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REVISITING THE PASS: AN EXAMINATION OF IDENTITY MANAGEMENT
STRATEGIES OF BLACK QUEER WOMEN IN THE SOUTH

by

Claudia Williams

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

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How do historically shaped and culturally specific identity management strategies of Black queer women in the South inform levels of disclosure about their stigmatized sexual identities? How does racial socialization and racial identity shape the ways that Black queer experience their sexual identities? How do these strategies impact Black queer women's experiences in the workplace context? I utilized an intersectional methodological approach to analyze nine in-depth interviews with self-identified Black queer women in Memphis, TN. Respondents reported gender and sexual identity policing throughout their maturation from childhood to adulthood, feelings of isolation or perceived difference, and salient experiences with respect to privacy and disclosure that shaped their identity management strategies. I propose these culturally situated experiences inform the ways that Black queer women manage levels of disclosure about their sexual identities and that these strategies impact how they experience, navigate, and disclose in the workplace context.

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INTRODUCTION

As a Development Coordinator at a majority white, multi-campus, Judeo-Christian private school in the South, I was often invited to work related events that *encouraged* employees to bring their spouses. On more than one occasion, my boss explicitly stated that I was welcome to “bring someone” to private events at his home, fundraising dinners and parties, and other events that seemed to necessitate the attendance of a spouse, husband, or fiancé. As a white, middle-class, heterosexual, married male with two kids, he perfectly fit the hegemonic norms and values of the middle-class, white-collar workplace environment. He often expressed his complete comfort with Black and gay people, noting to me in one of our meetings that he had *both gay and* Black people as friends and in his wedding party. I could never discern if these offerings of information were to provide an atmosphere of tolerance or to observe my physical and physiological responses to racial and sexual cues of tolerance with the goal of deciphering my own sexual orientation.

As one half of a committed lesbian partnership, I did not have a boyfriend, fiancé, or husband to bring to these events. I often overheard the implicit homophobic and racially charged comments of my coworkers in casual conversation that made me doubtful of their capacity for acceptance and made it clear to me that those aspects of my lived experience would not be tolerated in the workplace context. As I attended event after event with no “plus one,” my coworkers became increasingly interested in learning about my private life. After working for this school for three months, and after not being explicit about my romantic life, I began to notice regularly occurring questions about my private life. They were implicit at first, such as making jokes about me taking maternity

leave, but became more explicit as time went on, such as individuals blatantly asking if I had a boyfriend. One day, during morning small talk, one of my (white, female, upper middle class) coworkers offered the following:

...I have this Black friend. He is a good guy but he just can't seem to find any good women. He asked me if I knew someone and I thought about you. You need to stop focusing so much on school and get you a boyfriend. He is a nice looking Black guy and makes good money. Can I give him your number?

This woman, who in many ways I considered an ally due to our shared experience of living in the northeast, had the tone of someone genuinely trying to help me. She interpreted her northern identity, and the fast-paced lifestyle that she lived while in the North, as making her more elite and cultured than our other coworkers. Many of our coworkers were middle-aged, middle-class white women who had mostly attended state universities in the South. Due to the lack of faculty and staff members of color, my Blackness, age (23 at the time), and natural hair made me starkly visible in this environment. My education at a small, liberal arts college in Maine also made me different from my coworkers, so she interpreted me as someone who had experiences that were similar to her own. However, her quote hinges on the assumption that her friend and I would be compatible because of our race and because she viewed him as attractive and economically stable. It seemed outside of her understanding to believe that a Black woman could want to be single or sexually desire anyone but a Black man. By incessantly reminding me of her friend's race, she reinforced her implication that as a Black woman, I required the following things in a partner: 1) that the person be Black and 2) that the person be male, and in this particular context 3) that the person be middle-class. While she could have been attempting to build solidarity with me through using

what she perceived to be shared privilege, the implications of her offer were racist, sexist, and heterosexist. In an instant, she objectified me as a woman and constructed my love for women as deviant, while she also made assumptions about my race, social class, and sexual preference. In addition to these prejudices, she could not fathom that I was single and wanted to remain single, let alone that I was in a committed, long-term relationship with a woman.

While these incidents increased in frequency, my romantic relations were not the only things in question. I became increasingly accosted with questions about my natural hair, the location of my home, my educational background, and my family history. My education, perceived middle-class values, and previous experience navigating white, middle-class arenas simultaneously made my identity legible and illegible in a white-collar, middle-class working environment. These interrogations were attempts by coworkers to translate my differences into a language that they could understand and relate to. However, their attempts impacted my psychological, mental, and emotional well-being. I spent as much time there battling racialized, heterosexist, and gendered microaggressions as I did performing the tasks associated with my position. While I was at work, I was filled with anxiety and stress regarding interactions with my coworkers, students, parents, and community members that continued to require validation of my presence at this white, wealthy, elitist institution. I never knew if they knew about my sexuality, but the politics of Southern politeness and hospitality that mediated and exasperated the tensions of the relationships made me weary of testing boundaries in an environment where I was constantly othered. These microaggressions eventually led to the termination of the working relationship, but they continued to plague my psyche.

Which aspect of my identity was the source of the disgust and suspicion with which my coworkers regarded me? Was it that I was a lesbian who refused to conform to expected gender norms or confirm suspect gender “abnormalities?” Was it because I was a young Black woman? Was it that I was perceived as middle-class and that I could potentially encroach on their class privilege? How did race, class, gender, and sexuality interact to inform these interactions?

While race, sexuality, and gender based discrimination have all gained national attention in the recent years, consideration of how these elements impact the lives of those who identify with more than one of these identities has largely been absent. Thanks to available data, we know that Black Lesbian women are more likely to raise children, more likely to be at or near the poverty line, and more likely to suffer from employment discrimination due to one or more of their identities than other LGBT¹ individuals that do not identify as Black or woman (Think Progress 2013; Disilver 2013, and Proctor, Smith, and Walt 2013).² We must critically examine their lived experiences to gain knowledge about the ways that the structures of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other institutionally and ideologically ingrained mechanisms of oppression, create and recreate inequality in the day-to-day interactions of individuals.

This study seeks to be a corrective to the gap in the research by examining the ways that southern, Black Lesbians use identity management strategies¹ to negotiate their stigmatized sexual identities and how historical and socio-cultural contexts inform and

¹ When using the term LGBT, I refer to individuals that identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. While the term is not utilized as an umbrella term for any individuals that are not heterosexual or that have non-normative sexualities, I do acknowledge the political implications of the term in its contemporary usage.

² Recent studies have shed light on the ways that trans individuals experience additional hardships due to their gender identity, economic stressors, and discrimination because of their trans identity.

shape those strategies. The main identity management strategy that I focus on in this study is passing. *Passing* is an instance when a person with a stigmatized identity attempts to minimize their stigma by actively portraying themselves as a member of the normative group or allowing others to depict them as members of the normative group (Goffman 1963). I seek to study the key issues surrounding passing, and the ways that multiple marginalized identities impact the identity management strategies of individuals. Black Lesbians are the selected research participants because of their social locations in marginalized race, gender, and sexuality positions. In order to address each of these identities, this study will engage an intersectional approach to qualitative methodology. The purpose of this research is to 1) update, integrate, and recontextualize theories of passing, 2) to examine the ways that passing manifests in the lives of Black Lesbians and 3) to utilize intersectionality as a sociological research paradigm for qualitative methods. This research is guided by these central questions:

1. How do historically shaped and culturally specific identity management strategies of Black women impact how, when, and why Black lesbians pass?
2. How do racial identity and racial socialization influence Black lesbians' experiences of their sexual identities?
3. How do the intersections of multiple marginalized identities structure how Black queer women manage their stigmatized identities?

Racial socialization is the “process in which individuals are taught certain cultural values and beliefs that pertain to their racial group membership” (Berkel et al. 2009). The literature on racial socialization suggests that the formation of Black individuals' racial identities influence how they experience, interpret, and react to discrimination and

oppression (Simien 2005; French 2012). Studies have found the variables racial identity, ethnic identity, and racial socialization are linked to discrimination and psychological distress. In their quantitative study of the relationship between racial identity, ethnic identity, and racial socialization, Lee and Ahn (2013) found that racial socialization was significantly related to discrimination but not to distress. They posited that racial identity may function as a “buffer” in discrimination-linked distress and the more Black Americans perceive others to view members of their race in a positive manner the less distress they are likely to report in relation to discrimination (Lee and Ahn 2013). Scholars interested in racial socialization have also found that Black individuals who are more affiliated with members of their racial group are less likely to report distress. These affiliations have also been shown to protect individuals from internalizing negatives images and portrayals of their racial group (Lee and Ahn 2013; Jones 1999; Simien 2005) These studies show the significance that racial identity and socialization have on the worldviews of Black individuals as well as on their perceptions of, interpretations of, and mechanisms of coping with oppression and discrimination. Due to segregation, Black queer women are socialized in Black communities and therefore form their racial identities in those specific historical and socio-cultural contexts (Simien 2005). This study seeks to examine the ways in which racial identity and socialization impact Black queer women’s identity management strategies.

The following literature review examines the sociological theory of identity management, stigma, and the historical landscape of sexual passing for Black women. These sections aim to provide a theoretical and socio-historical context for Black Lesbians’ passing and identity management strategies. This is critical to understanding

the ways that passing is situated in a historical arc of identity management strategies of Black individuals, more specifically Black women, and most specifically Black Lesbians. This review is divided into four sections. Sections one and two examine the historical landscape on which Black women pass and the ways that racism, sexism, and heterosexism have informed their identity management strategies. Sections three and four will engage the theoretical and methodological implications of intersectionality and queer theory. Intersectionality is a theoretical orientation that arose from Black women's lived experiences of multiple marginalized identity locations that compels us to consider the mechanisms of multiple systems of interlocking oppressions and the ways that these systems reify and reinforce one another (Crenshaw 1991; Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982; Collins 1990; McCall 2005; Hancock 2007). Queer theory is a post-structuralist theoretical orientation that decenters heterosexual subjectivities and rejects categorizations of genders and sexualities into fixed signifiers of being (Johnson 2001; Story 2008; Butler 2011). I will consider the ways that these two theoretical orientations inform and shape the intersections of systems of oppression in the lives and experiences of Black lesbian and bisexual women.

These sections frame the lens with which I am interpreting passing and other identity management strategies deployed by Black lesbians. It aims to synthesize current identity management theories in sociology but to also allow theorizing done in Queer Studies, Black Feminist Thought, Gay & Lesbian Studies, Gender & Women's studies, Africana Studies, and Critical Race Studies to inform the ways that these multiple identities have historically influenced and shaped the landscape on which a Black queer woman passes.

BACKGROUND

Passing and Identity Management

Symbolic interactionists theorize passing within the context of identity management strategies of individuals with stigmatized identities. *Stigma* derives from the Greek use of the word, that refers to “bodily signs designed to expose something unusual or bad about the moral status of the signifier” (Goffman 1963:1). These signs used to denote immorality were cut or burned into the body of the stigmatized individual to permanently mark and advertise that person as immoral. This sign, even though embodied by an individual, was inherently social. It was designated by *presumably* non-stigmatized individuals, interpreted by other individuals both stigmatized and not stigmatized, and limited the social, economic, and cultural possibilities that the stigmatized individual could access. Although stigma no longer involves physical markings on the body like the cutting and burning of skin, scholars argue that stigma refers more to the disgrace or immorality of an act or aspect of one’s identity than it does to the bodily mark (Goffman 1963). Due to the social nature of stigma, as well as the proliferation of messages about stigma and the meanings associated with them, the effect of the stigma in the social sense can mirror the effects of stigma in the physical sense. The stigma can still be embodied; however, the embodiment of the stigma is likely referring to the embodiment of the stigmatizing characteristic.

Stigma, as a processual outcome, occurs when individuals impose assumptions on other individuals about the characteristics that they believe they should or do possess. These characteristics derive from and are rooted in meanings that are created, ascribed, and reinforced through the interactions of individuals (Blumer 1969; Williams 2005;

Williams 2004). People act toward things on the basis of the meanings that they ascribe to them and those ascribed meanings are derived from and are reinforced by individual interactions and social structures (Blumer 1969). The process of meaning-making was difficult for my coworkers, in a white-collar, middle-class environment, due to their inability to assign meaning to me during our interactions. The seemingly contradicting meanings of a Black, college educated, presumably middle-class woman in an environment where those meanings were not typically deployed, made me difficult to interpret. It was clear, through our interactions, that my coworkers' interpretations of me were informed by negative meanings associated with Black womanhood such as laziness, anger, and aggression. Yet, they also made assumptions about my sexuality, *need* of a partner, and class position because of my race and gender. These meanings are reified during individual interactions but derive from and are informed by structural and institutionally produced racist, sexist, and heterosexist assumptions that are imposed on individuals during personal interactions.

Whenever an interaction between two individuals takes place, two identities, both of the individual being interpreted, are formed (1963). The first is the *virtual social identity*, or the characteristics imputed by the interpreter, and the second is the *actual social identity*, which consists of the characteristics and attributes that the interpreted individual actually possesses. Due to the relational nature of this interaction, there is often distance between these two identities. This distance between the societally grounded assumptions imputed on individuals, in this case a Black Lesbian, and their actual characteristics is the concern of this research.

Scholars have described and navigated this distance between these two identities in many ways. Waldner-Haugrund and Magruder (2001) created the Negotiated Identity Model to describe the conceptual space in which individuals managed the disclosure of their identities within the positive and negative influences of social structures. Laser and Tharinger (2003) asserted that the locus of negotiated identity lies not within the individual but it is a product of interactions between individuals, actors in their environments, and the environments in which the negotiations take place. Although the focus of the analysis shifts within these theories, they all acknowledge that identity management is a process in which individuals make choices, which are influenced by their environments and broader narratives articulated in and through social structures, about how they disclose certain aspects of their identity. The distance between these two identities is the conceptual location of social stigma and the place where passing, a method that individuals use to navigate the disparity between these two identities, takes place.

Sociologists describe passing as an instance in which individuals with discrediting identities present themselves or are categorized by others as members of the normative group (Goffman 1963). Stigmatized identities are either *discredited* or *discreditable*. A discredited identity describes situations in which an individual with a social stigma assumes that other individuals that s/he could potentially interact with have knowledge of their difference or stigma. This knowledge derives from some embodied aspect of the stigma that the stigmatized individual believes to be visible. Whether or not the stigma is actually perceivable to others, the belief that the stigma is perceived and perceivable impacts the ways that stigmatized individuals navigate interactions. A discrediting

identity describes situations in which the difference of an individual is not immediately known or perceivable by those that s/he interacts with (Goffman 1963). These can be viewed as two possible outcomes that can occur within the space between the virtual and actual identities of an individual. During an interaction with a stigmatized individual, a person can either perceive the stigma and attribute assumed characteristics of the stigma to that person or cannot perceive the stigma and make assumptions about the person as if they were not stigmatized or make assumptions about other possible stigmas. This implies that there are forms of passing that are not active on the part of the individual but that result from others imposing categories on individuals through making assumptions about their identities. This form of passing could also take place when the person with the stigma makes assumptions about whether or not their stigma has been perceived. For example, if one believes that others actors have prior knowledge about their stigma

My previous coworkers assumed that I was heterosexual without ever having “evidence” that I was attracted to men or had relationships with them. The normative, white-collar, middle-class environment necessitated heterosexuality and therefore assumed that actors in this environment were therefore heterosexual. This is an instance of *compulsive heterosexuality*, or that heterosexuality is mandated and encouraged through social institutions, individual interactions, and through sanctions against non-normative sexualities and genders (Rich 1980). The assumption that I was heterosexual by my coworkers was rooted in institutional ideology that mandated heterosexuality as a requirement of entry; however, it was not due to my actions or experiences. The other actors in my environment made assumptions based on normative identity categories,

while also forcing me to pass as heterosexual when it was not my actions that caused me to do so.

Squires and Brouwer (2002) describe passing as the interplay between three actors: 1) the passer or person who performs the non-discredited identity, 2) the in-group clairvoyant or person who shares the discreditable identity and could potentially spoil the passer's attempts, and 3) the "dupe" or member of the privileged group that is an audience of the pass. While the in-group clairvoyant is not required to participate in the pass for the performance to take place, the use of "dupe" to describe the privileged individual implies that 1) the passing individual actively performs the privileged identity, 2) that they do so in order to trick or mislead the other individual, and 3) that the interpreting individual has no agency or control over the interaction. This also implies that the privileged individual or person interpreting the pass has the *right* to know the "truth" of an individual's identity.

Squire and Brouwer's (2002) conception of passing is narrowly defined because it does not acknowledge the involvement and actions of the interpreter or the pre-existence of ascribed meanings. Before passing takes place, there are already a priori meanings that are reified and reinforced by structural influences and through individual interactions. These socially constructed meanings are not being created in the interaction but already exist and inform the interaction as it takes place. The individual interactions reinforce the meanings that are already associated with individuals. The current definitions of passing allocate responsibility for the outcome of and meanings produced through interactions on the interpreted individual. It perpetuates the idea that the interpreter is innocent, powerless, and only receives the actions of the interpreted. There is a gap in the

understanding of the ways that individuals influence and are influenced by interactions. Actors are depicted as either having full control and influence over the interaction or being victims of the interaction. This study seeks to shed light on the ways that individuals, specifically Black lesbians, negotiate and navigate structural, ideological, and socially sanctioned messages that inform pre-existing meanings about their identities during individual interactions.

Contemporary scholars have expanded symbolic interactionist theories of passing in ways that address and somewhat, but not completely, resolve the one-sided nature of previous theories (Renfrow 2004). These scholars distinguish between *proactive passing* and *retroactive passing*. Proactive passing is defined as passing that is initiated by individuals, whereas retroactive passing is defined as passing that results from individuals embracing an identity assigned to them mistakenly by others (Renfrow 2004). This view of passing is 1) relational, 2) not defined in opposition to normative identity, and 3) analyzes passing as potentially active on the part of the individual passing. Importantly, this view of passing also creates conceptual space to view passing as active on the part of the audience or other participating actors involved. The theoretical framework deployed herein maintains that passing is interactional, both between individuals and their environments, and is critical of the victim-stance that usually privileged scholars attribute to individuals who have been “duped by” a pass.

In order to shed light on the history of passing and the different manifestations of passing in interactions between individuals, the following sections address racial and sexual passing. Although this study will primarily examine sexual passing, passing as a concept was introduced into U.S. consciousness through racial passing. These two types

of passing occur on different identity axes, but they both involve the transgression of identity categories and the sanctioning of transgressions of this type at the societal level. Also, it is especially important to understand how individuals' racial identities, and their racialized conceptions of passing, inform their perceptions of sexual passing.

Racial Passing

One of the most well known accounts of passing is the novel *Passing* (1926) by Nella Larsen in which the protagonist, a light-skinned Black woman named Irene, leaves her life as an African-American woman behind and attempts to move to a location where she can pass as a white or "Indian" woman. She then marries a white man who is racist and unknowing of her racial category (Larsen 1929). This novel, a central text of the Harlem Renaissance and African-American literature, sheds light on the anxiety towards race as a social category. Although the protagonist classifies herself as Black, she is able to live as white amongst white people without them noticing the "truth" of her race. It is this anxiety about potential access to white privilege for non-whites that undergirds the pressures of racial passing.

While racial passing is the central theme of the novel *Passing*, scholars such as David Blackmore (1992) assert that the novel has a "more dangerous" subplot of Irene's homoerotic desires for another woman. There are many scenes between Irene and Clare, in which Irene's thoughts, yearning, and adoration are pregnant with erotic undertones.

According to Blackmore,

Irene's descriptions of Clare are exotic, sensual, couched in the discourse of desire. While she dare not articulate explicitly her attraction, Irene cannot escape the urges which Clare invokes in her (Blackmore 1992).

Although many of the interactions between Clare and Irene are filled with homoerotic desire, Irene often dismisses or shrouds her sexual desire with her fear of having her true racial identity *exposed*. As the tone of the author implies, Irene “dare not” transgress the rules of desire, and same sex desire for a woman was certainly a transgression. Irene’s lightness of skin, always approaching but never reaching whiteness, allows her to have economic stability, to comply with the middle-class expectations and pressures regarding partnership, and to protect her from having her racial identity exposed. Because her true racial identity is kept hidden by her performed heterosexual identity, through her marriage to her husband, the manifestation of her sexual desires could potentially destroy the life that she has created for herself. Both her racial identity and her sexual desire, since one hinges on the other, must remain hidden to keep her access to white privilege. *Passing*, written in 1926, is indicative of the ways that the mechanisms of racial and sexual passing are interconnected. It also showcases the ways that Black thinkers, writers, and artists, have been critically engaging discourses of sexual desire, more specifically same-sex desire, and their intersections with racial ideology and identity.

While racial and sexual passing were engaged via literary texts during the early twentieth century, racial passing as a subject of sociological inquiry came to the forefront during the mid twentieth century in response to anxiety expressed by white Americans about the possibility of Blacks living as whites (Renfrow 2004). Several sociological studies were constructed in response to press claims that 200,000 African-Americans vanished from public records (Renfrow 2004: 505). One of these studies concluded that the “missing” African-Americans had crossed the color line and were living as white individuals. To account for the African-Americans that crossed the color line, researchers

(Eckard 1947; Burma 1946) supported the theory that the changing Census records were evidence that blacks could transgress racial lines. Asbury stated, “The sociological phenomenon of black becoming white, which is more or less peculiar to the United States, has existed in this country for more than two hundred years, and probably will plague racial purists for another two hundred” (Asbury 1964:12). Racial categories were concrete groups that could be clearly defined but also transgressed. These assertions further explain the ways that that scholars at the time were invested in maintaining and defining the social categories that were understood to be constant, clearly definable, and rational.

Sexual Passing

While passing has been primarily studied within the context of transgressing racial categories in the U.S., in more recent years it has been framed within the context of sexuality. In “‘Either/Or’ and ‘Both/Neither’: Discursive Tensions in Transgender Politics”, Katrina Roen (2002) critiqued scholars who construct “passing” in the lives of transgender individuals as choosing whether or not to be a part of the social movement. Scholars have argued that trans people that live as women or men, instead of as a transgender individual, are actively attempting to pass as a cis-gender³ person as opposed to a transgender person (Roen 2002). There are those who identify as transsexuals and acknowledge the transition inherent in their identity and those that live their lives as a man or woman without disclosing their previous anatomical realities. Kate Bornstein argued that in the lives of transpeople, “Passing becomes silence. Passing becomes invisibility. Passing becomes lies. Passing becomes self- denial” (Bornstein 1995:125).

³ Cis refers to individuals whose gender identity corresponds with their anatomical gender assigned at birth. I use it to shed light on the ways that cisgender privileges some individuals while relegating others as deviant.

Passing from this perspective is viewed as active, a form of “hiding” one’s “true” identity, and as a political distancing of one’s self from LGBT equality movements. In this conceptualization of passing, individuals with trans experiences that seek to pass as cisgender individuals are viewed as distancing themselves from their stigmatized identity in order to be perceived as an individual with normative gender privilege. The mechanisms of compulsory cisgender status, work in similar ways to compulsive heterosexuality, in that individuals are assumed to be cisgender unless proven otherwise. There are strict sanctions and consequences for individuals who do not meet this normative expectation. If a lesbian or gay individual presents their self or allows others to categorize them as heterosexual, it is interpreted by those who identify with Bornstein’s assertions as an attempt to de-stigmatize their selves through actively realigning with the normative group.

What Bornstein misses is that passing is not simply a political choice, but often one directly related to the empirical realities that gays and lesbians encounter in different areas of their lives. Passing from this perspective is viewed as active, a form of “hiding” one’s “true” identity, as well as a political distancing of one’s self from LGBT equality movements. Like many others, I chose not to disclose my sexual identity in order to protect myself from potential prejudices and discrimination by peers who were not legally required to treat me fairly as a gay individual. While I recognized that my visibility would have been a great resource to students who struggled to publicly identify as LGBT, of color and otherwise, the costs of possibly losing my job, losing my dental insurance, and experiencing increased bouts with discrimination. While I chose not to disclose my sexual identity, my racial identity made me hyper-visible in the white-collar,

middle-class workplace environment and because race is understood to be an embodied characteristic, I often negotiated the costs and risks associated with being the only Black and female staff member.

While those with more cultural, economic, and social capital may have been more apt to take the risks involved in disclosing their sexual orientation, I, like many Black queer people of color, could not afford these costs. Passing in this context was a strategic survival strategy to protect my socioeconomic stability and it did not mean that I lacked commitment to the equality movement or chose to distance myself from LGBT communities. In this account of passing, the individual who is viewed as passing made a conscious choice to “deny” that aspect of their identity and embraced and emphasized other aspects of their identity.

Whether or not an individual “chooses” to disclose their identities in potentially hostile environments does not determine and is not indicative of their level of commitment to social justice or equal rights. To depict these decisions as such, ignores the ways that structural factors shape and inform the landscape on which individuals must make strategic choices about their lives. Those in privileged positions, whether they are privileged race, gender, or class positions, are allowed more fluidity in their ability to determine or influence social outcomes. The concept of “choice” in itself is privileged due to the structural influences and pre-existing meanings that render some individuals as having more agency in decisions about their own lives and some individuals as having less agency in conscious decisions about their lives. This research does not assert that Black lesbians never benefit from actively managing the perceptions of others, but it also

does not privilege choice as the marker of distinction between the levels of disclosure about their sexual identities.

The literature on passing amongst Black lesbians is primarily concerned with the ways that black lesbians and other lesbians of color actively present themselves as heterosexual. Past research conceptualizes passing as an identity management strategy used by Black lesbians to cope with sexual prejudice and discrimination (Reed and Valenti 2012). Researchers defined passing as an attempt to access heterosexual privilege in order to experience acceptance in multiple and shifting social contexts. In their qualitative study of young Black lesbians, Reed and Valenti (2012) found that Femmes (lesbians that preferred a more feminine form of gendered expression) and Stemmes (lesbians that resisted feminine and masculine categories) passed for instrumental purposes such as securing a job, pleasing their family, or to attend church services without receiving condemnation for their sexuality. The theme of passing in order to attain or keep a job is reoccurring in research done on why Black Lesbians pass. According to a Black Lesbian named Candace, “I have been fired from two jobs for being out [as a lesbian]. Yes, and there are no laws on the books that protect me in this state” (Bowleg et al. 2008: 318). While this could be viewed as an account of individual experience, it reflects experiences with an important structural reality for Black Lesbians. Very few states have laws that protect LGBT people from workplace discrimination (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force 2005).

Although this study is pertinent to this research because it examines occurrences of passing in the lives of Black Lesbians, the definition of passing that the researchers use is one-dimensional and does not provide a foundation for examining the ways that

passing is relational and always already situated in a system of pre-existing meanings that inform individual interactions (i.e. involving the participation of multiple individuals not simply the individual who passes). By conceptualizing passing as an attempt to access heterosexual privilege, previous scholars reinforce heterosexuality as the normative group and therefore relegate any normative gender performance to purposefully appearing heterosexual. This definition of passing is defined in opposition to heterosexuality and minimizes the conceptual space for LGBT individuals to create identities that are not reactionary but that are created through the specific experiences and traditions of queer people of color.

Another template for interpreting passing amongst black LGBT individuals is the theory of intersectionality. Intersectional theorists provide a framework for understanding the ways that the systems of racism, heterosexism, and sexism work both distinctly and simultaneously to shape the experiences of LGBT people of color. Due to their sexual, racial, and gendered identities, LGBT people of color have specific standpoints that allow them to experience the contradictions inherent in the term passing. According to Collins,

LGBT people point to the contradictions of passing in which, among African Americans, racial passing is routinely castigated as denying one's true self, yet sexual passing as heterosexual is encouraged (Collins 2005:113).

From this perspective, one can view the ways that race and sexuality function alongside each other in the lives of individuals who identify with multiple identities. The constraints of these identities and the expectations and pressures associated with those identities can often be shifting and conflicting for individuals who live at the intersections of multiple systems of oppression. From this perspective, as elucidated by Collins, LGBT people of color have to negotiate the conceptualization of passing as both passing for

another racial category as well as passing for a person who is heterosexual. For these individuals passing as another race is viewed negatively as a denial of self, while passing for heterosexual is viewed as productive, and even encouraged in some black communities (Collins 2005). Black people are often socialized in Black communities due to segregation and share experiences of structural and interpersonal racial discrimination (Simien 2005). The salience of racial identity and racial ideology in Black individuals' socialization shape and inform the ways that Black communities interpret identity and resistance to oppression. Passing for white, whether retroactive or proactive, is viewed as a repudiation of Blackness, which for most Black people is not an available tool to resist racial oppression. Black individuals that cannot pass for white have to navigate racist structures and racial discrimination, whereas those whose skin tone allows them to pass can avoid some of these experiences. Because of the salience of race in the experiences of Black individuals, identities, such as sexual orientation, can be perceived as less salient than race. Since most Black people cannot pass in order to destigmatize themselves, identifying as LGBT and Black increases one's stigma instead of lessening or ameliorating the stigmatized identity. This study seeks to shed light on the nuanced complexities of identity mobility, especially for individuals who may receive contradicting messages about transgressions of identity.

Black women navigate often conflicting messages about their Blackness and womanhood while also navigating arenas in which their disadvantaged identity positions cause significant stress and distress (Brown and Keith 2003; Hughes and Dodge 1997). This study seeks to examine the ways that the additional disadvantaged identities of lesbian or bisexual impact and inform the ways that Black women manage their

stigmatized identities. I hypothesize that Black women use passing because of its utility in managing stigmatized discrediting or discreditable identities. While passing is an identity management strategy to manage stigma, there are also historical traditions of Black womanhood that make Black women, more specifically Black lesbians, more likely to utilize passing as a method of managing stigma.

Historical Traditions of Black Womanhood & Identity Management

*Rhinoceros woman
Who nobody wants and everybody used.
They say you're crazy
cause you not crazy enough
to kneel when told to kneel – Assata Shakur, 1987*

This quote by Assata Shakur describes the pain and contradictions that have become associated with Black womanhood. Black women, while historically battling negative images of their morality and sexuality, continue to struggle with issues shaped by their race and gender. Although this research seeks to examine the lives of Black lesbians, those experiences are shaped by Black lesbians' experiences as people of color and as people who identify as women. In order to contextualize the experiences of Black lesbians in the Black female experience in the United States, this section of the review examines the ways that the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality impact the formation of Black lesbian identity. It will examine the historical narrative of Black women in the U.S. for important developments in identity and meaning formation within the systems of racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Unlike white LGBT individuals, Black LGBT individuals have historically lived in communities with people of color (Collins 1989). While this is largely an outcome of systematic segregation that caused and continues to cause residential segregation of whites and Blacks, Black individuals'

experiences as people of color are articulated through their lives in majority Black communities. In order to better understand the ways that Black Lesbians develop their identity management strategies, this section will consider ways in which black female traditions and the historical narrative that surrounds Black women's experiences as U.S. citizens impact the ways that Black Lesbians experience reality.

A Historical Context of Black Queer Women Passing

There were two hundred and forty-one lynchings in the U.S. during the year 1892 (Wells 1895). These events were the climax of many deadly events in Memphis, TN experienced by Black individuals. Three Black, male storeowners were kidnapped from jails and lynched. Ida B. Wells was a journalist who wrote in response to brutality in Memphis. In 1866, after a close friend was broken out of jail and lynched, Wells warned Blacks to leave the city of Memphis for cities that would protect their citizens. She was a self-proclaimed gun owner and encouraged Blacks to get weapons to protect their families. Wells' perspective can be interpreted as militant, but she witnessed first-hand the brutality of violence enacted on Black people, families, and communities. She understood that in order to exist in these contexts, action had to be taken to protect the lives and futures of Black communities.

While Black families had to face the looming threat of bloodthirsty whites, the struggles of Black women within those families and communities were further complicated by their gender (Giddings 1984). In addition to lynchings and threats, Blacks in Memphis had to worry about riots and other forms of racialized violence as well. During one of the most brutal riots in Memphis, 46 Black women, children, and men were killed (Giddings 1984). Many single Black women reported incidents of rape,

beatings, and other forms of sexualized violence done to them in their own homes. While Black women experienced racialized and sexualized white-on-Black violence, they also endured domestic violence and sexualized violence at the hands of Black men in their communities, families, and partnerships. The number of incidents of sexual violence against Black women in these riots and other incidents that were unreported remain unknown in spite of research that points to the high probability of many unreported experiences of victimization.

In her experiences as a Black woman and a journalist, Wells discovered that lynching was justified by Southern whites' assertions that Black men were raping white women (Giddings 1984). Some scholars argued that post-civil war Blacks had regressed due to being apart from whites and that they were "primitive" and "criminal" (Giddings 1984: 31). These beliefs and messages further continued to support whites' incidents of violence against Black individuals. This continued in spite of scholars' claims that "Nobody in this section of this country believed the threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women..." (Ida B. Wells as quoted in Giddings 1984:29). The more that whites contended that Black men were raping white women, the more Black women combatted these messages through their own resistance campaigns against lynching. While campaigning to prove the innocence of Black men, Black women were rendered invisible by the intersections of their race and gender. The lynching discourse centered around the fragility and innocence of white women and the need for them to be protected by white men from Black men who were framed as sexually insatiable and inherently violent. Black women were nowhere in the discourse. While Black women experienced sexualized violence in their homes and communities, they also experienced sexualized

and racialized violence from White men. While Black women campaigned to protect and champion the rights of Black men to manhood they simultaneously contributed to a discourse that erased their own gendered experiences.

While southern Blacks experienced the brutality of lynching due to their race, Black women also carried the burden of experiencing the violence through their gender and sexuality. When I speak of sexuality, I am referring to the system of heterosexism that assumes the heterosexual subjectivity and renders individuals who do not identify as heterosexual as deviant or less than human as well as the body as a site of sexual meanings. However, in the context of Black female historical narratives, Black women have a particular relationship to sexual agency in their attempts to control and define their sexuality, and more specifically their bodies, without the impending threat of rape and sexual violence. Many Black women used the written word to "defend their names" against claims of immorality and promiscuity by whites (Giddings 87). In addition to defending their names, many Black women viewed themselves as responsible for the advancement of the entire race. In *A Voice From the South*, Anna Julia Cooper argued that the fate of the Black race depended on the work of Black women, who were in her eyes, responsible for the progress of the race (Cooper 1892). According to Cooper, "Only the BLACK WOMAN can say 'when and where I enter'...then the whole Negro race enters with me." (Anna Julia Cooper as quoted in Gutman 1976:536). Although Black women viewed themselves as inextricably bound to and responsible for the race, they also recognized the aspects of their racialized experiences that were caused by their positions as women.

Sexual violence was not a new phenomenon to Black women who used networks

to support expensive anti-lynching campaigns. Black women were historically documented as having experienced rape and domestic violence. According to Anna Julia Cooper, one of the central struggles of Black womanhood was “the painful, patient, and silent toil of mothers to gain title to the bodies of their daughters.” (Giddings 1984). In spite of the power held by white men, white women, and yes, Black men over the bodies of Black women and their daughters, negative controlling images of Black women as hyper-sexualized and lacking morals heightened their vulnerability to sexual assault. White men and women perpetuated images of Black women as hyper-sexualized and lacking morals to justify the colonization of the Black woman’s body. Black women were coerced, forced, and ordered, often violently, to participate in sexual acts with their mostly white male slaveholders, the slaveholders’ sons and relatives, and also overseers. Under the institution of chattel slavery, Black women were often victimized through emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual violence, as were all enslaved individuals, but many Black women experienced additional violence due to their gender. Sexual victimization and exploitation were so rampant in the South that Black women fled by the thousands to cities outside of the South (Giddings 1984).

According to Darlene Clark Hine (1989), many nineteenth century slave narratives contained at least a reference to rape or the threat of rape and sexual violence. Rape was essential to the maintenance of white supremacist ideology and to the intersections of race and gender as systems of structural, social, and ideological oppression. It was used as a method of controlling Black women, controlling their reproduction, and reifying a system in which white men profited economically from the sexual victimization of Black women. Children born out of rape or sexual violence

against Black women at the hands of white men were considered slaves and only increased the number of enslaved individuals that were exploited for their labor. Sexual violence rendered the experiences of Black women invisible while also enforcing and reinforcing their ties to white masters that often fathered their children (Giddings 1984). White men raped and committed acts of sexual violence against Black women in the private spheres but continued to define these same women as inhuman and immoral in public ones. I believe that this juxtaposition of proximal closeness and distance influenced the strategies that Black women used to gain agency over their sense of “self.”

Another function of the sexual violence imposed on Black women was to reify perceived distinctions between whiteness and blackness and also to perpetuate and support the ideological distinctions between white womanhood and Black womanhood. While southern ideology positioned Black men as the culprits behind sexual violence, Black women writers, thinkers, poets, and activists asserted that they experienced sexual violence at the hand of white men. Some women even shared that the white wives would allow them to be exploited as mistresses for their husbands. Many women bore children out of the violent acts and raised them as enslaved individuals in spite of their father's whiteness and citizenship. A Black woman who bore the child of a white man could not provide any more safety to her biracial child than she could to children born by Black men. These contradictions in the experiences by Black women continued to exasperate already hostile relationships with white men, white women, and Black men. They also furthered the cycle of secrecy around the rape and sexual violence experienced by Black women at the hands of white men and white women. While Black women were being depicted as immoral and sexually indiscriminate, they struggled to create space for their

daughters to exist outside of the violence and threats of violence in the southern states.

In order to combat the American ideology that depicted Black women as immoral, promiscuous, and lacking womanhood (in the Victorian sense of the word), Black women took agency over the "shameful" history of slavery and expressed their personal histories and experiences. These histories and experiences showcased their resilience and strength through shedding light on the terrors of being an enslaved Black woman. In addition to telling their stories, Black women continued to invest in maintaining a respectable image to combat negative images of them. Black women such as Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, and other activists asserted their rights to respectability as women. In spite of whites constructing Black women as not respectable, they considered themselves to be in many ways more respectable and honorable than white women, who participated, often knowingly, in their husbands' physical and sexual violence against Black women.

Although sexual violence was greatly influential in Black women's decisions to migrate north, away from southern cities, economic disparities also affected thousands of Black women leaving the South to pursue better lives. The jobs open to Black women were limited by their gender, class positions, and race. Scholars have argued that Black women experienced more economic discrimination than Black men and that they have historically had fewer opportunities for employment (Hine 1989). Clerical positions were closed to Black women because of their race and few Black women during this era had the qualifications to teach or practice other professions. Their race and class greatly influenced their ability to acquire a job and contributed to why they were relegated mainly to domestic positions. Even in their domestic work, they made less than white women who worked in the same positions (Hine 1989).

While many women became activists in the 19th century against the sexual violence being experienced by Black women, scholars have argued that Black women utilized particular identity management strategies as mechanisms to protect and arm themselves against sexual violence and attacks on their femininity and womanhood (Hine 1989). Scholars have argued that because of the intersecting impacts of race, gender, and class, Black women created, developed, and participated in a cult of secrecy called a "culture of dissemblance" (Hine 1989).

The culture of dissemblance is described as "creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma. Only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinary Black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own in the often one-sided and mismatched resistance struggle" (Hine 1989: 915). Black women created this culture of dissemblance in response to racialized, gender-based, and socioeconomic pressures and contradictions to protect their inner selves from the scrutiny and threat of violence from other individuals. In order to protect themselves from hostile social relationships, Black women formed a shield through creating distance between what can be considered their truer selves while creating the appearance of an open individual who disclosed private information about her self. This process involved decisions about the disclosure of certain facts or information about their inner selves and personal experiences. Black women, in response to the experiences of Black women historically, created and perpetuated images of Black women that countered negative images of Black women and left enough conceptual space for Black women to distance themselves enough to protect their inner lives. The appearance of openness that

dissembling provides, allowed Black women to perform Black womanhood in a way that shielded their own plans, thoughts, feelings, and experiences from the gaze of other people, especially white people.

I seek to situate the culture of dissemblance in the context of identity management strategies utilized by Black women in order to resist hostile social, emotional, and economic relationships with white women, white men, and Black men. The creation of the culture of dissemblance elucidates the positioning of Black women with relation to the rest of society. It also sheds light on the ways that specific pressures and contradictions created by the racialized, gendered, classed positions have impacted the ways that Black women structure their identity, relate to and interact with others, create a worldview in which their identity locations influence their creation of self. Ultimately, I am interested in the impact of dissembling and other identity performance strategies on the ways that Black women create their worldviews, create and nurture relationships, and interpret and relate to their surroundings.

Instead of presenting their full selves, Black women have used the strategy of dissembling to perform/project an identity acceptable based on the moral and cultural norms of society while also allowing them to interpret and study the performed selves of other individuals. When viewed from this perspective dissembling can also be examined as an identity management strategy that allows Black women to resist the pressures to deny aspects of certain parts of their selves. Audre Lorde described this pressure: “I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of self” (Lorde 1984). Instead of giving in to the pressure to eclipse certain aspects of their lives, Black women

created intellectual tools/strategies that provided them with safety, the ability to withhold aspects of their selves from the scrutiny of whites, and a space to exist within themselves without the constant pressures of society. These tools also allowed Black women to negotiate their multiple identities on their own terms. I am interested in the ways that their social locations as Black women impact and/or shape their experiences in specific contexts with other individuals and the ways that performing and performances of self manifest in the empirical realities of individuals that identify as Black women.

In the historical resistance of Black women against economic and social limitations placed upon them, many Black women novelists, storytellers, poets, and activists challenged the mainstream feminist movement and civil rights movement as privileging certain subjectivities over others. In the case of the mainstream feminist movement, Black women asserted that white feminists structured feminism with the assumed and unexamined white subjectivity (Pellegrini 1997). In crafting their definition of womanhood and only using the experiences of white middle class women, white feminists made the racial experiences of Black women invisible. One of the tactics used by Black women to critique the mainstream feminist movement and to create the foundation for the articulations of black feminism and other queer feminisms was to highlight the ways that their race and class impacted their experiences of gender. An example of class influencing the ways that Black women resist systems of oppression comes from Angela Davis' *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* in which Davis recounts the ways that three Black women vocalists performed a Black feminist aesthetic that was born from working class communities (Davis 2011). In addition to this performance, blues women also articulated a feminist standpoint that diverged from assertions of

respectability and middle-class womanhood of mainstream Black women's club movements. Their experiences as women from working-class backgrounds influenced their feminist perspective, while also shedding light on the ways that their classed experiences informed their epistemological standpoint.

A resistance text that in some ways summarizes the overarching critiques of Black women of the mainstream feminist movement is in the title of an anthology of Black women's writings entitled *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982). Black women authors asserted that their experiences with gender had been eclipsed by white women's assertions about womanhood and that their experiences as Black individuals had been eclipsed by the experiences of Black men. Although this piece had much in common with other texts by Black women thinkers and intellectuals, its' theorizations revealed invisibility based on gender and race. It also eclipsed the experiences of Black women that did not identify as heterosexual. In spite of the contributions of Black Lesbians to Black feminism, the mainstream feminist movement, and to racialized struggles, the subjectivity of the Black feminist was constructed under the assumption of heterosexuality. I suppose one could add the line *and All the Black Women are Straight*, to the title of the monumental anthology of Black women's works.

Scholars have noted that queer people of color historically have lived in communities of color as opposed to living in communities based on sexuality and continue to do so in contemporary communities (Moore 2011). These aspects of Black lesbian identities as LGBT people and as people of the African Diaspora are mostly socialized in communities of color. While Black lesbians experienced reality in ways that

heterosexual Black women did not, they also were raised with them and shared the same cultural and social norms and values. Their gender and sexuality norms overlap due to socialization but depart in that queer women also experience forms of oppression based on their sexuality. While Black Lesbians shared the experiences of racism and sexism with heterosexual Black women, they also experienced heterosexism in ways that heterosexual Black women's privilege shielded them from experiencing, especially if they conform to expected racialized gender and sexual expectations.

Scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins invoke the difficulties experienced by queer people of color because of the intersecting oppressions of racism, sexism, and heterosexism (Collins 2005). When examining the intersections of these systems, I will use the terms *identity categories* as well as systems of oppression such as race, sexuality, socioeconomic status, or gender. When I speak of these terms, or refer to the groups that identify with these terms, I do not seek to infer that these categories have concrete and agreed upon meanings. Through the lens of intersectionality and symbolic interactionism, I hope to create a space where the intersection of systems of oppression can be engaged while also acknowledging the ways that these systems impact and shape the experiences of Black lesbians. While I align with many queer theorists in my suspicion and critique of categories as insufficient to describe the innumerable experiences and potential experiences of those who may identify with them, I also acknowledge the impact of these same identity categories on the self-definition processes of marginalized individuals and their socio-economic outcomes.

As a powerful structuring system, race greatly impacts people's sense of self, the communities that they are raised and socialized in, and the ways that they interact with

other individuals. The racial ideology of Black Americans shapes and informs the ways that African-Americans experience the world and the socio-political and interpersonal stressors involved in managing race-based discrimination (French and Coleman 2012; Chavous, Sellers, Smalls, and White 2007). Research on the dimensions of racial ideology suggest that “coming to terms” with structures of racism and other forms of oppression is necessary to African-American’s healthy sense of self (Cross, 1991; Sellers, Smith, et al., 1998; French and Coleman 2012). The formation of a healthy racial identity is critical to the wellness of African-Americans and also equips African-Americans with tools to resist racism and oppression. An African-American’s sense of Blackness is linked to their sense of self and greatly impacts their racial identity (French and Coleman 2012; Hunter 2010). Unlike white LGBT people, who tend to live in LGBT enclaves, Black LGBT tend to live in majority African-American communities (Moore 2011; Moore 2012). This context in which the socialization of Black LGBT people takes place shapes their racial ideology and informs the ways that they experience, react to, and interpret systems of oppression. In spite of research on mutually reinforcing mechanism of race and sexuality, little research has been done on the ways that the racial ideology and identity of African-Americans informs the ways that they experience other systems of oppression, specifically heterosexism.

Black lesbians’ are unique subjects of violence due to their marginalized race, sexuality, and gender identity locations. In response to racialized and gendered violence against them, Black women utilized strategies to navigate and resist these forms of oppression. While some of these strategies involved combating negative meanings and stereotypes associated with Black womanhood at the macro level, others involved

historically crafted and passed down identity management strategies, such as dissemblance, that acted as shields to protect the inner lives of Black women from racialized and gendered violence. The experiences of queer Black women, due to their identities as Black women and socialization in communities where they would be exposed to the identity management strategies of other Black women, are shaped and informed by their racial identities. In order to achieve healthy senses of self, Black lesbians and bisexual women have to develop strong racial identities.

For these reasons, I choose to utilize these categories to tell us more about the systems of racism, sexism, and heterosexism that created and continue to re-create them. These categories are not simply abstractions in the lives of individuals; they greatly impact the life chances of individuals and the ways that they perceive reality. When Black lesbians enter the workplace, they enter them equipped with these strategies to resist and cope with systems of oppression. I will now turn to intersectionality as a method of theorizing and interpreting the ways that multiple disadvantaged identity locations impact the experiences of Black lesbians.

Intersectionality: Theory vs Practice

This study will utilize intersectionality in order to theorize the ways that the multiple marginalized identity locations of Black lesbians interact and impact one another. The term *intersectionality*, refers to the way that different dimensions of oppression can intersect or impact each other to produce injustice (Crenshaw 1991; Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982; Collins 1990; McCall 2005; Hancock 2007). It has been referenced as both a theoretical framework and a methodological paradigm. According to Ange-Marie Hancock (2007), intersectionality is a research paradigm or organizing

approach to conducting research that has its own set of beliefs, principles, and methodologies associated with its claims. Methodology refers to a coherent set of ideas about the philosophy, methods, and date that underlie the research process and the production of knowledge (McCall 2005). Research practice and methods mirror the complexity of social life, and calls forth unique methodological demands. While scholars tend to agree on the theoretical implications of intersectionality, translations and interpretations of intersectionality as a methodological paradigm disagree on some of the more nuanced research analytical choices with regards to the importance of and salience of identities and the ways that multiple identities interact and shape the experiences of individual. Generally scholars believe that intersectionality is 1) a link between deconstructing normative assumptions of social categories, 2) that categories are linked to inequalities and the oppression of individuals who are associated with these categories and 3) that social life, language, and the organization of power influence what individuals believe are categorical realities. I consider the theoretical implications of intersectionality then view two meta-analyses of the ways that intersectionality is conducted, theorized, and carried out methodologically.

Scholars also agree that the multiple intersections that marginalize at the individual and institutional levels create social and political stratification. According to one of these scholars, “Intersectionality theory claims that these policy problems are more than the sum of mutually exclusive parts; they create an interlocking prison from which there is little escape” (Hancock 2007: 65) To disrupt the links between categories and inequality, we must utilize intersectionality to comparatively engage the differences of individuals through analyzing the ways that they experience oppression.

Intersectionality emphasizes the interaction of multiple and shifting categories of difference.

The interests of intersectionality arose out of critiques of gender- and race-oriented research failing to account for the experiences of individuals at certain intersections (Hull, Scott, and Smith 1982). Perhaps the most well known of these is the critique of feminist movements for failing to account for the experiences of women of color and of women who did not identify with the middle class economic worldview. In developing this theoretical framework, researchers have struggled with epistemological questions and concerns about who and what constitutes analysis at particular intersections (Collins 1991). Patricia Hill Collins mentioned struggling with the *who* and *what* of Black Feminist Thought. In order to argue that Black women have a particular knowledge about certain lived experiences due to identifying as Black and Woman, and to use knowledge produced by Black women in order to support that argument, one must decide who counts as Black and Woman.

Collins negotiated this conflict by focusing on biases of the structural and ideological systems of oppression that were geared toward Black women (Collins 1991). The knowledge produced by Black women had not been critically engaged as an intellectual project and therefore Collins focused on utilizing these works to elucidate the epistemological standpoint of Black women. While this tactic proved to be largely successful for Collins, it did not completely resolve the tension regarding the categories implicated by Black women's works. One of the most contested identities was the identity of *woman*.

Scholars have contested the social, economic, and politicized meanings of womanhood. Feminists such as Adrienne Rich and Monique Wittig argue that one is not born a woman and that particular mechanisms in society create what is considered to be a woman (Rich 1980; De Beauvoir 1949; Collins 1991). It would seem that the conflicting notions of categorization and location must be resolved in order to establish a theory based on the two. While I do not seek to claim that these questions have to be fully teased out in order to meaningfully examine the intersections of oppression, I will explore the ways that scholars have engaged with these questions and then present my own summation of the strengths, challenges, and goals of intersectional analysis.

The questions about categories and the epistemological concerns that arise from using them are central to intersectional analysis. Scholars have presented key questions as central to the foundation of intersectional analysis as a research paradigm. I will examine a few of the questions that have been raised about race, class, and gender oriented intersectional research. The questions are as follows: 1) What are the categories? 2) What does the research posit as the relationship between the categories?, 3) How are the categories conceptualized?, 4) What is the presumed make up of the categories? and 5) What levels of analysis are used for a single analysis that employs intersectional methods?

Scholars employ three central approaches to race, gender, and class oriented research. The three strands are the unitary approach, the multiple approach, and the intersectional approach (Hancock 2007). The unitary approach privileges one category of difference (e.g. class, sexuality, race etc.) as having the most explanatory value in analyses of individuals' experiences. A scholar utilizing this approach to intersectional

analysis may choose to examine race as the most explanatory category with regards to a particular outcome (e.g. childhood poverty). The issue with this type of research is that it fails to engage the complexity of lived experiences that very scarcely are influenced solely by race alone. The second strand of this research is the multiple approach. This approach to intersectional research acknowledges the existence of multiple shifting and influential categories that are considered equally important but conceptually distinct (Hancock 2007). Under this approach, race, class, and gender, are viewed as co-operating systems of oppression that cause specific outcomes that can be compared and contrasted.

The final strand of conducting race, class, gender-oriented research, and the approach that this research draws on, is the intersectional approach. The intersectional approach acknowledges the ways that particular categories can influence individuals, like the first approach, but also acknowledges that multiple categories can have explanatory value in analyzing political, social, and economic outcomes. Like the multiple approach, the intersectional also addresses more than one category of difference. However, the multiple approach conceptualizes categories and the intersections of those categories as static and expressed at the individual and institutional levels. This is the central distinction between these two approaches. While the multiple approach assumes that relationships between categories exist a priori of individual influence, the intersectional approach posits that these relationships are dynamic, shifting, and empirically based. This distinction is important because it departs from quantitative methodological analyses that examine the interaction of categories (i.e. race, class, and gender) under the assumption that they operate and exert influence in identical ways (Hancock 2007). The interactional approach privileges empirical knowledge as the way to better understand the shifting and

fluid qualities of relationships between categories. These categories do not operate identically, even though they may share or have similar mechanisms, and their influences are not uniform.

Although categories are shifting and fluid, political organizers, policy analysts, and researchers use categories as a method for theorizing and categorizing presumed shared experiences. Linked fate, or the acute awareness that what happens to the collective group also impacts the individuals that are members of that group, has been used to theorize the ways that African-Americans conceptualize the connections between their individual experiences and the experiences of the group as a whole (Simien 2005). The shared experiences of African-Americans are expressed at the macro level through experiences of the system of racism, discrimination, and segregation and at the micro interactional level through the day-to-day, lived encounters with racial and classed oppression (Simien 2005). This study focuses on the micro interactional level through critical analysis of the experiences of Black lesbians with focus on their identity management strategies. In addition to shared experiences of racism and sexism that Black women experience due to their race and gender, Black lesbians also have the shared experiences of heterosexism. This intersectional framework examines the ways that the experiences of racism, sexism, and heterosexism impact the identity management strategies used by Black lesbian women.

Scholars note three approaches to satisfying the demands of complexity within an intersectional framework of analysis. The first of the approaches is the anticategorical approach. This methodology deconstructs analytical categories. From this perspective, social life is simply too complicated to be organized by categories. Categories are,

“simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences” (McCall 2005: 1773). The intracategorical approach falls in the middle of the first and third approach conceptually because it 1) rejects categories as a means of meaningfully organizing individuals into groups based on presumed shared characteristics and 2) uses categories strategically as ways to document relationships of inequality among social groups. The third strategy, the intercategorical approach provisionally adopts categories to document relationships between inequality among, and I would add between and within multiple and conflicting dimensions (McCall 2005: 1773). This approach centers the relationships amongst social groups and across analytical categories. It is largely comparative and seeks to compare the advantages and disadvantages of multiple categories (McCall 2005). It focuses on two between group dynamics and compares the two while folding in other aspects of the analysis.

The methodology of this study converges with the intracategorical approach in that it resists categories as meaningful ways to group individuals and utilizes these categories in order to shed light on the micro level mechanisms of inequality. Black feminists and other feminists of color such as Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldua, Barbara Smith, Patricia Bell Scott, and bell hooks asserted that their particular empirical experiences were not captured by identity categories (Story 2008). However, I also acknowledge that individuals who exist at similar categories may have patterns in the ways that they negotiate those identities and patterns in the ways that they experience systems of oppression. Linked fate is an example of the ways that categories impact how individuals view their individual experiences as connected to other individuals through shared experiences of structural oppression. These categories are culturally and

historically meaningful and inform the ways that individuals understand their selves in relation to others. For African-Americans, these patterns are rooted in historical racial praxis and passed down from generation to generation. For Black LGBT people these categories are salient in the ways that they understand their positions in society.

Quare Considerations of Identity

Queer theory is a post-structuralist theoretical orientation that decenters heterosexual subjectivities and rejects categorizations of genders and sexualities into fixed signifiers of being (Johnson 2001; Story 2008; Butler 2011). Foundational queer theories engage with identity politics in varying ways and continue to challenge normative assumptions surrounding identity and self-identification (Story 2008). “Quare” refers to the impact of individuals’ culturally specific positionalities on the ways that they understand identity (Johnson 2001). Quare is also used to consider the ways that African-American’s racial experiences impact their interpretation of and experiences of queerness. As stated earlier, racial identity shapes and informs the experiences of Black LGBT and informs the strategies that they use to resist race, sexuality, class, and gender oppression. This section will review central themes in queer theory from some of its foundational theorists and will examine the ways that Black Queer theorists conceptualize queerness and resist the assumed white subjectivity of queer theory.

At its core, queer theory is concerned with rejecting the categorization of genders and sexualities into fixed signifiers of being. Queer Studies at its genesis was invested in destabilizing normative assumptions of sexuality and challenging conceptions of sexuality as fixed and clearly defined (Story 2008). Like Black Feminism, Queer Studies was rooted in the resistance efforts of individuals through activism and consciousness

raising regarding concerns of the queer community. It was through this grassroots organizing, writing, theorizing, and other avenues of activism that led to the creation of queer theory. The post-structural orientation of queer theory demands at least the critique of social categories as ways to signify particular empirical experiences.

While queer studies began as a critique of feminism and sexuality studies, one critique of queer studies and queer theory came from Black Queer theorists who asserted that queer studies did not engage the intersections of race and sexuality in its analysis (Johnson 2001). They argued that the post-structuralist framework of queer studies to declassify or “unmark” differences had problematic implications for individuals who embodied differences that impacted their lives. In addition to the assumptions embedded in the theoretical perspective of queer theory, theorists also did not acknowledge the contributions of people of color and individuals that did not identify with the assumed middle class subjects of queer theorizing and activism. According to E. Patrick Johnson, one of the primary critiques of queer theory is that it

...has failed to acknowledge consistently and critically the intellectual, aesthetic, and political contributions of non-white and non-middle class gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgendered people in the struggle against homophobia and oppression (2001: 5).

Within the debates about queerness and queer theory, scholars ignored the contributions of queer people of color and queer individuals from class-consciousness other than middle class. Beyond meaningfully engaging these perspectives, queer theory did not recognize the innumerable experiences of queerness by queer individuals. These issues of LGBT people who felt that they were made invisible by queer studies led to the creation of other areas of scholarship that sought to engage these racial, gendered, and class differences amongst queer identified individuals.

Black Women's Studies and Black Queer studies, as critiques of Black Studies, Women's Studies, and Queer Studies offered great templates for broadening the ways that scholars analyzed and interpreted identity categories, especially racial and sexualized categories. They offered knowledge about the ways that the limitations of identity categories contained knowledge about the transformation of epistemological questions regarding identity and self-categorizations. These ideologically self-segregated spaces also derived from and occurred in the same contexts as the experiences of many Black women in the civil rights movements (Story 2008). Black men in the movement benefited from their male privilege in ways that Black women could not. In addition to benefits afforded to them by systems of patriarchy, many Black men expressed views that were derogatory to women and fully supported patriarchal values that restricted the roles of women to particular realms.

In response to the sexism and heterosexism that Black women were subjected to in their communities and families, and in response to the limitations of traditional feminism that assumed a white subject and set of experiences, Black women created Black Feminism as a theoretical perspective rooted in ideological, social, and socioeconomic resistance of Black women to intersecting systems of oppression (Collins 1989). The category of Black that *seemingly* acted as an umbrella to link together the experiences of people of the African diaspora was limited in its ability to account for the experiences of Black women that were implicated by their gender, sexuality, class, or region. The distinctiveness of these experiences and the subsequent backlash against categories that limited and defined the life chances of individuals was an important factor in the construction of Queer theory.

In spite of the challenges to identity categories and the post-structuralist critique of identity categories, Black Feminism was formed through these linked critiques of other categories. When categories such as Black or woman are deemed insufficient, more categories were created to give voice to the experiences of those marginalized by normative categories laden with racialized and gendered meanings. These new meanings and the assumptions embedded in them continued to be inadequate as markers to signify certain experiences. Even though Black Feminism was created as a critique of unexamined ideological assumptions, many Black women felt marginalized by the embedded assumptions of Black Feminism, (i.e. heterosexual and middle class subjectivities), and challenged perceptions of Black female sexuality as inherently heterosexual and as receiving the agency of Black men. The women that critiqued Black and Woman as inadequate categories that did not meaningfully engage the privilege of men and whites, were critiqued by Black lesbians and third world feminists as not engaging the heterosexual and nationality privilege of those women. Transwomen and transmen provided a critique of Black Lesbians for not examining their cis gender privilege. This train of critiques could flow endlessly as described by Judith Butler in her conceptualization of “the embarrassing etc.” (Butler 2011) According to Butler (2011), “The theories of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and able-bodiedness invariably close with an embarrassed “etc.” For Butler, this “etc.” should be an instructive one instead of a destructive one. While Butler argues that it signifies “the illimitable process of signification itself,” I add that this “etc.” is pregnant with possibility in that it allows scholars to freely critique identity categories, which they claim to represent, and how representation and performance work tangential to the

negotiation of one's identity. We must examine the assumed subjectivities of identity categories in order to gain knowledge of the ways that these categories contribute to the lived experiences of those that identify with them.

What I glean as most influential to this study from this background on queer theory and the challenges to identity categories that were embedded in its epistemological standpoint, is the process by which theory, practice, and activism are linked in the creation of identities. What queer theory, Black studies, women's studies, Black Women's studies, and Black queer studies have in common is that they were formulated, reified, and critiqued through the empirical experiences of individuals that challenged the assumed inclusiveness of these categories. They are all rooted in activism and the day-to-day experiences of individuals that contributed the richness of those experiences and theorized their existence. They showcase the potential of qualitative research to contribute to theoretically and empirically salient forms of knowledge. It is the experience of individuals that begins the formation of theory and these movements are proof of the complicated process that facilitates identity. They also showcase the importance of identities in the lives of individuals. While these identities are often insufficient and inherently contradicting, they matter in the creation of individuals' worldviews and in their understanding and framing of their self and the world that they interact with.

To say layered identities is not to claim that identities are clean cut and easily distinguished from one another, but it is to provide conceptual space for identity to be understood as something that exists in different ways for individuals who identify with different groups, particularly if the expectations for those identities are sometimes

conflicting. Multiple levels of critique are reflective of the experiences of Black queer women and can shed light on the ways that they navigate their social worlds. Using intersectionality in conjunction with the other previously mentioned areas of knowledge, I seek to provide space for Black lesbians to create and share their own understandings of passing, and to explain the ways that it functions in their lives. I also seek to examine the ways that their racially specific experiences of discrimination impact and shape the ways that they manage their identities.

METHODOLOGY

I conducted nine in-depth interviews with women who identified as Black, queer, lesbian, or bisexual, and living or having lived in Memphis, TN. Out of the nine women that I spoke with, each of them identified as African-American or Black. They ranged in age from 19 to 42-years-old with a mean age of 27. All respondents currently reside in Memphis in various neighborhoods throughout the city, however, four of them have lived outside of Memphis for extended periods (over a year).

While the majority of them identified as currently middle-class, two of the respondent identified as lower class or poor during their childhood. Each of these women reported completing high-school, five of them attended college, with three of them holding their bachelor's degree, and those that hold a bachelor's degree also hold graduate degrees. When the interviews took place, five of the women were in committed relationships. Although one of the participants was previously married to a woman (not legally), none of the participants were married. Of those in relationships, three were in relationships with women and two were in relationships with men, while four women were single or not currently seeking a relationship. Four women that participated

identified as lesbians, three identified as bisexual, and two respondents did not label their sexuality. The nine in-depth interviews took place from November 2013 until February 2014 in coffee shops, homes, restaurants, offices, and cafés.

This study targeted women who live or have lived in Memphis and the surrounding metropolitan area who identified as Gay, lesbian, bisexual, woman loving, same gender loving, or who did not identify at all. While I sought after respondents, a few of them chose to not label or identify in any particular way. The only requirement that I expressed to these women was that they had to identify as queer, experience same-sex attraction, or have been in relationships with women. Through locating research participants, I learned that many queer women that I came into contact with dismissed labels such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or straight and preferred not to label themselves. This was particularly true of the younger women that I spoke with in their late teens to early twenties. In order to be eligible for this study, the women also had to identify as Black or as a part of the African diaspora. Although the study was open to women throughout the African diaspora, all of the women who chose to participate identified as African-American. Also, to be eligible for this study, the women must be currently employed, employed in the past, or actively seeking employment.

Qualitative research methods were selected due to the lack of information about the process by which Black women negotiate the levels of disclosure with regards to their sexuality. Qualitative interviews allowed the researcher to access the observations of individuals about their experiences and provided insight into the internal processes that occurred during these experiences (Weiss 1994). Qualitative interviews also allowed participants to outline themes and influences that were not previously addressed in this

analysis. I hypothesized that Black Lesbians used historically situated and racially specific identity management strategies to navigate, ameliorate, and resist systems of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism. I also hypothesized that passing is one of those strategies and that Black lesbians' passing will be shaped and informed by their racial ideology and identity.

The data presented came from in-depth interviews. Interviews were transcribed, sorted by number, and stored in files with interviewer notes and interviewee demographic/general information. Data was coded and analyzed using Atlas.ti software. The Institutional Review Board approved this research with minor contingencies. All participants were provided with information regarding the study before interactions and signed forms of consent to illustrate their willingness to participate in the study.

Finding participants for this study was particularly challenging due to common characteristics of this subgroup that have been documented extensively by previous researchers. Scholars have highlighted the difficulty of gathering data on Black lesbians. According to Mignon Moore,

“There are populations that traditional methods of data gathering will not capture, and the Black lesbian community is one such group. Public advertisements, notices, flyers at lesbian nightclubs, or postings at LGBT community centers largely go unnoticed or unanswered by gay populations of color” (2006: 121).

E. Patrick Johnson, in his qualitative research with Black Gay men living in the South, expressed similar challenges with finding research participants (Johnson 2008). Black queer individuals tend to operate mainly within Black social circles that aren't necessarily constructed around sexuality (Moore 2006: 121). Respondents were located primarily through the snowball method. This method as described by E. Patrick Johnson (2008),

involved using social networks to gain access to individuals met the requirements of the study. When I met with women, I was often referred to other women who were eligible to participate but could not do so due to time constraints. Flyers were publicized using social media networks but this strategy did not yield any additional participants. Participants were referred using this process, but chose not to participate. If executed earlier in the research process, and promoted aggressively, I believe that social media networks can prove to be fruitful in expanding the pool of eligible applicants for researchers working with populations that are difficult to locate.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Coming of Age in Memphis: Black Queer Women Recall Growing Up in the South

The title of this section was inspired by the memoir *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, by Anne Moody (1968). In the novel, Moody describes her experiences as a child growing up in the South, and details the lessons she learned about her race, class, gender, and social location as a Black girl in the South and follows her into her mid-twenties. The first section of this memoir is entitled childhood and is punctuated by experiences of racism, sexism, and accounts of what it was like to live in the Jim Crow south. Many of the respondents I talked to spent a great deal of time discussing their childhoods. They would often locate their experiences as adults as directly linked to their childhood and informed by incidents that occurred when they were as young as three to five years old.

As a researcher interested in the ways that these women were socialized into certain culturally informed practices, I was curious to see how their experiences during childhood influence the ways that they experience their multiple identities as adults. The stories were vibrant and full of memories of growing up as a Black girl in the South-

from the smells of hot food wafting from window sills, time spent with family members in Memphis and beyond, being carted to church multiple times a week, to observing and experiencing abuse in their households. I will begin with a discussion of their childhood and adolescent experiences of identity in which the respondents described incidents that greatly impacted the ways that they perform their identities. I will then report the ways that women negotiated privacy and disclosure as an adult with an emphasis on the workplace context. Finally, I will begin to interpret the research findings and try to make some sense of the complex social worlds that the respondents navigate due to their multiple and complex identities.

Who the F@\$% likes Pantyhose?: Navigating Gender Expectations and Pressures

I encountered many differing reactions when I began each interview with questions about the respondents' childhoods. When I asked general questions about childhoods, respondents often began their description of their self as a child by telling me about their performed gender identity. For many of the respondents, their childhoods were shaped by their experiences of having their gender identity policed by individuals in their lives. I found that respondents had complex gender identities that often blurred the assumed dichotomies between male and female. While some women shared stories of feeling that their physical body did not match the gender of their inner self, others shared their navigation of gender policing from individuals in their lives. I met a woman named Wendy⁴, a 26-year-old graduate student in the education field, who grew up in what she perceived to be a lower-middle class to middle class neighborhood and moved to a suburb in Memphis as an adult. She talked to me extensively about her experiences with

¹ In line with conventional research practices, all names included in these accounts have been changed to protect the identities of the respondents.

gender as a child and described how she navigated having a physical gender identity that did not match the gender that she identified with.

Claudia: When you were a kid, do you remember ever being aware of or noticing your sexuality?

Wendy: No, that never entered my mind. As a kid, I felt like and believed that I was a straight person...just not a girl. Straight wasn't even in my head either. It was like I liked girls and I felt like I wasn't a girl. So gay or straight, I wasn't aware of those terms, I just remember doing boyish things and when I did sexual boyish things, it was always with a girl. I knew I was a girl but in my head I wanted to be a boy. I pretended to be a boy, did make believe, pretended to have a girlfriend. I imagined myself sometimes with no breast and a penis.

As a child, Wendy had a complex understanding of her gender identity that included distinction between the gender that she identified with and the gender that she performed.

Before I could ask her to further describe to me what boyish things were, she said:

Wendy: Now of course you're going to ask me how I knew what boyish things were. I knew from my Aunts and uncles, and my dad and mom, and mostly from the women in my life. I knew that there were things that girls did and things that boys did and I liked to do the things that boys did. Stuff like sports and pretending that I had a girlfriend. I didn't want to do the girly things because... I mean I liked playing with dolls... It was cool when I would go over two of my closest female cousins' houses and play with their stuff for a little, but at my home I wanted video games.

Even though she mentioned that her uncles and dad also played a role in teaching her the expected roles of her gender, she noted that the women in her life played an integral role in shaping the way she performed her gender. Through her experiences she learned the expectations of her gender, what spaces were safe spaces to perform "girl things" but also which spaces were safe to perform "boy things." Through learning the expectations for her gender identity during childhood, she was able to perform the expected gender identity in order to bypass the chastisements of her parents and other individuals in her life. She learned that by performing the gender in "public" spaces, she could avoid the

corrections of her mom and aunts. She was able to perform the gender identity that she identified with (male) through activities (i.e. video games, football, and “pretending to be a boy”) in the “comfort” of their own home. I use comfort in quotation marks because many of the respondents said that their parents and/or siblings also policed their gender in the home. Still, most respondents expressed that home was the only place that they felt was a private space. Like Wendy, other respondents reported a propensity for “boyish things.” Victoria identified more with being male as a child than with being female and described the ways that she was taught the expectations of her gender.

Claudia: Tell me about you when you were in elementary school.

Victoria: I had a very smart mouth because I grew up with a lot of sisters and brothers but I got my lesson. When I was in kindergarten, my teacher caught me standing over the stool peeing like a boy. She called and told my mom on me and I got a good whooping for that, of course. But I was a little tomboy.

Claudia: When your teacher called your mom, what did your mom say?

Victoria: She was like you ain’t no boy. I know you wanna be a little boy... a lil tomboy but don’t be doing that or I’m gonna’ beat your ass. She beat my ass and I still did it again and again and again and again.

The experience that Victoria described led to punishment through the institution of the school by having her mother called by her teacher, and in her home, through her physical punishment and reprimand from her mother. This was one of many incidents that she described to me in which family members policed her gender identity throughout her childhood and into adulthood. Unlike Wendy, who utilized the experiences of having her gender policed to avoid getting reprimanded for displaying “boyish” behaviors, Victoria continued to be punished for those behaviors. These incidents of being punished for their non-normative gender behaviors are in line with the theory of *compulsive heterosexuality*. This theory posits that any non-normative gender identities or sexualities are policed and sanctioned. Due to compulsive heterosexuality, the normative assumption is that

individuals are heterosexual until proven otherwise, and that acts of dominance and violence can be utilized as methods of sanctioning those who do not possess normative identities (Rich 1980). In many of the lives of the women that I talked to, in spite of their gender presentation as an adult, they discussed experiences during which their expression of gender was policed or corrected, often in public.

In “Doing Gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987), the authors described the ways that gender as a category, while seemingly natural, is ingrained through repeated social processes that promote heterosexuality as the norm and negatively sanctions other gender presentations or sexuality that do not fit this model. Other respondents shared similar experiences to Wendy and Victoria in which their gender identity was policed, either in explicit or implicit ways, by other Black women in their lives. Many respondents shared understandings of the expectations for their gendered behaviors and talked about their means of navigating those expectations in ways that allowed them to preserve their inner selves. One of them told me, “I had this stereotypical script for how I grew up. I mean they (her parents) didn’t drill it in to me, but it was like I know these are the steps you are supposed to go through.” The knowledge of this script and the steps required to navigate within it, in one sense, could be interpreted as detrimental to their identity due to limiting the ways and contexts in which they could share their “true” gender identities. However, like Wendy, many of the women were able to use their knowledge of “the script” as Katherine called it, in order to create space for the expression of their true identity. While Katherine identified as “masculine of center” and Victoria identified as a “stud” (I will spend more time engaging the implications of these self-identified masculine identities in

a later section), the majority of these women, regardless of their gender presentation as an adult, shared similar experiences with respect to gender.

Many respondents reported feeling confined by gender expectations and wanting more expansive forms of gender to account for their gender presentation. When I asked Wendy about how she navigated the gender expectations, she leaned back, stroked her chin and paused for a second. Then she said:

Wendy: If you ask me now as a 26-year-old woman I'm going to say that what I was doing was a natural part of life. For everybody? No, but for a lot of people yeah. What I mean by natural is that for me natural means everything... It doesn't mean this one set of ideas. What's natural for one person may not be natural for another person and that's perfectly fine. So me as a 26-year-old woman, I know now that that was natural behavior. It's not just a "boy" thing... (long pause) I also feel like I changed as well. I don't know where the thoughts went or how it occurred. Its just that the older I got those thoughts were pushed to the back. It wasn't something I didn't think about. I didn't think about being with a woman. I didn't think about being a boy. It was like that as a child and the older I got, in my opinion the more conditioned I got, those thoughts just started to mellow.
Claudia: How were you conditioned?

Wendy: How our society conditions females and males. Like if that's a boy you go to this department and if it's a girl you go to that department. It's amazing that in all of this biology we never considered the mental because the truth is that there shouldn't be boy or girl or man or woman. There should just be male and female and who ever falls in between or closer to one or closer to the other. But as they grow older they can choose. So you get rid of the girl/boy or the woman/man. For example when you go into the women's bathroom, you're going into the women's bathroom from the time you are a baby until the time that you understand that it is a women's bathroom to the time that you continue to go after knowing that it is a women's bathroom so therefore you are a woman. It's what society sends you. It's the messages that you receive. At that moment you are then a boy or you are then a girl and that's how you go about your life. Whether we learn that consciously or subconsciously we do learn that.

In this excerpt, Wendy called for the abolition of gender roles to achieve more expansive understandings of self. Although she asserted that the man and woman genders should be eliminated altogether, she still organized the "new," less restrictive gender system,

around the same genders that she described as constricting. She, like many respondents, found that the process of gendering, or socializing individuals into their perceived gender at birth, did not allow individuals to mature and have agency in the ways that they choose to identify. I also noted that respondents seemed to be hyper-aware of the processes involved in creating gendered identities.

Signs of Difference: Fitting or not Fitting In

Many of the respondents described, abstractly or concretely, feeling different from their peers. Katherine, a 30-year-old graduate student in the humanities, shared similar sentiments about her gender identity being different from others. Katherine also highlighted the women in her life, particularly her mother, as being particularly influential in socializing her with regards to her gender. According to Katherine,

Katherine: I'll tell you about the time that I started noticing my difference, with regards to my peers. So I knew what I liked and what I didn't like but I started noticing the differences between myself and my female friends around the age of ten. I noticed that my friends had crushes on the little boys and the boys had crushes on the girls. When I noticed that, hell I had crushes on the same people that my guy friends had crushes on. That's when it hit me that I was different but I didn't have a word for it. I just knew that that there was something different about me. I also implicitly knew, well not knew but felt. That I couldn't share that because I didn't see anyone else expressing the sentiments that I had. I grew up with a certain kind of script and there was nothing out there that I saw that matched what I felt.

Katherine's account of coming to terms with her "difference" was shaped by her understanding of the ways that she either met or did not meet the expectations associated with her gender. She came to *know* that she was not meeting those expectations through comparing her attraction to the attraction of her friends and peers. Since her attraction is different from that of her friends, she chose to not disclose the ways that she was

different from her friends after observing their behaviors and discerning the expectations of normalized adolescent attraction.

Many of the respondents used terms such as “different,” “loner,” or “didn’t fit in” to describe their social engagement with peers as kids. These descriptions of isolation punctuated many of the interviews. Wendy also described thinking of herself as different, and how the feelings of “not fitting in” contributed to her ability to bond with other individuals.

Claudia: You mentioned switching schools a few times when you were in elementary school. That’s an interesting experience.

Wendy: Yeah. I mean for me I was always cool with a few people but I never really bonded to a place or bonded to a person. So to pick up and leave I guess it’s abnormal (pause) but it didn’t negatively affect me because I was never attached to a place. I mean it was weird changing schools and stuff like that but a lot of times growing up...I never felt like I fit in. It wasn’t in a bad way because I never felt abused or mistreated or bullied. I never went without friends or hanging out. I just never got this sense of this is my place in the world so to pick up and leave would have been nothing.

After moving to a new elementary school four times, she did not feel bonded to other individuals at any of these institutions. She attributes her lack of bonds with others to her “not fitting in” with her peers. Many of the respondents mentioned “isolation,” “not fitting in,” “being different,” “feeling older,” or “being more mature” than their peers throughout their childhood. The reasons they gave as to the source of their difference varied.

I met a respondent named Kyle at her home in east Memphis who talked extensively about feeling more mature than her peers. Kyle is a 22-year-old woman who lives with her parents. She is an Engineering student, who is currently on break from school because she can’t afford to pay off the balance she owes in tuition. She recalled

many times in her childhood during which she had friendships with individuals much older than her. “Everybody that I hung out with was older than me. Everybody,” she repeated several times during the duration of the interview. Kyle’s groups of friends throughout her childhood were usually about three to four years older than her, at least in her estimation. She attributed this to experiences in church. When she was eleven or twelve years old she was placed in the advanced Sunday School class with teenagers who were 16 and 17 years old. These individuals became her peers and she was often around them. She attributed her difference to her maturity and the lack of time spent with peers in her own age group. Because she wasn’t around individuals of her own age group, she didn’t feel as though she belonged with them. When she spoke about why she considered herself different, Katherine expressed not having the language to describe her difference as a child but through “knowing” of this difference.

I interpreted these feelings of difference and maturity as being connected. These two descriptions of self often appeared together, as in the women who described their selves as different or not fitting in often also described their selves as mature or older than their peers. I believe that this connection was due to the experiences of having their gender policed. Once an individual was policed regarding their gender, they reported becoming more aware of what actions were acceptable and which actions were not. The respondents’ gender identities caused them to carefully select who they could “be their selves” around and to learn to discern what situations were not safe to share the fullness of their identity.

All About Race...Or Not: Race and Class Identity in the lives of Black Lesbians

When I began this work, I anticipated that the respondents' racial identity would shape and influence the ways they respond to discrimination and oppression, and therefore influence the ways that Black queer women in Memphis negotiate their identities. What I found was that the respondents had many differing positions about the ways that race shaped and influenced their lives. For some of the respondents, race was present, in that they lived in majority Black neighborhoods and attended majority Black schools, but they did not view their race as structuring or impacting the occurrences in their day-to-day lives. Still, other respondents reported race as deeply meaningful to their understandings of self and the economic realities that they experienced. Katherine described to me the process of becoming "racially aware" which she took to mean cognizant of the racial history of Memphis, the socioeconomic trends in Memphis with regards to segregation, class, and social mobility.

Katherine: My folks were very intentional with making sure we were racially aware. So ya know, this is your history, this is your background, this is Memphis history, and this is how it impacts your options in life and the decisions that we are making.

Claudia: You said they taught you to be racially aware. That stands out to me. What did teaching their kids to be racially aware look like?

Katherine: I guess one of my favorite examples was not reading me fairy tales. There was no Snow White in my house. There was no Cinderella, we had "The People Could Fly". That was the book he read to us. We had these little mini books about figures in different figures in Black history. Like we had a book about Matthew Henson the explorer and that was commonplace in my home. We had little books about, not just Malcolm and Martin (Luther King) and (Rosa) Parks, but about Matthew Henson and Althea Gibson. So we could have a different picture of what Blackness looks like with regards to achievement because they knew we wouldn't get exposed to that...I mean our dentist was Black. Our physicians were Black. They wanted us to see ourselves reflected in the world so there was never a question about who we were or who we could be.

Katherine's experiences are in line with some of the respondents who considered race to structure and greatly impact their lived experiences. I called this group the "racially aware" group because they emphasized the salience of race in their experiences. I do not believe that any of these groups are independent of each other and many of the women do not fall neatly into one category. I use these groups to show the many different ways that queer Black women involved in this study conceptualize their race and class respectively and the intersections of race and class in their lives. For Katherine, race was something that was "taught" explicitly to her and her siblings. She stressed that many of the lessons she learned about race were shaped by her parent's middle class status. Her father was a police officer and military veteran, and her mother was a nurse. Since her mother worked nights, her father was able to take her and her siblings throughout the city to teach them the racial history of Memphis, which was conveyed to Katherine as both structurally rooted and ingrained in the day-to-day interactions between individuals:

Claudia: When you went out into other areas of the city. What did that look like?

Katherine: When we would go to certain areas in the city, as a child, daddy would say, "When white flight happened, these are the areas they populated" and he would show us. Like this is what it looks like. He would say, "If we go to the store here, pay attention. Pay attention to how people look at you. Pay attention to how they respond to me". Because my dad is six-two and at his largest he was somewhere between two hundred sixty-five pounds. He was a big guy. He would do that even when we would go to his job at the police station and at 201 Poplar. He'd say, "Pay attention to who is walking in this courtroom and why." We were little kids.

As a child and during adolescence, these lessons on race and the impact of race on individuals shaped the ways that Katherine interpreted the world. I found the lessons of observation particularly interesting. As her father would go on with his day-to-day activities, he would have her observe individuals, particularly white individuals, to make

note of the ways that they responded to him as a “big,” Black, man. She learned of race as something that was both ingrained in the structures of the city, through segregation and gentrification, but also ingrained in the ways that individuals spoke with one another, interact with each other, and interpret one another. Integral to her racial identity are 1) the belief that racism is both structural and interpersonal, 2) that there are nuances in the ways that people interact with each other that can allow you to dissect the underpinnings of social interactions, and 3) that there are aspects of your life that you “know” but do not act on. When observing other individuals during interactions with her dad, they would be unaware that they were being watched. This allowed her to dissect these social interactions in order to discern the ways that race, gender, and class interacted in social interactions.

Katherine was the only woman that I interviewed who reported explicit lessons on race and racial issues. Many of the respondents who reported race as a structuring sphere of their lives gleaned their lessons about race, which more often than not included lessons about class, through observation as well. I met Angelica at a small café in Memphis. Angelica was a tall woman, with a bold presence that complemented her height. Upon entering our meeting place she pointed to me and said “You” as if we were old friends encountering each other after a long absence. Upon meeting her, her smile was as noticeable as her height, warm and affirming. She is 39 years old and works in the education field, or “on the brink” as she joked with me about the impending fortieth birthday. Angelica used very explicit language to talk about the ways that she understood race and class. As a child, she attended a boarding school in the northeast, and compared her observations of race and class in Memphis with her experiences of class elsewhere:

Claudia: What about Memphis made you feel as though you couldn't come back?

Angelica: The people in my family who had gone to college. I really looked up to them. All women. But they came back to Memphis and their lives didn't look very different from what their lives looked like before. I mean they had money and jobs that the generation before didn't but they were still in church all the time and doing all these things. I just wanted something different. I just felt like there had to be something else out there. They were in unhappy relationships or they were single moms. It was just like I don't want this life. I looked around at Memphis. There were these things that were going on television and the world and they weren't happening to anybody that I knew. There were places in Memphis that we never went. I looked at maps and was like "what's all of this?" I didn't really understand class and race as separate. I conflated them all under race until my sophomore year when I met a Black girl who was rich. Her father drove a Rolls Royce and she was dropped off at school with designer luggage. I was like what the hell is that. That was when I really started to understand class. For the most part, for me, it was all about race.

Claudia: Did you ever think of class and race in that way when you were in Memphis?

Angelica: In Memphis, it was all about race...Black people are poor. White people are rich. White people live off somewhere that Black people can't go. You never see them unless they are somewhere in charge of you. They have all of the power. You have none of the power.

Like Wendy, Angelica looked to the Black women in her life as models to approximate what she, a young black girl, would be capable of accomplishing. While these women modeled educational advancement through their bachelor's degrees, when compared with what women were able to accomplish in other places, she felt that their advancement was stagnated by the racial and socioeconomic barriers in Memphis that prevented women from achieving what she felt she could successfully achieve elsewhere. For Angelica, her aunts and cousins transgressed the achievement expectations of Black women, and so as a Black girl, she felt that she observed the maximum potential of Black women in the context of Memphis. In her description of the racial dynamics of Memphis, Angelica discussed the ways that sharp dichotomies existed in Memphis: black/white, poor/rich, allowed space/not allowed space, and powerless/powerful. When she was outside of the

Memphis context and was able to compare the levels of achievement and potential of Black women in Memphis with the levels of achievement of women in other places, she felt that she could move beyond the level of achievement of the Black women in her life by being outside of the “confines” of Memphis. The ways in which the Memphis context limited the achievement of people of color generally, and Black women more specifically, were deeply influenced by the intersections of race and class.

Class was often the first aspect of the respondents identity explicitly mentioned during interviews. A majority of these women identified as middle-class and mentioned what they considered to be signifiers of the middle class lifestyle, such as one of the respondents mentioning that her father owned a Fiat. A woman I spoke with named Samantha, a 39-year-old non-profit organizer, described her middle class identity by stating aspects of her life that she viewed as signifying her middle class status:

Samantha: Initially I would say we had a kind of thriving middle class lifestyle. We lived in a two flat and my father was the janitor of the building so we were living there but we were making money off the building. Then we got a house and my daddy had a Fiat. My mom came from a middle class family too. My grandfather worker for general motors and he owned a cab and he put her through theological seminary. He straight from Collierville and she was from close by. My grandparents are part of that generation of the great migration to northern cities and they were able to do well. We had mother and father. We had a nice home. I remember we had birds and fish and it was really nice. We even had a tomato patch.

She viewed these as characteristics explaining her middle class status; however, the ways in which she understood herself as middle class were connected to the racialized history of her grandparents. She viewed her middle class status as connected to the actions of her grandparents who migrated to a major Midwestern city during the Great Migration in order to find better jobs and opportunities outside of the South. In her account, the class

of her grandparents contributed to the class of her parents, which in turn influenced the neighborhoods in which she lived. Even though she did not consider all of the neighborhoods she lived in to be middle-class, she continued to identify as such in part due to the legacy of middle class status in her family. Like Samantha, many respondents had complex reasons for identifying with a particular class and those reasons often intersected with race and gender.

All of the respondents reported growing up in areas that were majority black. Although only two of them attended private schools, which were described as having mixed racial make-ups, the majority of the women attended public schools throughout their schooling experiences that were mostly made up of African-American and Latino students. While other respondents described the racial composition of their schools and neighborhoods, mostly majority Black, there were some individuals that did not view race as structuring occurrences in their life. I call these women the node-race⁵ group because they do not view race as having direct impact on their lives. Some of the respondents reported noticing the segregation in Memphis, either directly or indirectly through acknowledging the lack of race/class diversity in their neighborhoods. A young woman I talked to named Ashley, who was a 19 year old student who worked two full time jobs, viewed class as structuring her experiences as a child and young adult, and talked about the ways that she came to know class as a child:

Claudia: What was the make-up of your neighborhood growing up?

Ashley: Black. We lived in the hood. We had the biggest house in the neighborhood and we knew er'body.

Claudia: When did you start thinking of your neighborhood that way?

² Node race is a short for no definitive race. These women did not explicitly or definitively describe race as structuring their life experiences.

Ashley: Middle school was when I realized. We moved and I thought back and was like oh my God we lived in the hood! I didn't know that the lady that used to come clean our house was a crackhead. We stayed in the hood.

Claudia: What about moving to the new place made you feel like the previous place was the hood?

Ashley: Because I didn't see a lot of crackheads anymore. We moved to some apartments in the North Memphis* area. It wasn't any broke beer bottles on the sidewalks and cigarettes between the cracks. I ain't have nobody ask me for a quarter when I walked to the store.

Although she described herself as middle-class in the interview, Ashley, like many of the respondents that I spoke with, described the ways that they learned their class identities.

As with gender identities, the respondents learned of their perceived class, and the classes of other individuals that they encountered, through the process of observation of class signifiers in their communities. Ashley noted the appearance of litter and the presence of individuals believed to be drug addicts or homeless in her community as markers of the community's class. The way in which she determined her class identity was by the way she interpreted the class of her community. In Ashley's community she described generations and generations of individuals, mostly Black, growing up in the same houses that were passed down through generations. In this sense, she was aware that the people who lived in what she described as "the hood," had multiple generations of Black families who, unlike her family and other families she mentioned, were able to move out of this area to areas described as middle class communities. When I would ask the women in this group if they viewed phenomenon in their lives as influenced by race, they would respond with answers like "no" or "I don't think race has anything to do with it". Despite growing up in a community that was majority Black, Ashley, like the other women in the node-race group, viewed class as shaping their lived experiences and the opportunities afforded to them more so than race.

Neither of these groups completely cover the perceptions of race and class by the respondents, but regardless of which group the women belonged to with respect to their raced and classed understandings, they all viewed their race and class as being shared by those in their communities. Due to the difficulties of locating a population like queer Black women, and as part of the outcomes of utilizing snowballing as a method of locating potential subjects, I was unable to interview any women who identified as lower class. I did not collect class information from the women outside of the scope of the interview, so it is possible that some of these women who identified as middle class did so because of cultural ties and less so because of their socioeconomic class position. The tendency of these women to identify as middle-class could be worthy of in-depth inquiry in itself since statistics show that individuals who are Black, queer, and women are likely to have to navigate economic obstacles related to their marginalized race, gender, and sexual identities. Despite the particulars of their socioeconomic realities, the majority of the respondents referred to their class identity as shaped by and connected to the perceived class of individuals in their lives. They viewed their class as shaped and influenced by the class of those around them.

Coming Into Sexuality: Negotiating Sexual Preference, Identity, and Disclosure

As stated earlier, the closet has been criticized as the primary organizing pillar of queer sexual identity. Part of the motivation to conduct this work was to better understand the ways that Black, queer, women in the South navigate their sexual identities. In line with much of the research that has been conducted on the sexuality identity of individuals with multiple or layered identities, the women that I spoke with had complex histories with their sexual identities, but also varied in how they identified sexually or if they identified with any sexual label at all. The following section will review the ways that respondents navigated their sexual identities and ways that these identities are influenced by their experiences of other identities.

Lessons in Identity: Managing Queer Identity into Adulthood

Many of the respondents reported that they had queer women in their lives at a young age. Whether the woman was a childhood friend, member of the community, or member of their college community, many women had interactions with, or at minimum observations of queer women in their communities and were able to analyze the way that they were treated in different contexts. Katherine shared with me the story about the first person that she encountered that showed signs of same-sex desire:

Katherine: At age 12, I had a friend who talked to me about her feelings. She used to write stories all the time, wonderful stories. She said she wanted me to read something. So I'm reading the story and it was, I kid you not, erotica about TLC. I'm like who the f*ck is writing erotica at age 12, hell I had never even read it before. The more shocking part for me was that it was erotica, not the part that it had two women that were involved which each other, so I was like Oh. That was me realizing that she was sharing something deeply personal with me and for the first time I didn't feel alone. I was like okay so there is someone else like me, but I didn't tell her at the time. Eventually, it got out. She had a sleepover and one of the girls found her journal and shared it with a room full of the other girls. I cussed 'em all clean out. I did. It was such a complete violation of her privacy. She was crying... crying mad in the other room and I sat with her. They were calling her gay.

Claudia: So when they read the story, it had to do with two women being together?

Katherine: Uh huh. And we got back to school the following Monday, it of course it spread like wildfire. She was ostracized...they also teased her about that...cruely. So that incident taught me a couple of things. I went home and looked up gay in the dictionary...It was coldly factual so there was nothing that seemed positive or seemed safe about it. I looked in the encyclopedia as well and same thing, but there was nothing affirming. Which it's the dictionary it's not supposed to damn affirm you.

Claudia: But you didn't have that anywhere else. The affirmation.

Katherine: Yeah and where am I hearing anything about these people. I'm like these people are hidden from view

Claudia: Gay people you mean?

Katherine: Yeah and I saw how the one gay person I knew was being treated. So I didn't say anything...I had a word for it now but I still had a certain kind of context but I didn't say anything about it.

Unlike Katherine, who as a "loaner" and did not share this aspect of her identity with others, her friend confided in her that she had thoughts about same-sex attraction. This experience exposed her to the possibility that other individuals with same sex attraction could exist, while allowing her to protect her own thoughts and feelings around being attracted to women. She bonded with her friend through attraction that she shared without disclosing that she also had feelings for women. After seeing a friend's privacy violated and her inner feelings and thoughts disclosed with other individuals without her permission, Katherine committed to keeping her sexual identity, or what she knew of it at that time, to herself. Although she sympathized for her friend and advocated for her amongst other students, she did not want her privacy breeched by sharing information she understood to be private. She also feared the ramifications of being associated with a non-normative sexuality and witnessed the harsh social sanctions of an individual who was labeled "gay". Very few of the respondents reported hearing any queer identities other than gay and reported that "gay" was often used as a catchall term used to delineated a non-normative gender presentations or non-normative sexual behaviors. The

term “gay” was used the majority of the time by the women in the interviews, in spite of their often complex sexual identity labels.

The experience of witnessing the negative treatment of “gay” individuals was common for the respondents that I spoke with. Very few of them reported not encountering at least one other individual during their maturation into an adult who identified or was classified by other individuals as gay. Ashley also reported multiple instances during which she observed conflicting treatment of gay individuals at her school and in her community. During her childhood, when she reported “staying in the hood,” a masculine identified lesbian and her feminine identified partner were a part of the community. While she was young at the time, she shared playing with the daughter of the lesbian couple and that the couple often attended community events. She described their neighborhood as close-knit and did not recall witnessing any negative experiences with regard to their sexuality. According to Ashley, “she was just like everybody else” and was treated with respect to her identity and her privacy about her identity. Ashley associated living in a lower-class neighborhood with having more interaction and strong ties between neighbors who in her estimation had likely lived in the neighborhood throughout their lives and potentially their parents’ lives as well. For her, the class of the neighborhood, and the respect given to individuals in the community were at least connected.

Despite observing a queer woman and her family accepted into the community as a child, her adolescence was punctuated by witnessing her close friend struggle with the exposure of her sexual identity:

Ashley: My best friend in high school was a lesbian. She took a long time to tell me because I guess she thought I was gone judge her but when she

told me I didn't care. I was raised in a family where we don't judge people. We just love everybody. When she told me I didn't care. She thought I would stop being her friend but I loved her more.

Claudia: How was it for your best friend?

Ashley: Her girlfriend went to a different school. When she would tell me about her she would say "him." She would show me pictures and I would say he's so cute, and it was a girl the whole time. She was a stud too so you know she dressed as a boy. I'm like your boyfriend is really cute. He had this long hair so when she told me I was like I knew he was just too pretty (laughs). He was just too cute. Our relationship didn't change but I was the only one who knew for a long time until she started dating a girl at our school. You know in high school kids are so mean and rude. She tried to keep their relationship between just them but it got out and the school was talking about it. And me as her best friend, I was drug into the rumors as well. I mean I tried to keep our relationship the same, which I did but I'm still like it's too much dick out here to be gay, hell naw. But for her it was kinda difficult for a couple months then everybody forgot about it.

Claudia: What would people say?

Ashley: Well you know they would eat lunch together and sit real close and lean on each other so people start saying oh my god are they gay? You know then I would get the questions too like is your friend gay and I would say I don't know. Ask her. That's really none of your business. Kids are just so rude.

Ashley witnessed her friend being sanctioned in the school through gossip and teasing.

Although her friend wanted to keep her relationship private, students were able to "discover" that she was in a romantic relationship and that the relationship was with another girl. In addition to witnessing these sanctions, the rumors about her friend's sexuality lead to rumors about her sexuality. She was sanctioned for merely associating with the stigmatized individual and received questions about the sexual identity of her friend. Very few women, however, discussed observing positive experiences with queer women. For many of the respondents, their interactions with queer women were shaped by experiences of witnessing prejudice, "teasing", "outing," and other forms of mistreatment. After describing her family's treatment of queer individuals, Samantha said,

“I just didn’t to tell anybody I didn’t want anybody to judge because it just wasn’t cool to be gay. It ain’t never been cool really to be gay unless you around other gay people. Then I wasn’t necessarily comfortable saying I was gay. It wasn’t like I ever not wanted men. Ever. It wasn’t ever about that. I like men. Women were always secondary. It was always this sneaky kind of quiet thing that nobody ever knew about. I like to keep it that way.”

From her personal experiences observing the treatment of queer people in her communities, she extrapolated that identifying as gay was not acceptable and that doing so would result in negative outcomes. In addition to the stigma placed on the identity of being gay, many women described a lack of language surrounding their sexual identity. Most of the women used the term “gay” to describe all other sexuality outside of heterosexuality. Because Samantha felt attraction to men, she felt uncomfortable about identifying as gay, especially in light of the negative treatment and breach of privacy that could result from identifying as such.

The narratives from respondents’ experiences with queer individuals before they became adults shaped the ways that they perceived the treatment of gay individuals. Although there were positive experiences shared during interviews, the overwhelming sentiment from respondents was that they witnessed the negative treatment of gay people or experienced sanctioning in their own families of gay identity. These experiences greatly shaped and impacted the ways that respondents experienced their sexual identity. Although I hesitate to over emphasize this aspect of their experience as individuals with multiple identities, I expect that witnessing or experiencing discrimination or mistreatment of gay people impacted the expression of their sexual identity lead to increased privacy and lower levels of disclosure in the lives of the women that I talked with.

Privacy was a central concern for many of the respondents involved in the study. In order to shield themselves from potential mistreatment or invasion of privacy, many women shared that they performed stereotypical gender presentation in order to explore their sexuality without the gaze of those who questioned them. Angelica described creating a “pretend” boyfriend to fit in with her female peers while in school. She modeled her behavior based on that of another Black girl at her school that was in her grade who had a boyfriend. According to Angelica,

“It was easy because I knew that there was no way it could happen. It was fun to talk about. Everybody’s fascinated by the good, smart girl who likes bad boys. It was a good story, and I completely let it happen.

Claudia: When you say those types of behaviors, are you referring to the boy crazy behaviors?

Angelica: Mmhmm. I was completely performing it. I didn’t give a damn about him. There was this other black girl who was from Michigan. She had this guy and he was real and she was really in a relationship with him. And I just kind of learned from her what it was that I was supposed to be doing.”

Because she didn’t confirm the dating expectations for a young girl of her age, Angelica, and several of the women that I talked to shared experiences in which they pretended to have a boyfriend and/or fashioned a “made-up” boyfriend to avoid the invasion of peers, family members, or other significant individuals in their lives. The process of learning to meet expectations was a common theme for some of the respondents. They described observing the behaviors of girls who did not have to undergo scrutiny about their private life, usually girls in their age group who reported having boyfriends, and found ways to mimic their behavior. As children, and in many cases into adolescence, many women expressed learning that they could perform a particular gendered subjectivity in order to avoid the questions that often accommodated a lack of investment in the opposite sex. The sexual identity of the women who reported using this strategy varied from lesbian, to

bisexual, to resisting identification, but Angelica's narrative was representative of the stories that I received from these women about the ways that they managed pressures to conform to gendered expectations and by virtue of the implications of the gendered expectations, sexual expectations as well. Like many women, Angelica learned from her observation of women in her life how to perform her gender identity in a way that did not require further inquiry or probing by others.

Probing, questions, and other forms of inquiry were common experiences amongst the women that I spoke with. "Are you gay?" was a common phrase that women were approached with during their maturation into adolescence and adulthood. The majority of the women, especially the women who reported gender nonconformity in during their childhood or adulthood, reported negotiating the amount of knowledge that even their friends perceived to be close friends knew about their romantic lives. Wendy told me about times during college while she was in a relationship with her first girlfriend, when she would change the name of her girlfriend in her phone to one that was more masculine and would use male pronouns to describe her girlfriend to her friends.

According to Wendy:

Claudia: Why didn't you tell your friends?

Wendy: Yeah. I just didn't want them to freak out. I didn't want them to be weirded out. I didn't know how they felt about it so I didn't tell them. Now I didn't hide anything from anyone...well I'm lying. When I went home on break, I would change names in my phone to a guy's name.

Claudia: Your girlfriend's name?

Wendy: Yeah

Claudia: Why would you do that?

Wendy: Because I was texting a lot, talking on the phone a lot. They would always be peeking over trying to see who or like "Dang you talking on the phone a lot. Who you talking to?" So I would just like you know...okay I couldn't be talking to a girl this much or you'd disown me.

Wendy, like many respondents, expected to have her privacy invaded because she was already labeled, albeit as a child and young adolescent, as having a non-normative gender embodiment. The potential threat of invasion with respect to their privacy and levels of disclosure led the women I talked to become hyperaware of others knowledge about their private lives. As I discussed earlier, more affiliations with people of their own racial group contribute to well-being and one's ability to reject negative representations of Black people (Lee and Ahn 2013). While these women were affiliated with members of their own racial group, they experienced forms of social distance from those in their communities because they strategically distanced themselves through misdirection and other efforts to protect their privacy regarding their sexual identities. Wendy chose to not disclose her sexuality because of fears of rejection and of not being accepted by her friends, family, and community.

While Wendy was away at college she went through a process of embracing her identity outside the gaze of family, friends, and the communities that she grew up in and without the pressures to conform to expected gender normalities. Although many women described negative experiences surrounding sexuality in their communities, in this instance Wendy offers that she was unsure about her friends' stances on sexuality. This uncertainty was supplemented by fears of not being accepted by her community of friends. Like Wendy, other respondents talked about the uncertainty of the responses from their family and/or friends about their sexuality. In spite of the potential that family members could be accepting, as was exhibited in Ashley's community growing up, many women erred on the side of caution with respect to their sexuality and those who shared their burgeoning curiosity or identity with their families were met with scrutiny and

disapproval. A 23-year-old bisexual woman that I spoke with named Jerrica talked about how her mother and all of the women in her family sanctioned her severely after she shared questioning her sexuality as a teenager:

Jerrica: I believe I was 14. That was when I first looked at a girl's butt and I told my mom about it. I wasn't dating a girl and I hadn't done anything with a girl. I just told her I thought that I was attracted to women. That's when they sat me down and said I was gone go to hell and God don't like that and a whole lot of stuff.

C: They being your mom and?

J: My mom, my sister, my auntie. She felt like she had to call everybody.

C: What made you feel you could tell your mom?

J: Cause it's my mom and I couldn't stop looking. I thought I was crazy or that something was wrong with me. I had to tell her and she knew when something was going on with me...but I wish I wouldn't have told her because they started treating me different. She wouldn't even drink out of my cup anymore.

Jerrica considered her mother to be a safe person within the sphere of the home with whom she could share personal issues. Her mother, who cited religion as central to her reasons, not only sanctioned her by not interacting with her in the same way, but she also told other women in the family about Jerrica's exploration of her attraction to women. According to Jerrica, the women in her family stopped talking to her or acknowledging her presence for two months. The social sanctioning from her family members compounded Jerrica's feelings that "something was wrong with "her or that she was" crazy. After this incident, she reported not "feeding into" her feelings with women until several years later.

Experiences such as Jerrica's, in which one would test the waters for disclosing their sexuality to family members, were often conflicting for the respondents. Some of them, like Ashley, tested the waters through joking or mentioning women in the popular culture. Ashley said to her mother, who has since passed away, "Mama look at that a*s."

While Ashley asserted that this was completely in a jovial context, I interpreted her actions in the context of what I have called “testing the waters” during which respondents discuss the sexuality of other individuals to test if disclosure in that context was safe and without the threat of a breach of privacy. In this sense of “sharing” information about their sexuality, Black queer women could tightrope walk the “line” between disclosing their identity and keeping the details of it hidden. This type of testing is also in line with racial socialization theory’s assertion that Black individuals are socialized to discern the level of safety in particular racial contexts. Studies have found that individuals who report higher levels of racial socialization (i.e. being taught explicit racial lessons or being prepared to encounter bias) are more likely to perceive racial discrimination than their counterparts with lower levels of racial socialization. These “testing” strategies appear to function both in the context of race and sexuality for the women that I talked to as a protective measure to shield them from potential discrimination whether it’s based on their race or sexuality. This response to discrimination or oppression is rooted in strategies learned during racial socialization and due to Black queer women experiences of heterosexism, they seem to also utilize these tools to resist sexuality based oppression as well.

Although the dichotomy between having one’s sexuality exposed and not having one’s sexuality exposed would seem clearly delineated through the accounts of respondents, many described instances where individuals claimed to “know” about their sexuality but did not openly discuss this information. Katherine talked to me about reuniting with a childhood friend and having her friend say “My mama was just asking me if Katherine finally came out yet”. In spite of her mother’s apparent suspicion that

Katherine was queer, the politics of southern respectability allowed her to interact with Katherine without asking details about her sexual preference, which would have been transgressing the boundaries of southern politeness. According to E. Patrick Johnson, the violent racial history present in the cultural landscape of the South is complemented by Southern folks' "gentility, civility, and general 'good manners'" (Johnson 2008). Black queer women in the South are raised in this socio-cultural context and like the Black gay men in Johnson's study, they also utilize culturally specific strategies to buffer the visibility/invisibility of their sexual identities. Johnson states,

"They were reared in the same country kitchens and on the same front porches as their heterosexual siblings, cousins, and extended family. They speak the same colorful language, eat the same artery-constricting food, and deploy the same passive-aggressive techniques to circumvent un-welcome or seemingly inappropriate questions by addressing everything but what was asked" (Johnson 2008:1).

These strategies of misdirection, redirection, and complete avoidance were in line with the methods described to me by respondents to avoid invasion of their privacy. While Katherine expressed that people like her friend's mother "knew" about her sexuality, the "impoliteness" of asking about a young person's sexuality or making assumptions about a young person's sexuality protected her from direct inquiries. While the notion that asking explicit questions about one's sexual identity is impolite is not unique to the South, the cultural context in which both hostility and gentility coexist provides a frame in which some subject matters are avoided or spoken about only within the parameters of politeness. Southerners often accept or "forgive" non-normative aspects of individuals' identities as long as those characteristics pose no threat to the established Southern social order (Johnson 2008). For many of my respondents, not posing a threat meant navigating

the complex tightrope of embodying their sexual identity without transgressing Southern rules about “polite” conversation and social expectations.

Some women reported much more serious instances in which their sexuality was disclosed. Kyle had her sexual identity told to her mother at the age of fifteen after leaving an abortion clinic. According to Kyle,

“She (her mother) knew different things. I think she knew way before anything. She knew the night I got an abortion. The guy who I was pregnant by blasted my best friend and told everybody she was gay, which was never the case. She called me crying and her mom said she had to pick her up from school because people were calling her gay. He called about being gay and I was like “Why are you calling me with this?” So he said, “Well, I’m going to call your mama.” You know, my mama was in the car, she had just went with me for the abortion. He called her while we were in the car. He told her “Did you know your daughter was gay.” She said, “Yeah I knew she was gay. Now what?” And we didn’t talk about it again. So she knew. She had to know. Even if she didn’t know. She found out that night, because he wanted to hurt me. So if she didn’t know before then. That night she knew. But she didn’t say anything till after I was grown.”

Experiences in which respondents were “outed” or accused of being gay were common.

Although respondents reported instances during which their sexual identity was disclosed to individuals, I found that particularly with the older Black women who were in their lives, this information was not discussed and there was often silence around sexuality afterwards. Although Kyle’s mother explicitly stated that she knew about Kyle’s sexual identity as “gay”, even though Kyle identified and continues to identify as a bisexual woman, she never mentioned or discussed this incident with Kyle. In addition to the silence around her sexuality, once it was disclosed to her mom, Kyle reported that when she shared her first relationship with a woman with her mother, that she asserted that she had never had any inklings with regards to Kyle’s sexuality. I use the term silence hesitantly, because in many of the instances where an individual had their identity shared

with a family member, either voluntarily or involuntarily, it was often followed by periods of not talking about sexuality or topics that could be viewed as sexual.

Respondents differed in whether they viewed the silence to be acceptance of their sexuality or a method of limiting the spread of information about one's sexuality.

You Can't Tell Er'body Your Business: Privacy & Disclosure in Adulthood

The title of this section came from a sentiment expressed by one of the respondents that often surfaced during interviews. Katherine echoed this sentiment while discussing whether individuals could visibly discern her sexuality:

Katherine: You absolutely could read it on me. It was there but it wasn't a question of like is this a tomboyish thing. It was pretty visible. It was apparent. But I don't carry myself in such a way that I'm open to questions. I didn't mind if they assume it because it's true but my private life is not up for discussion. It's not that I have a problem with it but I just have a problem with invasiveness of all kinds.

The strategy described in this quote is quite representative of the general attitude of respondents toward sharing information about their private lives. As a masculine of center lesbian, or one who identifies with masculinity but also identifies as a woman, Katherine's appearance often caused individuals to question her sexuality. However, the feminine appearing queer women that I spoke with described similar sentiments about their identity. For these women, shielding their lives from the invasion of others, protects them from intrusiveness but allows them to manage the amount of knowledge that individuals were allowed to discover about them. While this strategy was particularly relevant to their levels of disclosure with regards to sexuality, the general attitude of the respondents about all aspects of their lives classified as "personal," "private," or "on a need-to-know basis" was that these bits of information were not open to the inquiry of others, especially within the context of the workplace. In earlier sections, I described the ways that women

negotiated levels of privacy and disclosure during their childhoods and adolescent periods to reduce the stigma of having a queer identity. Most of the women that I talked to described very specific strategies for managing the knowledge about their sexual identity at work. I will now provide a bit of context to frame the experiences respondents shared with me about their experiences in the workplace.

Like many LGBT individuals, I have never disclosed my sexual identity in a workplace context. According to a report on LGBT workers by ThinkProgress, over 4.3 million LGBT people live in states that do not have employment protections based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression (2013). In addition to the lack of anti-discrimination protections for LGBT individuals, 37% of LGBT adults have at least one child, with an estimated 19% of LGBT couples raising children. Of these families, LGBT individuals raising children, partnered, or married are twice as likely than their single LGBT counterparts to live near or below poverty levels. For Black LGBT individuals, who face dismal employment prospects due to the intersections of race and sexuality oppressions, the picture of LGBT life is further complicated with Black unemployment rates consistently twice that of rates for whites since 1954 (Desilver 2013). If the Black LGBT person happens to also be a woman, the picture becomes more dismal, as women make only \$0.77 to every male earned dollar (Walt, Proctor, and Smith 2013). When people occupy disadvantaged positions in race, gender, and sexual identity locations, the portrait becomes quite complicated for those who identify with more than one of these identities, specifically Black lesbians (Think Progress 2013; Disilver 2013, and Walt, Proctor, and Smith 2013).

Although Black LGBT women experience the intersections of multiple systems of oppression, little research has been done to examine the ways that they navigate the employment market in light of these experiences of inequality (Hughes and Dodge 1997; Hall, Everett, and Hamilton-Mason 2012; Perry, Harp, and Oser 2013). In spite of the lack of information about the particular experiences of Black LGBT women, scholars have recently examined the ways that the experiences of racism and sexism shape and negatively impact Black women's experiences in the workplace.

Black women experience individual stressors and social stressors caused by experiences of race and gender discrimination that further reinforce and recreate inequality (Perry, Harp, and Oser 2013; Meyer 2003; Pearlin 1999). Interpersonal and institutional discrimination are better predictors for job quality amongst Black women than other factors such as heavy workloads, poor supervision, and low task variety (Hughes and Dodge 1997). Because of occupational disadvantages due to systems of racism and sexism, Black women are more likely to experience high rates of unemployment, work in support roles with less opportunity for advancement, and be employed in less secure positions than men (Hughes and Dodge 1997). According to Hall et al. (2012), experiences of gender and race based discrimination are chronic stressors for Black women who are easily targeted, singled out, and treated differently by their colleagues. In addition to experiences of discrimination in the workplace, Black women also experience racism and sexism while on the job market (Brown and Keith 2003; Hughes and Dodge 1997). Scholars report that racism and sexism impact the occupations that Black women select, the income that they receive, and the benefits that they are given or not given in conjunction with the position (Brown and Keith 2003). At every

junction of the employment process, Black women's experiences of racism and sexism negatively impact their experiences and cause them additional emotional, mental, interpersonal, and institutional stressors. While the experiences of race-related stress, gender-related stress, and generic stress can be viewed separately, studies show that it is the intersection of these stressors that predicts distress for Black women in the workplace context (Hughes and Dodge 1997). It is in this context that the women involved in this study navigate their marginalized multiple identities in the workplace.

Of the women I spoke with, only two of them shared experiences that involved explicit disclosure of their sexual identities at work. I will discuss both of those situations and discern how I interpreted these instances. Angelica was the first person that I interviewed who talked about sharing her sexual identity in the workplace context. While we waited to be seated at the restaurant, she explained to me that she just could not figure out what experiences she could tell me about. "I have never had an issue with my sexuality," she said. "I have thought and thought about what I could share with you but it has honestly never been an issue for me." For Angelica, her experiences with race, gender, and class often eclipsed her experiences with sexuality in the workplace context. She talked to me extensively about struggling with the racialized interpretations of her gender in workplace contexts:

Angelica: I was a professor at Virginiaville* University. It was hell. It was horrible because it was racist, and sexist, and anti-intellectual. I never once had issues with my sexuality.

Claudia: So in a sense, your other identities...

Angelica: Completely trumped it. I was the first black faculty member ever in my department. I was the third black faculty member in the entire college...ever. The second Black faculty member was hired six months before me. Most of my classes were 100% white. I had students who had never ever ever ever had a Black person in a position of authority over them ever....I was a Black woman and my story is offensive to some

white people. I felt that pretty acutely in some of the responses I got. Quite frankly, one man actually yelled at me in a meeting for asking a question about my role. He yelled down the conference table, like foam...like his mouth was frothy because he was so angry, "Maybe you shouldn't be here at all...especially if you don't want to do the work" He was white. Now all I asked was what is my role so that I can do my job and your response is I shouldn't be here at all. What I really wanted to say was "Do you mean in this room or on this planet" but I didn't say that. I just said "You may be right about that. But I still need an answer to my question."

This experience in which Angelica was publicly confronted by a white supervisor, was indicative of other experiences that she had with coworkers in the work environment. She described another instance in which she was confronted by a white female coworker, while being physically blocked into a room. The coworker lashed out at her for being "arrogant" and "overstepping her place." The respondent interpreted these experiences as due to her race and class position. As a Black woman teaching at a predominantly white institution that had largely been without people of color as students or faculty, her race felt particularly salient in that professional content. She shared this experience and other experiences, often in majority white environment, in which her race "trumped" her sexuality. This was in line with many of the respondents' narratives that cited race more often than sexuality as influencing their interactions with other individuals. Even the respondents that mentioned not attributing events to race, often cited the racial make-up of the groups involved. In some ways it appeared that respondents' sexuality, which prevented them from performing expected racialized, gendered, and racially gendered expectations in line with their identities as Black women, mediated their performances of race and made them particularly vulnerable. For example, when I worked at the school, my coworker had racial and gendered specific expectations about my sexuality. She thought that I was attracted to men, but only could conceive that I was attracted to Black

men. She made these assumptions based on the interaction between my race, gender, and sexuality and because I did not respond in the way she expected to her assumptions, I transgressed both the racial and sexual expectations of my racialized gender. For many women I spoke with, not performing the expected sexuality of a Black woman, led to increased suspicion and left them more vulnerable to experiences of invasion due to their sexuality or questions about their sexuality.

Angelica's method of "dealing with" her sexuality was to explicitly disclose her sexual identity with her coworkers and students. She told me that her sexuality had always been known in her professional contexts and that she told people at the outset of a professional relationship that she identified as a lesbian. She joked with me about how she recently told an employer, "You know I'm a lesbian right?" In spite of her assertions that she never had any negative experiences with sexuality, during the interview she recounted a traumatic experience while teaching at a girls boarding school in which the wife of a white, male coworker accused her of sexually harassing a female faculty member during a student program:

Angelica: So his wife kind of developed this group of women on campus to basically come after me. There was this one woman in particular who was a really fundamentalist Christian, and she accused me of sexual harassment, and filed a claim against me. I had to be investigated for sexual harassment.

Claudia: Wow.

Angelica: It was awful. It was horrifying. Because if I had been dismissed for that I would have never gotten another job teaching. It was a girls school, and I was living in a dorm with the girls. So that could have erupted into all sorts of crazy. It could have but it didn't though.

In this particular situation, the disclosure of her sexual identity led to an accusation of sexually harassment toward another woman. The claim was fully investigated and she went through multiple rounds of interviews and questioning before the charges were

dropped. In spite of telling me that she had never had any negative experiences with her sexuality, she recalled this traumatic experience that led to depression and a series of other physiological reactions to the stress of the claim. She was prescribed antidepressants and had to see a skin specialist to clear up eczema outbreaks due to the stress of this incident. These findings are in line with the research that asserts that many Black women suffer from stressors related to discrimination based on their race and gender, however, for many of the women that I spoke with, their sexual identity also led to similar instances of stress. Unlike many of the respondents, Angelica chose to continue her “full disclosure” policy with regards to professional contexts after her experience. As an observer, I pondered many possible reasons as to why such salient experiences with her sexuality were not present in her memory of her experiences at the beginning of our interview. I believe there could be many causes for this. Perhaps the process of the interview brought certain aspects of her experiences to the forefront of her consciousness, or her experiences with racism and sexism could have potentially eclipsed her experiences with her sexuality because they occurred more often.

Angelica’s experience with sexuality, and her method of managing her sexual identity in workplace contexts, was an outlier in the respondents’ narratives. She was one of only two women who actively shared information about their sexual identities. Many women expressed either choosing to not “come out” to their families and friends or feeling that “coming out” was a process that did not resonate with them due to their race and class identities. One respondent told me,

“As I got older, more mature, more self-aware, gained more insight about myself, became more comfortable with myself, I’m not about to pretend. I’m not about to fake and act like I want some dude because I don’t. I’m not going to “come out” because again I don’t come out as black, I don’t

come out as woman. I'm not coming out as gay. You don't deserve that. Who are you? I am who I am. Me coming out to you is like...that's where I draw the line. I'm not about to sit down with you and have coffee, tea, cupcakes, and pies like (whispering) "yeah I just wanted to let you know I'm gay". No. I didn't have to do that to tell you I'm black and I didn't have to do that to tell you that I'm a woman...I'm not about to give you the satisfaction of coming to you like I've committed a sin or like something is wrong with me. I'm not about to give you this satisfaction as if I've done some dishonorable act or as if something is wrong with me or as if this isn't who I am."

For this respondent, explicitly stating her sexual identity to those in her life would feed into the belief that there is something "wrong" with her identity. She justifies not explicitly stating her sexual identity by emphasizing that she did not have to explicitly state her other identities, although she acknowledged that her identities as female and Black were visible or perceived as visible by others. This respondent, like many other respondents, expressed the sentiment that her sexuality was not the "business" of other individuals.

Jerrica was the other woman who experienced explicitly stating her sexuality in the workplace. Jerrica worked her first job with her girlfriend and told me how the experience led to her drastically altering the way that she interacts with other individuals in her workplaces:

Claudia: How was working with your girlfriend?

Jerrica: Working with her? Terrible because I was open about my sexuality at work. I don't care, but with her she was messing with dudes at our job and I didn't know. She would be fake around them. She just lied at work like we weren't together. I was like why lie?

Claudia: So people at work knew about your sexuality but didn't know about the relationship?

Jerrica: Yeah because they would ask her about it and she would just lie. I don't know if she was afraid of losing her job or something but if I'm with somebody I'm with them. I don't care who knows so I stopped talking to her.

Jerrica viewed her girlfriend's explicit denial of their relationship as influenced by structural causes but primarily caused by her fear of having other individuals know about their sexuality in the workplace context. She cited many experiences in which coworkers would come to her and ask about her sexual identity. According to Jerrica, "I just didn't like people asking me about my sexuality everyday. Coworkers were all in my business. They would ask me everyday and then go ask her. She would just say no." For Jerrica, her vulnerability in having her sexual identity known at work resulted in regular invasions of her privacy. After she moved on to another workplace, she never again explicitly stated her sexual identity and actively shielded her personal life from her coworkers altogether. According to Jerrica,

Jerrica: After that, I didn't talk about my personal life at work. I learned my lesson from doing that with my girlfriend. So anything personal I don't bring with me to work at all.

Claudia: So did anyone still ask about your personal life?

Jerrica: Nope. I stayed to myself...If I had company on a lunch break and they asked me "who is that" I'd be like Why?

Privacy or "not having folks in my business" was a central concern for the women I talked to. Jerrica's strategy of completely avoiding or misdirecting inquiries about her personal life was shared by many of the women that I spoke to. However, while this strategy was often discussed with regards to work environments, I view this strategy as a product of the ways that these women learned to shield their private lives from consumption by their peers and families during their racial and sexual socialization. I also view it as reflective of the prevalence of public and private negative sanctions of their disclosure or the disclosure or "outing" of others. In my conversations with Black queer women about their experiences with respect to their sexuality in Memphis, I found that

many of the strategies used to navigate their sexual identities as adults stemmed from the “lessons” in identity as a child.

DISCUSSION

Either Brave or Crazy: Black Les/bi/other Women Navigate Multiple Identities

The title of this section came from Angelica in describing her battles with racism and sexism during her professional developments. She told me, “Most days I go to work and I don’t know if I’m brave or crazy.” This sentiment echoes that of the text entitled *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies*, in which Black women discuss the ways their lives are influenced by the intersections of race, class, and gender. For Angelica, the pressures associated with managing all of these identities heightened the difficulty of and her awareness of complex negotiations of privacy and disclosure of her sexual identity. Most of the women that I talked to described very specific strategies for managing the knowledge about their sexual identity at work. The most common strategy was to withhold any information that was “too personal” or that invaded their privacy. While passing was the central strategy examined by this study, I found that many women blurred the lines between retroactive and proactive passing. While proactive implied that they actively attempted to shield their sexual identity from other individuals, many of the women actively attempted to keep as much personal information private as possible. Although public/private is complicated for the women who were in relationships, especially women who were in relationships with women who identified as “studs” or as having more masculine gender presentation, while in the workplace context, their private lives and details of such were often kept hidden.

Retroactive passing seemed to be more fitting in describing the ways that women did not correct individuals for assuming that they were straight. However, many of these women kept information about their private lives protected and neither confirmed or denied assumptions about their sexuality. In the few occasions when women chose to identify explicitly at work, they reported negative outcomes that were at best connected to their disclosure of their sexual identity.

Perhaps one of the clearest incidences of passing occurred during the interview process itself. When I interviewed Ashley, her boyfriend dropped her off. Although she previously identified as bisexual, during the interview she reported that the only time she was attracted to women was her attraction to a celebrity. While I suspect that her boyfriend's presence influenced why she decided to identify this way during the interview in a way that was different from how she identified previously, I witnessed her passing as heterosexual during the interview. However, in retrospect I hesitate to classify her behaviors as passing as heterosexual because she reported that she did not label herself or her sexuality. Could she pass for heterosexual if she did not identify as heterosexual or label herself with any type of sexuality?

In spite of the complexities and sometimes contradictions of the interview process, I believe that the in-depth interviews revealed meaningful patterns about the ways that Black queer women managed their identities. The women who took part in this study shared vivid stories of having their gender identities policed as children and into adolescence in ways that I believe impacted how they choose to identify as sexual beings and disclose information about their sexual lives as adults. As a researcher, I worried about the time in interviews spent on childhood and adolescence, but these respondents

stressed (sometimes explicitly) that these stories about their development were imperative to understanding their identities as adults. I allowed them to show me which aspects of their lives were salient in the formation of their identity. While I anticipated that many of the identity management strategies used would be outcomes of experiences during childhood and adolescence, I was surprised by the presence of these experiences in their methods of managing their identities as adults.

Race as a structure continues to shape and structure the experiences of Black people, especially Black LGBT people who form their racial identities in Black communities. As I predicted during the earlier stages of this research, many of the identity management strategies, not allowing others intrude in one's "business" for example, were often learned from women in their communities. I believe that much of the data points to a connection between the cultural "lessons," both explicit and observed, and the ways that women decide how, when, and in what contexts they disclose personal information, particularly sexuality. Due to growing up in majority Black communities, many of these lessons were learned in the context of Black neighborhoods and were taught by older Black individuals in families. Although respondents differed greatly in their understandings of race and its impact on their lives, they strongly identified as members of Black communities whether that identification is a source of positive or negative emotions for them. Future research could focus on the ways that sexuality or gender identity impacts the racial socialization of Black LGBT people and could also further examine the ways that these lessons manifest in the day-to-day lives.

Black women created the identity management strategies that I sought to examine over time in response to racism and sexism. I found that respondents also deployed

strategies learned through experiences with racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Although more work is needed in this area, I believe that the data presented documents patterns in the resistance strategies of Black queer women in Memphis and that these resistance strategies are rooted, learned, and produced in historical resistance to oppression. I found that even when women did not view race as structuring their lives, they still tended to strongly identify as member of Black communities and view their destinies as impacted by the experiences of Black communities on a larger scale. To the extent that this phenomenon is present is also a potential subject for research.

CONCLUSION

Passing, and the negotiation of privacy and disclosure, is an identity management strategy utilized by Black queer women that is historically influenced and shaped by their race, gender, and sexuality identity locations. Black women have a long history of utilizing identity management strategies to navigate and resist systems of racism and sexism. These strategies counteracted negative images and meanings associated with Black womanhood at the structural level by combating meanings perpetuated by systems of racism and oppression, and at the individual level of interpersonal interactions by resisting negative connotations and stereotypes of Black womanhood. This connection between the experiences of the individual and the experiences of Blacks as a group proves to be central to understanding the ways that Black queer women form their racial identity, class identities, sexual identities, and senses of self (Simien 2005). Black Lesbians, because they are racially socialized in Black communities, are exposed to multiple strategies to navigate and resist racism and sexism; however, they also experience heterosexism as a form of oppression due to their sexual orientations. These

historically shaped and culturally specific strategies, such as passing and dissemblance, impact the ways that Black lesbians resist oppression and the ways that they understand their selves in relation to other actors in the workplace context. Black lesbians have three stigmatized, disadvantaged identity locations that make their experiences relevant to understanding the distinct mechanisms of racism, sexism, and heterosexism respectively. By utilizing an intersectional lens of analysis, I also seek to gain insight into the ways that these systems interact and intersect in the experiences of Black lesbians.

I hope that this study has added to the literature about the lived experiences and identity management strategies of Black queer women that grow up in areas that are not the expected locations of queer communities. I hope to contextualize the ways that these multiple identities have historically influenced and shaped the social, economic, political, and sexual landscapes of the contemporary U.S. Individuals at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality can provide valuable insight about the marginalizing mechanisms of these structures as well as the fluidity allowed for individuals who exist at multiple intersections.

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