied—as was evident by the fact that there was group sex occurring among people of different genders, races, sexualities, etc. Mabel Hampton recalled “slumming” in Harlem around the 1930s in which she attended different sex parties and stated, “You see everything you didn't wanna see.”¹¹¹ These

¹⁰⁷ Elizabeth Kennedy, “The Hidden Voice: Fems in the 1940s and 1950s,” *Sojourner: Massachusetts Institute of Technology* 23, no. 3 (November 11, 1997): 7–8.

¹⁰⁸ Kennedy, “The Hidden Voice: Fems in the 1940s and 1950,” 8.

¹⁰⁹ Kennedy, “The Hidden Voice: Fems in the 1940s and 1950,” 8.

¹¹⁰ Kennedy, “The Hidden Voice: Fems in the 1940s and 1950,” 8.

¹¹¹ Hampton, Mabel Hampton Interviews (Tape 1), 1987.

parties were highly secretive and selective due to the fact that they were illegal. All societal norms regarding sexuality were blatantly disregarded, and *sexual deviance* replaced these norms. In an account of different sex parties that he frequented, Walt Lewis detailed what occurred in such parties within his testimony “My Story of Fags, Freaks, and Female Impersonators.” Lewis himself (who can contemporarily be considered a Black queer man), mentioned Black queer women that participated in sexual acts at such parties. The “woman fucker” described a queer woman who engaged in sexual activities with a “straight” woman and eventually became the woman’s partner over her previous male partner.¹¹² As previously mentioned throughout this larger text, the predatory Black lesbian trope is common in which Black queer women are depicted as converters or negative influences on heterosexual, innocent women. Furthermore, Black queer women’s sexual and/or romantic interactions with ostensibly heterosexual women only served to exacerbate the moral panic regarding lesbianism.

Despite this fear and negative reputation, Black queer women were also Black queer community leaders. For example, Lewis detailed marriage customs among Black queer men: “When they want to get married they go to a bull diggars [sic] ball, a bulldiggars [sic] marries them.”¹¹³ The “bulldagger,” which is an antiquated (and a contemporarily derogatory) term to describe lesbians, assumed the role as a minister that possessed the capacity to marry Black queers. Similarly, Black queer men were also active members of the Black queer community. When Black lesbians sought to marry, they had two options to obtain a license. Mabel Hampton stated that they masculinized the stud’s name, or a Black queer man obtained the license for the couple.¹¹⁴ Hampton recalled that the affair was formal, with many attendees and a common ceremony—

¹¹² Walt Lewis, “My Story of Fags, Freaks and Women Impersonators by Walt Lewis.”

¹¹³ Lewis, “My Story of Fags, Freaks and Women Impersonators by Walt Lewis.”

¹¹⁴ Mabel Hampton, *Mabel’s Parties* / Mabel Hampton, 1981 (Tape 1), 1981; Luvenia Pinson, “The Black Lesbian: Times Past-Times Present,” *Womanews*, May 1980.

albeit an underground, Black queer one.¹¹⁵ A Black male minister was known for marrying Black queer couples as well—further creating a sense of normalcy surrounding the Black queer union.¹¹⁶ Through these methods, Black queer women were able to societally legitimize their relationships through the private Black queer wedding.

Another private Black queer woman space was that of the house party. “Rent parties,” or gatherings in which attendees paid a small fee to enter, were common among Black queer women in the early twentieth century.¹¹⁷ In these parties, queer sexuality was normalized and displayed “publicly.” However, the exclusive nature of the gathering made it such that the space/apartment the party was hosted in became a private space for Black queer women only. In Saidiya Hartman’s *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Hartman describes Mabel Hampton’s exposure to the Black queer woman scene in Harlem in the early to mid-twentieth century. Hampton frequented different Black queer-only gatherings, as stated in her interviews as well, and Hartman illustrates what Hampton’s occupation of the location of the house party meant for her understanding and embrace of her own queer identity as well as the queerness that marked Harlem at the time.

Hartman states:

The private parties hosted by friends in Harlem flats were the only places she felt comfortable, safe. These gatherings had an entirely different set of arrangements. There were no white folks observing her like she was a rare specimen, or a strange kind of human...No downtown folks eager to gawk at faggots and Negroes, only the white wives and girlfriends of black bull daggers and lady lovers...*Harlem was surely as queer as it was black.*¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Mabel Hampton, Mabel Hampton, 1988 (Tape 1), 1988.

¹¹⁶ Hampton, Mabel Hampton, 1988 (Tape 1), 1988.

¹¹⁷ Thorpe, “A House Where Queers Go,” 43.

¹¹⁸ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), 304.

These house parties were secretive, and information regarding their whereabouts spread through word-of-mouth.¹¹⁹ Connections with other Black lesbians were crucial in entering this nightlife since these parties were so selective to avoid raids.¹²⁰ Parties hosted by prominent and popular Black queer women, such as Ruth Ellis, provided an escape from the heteronormative public entertainment spaces and the hostile white queer clubs and bars.¹²¹ In these spaces, Black queerness was *the* norm—therefore cultivating an air of freedom to be oneself. However, Black queer women-only spaces were not always “safe spaces”—despite their intent to be so.

Within the *Chicago Defender's* 1922 newspaper article “‘Unusual Type’ Says Cops of Women Caught in Raid,” a “women only” party was raided by the police after a stabbing occurred involving two unwed Black queer women. The article stated that the party was held on Thanksgiving.¹²² Thanksgiving is known as an intimate holiday shared with close friends and family. The gathering occurring on this holiday gestures towards a communal feeling among these Black queer women that represents a kinship among them. The household in Chicago was allegedly frequently targeted for noise complaints.¹²³ The article insinuates that *because* these women were of the “unusual type” the noise complaints and chaotic environment persisted. “Unusual” represented a codified means to express homosexuality—and therefore a threat to the heterosexual order of society.

Within the realm of the household (outside of parties) as a private location, Black queer women lived amongst each other and/or even with their male partners. Hartman writes of the life of Edna Thomas, a Black queer woman married to Lloyd Thomas. Edna frequented popular,

¹¹⁹ Thorpe, “A House Where Queers Go,” 43-44.

¹²⁰ Thorpe, “A House Where Queers Go,” 44.

¹²¹ Thorpe, “A House Where Queers Go,” 45.

¹²² “‘Unusual Type,’ Says Cops of Women Caught in Raid,” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, December 9, 1922.

¹²³ “‘Unusual Type,’ Says Cops of Women Caught in Raid.”

famous circles and the African American theater scene during the 1920s and 1930s. Edna Thomas, though married to a cisgender man, had her own “lady lover,” white English aristocrat Olivia Wyndham. The two were romantically involved, but as Hartman states, “The romance of the English aristocrat and the Negro leading lady captivated the press. The articles stepped gingerly around the obvious—never mentioning the words lady lovers or homosexuals or lesbians—and cast no aspersions.”¹²⁴ Lloyd himself continued to reside in the household with the two women—seemingly indifferent to his wife’s queerness as he welcomed the attention from the press.¹²⁵ As time went on, the two assumed a non-monogamous relationship, but the three individuals continued to live together, entertain together, and even entered society publicly as man and wife with Wyndham posing as a close friend.¹²⁶ That the three coexisted under one roof for an extended period of time demonstrates that there was a tolerance among the male partner of a Black queer women. Cookie Woolner writes:

For some African American women in the early 20th century, marriage may have made queer relationships easier to maintain since married women’s female friends were assumed to be platonic. The increased mobility of southern migrants, coupled with the anonymity of urban life and the social spaces opened up by Prohibition, created opportunities for lady lovers to connect. For many women, their relationships with men were no detriment to their same-sex flirtations and liaisons, which led some male critics to further denounce lady lovers as a threat to the black family and “the race.”¹²⁷

Was fame the price of this tolerance? In either case, unlike other cases in which Black queer women who were involved with male partners and also ventured into some facet of the queer world, violence perpetuated by the man was not present.

¹²⁴ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 213.

¹²⁵ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 213.

¹²⁶ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 213.

¹²⁷ Cookie Woolner, “‘Woman Slain In Queer Love Brawl’: African American Women, Same-Sex Desire, and Violence in the Urban North, 1920–1929,” *The Journal of African American History* 100, no. 3 (June 2015), 416.

Contrastingly, violence within the household where Black queer women resided existed. A 1959 article published by the *Chicago Defender* detailed the murder of a man in a relationship with a [presumably] Black queer woman. An age 34 Chicago woman stabbed her boyfriend to death after he accused her “of having unusual relations with other women.”¹²⁸ The article employs the term “unnatural relationships with other women” to describe the past of the woman, Willie Lee Eakins, who admitted to being attracted to women at a prior time in her life but who had since been “reformed.”¹²⁹ The nuances surrounding sexuality could mean that Eakins *was* no longer interested in women, but the question remains: What does sexual reformation entail?

Woolner claims, “The growing networks of African American women who loved women increased the likelihood of intimate partner violence.”¹³⁰ One such case of this intimate partner violence between Black queer women lies in the case of the murder of Revonia Kennedy in 1928. A “Mrs.” Revonia Kennedy was shot and killed by “Mrs.” Pearl Anchrum, her landlady—a crime that Kennedy claimed, on her deathbed, was because Kennedy wanted to move from her residence.¹³¹ “Mrs.” Azelia Leghorn was present at the crime scene as well but denied involvement in the murder.¹³² The *Chicago Defender* did not include information about these women’s husbands, but it did claim that upon a police investigation of the crime “further investigation by the police...revealed a strange love affair between the three women.”¹³³ A “love triangle” complicates the notion of a monogamous interpersonal relationship existing within a household, and many questions remain regarding what exactly occurred in the apartment that

¹²⁸ “Slays Lover in Row Over Sex: Westside Man Is Stabbed Fatally,” *Daily Defender (Daily Edition 1956-1960)*, January 26, 1959.

¹²⁹ “Slays Lover in Row Over Sex: Westside Man Is Stabbed Fatally.”

¹³⁰ Woolner, “Woman Slain In Queer Love Brawl,” 422.

¹³¹ “Woman Slain in Queer Love Brawl: Bullets Stop Roomer Who Tried to Move,” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, December 1, 1928.

¹³² “Woman Slain in Queer Love Brawl.”

¹³³ “Woman Slain in Queer Love Brawl.”

day. However, the intimacy between queer people in interpersonal relationships begs the question, "How does close proximity in location lead to turbulence and/or care in interpersonal relationships as uninhabitable spaces within the lives of Black queer women?"

Interrogating The Space Between

When examining Black queer women's interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships as uninhabitable spaces, one must frame interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships as a *space between* people. In these relationships, the connections of those involved exist in their own space—a space in which one's being is intertwined with another, or their own, and resides in the non-physical gap between the actors in such relationships. In short, interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships are spaces as the elements of such relationships must exist in the concept of *somewhere*. One's Self is present in this ever-shifting gap as relationships change in nature over time. Through these shifts, this form of uninhabitable space is inherently unstable.

Different case studies regarding Black queer women's interpersonal relationships provide context with which one can better understand how uninhabitable spaces connect to the Self. As previously mentioned, violence between Black queer women in close proximity was not unheard of. In the case of Revonia Kennedy's murder, the "love triangle" she was a part of resulted in her death. This case was not an isolated incident. In 1951, a Detroit woman, Marion Ware, was murdered by her lover, Leatrice Calloway, for engaging in sexual relations with their male landlord. Calloway claimed that the two had formed a mutual "love pact" that stated if one of the two Black queer women were to engage in relations with a man, the other partner would kill them.¹³⁴ Calloway visually discovered Ware and their landlord together and killed her lover due

¹³⁴ Isaac Jones, "Hold Girl In 'Queer Love' Killing: Slayer, 20, Bares Pact With 'Sweetheart' 24," *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, November 24, 1951.

to the breaking of this pact, she explicitly admitted.¹³⁵ In having sexual relations with a man, Ware was *breaking queerness*—similar to Mabel Hampton's concept of a "real lesbian." To *break queerness* is to exist outside of Black Queer Space.

The complexities of this case relate to the concept that in Black queer women's romantic and sexual interpersonal relationships, cisgender men were viewed as an imminent threat. The *Chicago Defender* claimed that the two lived together as "man and wife."¹³⁶ The notion that the two were "man and wife," Calloway being the stud/man and Ware being the femme/wife, is an example of how heteronormativity was ascribed and practiced even among queer couples. Calloway was cited as stating, "I wanted Marion all by myself."¹³⁷ The possessive personality trait of Calloway relates to Hampton's claim that marriages between studs and femmes were a means for studs to assert their dominance and prove possession of their femme wives.¹³⁸ This notion connects to the concept of uninhabitable space as the two women's senses of Self and gender expression were in the "heteronormative bubble"—meaning that the two's relationship, although innately non-normative due to queerness, was somewhat heteronormative in the gender roles the two assumed.¹³⁹ Their relationship did not exist in an uninhabitable Black Queer Space.

¹³⁵ "'Queer Love' Killer Faces Life Term For Pact Murder(2): Guilty In Death Of Girl Mate," *The Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, January 12, 1952.

¹³⁶ Isaac Jones, "'Queer Love' Killer May Plead Insanity," *Chicago Defender (National Edition) (1921-1967)*, December 8, 1951.

¹³⁷ Jones, "Hold Girl In 'Queer Love' Killing."

¹³⁸ Hampton, Mabel Hampton with Joan Nestle (Tape 1).

¹³⁹ In this understanding of two Black queer women existing within a "heteronormative" marriage, it is not a dismissal and invalidation of their queerness. Rather, it is a means to complicate the notion that queerness contains the innate capacity to transcend heteronormativity. Compulsory heteronormativity is internalized by all living in this American society by nature of the existence systems of oppression, such as heteropatriarchy. I still consider their queerness as legitimate and transgressive, but it also can be characterized as heteronormative. I believe this to reveal the nuance associated with queerness: queer relationships can be heteronormative, homonormative, or neither. Queerness has the ability to be *whatever it wants* and show up *however it wants to* within one's life. It is expressed through a multitude of differing fashions. In this case study, the butch/femme quasi-marital relationship is similar to that of a man/wife marital relationship in that traditional, Western concepts of masculinity and femininity as being one of the masculine-protector/feminine-protected was present and actively practiced—as seen through the words of Calloway.

In fact, they were directly influenced and participatory in the dominant society's norms. Through embracing normative masculinity and femininity, they were under the umbrella of hegemonic heteronormativity.

Perhaps the most nuanced rendering surrounding uninhabitable space and relationships pertains to the relationship that a Black queer woman has with herself. The ways in which Black queer women viewed their own queerness and subsequently expressed such queerness is its own form of intrapersonal relationship and therefore an uninhabitable space as her queerness lived in a non-normative space *within* herself. Mabel Hampton's life is the most salient illustration regarding self-expression of queerness. Hampton herself was a stud. She dressed increasingly masculine over time and had interpersonal relationships with femmes. Despite the ostensible adherence to heteronormativity, it was Hampton's outlook on her queerness and gender expression that represented a transgression of traditional notions of femininity and masculinity.

Hartman writes of Hampton's clothing choices:

Mabel called herself a stud because she didn't want to bother with men and she loved women. She had liked girls all her life. Her style became more masculine—low-heeled shoes, Panama hats, and skirt suits—but that had nothing to do with being a man, it was simply claiming the 'he' who also defined her. When dressed in trousers, jacket, and tie, she was just being Mabel.¹⁴⁰

Mabel *was* Mabel. The "he" inside her was more than the masculinity associated with cisgender men. It was a uniquely masculine part of herself that she intertwined with her own rendering of femininity to express herself in the ways she saw fit. She did not view herself as anything or anyone other than Mabel: "When I dressed, it was what I wanted to be—just myself and nobody else."¹⁴¹ Did she ever feel like a man? "I just felt like myself, see, and I just loved women. It

¹⁴⁰ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 338.

¹⁴¹ Mabel Hampton, Mabel Hampton, Undated (Tape 1).

wasn't no way of being a man or nothing. I just loved women. And I've always loved women."¹⁴²

Hampton's queerness revolved around her own sense of Self and her attraction to women rather than her desire to be attractive *to* women. She did not put on a persona. Hartman continues:

"What was it that a colored woman was supposed to be? Whether that they had bobbed hair or not, wore pants or dresses, had husbands or not, it didn't seem to matter; they all fell in between the categories or failed to conform to them."¹⁴³ An answer Mabel would most likely respond with, "Nobody knew what you was when you had a suit on."¹⁴⁴ Her selfhood existed in a liminal space—an uninhabitable space—in which her gender expression and sexuality were integral parts of her understanding of who she was. She never quite exited such a space, but she did not seem to want to. She was proud of who she was and how she presented herself, and that was enough for "Mr. Hampton," as she was known among close friends.¹⁴⁵

Standing in the Flesh and Feeling the Erotic: Black Women's Assertions of Self

I have analyzed Black queer women's occupancy and movement within various spaces in order to reveal their bodily autonomy and interiority. By focusing on geography, we can better understand and amplify their lives. Black women's womanhood is directly oppositional to that of white women's—placing Black women in the Other position and thereby rendering them abject. I posit Black queer women as "the Other within the Other" as they are uniquely impacted by the violence of the heteropatriarchy. In understanding what their physicality represents and functions underneath the dominant hegemony, Hortense Spillers's concept of the "body" and the "flesh" of Black women under enslavement and under institutionalized, anti-Black oppression must be included in this analysis. Spillers writes of the ways that, under enslavement, the abject Black

¹⁴² Hampton, Mabel Hampton, Undated (Tape 1).

¹⁴³ Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 338.

¹⁴⁴ Hampton, Mabel Hampton, 1988 (Tape 1).

¹⁴⁵ Hampton, Mabel's Parties / Mabel Hampton, 1981 (Tape 1).

woman was not human. Spillers offers a way of viewing Black womanhood that accounts for the complexities of Black female identity through defining the body and the flesh:

But I would make a distinction in this case between 'body' and 'flesh' and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography.¹⁴⁶

In Spillers' conception of the flesh and the body, the body is a social construct of white supremacy that is inherently gendered due to the socialization that the body experiences. A consequence of this socialization is the possibility for what she describes as "pornotroping" and "powerlessness" as the body is required to perform for the white gaze.¹⁴⁷ The flesh operates as an ungendered reduction to literal flesh, and Spillers makes the argument that only Black women can truly stand in the flesh due to the historical intentions and functions of white supremacy that force Black womanhood into namelessness. These two ideas (the body and the flesh) contort to fit to the confines of white supremacy's manifestations in American society. Black women are violently thrust into either side of the dichotomy whenever it is convenient for whites. For example, Black women are gendered (and therefore in the body) within enslaved communities as they play an integral role in how Black families operate and survive, but these spaces also require that Black women perform Black femininity in ways that do not fully recognize their subjectivity. In regard to the flesh, Black women are reduced to their reproductive capabilities as the sexual violence and exploitation they are vulnerable to operates with the intention of producing, en masse, the process of ungendered birth. Spillers writes:

Only the female stands *in the flesh*, both mother and mother-dispossessed. This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, out of the traditional symbolics of female gender, and it is our task to make a place for this different social subject. In doing

¹⁴⁶ Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67.

¹⁴⁷ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.

so, we are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject. Actually *claiming* the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to "name"), which her culture imposes in blindness, 'Sapphire' might rewrite after all a radically different text for a female empowerment.¹⁴⁸

Through self-naming and reclamation of what once controlled how Black women were perceived and treated, Black women's selves can exist outside the dominant hegemony. To take this analysis a step further, in the context of Black women's queerness, Black Queer Space offers the breadth for Black queer women (in gender, sexuality, and/or positionality) to escape these "traditional symbolics of female gender."¹⁴⁹

Black women's refusal of their otherness and their subsequent reclamation is furthered in Audre Lorde's conceptualization of "the erotic." Lorde describes the erotic "assertion of the life force of women."¹⁵⁰ Women, of all races, have the capacity to access the erotic. However, when considering the abjection that Black women are thrust into, Black women have more *at stake* in the erotic than other women. The capacity to access the erotic is more than embracing femininity: it is the declaration of Black women's personhood and subjectivity. Lorde's definition of the erotic *requires* action on behalf of the woman in order to assert her subjectivity and (re)claim her sense of Self:

Once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives.¹⁵¹

Both Spillers and Lorde imagine a world in which Black women can be human and *live* rather than plainly exist. Their femininity can be asserted as an entirely new version of

¹⁴⁸ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80.

¹⁴⁹ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 80.

¹⁵⁰ Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, Calif: Crossing Press, 2007), 55.

¹⁵¹ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 57.

womanhood. Black queer women—existing on the circumference of womanhood and society at large—can revise the preexisting narratives surrounding Black womanhood and its intersections with queerness. Through their taking up space in different locations and uninhabitable spaces, Black queer women prove that they have the capacity to write their own stories and (re)write their own narratives. They chose *where* to go, *who* their community would be, and *what* they would do in such spaces. Black queer women were actors in their own lives—occupying various locations and uninhabitable spaces in dynamic ways. Their occupancy of such spaces with other Black queer women or with themselves gestures towards the importance of community in the Black queer experience and how Black Queer Space encompasses both the physical and abstract forms of space.

Conclusion

Black Feminism and Queer Theory's emphases on examining the identities and amplifying the voices of marginalized Black women and queer bodies and selves indicate that the dominant hegemony silences such marginalized people, leaving them stranded within the liminal, constricting white supremacist heteropatriarchal capitalist confines. However, these people resisted—specifically Black queer women. One can envision Black queer people as residing on the circumference of society, specifically Black queer [ascribed] women. Despite this exclusion, Black Queer Studies as praxis enables the onlooker, or Black queer woman themselves, to not only observe but to *practice* active inclusion and celebration of Black queer women in a way such that their complex identities and interiorities are at the forefront in the struggle for liberation.

Made evident by the previous chapters of this thesis, Black queer women's occupation of two differing, yet not mutually exclusive, types of spaces (location and uninhabitable space) dictated how their queerness manifested in such spaces. However, their occupation was not dictated in a way that their agency was revoked by the dominant society. In fact, the voluntary and involuntary inhabitation and movement within locations and uninhabitable spaces symbolize the blurring of the line that separates both kinds of intention. Their existence as “out” or “closeted” Black queer women moving through various geographic sites and abstract spheres was innately subversive in that they did not relegate themselves to the shadows—they were active members of society.

Black queer women inhabiting uninhabitable spaces theoretically—such as the *space in between*—exposes Black Queer Space as positioned outside suppressive liminality. Black queer women “passed” through different identities and spheres, as Snorton states, to transgress

controlling notions of how identity is static rather than fluid. Black queerness is a reminder that identity is not fixed and is inherently unstable. I endeavor to employ McKittrick's concept of "respatializations," in order to imagine a world in which Black queer women escape the matrix of power through such ways of "respatializing" and tracking Black women's geographies.

Black Queer women are situated so that their beings exist on the circumference within the bounds of the dominant hegemonic society rather than inside of this society. However, archival analyses of the pieces left behind by such women from the early to mid-twentieth century reveal the complexity of a Black queer woman's identity. These written remnants speak to how a larger Black public sphere viewed Black queer womanhood. The Black Press's biases toward queerness and womanhood intertwined to target Black queer women and portray them as predatory and sexually deviant. However, the Black Press also brings to light the ways in which Black queer womanhood at the time presented itself physically and where Black queer women took up space.

Black queer women existed openly and were perceived by Black society in various ways that connect to Black society's ideological leanings at the time, specifically the politics of respectability. These politics partially dictated how the abject within an othered society—meaning Black queer women in the Black community, respectively—were depicted publicly. The sensationalizing of Black women's queerness, whether that be in positionality, sexuality, and/or gender, served the purpose of exposing a largely sexually repressed Black public to perceived scandalous sexuality through readership. Furthermore, when examining the Black Press, the paradox of simultaneously present hypervisibility and invisibility of the Black queer women presents itself as a complicator to the common belief that Black queer women existed in the dark underbelly of society.

As chapter three claims, Black lesbianism/queerness in sexuality and/or gender regarding location stood in the public eye through heteronormative sites such as bars and dance halls. Even those public sites coded as queer, such as lesbian bars, adhered to heteronormativity and misogynoir through the racialized gender roles lingering in their atmosphere—marginalizing Black butches and femmes in spaces that were supposedly for them. Left to find their own sites of safety in the search of reprieve from consistent subjugation, Black queer women formed community in gathering collectively and cultivating their own unique networks. In private locations like house parties, Black queer women made space for themselves and bonded. Despite this, there was not always peace and concordance in the Black lesbian community. Private households were sometimes sites of interpersonal violence which, in a way, posits Black queer women as somewhat normative in the fact that intimate partner violence was not solely reserved for the heterosexual. Moreover, close proximity between Black queer women generates questions regarding how the nature of a queer relationship led to either positive community-building or conflict.

Chapter three also contends that interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships were their own form of uninhabitable space. Seeing relationships as a space can be done through thinking of the Self conjoined with another or one's own in a manner such that the inter/intrawoven selves possess a gap in between them—due to the nature of an expanding singular, personal identity. These interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, made more concrete in comprehension through case studies such as personal testimonies, uncover the nuance in relationships themselves. The interpersonal relationship combines people's selves to leave room in between them to exist as individuals. These types of Black lesbian relationships presented themselves differently (such as butch and femme/"man and wife"). On a more conceptual level, each person

has a unique, singular relationship with themselves where they are able to perceive themselves internally and express themselves externally. Gender expression is but one example of intrapersonal relationships as a Black queer woman had to understand herself within her own mind in order to cultivate her own queer appearance—both stereotypically queer or more covertly queer. In both kinds of relationships, however, the Self lies in its own uninhabitable space—a symbol of Black Queer Space on the molecular, personal level.

In imagining Black Queer Space as praxis, the “body/flesh” as well as the “erotic” concepts are integral in this imagination of Black queer women as experiencing liberation and freedom from subjugation. Black women travel through the body and the flesh in different contexts that disturbs the idea of a stark, strict binary. Therefore, Black women challenge Western notions of dichotomies by radically moving between different states of being—another manifestation of “passing.” To be in the erotic is to be oneself unapologetically and embracing that subjective aspect of sexuality that each woman possesses. To extend these two concepts to Black queerness, Black women being in the flesh as liberatory while feeling the erotic means that Black women are engaging in the process of (re)claiming their subjectivity despite abjection. This subjectivity is queer in its positionality, and it can extend to sexuality and/or gender as these forms of queerness are increasingly othered identities.

The central aim of this thesis revolves around the analyzing and amplifying of Black queer women in the early to mid-twentieth century. Black queer women, existing in abjection, are often excluded from the narratives of both Black and queer histories. Through delving into the archive through tangible examples of Black queer [ascribed] women and their lives, there is the personal description of Black queer women collectively and the personalization of the Black queer woman as an individual. Space is the theoretical framework with which to understand the

subjectivities of such women. Location and uninhabitable space function as a means to site Black queer women, but it is secondary to the identities and actions of Black queer women themselves. Their individuality and communal navigation of different types of space in an oppressive society prove that they were autonomous human beings who made their own decisions despite being the Other. Historically grounding such a project offers a new perspective on Black queerness itself. Carefully and extensively looking at the past charts a fresh path for the future towards Black [queer] women's liberation that will, inevitably, lead to the liberation of all from the matrix of power.

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