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Je-Shawna C. Wholley  
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Sexing While a Survivor: Black Queer Desire

By

Je-Shawna C. Wholley

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Art

In

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Mankato, Minnesota

May 2016

May 2016

Sexing While a Survivor: Black Queer Desire

Je-Shawna C. Wholley

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

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## **Abstract**

The vast sexual exploitation of Black queer women is under addressed by therapeutic and family counseling experts alike. Scholarship on the subject shows that a history of sexual trauma can have direct negative implications on women's sexuality and ability to access sexual pleasure. However, therapeutic and family counseling interventions lack an intersectional analysis that directly address the unique experiences of Black women – and even further, Black queer women, who are survivors. In this research study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with Black queer, lesbian, bisexual and same-gender-loving survivors of sexual assault to assess how they located agency, empowerment, and pleasure within sexual relationships with women. Researchers indicate that survivors of sexual trauma are likely to experience a negative impact to their sexual arousability. I hypothesized that Black queer survivors' would have unique abilities to achieve sexual pleasure within their sexual relationships as a result of queer identity politics and sex-positive models of resistance. This study found that although survivors did experience symptoms typical for survivors of sexual violence, they also reported implications that were unique to their queer identities. Additionally, their ability to access pleasure and desire in their sexual relationships was intimately tied to their ability to embrace their queer identity within their intimate relationships, and exist as their full and authentic selves.

## Acknowledgements

This project would not be possible without the foundational work by Black feminist pioneers that have come before me. As a Black queer feminist I would be remiss not to acknowledge how the work of scholars, activists and feminists such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw (to name a few) continue to inform my own research and feminist politic. Their foundational work to the field of Gender and Women's Studies guide my own efforts as I create transformative scholarship.

Second, I thank the Black queer women that were generous with their time and stories as participants in this project. These women trusted me to report the complexities of their lived experiences, and the communities they represent, with honor. It is my hope that I did them justice. The Black LGBT community molded me in to the woman, activist and scholar that I am today. I grateful for the continued support, inspiration and energy of my friends, family and colleagues that have been with me through this journey.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The *White House Council on Women and Girls* released a report in 2014 addressing the prevalence of sexual violence in America. The report stated that one in five women and girls across the nation have been sexually victimized at some point in their lives (2014). The majority of women, regardless of race, had experienced sexual coercion, violation, molestation or assault before they were 18 years old (Black Women's Blueprint, 2015; White House Council on Women and Girls, 2014). When race is factored, 23percent of Black women reported having had been victimized in their lifetime. Other reports suggest that this rate is actually somewhere between 30 percent and 40 percent (Black Women's Blueprint, 2015; Tillman, Bryant-Davis, Smith & Marks, 2010).

The National Coalition Against Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) offer insight on the prevalence of sexual violence committed against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. According to the *LGBTQ/HIV-Affected Intimate Partner Violence* study, there were over 2,000 cases of intimate partner violence committed against LGBT individuals in 2015 (p.10) – and 4 percent were cases of sexual violence (p.26). People of color represented over half (51 percent) of the sample (p.11), while transgender women and trans\* people of color reported a 50 percent chance of experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) in their lifetime (p.34). Additionally, 46 percent of bisexual women and 44 percent lesbian women reported experiences of rape in their lifetime (p.36). As alarming as these statistics are, we must also account for the fact that approximately 70 percent of sexual assaults go unreported; thus, these numbers may



barely represent the immensity of the issue pertaining to sexual violence in the United States (Black Women's Blueprint, 2015).

According to the *National Sexual Violence Resource Center and the Pennsylvania Coalition Against Rape* (NSVRCPAR) survivors of sexual violence are likely to experience mental, emotional, and physical implications as a result of their victimization (2012). Such impacts can include: depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, negative self-esteem, and high suicidality (Bryant-Davis et al., 2010; Tillman et al., 2010). When we account for other social factors such as race, sexual orientation, gender identity and socioeconomic status the severity of these symptoms increase drastically (Bryant-Davis et al., 2010; NCAVP, 2015; NSVRCPAR, 2012).

Culturally competent and quality support systems are essential to a survivor's ability to combat these symptoms (Tillman et al., 2010). However, according to Tillman, Bryant-Davis and Smith, Black women are less likely to utilize public services (2010, p.61). Reasons for this include the internalization of rape myths that blame female sexuality for male sexual coercion. Additionally, Black women in particular have high reported rates of re-victimization when they utilize formal support systems (2010, p.63). Women reported feeling *disappointed, violated* and *very hurt* by the support providers (2010, p.63).

Similarly, NCAVP reports that of the 648 public services surveyed, including rape crisis centers and law enforcement agencies, 94percent said they "were not serving LGBT survivors of IPV and sexual violence" (2015, p.13). Considering the high prevalence rates of IPV and sexual violence faced by this community, one must ask, how is this possible? I argue, one explanation could be that members of the LGBT community

choose not to utilize these services due to fear of discrimination, further biases based on racists and heteronormative ideations, and re-victimization by the service providers. Prior research supports this claim. For example, 28 percent of trans people reported postponing medical care for IPV related injuries due to transphobic discrimination and bias, while 48percent reported an inability to afford care (2015, p.35). Similarly, when bisexual survivors reported cases of sexual violation by their male partner, they were assumed to be heterosexual, finding themselves re-victimized by the denial of their bisexual identity (2015, p.36).

### ***Current Study***

The state of sexual violence, lack of competent intervention services, and gaps in the research that center the lived experiences of Black LGBT sexual assault survivors led me to pursue this research topic. Black women and LGBT communities occupy the highest rates of gender-based and sexual violence in comparison to white women and heterosexual individuals. Black LGBT communities are an extremely vulnerable population – highly targeted, under resourced and unprotected. There is a plethora of research that has documented the prevalence of violence experienced by this community; however, there is a gap in resilience studies that turn to this community as sites of inquiry (Bowleg, Huang, Black, Burkholder, 2003).

The purpose of this research study is to center survivors' agency as a site of analysis. In addition, the literature, methodology, and research questions all approach Black queer survivors as sexual agents whom have cultivated their own mechanisms of accessing sexual empowerment within a systematically and socially violent climate.

This thesis is organized into four remaining chapters. Chapter Two: Literature Review conceptualizes the history of institutionalized violence committed against Black women and the contemporary implications on Black women's sexuality. In addition, this chapter provides an overview of the feminist sex-debate in order to set the groundwork for a Black queer analysis of the discourse.

Chapter Three: Methodology provides an overview of the process and theoretical framework through which I conducted this research. This chapter explains the procedures used to recruit participants, collect and analyze data. Qualitative research methods were used in both data collection and analysis. I conducted semi-structured interviews with Black queer women who are survivors of sexual violence to determine how they were able to access desire and empowerment in their sexual relationships to other women. I then utilized Narrative Analysis and Descriptive Coding methods to determine re-occurring themes that emerged from the data. My own reflection on my positionality is also covered in this chapter.

In Chapter Four: Results I present major findings on obstacles and responses faced by the participants, mechanisms for accessing desire and empowerment and queer modalities of resistance. As expected, I found that participants experienced negative consequences to their sexual selves as a result of their history with sexual violence, but were also invested in accessing agency and desire in their sexual relationships. This chapter addresses this occurrence as well as other themes, such as the role of gender ideations, which emerged from the data.

Finally, in Chapter Five: Discussion I interpret the findings based on the literature review and relevant research. The findings indicate that there are unique challenges faced

by Black queer survivors that should be considered by feminist researchers, services providers and community activists alike. I conclude with potential areas of future research that could expand our understanding of sexual agency – particularly for Black queer survivors of sexual violence.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this literature review, I address the institutionalization of Black women's sexual exploitation and employ Black Feminist Theory to both honor Black women's agency and challenge dominant narratives that pathologize Black sexuality. In the first section, I present the history of sexual violence committed against Black women in the U.S., and how it serves as a foundation in the socialization of Black female sexuality both as an embodiment and as a discourse. Next, I consider feminist debates about sexuality and desire to explore how social and political realities pertaining to gender and race are intimately tied to the ability to access sexual agency. Finally, after setting the historical and theoretical foundation for feminist debates on desire, I discuss Black lesbian identity politics, and focus on scholarship illustrating how Black queer women continually display a politics of desire that is grounded in resilience.

### **Past and Present: Institutionalized Sexual Violence against Black Women**

The construction of Black women's sexuality in the United States has a particular relationship with trauma and institutionalized violence. Although this project seeks to center Black women's resilience it would be remiss to not acknowledge how institutionalized racism and sexism impacted Black sexual politics. This section will examine the role of chattel slavery in the socialization of Black women's sexuality. It will end with an examination of how Black women resisted the physical and internalized constraints that white racist patriarchy had on their sexual bodies.

**Institutionalized Rape.** The dehumanization of enslaved Africans was an integral element in maintaining power and control over Black people in the newly colonized Americas. The psychological, emotional, and physical terror inflicted on enslaved Black

people was strategic manipulation in an effort to ensure the success of the slave industry. Enslaved Black women found themselves to be the most vulnerable, and were literally deemed un-rapeable with no legal protections for them as victims of sexual violence (Bryant-Davis, Ullman, Tsong, Tillman & Smith, 2010; hooks, 1981; Roberts, 1997). Their reproductive bodies were means to produce slave labor and capital. Racist popular cultural messages were created in an effort to distort Black women's sexuality within the psyche of white men and white women alike. Black feminist scholars such as Angela Davis, bell hooks, Jennifer Morgan and Dorothy Roberts identify the reproductive injustices committed against Black enslaved women as acts of sexual violence (Davis, 1983; hooks, 1981; Morgan, 2004; Roberts, 1997). In *Killing the Black Body*, Roberts writes, "Black procreation helped to sustain slavery, giving slave masters an economic incentive to govern Black women's reproductive lives" (1997, p. 22).

Referencing the culture of chattel slavery, Patricia Hill Collins, in *Black Sexual Politics*, defines institutionalized rape, as "a form of sexual violence whose aim is to dominate or control its female (and male) victims" (2005). Sexual violence was used as a tool to terrorize Black enslaved women, and legal sanctions normalized sexual terror. State laws contended, "the crime of rape does not exist...between African slaves" (Roberts, 1997, p.31). Similarly, legal sanctions prohibited Black slaves from testifying in court against white people (Roberts, 1997; hooks, 1981). Enslaved women could also not be legally raped by enslaved men; if it were a crime for Black men to rape Black enslaved women, then it would be impossible to breed slaves against their will – thus impacting the main source of labor production (Collins, 2005; Roberts, 1997). This is a

demonstration of gendered racism and what hooks refers to as the intersection of “institutionalized sexism” and “racial imperialism” (1981, p.15).

Black men were not immune to the impact of such institutionalized devaluation of Black women. Their exposure to white men’s power over women gave them a script to resist the dehumanizing realities of slave life (Collins, 2005; hooks, 1981). For example, by mimicking the same misogynistic ideology of white patriarchal supremacy, Black men used Black women’s bodies to access power and control in their own life.

**The Impact: Creating the jezebel and respectable responses.** Black women became the embodiment of sexual temptation - responsible for the sexual advances men forced on them (Collins, 2005; hooks, 1981; Roberts, 1997), and this temptress discourse has grave contemporary consequences for Black women. Collins draws clear connections between the spectacle of the auction block where Black women’s sexual bodies were literally put on display, to the contemporary occurrence of street harassment, and the casual nature that Black women are sexually objectified (2005). The hypersexual jezebel, an archetype created by the white imagination, permeated popular cultural understandings of Black female sexuality and justified the mass occurrence of rape and sexual violence committed against Black women (Collins, 2005; hooks, 1981; Roberts, 1997; Tillman et al., 2010).

The Black community developed a *politic of respectability* as a response to the racist depictions of Black sexuality (Collins, 2005). Collins and hooks describe this respectable politic as the internalized censorship of Black sexuality that required a prescription to heterosexual marriage, Victorian notions of virtue, and a general ethos of shame regarding sexuality (2005; 1981). This strategy to reject racist notions of Black

sexuality functioned as a repackaged version of internalized white patriarchal supremacy, and Black women found themselves vulnerable once again (Collins, 2005; hooks, 1981).

In their essay *Searching for Climax* (2013), Black feminist historian Treva B. Lindsey, and Black feminist scholar Jessica M. Johnson problematize the strategy of responding to racist notions of Black women's sexuality by de-sexualizing them. They turn to Harriet Tubman, freedom fighter and slave revolt leader, to argue that Tubman was, in fact, a sexual woman, and discursive practices to desexualize her is consistent with the re-writings of Black female sexuality through the lens of Black respectability politics:

[v]isualizing enslaved Blacks, and more specifically 'Black Moses,' [a name given to Harriet Tubman] as sexual subjects introduces sexuality, intimacy, pleasure, and erotica into a historical era in which dehumanization and dispossession messily complicate the meaning of consent, complicity, and agency for enslaved Black people (Lindsey & Johnson, 2013, 171).

Lindsey and Johnson approach the enslaved woman's sexuality with what Chandra Mohanty (2003) refers to as a politic of contradiction. This political analysis centers the *both/and* that allows an "envision[ing] of the enslaved and free Black female sexuality as a thing beyond the encounter [of the slave-owner's power], a thing belonging to itself, whether stolen away, self-purchased, or manumitted" (Lindsey & Johnson, 2013, p.180).

Black women were faced with the burden of group loyalty as it pertained to race, while forced to deal with symptoms of sexism and heterosexism and intra-racial sexual violence (Collins, 2005; hooks, 1981). It is within this racialized and gendered sociohistorical context where Black women's sexuality is constructed. The question then



becomes, how does “transgenerational trauma” (Bryant-Davis et al., 2010, p.61) impact Black women’s access to sexual agency? Bryant-Davis et al. define *transgenerational trauma* as the “historical and sometimes continuing, traumatic experiences that affect more than one generation” (2010, p.61). This concept is relevant to feminist theoretical discourses on desire within a patriarchal society that normalizes sexual violence.

### **A Feminist Debate on Desire**

The question of sexual agency has been a critical intellectual concern for feminists, and the primary question has been: *can women access sexual agency in a male dominated society?* As it relates to enslaved women, Black feminists such as Treva B. Lindsey and Jessica M. Johnson argue that there is room to acknowledge the sexual exploitation of Black women during chattel slavery *and* the opportunity to see enslaved Black women as sexual agents capable of saying yes to their own sexual urges and desires (2013). Conversely, bell hooks argues that sex while in captivity is not possible and that any sexual encounter experienced by an enslaved woman was one of exploitation and violence (1981). This discourse pertaining to sex, agency and political and social captivity continued to be a concern for feminist throughout the feminist movement. By the second wave, the debate shifted from looking at enslavement as a site of domination to focusing now on patriarchy. This section examines various viewpoints on the second wave feminist debate as it pertains to sex and desire.

The historic sex debate is a political and theoretical discourse which was predominately dominated by white feminists’ perspectives on sexual agency, power, consent and domination. The two sides of the debate consisted of radical feminist (otherwise known as anti-sex feminist) and libertarian feminist (also known as pro-sex

feminist) (Ferguson, 1984). According to feminist writer Ann Ferguson (1984), the central issue was a question of sexual morality: First, can sex, within a patriarchal society that uses sex as a tool of male domination over women, also be a site of consensual pleasure and agency for women? Further, are sexual practices that explicitly rely on the erotization of dominant/sub-dominant power relations inherently anti-feminist, thus perpetuating and condoning sexual violence committed against women? Anti-sex feminist believed that heterosexual relations that perpetuate polarized gender roles (male/masculine and female/feminine) are also perpetuating “an ideology of sexual objectification” in which women are to be sexually victimized by men (Ferguson, 1984, p.108). Thus, sexual freedom is only possible when sexual practices such as sadomasochism, and patriarchal institutions such as the “patriarchal family, pornography, and compulsory heterosexuality” are eliminated (Ferguson, 1984, p.108). Pro-sex feminist argue that the policing of consensual sexual practices “stigmatizes sexual minorities such as butch/femme couples [...] thereby encouraging a return to a narrow, conservative, “feminine” vision of ideal sexuality” (Ferguson, 1984, p.107). In order to contextualize the debate itself and the implications that this discourse has had on contemporary feminist analysis of sex and desire, one must reveal the social and political climate during this time.

The peak of the debate unfolded during the late 1970s, a time where equality, access to, and representation within, the public realm were high priorities of the mainstream white women’s liberation movement (Duggan & Hunter, 2006). Feminists were pushing back on misogynistic ideologies that situated women as submissive subjects of male desire. As a result, women began to strategically connect the sexual

objectification of women in the media to the prevalence of rape (Duggan & Hunter, 2006). Groups such as the Women Against Violence in Pornography and the Media (WAVPM) and Women Against Pornography (WAP) were formed to address the commodification of sexual violence, proclaiming that “consensual sadomasochism” is dangerous to women (2006, p.21). This is also during a time where lesbian feminists and women of color recognized the inadequacies of the women’s movement to address issues of heterosexism, racism and classism within the feminist movement and as political priorities within the greater civil rights discourse of the time (Duggan & Hunter, 2006; hooks, 1981).

In 1982, women’s sexuality – more specifically “pleasure and danger” – was the theme of the annual Barnard Conference (Duggan & Hunter, 2006). Members of the Women Against Pornography organization staged a direct action protesting that there is a “feminist sexuality” and that sadomasochism does not fit into the description (2006, p.22). They also publically condemned known feminist for their alleged sexual practices. The action resulted in counter demonstrations by pro-sex feminists groups such as the Lesbian Sex Mafia. Additionally, the Helena Rubinstein Foundation pulled funding for any future conferences (2006, p.22). The following year, Catherin MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin begin their political quest to have pornography banned in Minneapolis. The anti-porn ordinance was momentarily passed, but was later deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court (Duggan & Hunter, 2006). It is worth noting that MacKinnon and Dworkin worked with Beulah Coughenour on this ordinance, a council member who “built her political career on anti-ERA [Equal Rights Amendment]” platforms (2006,

p.23). The inclusion of women in the ERA was a primary political concern during the women's movement of the time.

During this time, the right-wing political parties are making strides in stigmatizing and criminalizing sexual minorities of the time. Gay and lesbian communities are faced with the political backlash of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Duggan & Hunter, 2006). Obscenity laws are becoming intensified, thus impacting the distribution and funding of literature and art that centered women's sexuality and pleasure (Duggan & Hunter, 2006). Not only are pro-sex feminist feeling excluded from the mainstream feminist political priorities at the time, they are essentially under attack by them as well.

**The Sex Wars: Anti-sex feminists.** On one hand, anti-sex feminists Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin argue that sexual agency is not possible within patriarchal societies (Dworkin, 1979; MacKinnon, 1989); in *Sexuality*, MacKinnon (1989) writes "a theory of sexuality becomes feminist to the extent it treats sexuality as a social construct of male power: defined by men, forced on women, and constitutive in the meaning of gender" (p. 416). She suggests that women's sexuality is simply a bi-product of patriarchy.

This side of the debate collapses consensual sex and rape together, arguing that the socialization of sexuality within a rape culture can only lead to the victimization of women during sex (Dworkin, 1979; MacKinnon, 1989). This argument is not limited to heterosexual sexual partners. MacKinnon maintains that the eroticization of power and force creates a dynamic in which coercion is always present no matter the gender of those involved in the sexual act; she states, "Speaking in terms of roles, the one who pleasures in the illusion of freedom and security with the reality of danger is *girl*; the one who

pleasures in the reality of freedom and security, within the illusion of danger is the *boy*” (MacKinnon, 1989, p.491). This stance stresses that heterosexual relations are always present during sex – and such relations are dangerous.

**The Sex Wars: Pro-sex feminists.** On the other hand, pro-sex feminists Amber Hollibaugh and Treva Lindsey contend that anti-sex feminist’s arguments are limiting at best and victimizing at worst (Hollibaugh, 1984; Lindsey & Johnson, 2013; Riggs, 2008). Jill Filipovic (2008), her essay entitled: *Offensive Feminism*, challenge dominate feminist narrative which suggest that sex is “something that men *do to* women, instead of a mutual act between two equally powerful actors” (p.18). Wood, Milhausen and Jeffrey (2014) support the notion that women are interested in engaging in sex for the purpose of sexual pleasure; nonetheless anti-sex feminists would argue that sexual agency is a delusion, and to engage in sex is to perpetuate internalized sexism. I contend that the impulse to collapse consensual sex and rape encourages a culture of fear, which can be dangerous to women during the process of sexual identity formation as well as ignore the impact that sexual violence can have on an actual survivor’s sexuality (Riggs, 2008). Pro-sex feminists are concerned that anti-sex theoretical frameworks may do more to maintain patriarchal social dynamics than they do to subvert them (Filipovic, 2008; Higginbotham, 2008; Rubin, 1989). [H]ooks discusses this point as it pertains to the psychological control of Black female sexuality, challenging the notion that fear from violence will protect women. She states, “[p]hobic fear is not a solution to the problem of sexual exploitation or rape. It is a symptom” (1981, p.68). Further, scholars suggest that sex-negative cultures work to shame female and queer sexual desire (Lindsey & Johnson, 2013; Riggs 2008; Rubin 1993).

**The Sex Debates: An analysis of the discourse.** There is agreement between both sides of the debate that social contexts such as race, class, and sexual identity all shape our sexuality (Bryant-Davis et al., 2010; Tillman et al., 2010) and one's experience of sexual violence (MacKinnon, 1989; Riggs, 2008). In *A Love Letter from an Anti-Rape Activist*, Lee Jacobs Riggs (2008), contends that a sex negative culture works to stabilize a hierarchical sexual system that values certain sexual bodies (white, heterosexual, able-bodied etc.) while pathologizing and criminalizing others (Black, non-heteronormative, trans bodies etc.) (p.110). It seems, then, that the connecting axes between rape culture and sex negative theoretical frameworks are silence and shame. Furthermore, some contend that sexual violence remains a taboo topic not because it is an act of violence, but because it is an act of violence committed through sex (Riggs, 2008). This argument calls our attention to the potential harm of anti-sex ideologies. For survivors of sexual abuse, this framework, if internalized, can be potentially re-traumatizing because it argues that each time one engages in intimacy one will actively (and willingly) engage in the violation of her body. A pro-sex feminist approach to sexuality must include ways that people – to include survivors – can obtain “sexual subjectivity” (Tolman, 2010).

**Beyond the Debate: A Black queer desire by our own design.** The centering of white heterosexual feminist voices during the sex wars could leave one to believe that Black feminists lacked a legitimized politic of desire. However, close readings of Black literary canons allow us to reject this notion easily. Scholars have turned to works from artists such as Zora Neal Hurston, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde and Cheryl Dunye – to name a few – in an effort to illustrate the history of a Black erotic politic within a climate

of violence, erasure and racial tension (Bennett & Dickerson, 2001; Hammonds, 1994). In fact, Audre Lorde, a Black feminist lesbian scholar activist, gave us language to describe this very politic in her pivotal essay *Uses of the Erotic* (2006). She writes, “[t]he erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (Lorde, 2006, p. 53). Black lesbian feminists, such as Lorde, have historically interjected dominant rhetoric that sought to erase the nuanced experience that is Black sexuality.

Mark Winokur (2001) discusses Cheryl Dunye’s *Watermelon Woman* in his essay, *Body and Soul*, as he calls our attention to the historical presence of Black lesbian sexual agency. He argues that Dunye’s work transcended dominant narratives of Black sexuality, which is evident in how Dunye queers and sexualizes the historically asexual Mammy figure in her film (2001). Furthermore, he adds, Dunye, a Black lesbian filmmaker, blurs the lines between the public realm, the political responsibility and the personal self – a tightrope of sexual politics that Black women have had to navigate throughout history. He writes, “[t]he film moves from stereotypical images of the mammy to the self-acknowledged lesbian body of Dunye herself, in the process initiating the audience into a world of representation of which it might otherwise have no experience” (p.233). Her cinematic choices center Black female sexuality as both autonomous, erotic and queer, which is seen in her overt nudity and sex scenes with her white female co-star (Juhasz, 1996). In her narrative, and those of several Black feminist scholars alike, the Black female sexual body has a history of being autonomous and resistant of the hetero-patriarchal restrictions required of Black sexual respectability politics (Peterson, 2001; Lindsey & Johnson, 2013; Winokur, 2001).

In the forward to *Recovering the Black Female Body*, Carla Peterson (2001) shares alternative ways to read the Black female body (Peterson, 2001). As a writer, she describes Black women's bodies as "eccentric" (p. xii). She writes, "[...] I have chosen to term the Black female body "eccentric" [... which] extends the notion of off-centeredness to suggest freedom of movement stemming from the lack of central control and hence new possibilities of difference conceived as empowering oddness" (p. xii). This viewpoint is useful to this project because it provides a queer analysis of Black women's sexuality that utilizes the perceived abnormality of Black female sexuality as a gift as opposed to a curse. Other Black feminist scholars maintain this approach (Collins, 2005; Lindsey & Johnson, 2013). For example, Kimberly Springer (2008) asserts that queering Black women's sexuality is the act of "com[ing] out as Black women [regardless of sexual orientation or identity] who enjoy sex and find it pleasurable; [to] protest the stereotypes of Black female sexuality that do not reflect our experiences; [and to] know that our bodies are our own" (p. 86). I argue that a Black feminist politic of pleasure invites a sexuality that resists hetero-patriarchal ideals and restrictions, while simultaneously acknowledging the social and political realities in which Black women's bodies exist.

### **Black Queer Realities and Models of Resistance**

Bowleg, Brooks, Black and Burkholder (2003) found that Black lesbians experience multiple minority stresses related to their race, gender, and sexuality. A Black feminist intersectional framework calls us to examine Black lesbian women as having an unabridged identity with experiences that cannot be fragmented (Bowleg, 2008; Crenshaw, 1991). With that, researchers suggest that although there is stress associated



with not being able to name which form of discrimination they are experiencing at any point in time, racism is the most prevalent, mundane, and significant stressor for Black lesbians (Bowlge et al., 2003). Consequently, Black lesbian women would seek strategies of resistance that served as buffers to this stressor. Often, however, these spaces existed within the greater Black community, but were not completely supportive of their lesbian identity.

The Black church, or Christianity more specifically, is an applicable representation of this occurrence. Places of worship have been sites of resistance, community building and healing for Black people since chattel slavery (Collins, 2005). It was from behind the church pulpit where the civil rights movement was conceived (Collins, 2005). Religiosity has been cited as saving Black people from ending their own life in the face of systemic and interpersonal hardship (Bryant-Davis et al., 2010). The complexity of the relationship between Black women and the Black church is exposed when this same site of communal empowerment becomes a site of personal damnation and spiritual abuse.

This reality is true for many Black queer women whom find themselves caught between two burning ends. On one hand, the Black church serves as a viable buffer from racism and induces racial solidarity and esteem (Miller & Stack, 2014). On the other hand it creates a hostile spiritual climate that demonizes their sexuality (Collins, 2005; Miller & Stack, 2014). Miller and Stack (2014) defines this phenomena as *Christian-based homophobia* (CBH). They share that CBH is the “[homophobic] beliefs and practices justified by Christian rhetoric” (Miller, Stack, 2014, p.246). Black feminists have identified this as a symptom of white supremacist patriarchy in its effort to maintain strict

gender hierarchies, control women's sexuality, and assimilate to white mainstream culture (Collins, 2005; hooks, 1981).

According to Miller and Stacks (2014), CBH is an internalized social ill that can be resisted and unlearned. In a study measuring Black queer women's responses to CBH, Miller and Stack (2014) found that participants were able to resist the implications of internalized CBH. Resistance strategies included: combating occurrences of CBH in the moment and head on, seeking validation from affirming religious authority figures, or choosing to live authentically but not having open dialog with community and family members about their sexuality (2014). Miller refers to this last phenomena as *Don't Ask Don't Tell* (DADT) (Miller, 2015). Other acts of resiliency include internal strategies such as high self-esteem that allowed women to conceptualize their marginalized identity as a *gift* or *blessing* – expressing that being a Black lesbian meant freedom from the confinement of heteronormative gender roles (Bowleg et al., 2003). These strategies of resistance suggests that Black queer women have expertise in developing an affirming sexual identity in the face of discriminatory climates.

Such expertise is needed considering how lesbian women must navigate the residual effects of Black cultural norms pertaining to sexuality. How do such norms impact one's own conceptualizations of queer sexuality and coupling? Some researchers argue that the adoption of heteronormative gender ideations within queer couplings is one impact. Mignon Moore (2006) discusses gender expression within the Black lesbian community. She states that there are Black lesbian-feminists who believe the stud/femme dichotomy to be problematic and a symptom of Black lesbian identity formation that was “distant from the feminist movement” of the 1970s (2006, 117). However, Moore

contends that Black women choosing to reject (or expand) femininity are potential sites of transgression, and that variations in gender presentation allow for Black lesbians to be deliberate about the gender scripts that they want to prescribe to (2006). Others maintain that Black female masculinity is a subculture of hegemonic masculinity (Lane-Steel, 2011). My own view is that there is validity to both claims. Although the ability to transgress gender expectations can be liberating for some women, we must also acknowledge the potential for adopting harmful cues from hegemonic gender ideations.

Lane-Steele (2011) explored this nuanced argument in a study looking at protest masculinities among Black studs in the South. Protest masculinity speaks to the act of masculine women adopting notes of misogyny as a mechanism to avoid homophobia and sexism from their Black male heterosexual peer groups (2011). Typical traits of hegemonic masculinity were demonstrated which included, dominance over their femme identified partners and lateral homophobic attacks against masculine-on-masculine affection. However, in the same study, the author discusses how these same women openly reject scripts of protest masculinity. This was demonstrated in their centering of their femme partners' sexual pleasure as compared to models of hegemonic masculinity. Additionally, choosing to give birth to children, a task deemed socially unacceptable for masculine bodies, was another indication of transgression. In any regard, gender role identification is seen as a significant element to consider when examining Black queer women's resistance and coupling dynamics between Black women lovers.

## **Conclusion**

This literature review provides a framework of the existing theoretical perspectives pertaining to sexual violence, desire, and the construction of Black women's

sexuality at the intersection of the two. This project builds from the prevailing research as it moves to examine Black queer survivors capacity for sexual desire and empowerment.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this research study was to determine how Black queer survivors of sexual violence locate sexual pleasure within their sexual relationships to other women. Two research questions guided this study: *What obstacles, if any, do survivors have to overcome in their sexual relationship, and how do they address these obstacles when they encounter them? How do Black queer women describe a community space led by survivors focused on sexual desire?* I hypothesized that although survivors would share experiences in which their sexual identity was negatively impacted by their sexual trauma, they have created ways to access agency, empowerment and to enjoy sex with their partner(s).

Inclusion criteria required participants must: be between 21 and 35 years of age; identify as Black or African American; identify as queer, lesbian, bisexual, or same-gender loving; identify as a woman; be a survivor/victim of sexual violence; currently reside in Atlanta, Georgia; and be in a relationship currently (or within the last 6 months) with a woman. Atlanta serves as a mecca for the Black queer and trans\* community. It is known for its institutionalized gay culture as seen in the plethora of gay night life and historical Black gay prides. The intentionality in cultivating an autonomous Black lesbian identity and community in Atlanta positioned this city as an ideal location for data collection.

#### **Participants**

Participants included seven Black queer women with histories of sexual violence whom identify as lesbian, bisexual, pansexual and queer, located in Atlanta, Georgia. The

participants were between the 21 and 35 years of age. Five out of six of the participants had some form of higher education experience.

In this study, three (of seven) participants identified as masculine-of-center or gender-non-conforming, three as femme, and one did not qualify her identity but did state that she did not identify as masculine. Within the LGBTQSGL community gender is seen as fluid concept. This is seen as a resistance to constructs within heteronormative communities that have very clear and rigid guidelines for how women should express and present themselves. Such variations could include (but are not limited to) femme, high femme, stud or masculine of center, aggressive (AG), dom, top or bottom. Other gender expressions and identifications include gender-non-conforming or androgynous. Acknowledging that gender is both prescriptive and performative is beneficial in determining how one's gender identification impacts the way a woman experiences sexual violence and sexual empowerment. Although I intentionally targeted Black trans women in my recruitment process, I was not able to recruit any participants.

All participants were in a sexual relationship to another woman - either currently or within the last 6 months. This study did not limit relationship status criteria to monogamous relationships. Three of the seven participants identified as polyamorous and one participant is partnered with someone who identifies as polyamorous although they have decided on a monogamous relationship structure presently.

## **Procedure**

**Recruitment.** Snow-ball sampling was the primary method used to recruit participants. A recruitment flyer was dispersed to friends and colleagues within the Black LGBTQSGL community via email and Facebook messaging, and requested that they

distribute it throughout their own networks. The flyer stated the purpose of the study, the target population, and method of collecting data (one-on-one interviews).

Next, I posted digital versions of the recruitment flyer to online social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram with captions reiterating the purpose of the study, the target population, and ways that potential participants could contact me. I posted to my personal social media profiles, as well as in several Facebook groups that are curated by and for the target population. Members of the social media groups were asked to share the flyer throughout their social media networks.

**Screening potential participants.** Potential participants contacted me either by email, Facebook messaging or phone. I conducted a call with all potential participants in order to reiterate the purpose of the study again to ensure that this was something that they were interested in. This was also an opportunity to schedule a time, date and location for the in-person interview.

Once participants confirm that they were interested in participating, I scheduled a time for our one-on-one interview. I allowed the participant to choose the location, stating that they had the option of their home, my residence or a public library nearby. I stressed that their comfort was important, and that I was happy to meet them where they would be most comfortable. Four of the participants opted for me to meet them at their homes, while the other three preferred to meet at a public library.

**Data Collection.** Each interview began with me introducing myself and stating the purpose of the study and reading over the consent form with them. Participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they were able to stop the interview or opt-out of the research study at any time in the process. Additionally, due to

the sensitive nature of the topic, participants were reminded that the interview will include questions referencing their history of sexual violence and how (or if at all) it impacts their current sexual relationship. However, I assured them that questions pertaining to the details of their sexual violation would not be asked. There were some moments when participants became emotional during the interview, at that point I asked if they wanted me to stop the recording. None of the participants requested that the recording be stopped during those moments. Resources to local and national LGBTQSL sexual violence advocates were provided at the beginning of the interview.

Additionally, participants were assured that I would not ask questions that I, myself, was not willing to answer, and stated that there would be time at the end of the interview for them to ask questions of me. Specifically, I stated, “any question that I ask you, I am happy to answer myself.” Finally, participants were informed that their names and all identifying markers (e.g.; names of universities, churches, partners etc.) will be changed in the transcription process in an effort to maintain confidentiality. If the participant agreed to the terms, she was asked to sign two copies of the consent form. One copy was for me to keep. The other copy was for the participant.

Once that was done, I began the recording. The qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews was used to collect the data. The informality of this method allowed for the participant to share openly and in narrative form. At the same time, by having prepared interview questions aligned with research questions, I was able to keep the conversation focused. It was also necessary to create an open and comfortable environment for the participant to discuss intimate details that are required for this research study. Face-to-face interviews provided an opportunity to observe non-verbal



cues such as: facial expressions, body language, and emotional reactions that can provide depth to what is being communicated (or not) verbally. To that same point, the participants were able to read my body language for indications of understanding, openness, affirmation and non-judgment to their stories.

Interviews lasted anywhere between 35 and 90 minutes. Each interview began with an open-ended question: *What about this research study made you interested in participating?* Beginning the interview with a low-risk question, one that does not require too much disclosure or vulnerability, allows for the researcher and participant to build a rapport. Each interview ended with the same closing questions: *If you were to write your sexual partner a thank you letter what would it say? If you were to write your sexual self a thank you letter what would it say?* These closing questions were meant to close the interview process from a place of self-reflection and gratitude.

Once the interviews were over, I asked participants if they had any questions for me. Leaving the recorder on during this section allowed me to share in the experience of vulnerability and disclosure. If her story can be captured for the purposes of research, then so can mine. All recordings and transcripts were stored on a password protected computer which only myself and the project's advisor, Dr. Shannon Miller, have access to. Signed consent forms are stored in a locked file cabinet and will be destroyed three years after the completion of the project.

**Theoretical Framework.** This project relied heavily on Black feminist research methodology and theory— specifically intersectional theory. In *Mapping the Margins*, Crenshaw discusses how feminist and antiracist movements alike failed to adequately address the needs of women of color due to their singular narrative identity

politics (1991). By highlighting the lack of racial analysis in the feminist movement, as well as the lack of gender analysis in the anti-racist movement as it relates to anti-violence efforts, Crenshaw illustrates how women of color are often further marginalized by and/or erased from the theoretical discourse and intervention services provided (1991). By advocating from a singular identity framework those participating in these discourses are further perpetuating the same model of domination that they should be working to dismantle. It was my hope to avoid this by utilizing an intersectional methodological framework that will address the gaps in literature and interventions that leave Black queer survivors of sexual violence without culturally competent resources.

**Data Analysis.** I transcribed all of the interviews. The analysis of the interviews was guided by the research questions, information obtained from the literature review and new insights obtained from the interviews themselves. The methodological practice of narrative inquiry was used as the primary mode of analysis. Narrative analysis uses stories as a mechanism to collect participant's insight on broader events, experiences or moments in time (Feldman, Sköldbberg, Brown & Horner, 2004). Stories are used to attach appropriate meanings and examples to broader themes of the discussion (Feldman et al., 2004). In regards to this discussion, I looked for stories that provided clarification of the participants' views (points conveyed) on navigating sexual relationships as survivors of sexual violence.

Descriptive Coding was used as themes emerged from stories shared. This coding method "summarizes in a word or short phrase [...] the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (Saldana, 2014, p. 70). Themes that emerged include definitions of desire, indications of empowering and healing sexual experiences, articulation of

obstacles and ways of addressing those obstacles in their relationships, and impact of sexual violence. These were themes that I anticipated prior to data collection, however, there were other themes that emerged from the data that I did not anticipate. For example, gender expression as a variable worth considering as well as the role of kink sex and BDSM (bondage - discipline, dominance – submission, and sadism – masochism) in accessing desire and sexual empowerment were persistent and relevant themes.

### **Reflectivity and Positionality**

Several factors contributed to how my positionality would impact this research study. For example, I chose to disclose my status as a Black queer survivor to the participants. As a Black queer survivor I brought my own experiences with sexual violence and navigating a sexual relationship with another woman to this project. Additionally, my time as an activist may explain the fact that five of the six participants also identified as activists or advocates. This “insider status” had potential to serve as both a benefit and potential limitation to this study (Hesse-Biber, 2014). As a member of the target population I hoped that by disclosing, I would provide a comfortable environment for the participants. However, I understood that all survivor’s experiences are not the same. Therefore, I was clear to be conscious of the possibility that I could project my own experiences on to the participants and the data during the analysis process.

Second, feminist research requires that the relationship between the researcher and subject is problematized by minimizing the power dynamic within this relationship without denying its existence. As the researcher, I have control over the project, the questions and narratives once they are handed over to me by the participants. Efforts for

me to address imbalance in power can be seen in my willingness to allow the participants to also become the researcher by allotting time for them to ask me questions during the interview process. Additionally, by informing participants of their rights to end the interview or completely opt-out of the process at the beginning of each interview, they are empowered that their narratives are still their own.

### **Potential Limitations**

This research cannot be generalized to the experience of the entire LGBTQ population. The lack of Tran's women participation is a limitation, and further research is needed to understand the unique experiences of this population. Additionally, because the data collection took place in one city located in the southeastern region of the United States, any themes or conclusions made may not apply to samples from other regions within the U.S. Finally, there is research to suggest that those that are willing to participate in sexuality studies are a unique population. This study may have attracted a particular type of person that was more inclined to speak openly about sex and desire with a researcher as compared to your everyday person. Even more, because this research is focused on desire and healing, it may have isolated those with history of sexual violence that may feel as if they have not yet been able to locate pleasure in their sexual relationships, or whom have not yet healed from their violations. Therefore, findings cannot be generalized to all survivor/victim's experiences. The fact that majority of the participants are social justice activist may also impact the generalizability of the findings. The participants may have access to language and ways of articulating the implications of violence and strategies of resistance that those not a part of movement building work may not be familiar with. Finally, due to the small sample size it will be hard to draw

inferences that are generalizable to the broader population. Instead, this sample size more appropriately allows for an analysis of theme observed from the interviews.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

The purpose of this study was to determine how black queer women whom are survivors of sexual violence are able to access desire and empowerment in their sexual relationships to other women. Participants included six Black queer, lesbian, and bisexual women with diverse gender presentations (femme, stud, masculine-of-center and gender-non-conforming) ages 21 years and older. Some participants identified as monogamous while others identified as polyamorous. In the first section of this chapter, I provide a summary of demographic information for each participant and illustrate how their identities and experiences informed the findings of this research. Next, I highlight major themes; including, a) indications of empowering and healing sexual experiences; b) articulation of obstacles within sexual relationships and responses to those obstacles; and c) impact of sexual violence on the sexual self. Through these themes, a further examination of gender expression and kink sexual practices as sites of analysis emerged. I conclude with a summary of research findings, and an analysis of what they mean for the broader field of gender and women's studies and anti-violence advocacy work.

### **Participants at a Glance**

Inclusion criteria for this studied required that all participants identify as a Black woman, queer (used as an umbrella term for non-heteronormative sexual identity), and in a sexual relationship with another woman within the last six months. Although not requirements for the study, there were some similarities among those recruited. For example, all but one expressed that they were social justice advocates or activists. Four (of six) participants explicitly stated that their partner was also a survivor of sexual violence. Although there are overarching themes that tie the participants' stories together

in particular ways, each of their stories provide a unique perspective as it pertains to survivorship, identity, and desire.

**Star: Survivorship as a fluid identity.** Star is bisexual and femme presenting. Communication is not her strong point so talking about sex is uncomfortable for her. She struggles with feelings of shame and feels as if her sexual self is “broken.” Although her community affirms her and encourages discussions about sex, sexuality and trauma, she has not been able to experience sex as a mechanism of healing. During the interview, she was visibly uncomfortable and apprehensive. However, she shared that she wanted to participate because bisexual women face a higher prevalence of sexual violence in comparison to other members of the LGBT community. She believes including bi-women’s voices is important to anti-violence and prevention work.

**Marco, Kason, and Phoenix: Female Masculinity.** Marco, Kason and Phoenix are three masculine-of-center women who shared how gender expression shaped their experiences as survivors, both within their sexual relationships as well as how they navigated public space. Marco is a lesbian, gender-non-conforming, masculine-of-center woman. She and her fiancé met in the church where they are both very active. She describes her partner as fluid in her gender-expression, stating that she is “not the most effeminate woman.” Her partner is also a survivor of sexual violence. When asked why she felt the need to disclose her sexual violence to her partner, she replied it was because her partner disclosed to her first. Marco describes this experience as liberating:

Interesting enough, [disclosing was] liberating. Because it was something I really didn’t think about. So at the time, bringing it up was kind of like rehashing old

wounds, but sometimes you have to go into that wound that doesn't heal right and clean it out and re-pack it.

Kason, described herself as a lesbian, stud and gender-non-conforming woman. She married her high-school sweetheart, and has been with her for 9 years. There is some indication that Kason may associate her history of sexual violence to her queer identity. When asked what made her want to participate in the study she replied, "I've always heard that [...] if you're inappropriately touched that's why you're like that or you're scared of men or whatever." I argue that Kason's curiosity illustrates the internalization of homophobic myths that assumes lesbian identity is a symptom of sexual trauma.

Phoenix is a black gender-non-conforming, masculine-of-center, lesbian woman. She is the partner of Star, another participant in this study. Phoenix expressed that her lesbian identity was a choice informed by feminist readings and experiences with queer community:

It wasn't until I got certain kind of language through studying feminism, Audre Lorde and all of these folks, where I realized that patriarchy was a large factor in why relationship[s] with men [were not] desirable to me. [...] I felt like it put me in to a position to be dominated, to be controlled, to have to be submissive and those just weren't things that I wanted. I knew that as a woman who met feminist men and all types of men that it was possible to have a different kind of relationship with a man but I felt like 'why be searching for this magical man when there [are] so many incredible women.' So I chose a lesbian centered identity and found community through that identity and found a lot of my identity



and my politic through that identity. It's where I feel most comfortable and most empowered and most loved and cared for and supported.

Phoenix described her partner as bisexual and polyamorous, although they are practicing a monogamous relationship. Her partner is also a survivor of sexual violence, and is aware of Phoenix's experience with violence. According to Phoenix, "[A]s a lesbian woman [...] 9 out of 10 of all women that I've dated have been sexually abused or experienced some form of sexual violence." Several participants shared Phoenix's sentiments regarding the prevalence of sexual violence committed against black queer women.

**Audre: The politics of disclosure.** Audre is a black/bi-racial, queer, and femme woman in a polyamorous relationship. She, like most participants (5 of 6), was in a sexual relationship with a woman that was also a survivor of sexual or physical trauma. Audre shares:

The thing is I feel like it's rare to actually meet anyone who doesn't have a history of sexual violence. So most of my first interactions with people is kind of assuming that you are a survivor. At some point the actual details of the story become less important because everybody has that story. I think I have maybe two friends who I know have never experienced sexual violence. And it's weird. They feel weird you know. And it's almost like the opposite. It's like a coming out as someone who is not a survivor.

For Audre, sexual violence is such a likely occurrence that she assumes someone is a survivor until she learns that they are not.

During the interview, she focused on two of her most recent relationships to women. Cody, her most recent partner, is more “femme-ish” identified (a term used by Cody to describe a fluid gender expression that is geared towards femininity). Audre describes her relationship with Cody as a sexual companionship - “leaning more in to friendship.” Then there is Terry who is more masculine identified. Audre was in love with Terry and described their relationship as serious. When asked if her partners knew about her experience with sexual violence, she shared that Terry (who is also a survivor) knew because the two of them would do advocacy work around sexual violence together. Cody did not know about her history, but knew how to respond to Audre in moments when she was triggered during sex or within the relationship in general. Audre, appreciates that Cody does not need to know the story in order to respond appropriately.

**Danielle: Black queer women as perpetrators of violence.** Danielle identifies as a Black, fat, queer woman. She came out as lesbian a few years ago. Unfortunately, all of her relationships with women have been abusive or destructive in some way. Although she seeks to be in queer community, she does not feel safe or comfortable there. She feels that because she is often read as a masculine woman (although she does not identify that way) she is perceived as a threat or predator in queer spaces. She talked about two main relationships during our interview. Being polyamorous, the two relationships overlapped. Her primary partner identified as asexual for the first five years of their relationship, but decided she wanted to have sex suddenly towards the end of the relationship. When Danielle shared that she needed time and space to consider this change, her partner tried to force sex onto Danielle, or attempted to manipulate her by claiming the reason Danielle did not want to have sex was because she was not attracted to her.

This experience was troubling but particularly triggering for Danielle considering that her other partner also used sex to feel powerful, and often pressured Danielle to have sex against her will. Danielle discussed her identity as a fat Black woman and how that interplays with her experience with desire, vulnerability, and victimization. Her most empowering sexual experience was with a man that never used his penis. It was empowering because as they participated in kink sex, she was encouraged to communicate her desires.

### **Triggers: Obstacles and solutions**

Participants shared how their history of sexual violence impacted their sexual selves. For example, each participant reported experiences with triggers, either as the person being triggered or as the partner of someone who was triggered, during their sexual or relational experience. Derenne, Roberts, & Weiss (2010) explains that “trigger” is used to refer to the experience of re-traumatization that is common for survivors of sexual violence. Sexual violence can have lasting negative impacts on the physical and emotional self even after the initial moment of violence. Such implications include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Symptoms of PTSD include “diminished libido or impulsive sexual behavior, acute stress disorder, numbing, avoidance, re-experiencing the event, and nightmares” (Derenne, Roberts, & Weiss 2010, p.410). Some of the participants in this study discussed in detail how they experienced being triggered, but most provided information on what they needed in order to counter that emotional state.

Although experiencing triggers is a common phenomenon for survivors, participants recalled having to also navigate their partner’s triggers. Phoenix provides an understanding on the importance of communication about boundaries and sexual activity:

We have a very rough sex life and because of that there's been moments when outside of our sex life [would be] rough with her assuming that it was flirting, and not realizing that it was actually triggering when it would happen outside of sex. So the ways in which a partner may want certain dynamics or want to interact a certain way in the bedroom can't always be carried outside of the bedroom, particularly for a survivor.

Kason and her fiancé decided to enter therapy and address the obstacles in their sexual relationship. She found it necessary to disclose her experience with sexual violence to her partner in order to explain the moments when she was triggered during sex. Kason described positive experiences with therapy and explained that her therapist provided tools to use with her wife to help “bring her back” when she would disassociate. To disassociate is a relatively common reaction to survivors of sexual violence. It is the act of leaving one's body mentally or emotionally during a traumatic event (Haines, 2007):

I had to identify safe spots on my wife that calmed me down, things that could be a turn on, but not necessarily sexual. My safe place for her, is laying right here on her chest. So sometimes we would have to stop what we're doing and I would really take in listening to her breath, listening to her heartbeat, which would create an emotional intimacy, but we're close and we're naked so it would create a sexual intimacy.

For some (2 of 6), disclosing experiences with sexual violence brought them closer to their partners. It allowed them to provide an explanation for who they were as sexual partners. For others, such as Audre and Star, disclosing did not carry as much emotional

importance as their partners knowing how to address them when they were triggered.

Audre states:

I've gotten annoyed sometimes when people have to know the story behind it in order to make sense of it. You don't really need to. Like violence is violence. And certainly I get that it brings you close to someone but I don't know. I just heard so many stories and after coming out of doing anti-violence work I think I can get desensitized. So it's easier just to be like, here is the thing I need you to do. And not like the feeling I need you to process.

Audre described partners of survivors as allies. Their job is to support the person in their journey, and take joy in the process of supporting someone. In fact, several participants stressed the importance of the partners not internalizing the survivor's trauma, or approaching the survivor as a project in need of saving or fixing. Audre also described sex as a valuable mechanism for healing because it utilizes the body in releasing trauma done to the body:

We have to figure out ways to practice healing with our bodies. Like practice, literally, new shapes that our bodies make. So sex is one of the easiest ways to do that for me. Let me not say 'easy.' It's the one that makes the most sense. It's not the easiest it's very hard actually. So, there's a lot of practices in somatics that I practice during sex. There is a practice called centering that's an embodiment practice where you sort of bring attention to your width, your length, your depth. You sort of come in to yourself. And I do that when I'm getting down and it's fucking awesome. Cause then I can actually ask myself what are the sensations that I'm experiencing? I can list them: I'm feeling hot, I'm feeling tense, that feels

good, and that doesn't feel good. And without judgment I can decide which ones I want to keep, which ones I don't. And I can communicate that or not. And going through that whole thing of thinking about what do I want to keep, don't or change has been really life changing.

This practice centers desire because it requires the survivor to remain in her body to name its sensation. Not only does this practice have potential to help survivors come back to their body if they find themselves disassociating during sex, it is also a way to become aware of one's sexual desires (Haines, 2007).

**Gender Socialization and Trauma.** For all participants, sexual scripts were often gendered and nuanced. One participant, Audre, appreciated transcending gender expectations and found her most empowering moments when she was able to challenge restrictions pertaining to gender during sex. However, three participants (Kason, Marco and Phoenix) took great pride in their masculine expression and identity. Kason and Phoenix both described themselves as sexually aggressive and found power in their sexual positioning as "Tops" (a common vernacular in the queer communities to describe those that are more masculine/aggressive. Top is also used within the BDSM community to describe those that are dominant in sexual power play) (Weiss, 2011). On the other hand, two participants (Kason and Marco) described incidents in which masculinity served as a barrier to desire and safety. Danielle, for example, discussed how her partner used masculine tropes around sex to further victimize her and limit her access to the type of sex that she desired. This section seeks to examine the role of gender scripts in how survivors are able to access desire.

**Masculinity as a Target.** Masculinities studies identify hegemonic masculinity as a source of perpetuating gender-based violence (Kaufman, 20017), however, some participants identified their masculinity as a target for particular forms of gender-based and sexual violence. For example, Phoenix, a masculine-of-center woman, described her experiences with street harassment, “[W]hen I experience street harassment the type of sexual comments that are made to me are often in the form of ‘I want to rape you back to being a woman,’ because ‘how dare you feel like you can take part in masculinity.’”

Phoenix’s experience with street harassment can be defined as a threat with “corrective rape,” the act of raping lesbian women as a way to change them to heterosexual. This phenomena is often associated with South Africa (Mittelstaedt, 2008). Masculine women become easy targets for the sum of sexism and homophobia because their rejection of emphasized femininity writes queerness on to their bodies. Therefore, masculine women’s navigation of public space, queer or not, is a bold resistance against heteronormative requirement that women’s sexuality is solely for, and readily available to, men. In addition, their presence is an indication of the fragility of male masculinity, in that a woman can embody it, effortlessly, as her own. This combination of sexual and gender transgression creates a unique type of gender-based violence for Black queer masculine women.

The presence of masculinity can both create a particular climate of violence for some Black queer women and a barrier to community resources. Danielle does not identify as a masculine-of-center woman but is perceived as one. As a fat queer woman she could be judged based on stereotypical beauty ideologies that typecast femininity as thin or petite (Ross & Moorti, 2005). It is also possible that she is being held to

butch/femme heteronormative dichotomies that require femme women to solely date butch women – considering how she described her partner at the time as being “more feminine than [her]self.” Being read as masculine has had a great impact on her ability to access community and support within the queer community.

I’m perceived as a masculine person. So I’m perceived as a predator in a lot of spaces. [...] So when I’m in queer spaces I don’t notice how attractive people are. I don’t try and strike up conversations like that. I don’t flirt. Ever. So I think I’m having this tug-a-war with my desire and whether or not it’s me feeling myself, or am I being a misogynist right now? I think more about that in queer spaces than I do in perceived hetero spaces mostly because the conversation flows a bit easier. I don’t feel like I have to meet some kind of standard. [...] No one is interrogating my presentation, my masculinity, my femininity, nothing. People are just taking me for who I am. And I feel comfortable.

Not only has being perceived as masculine impacted her ability to access support and community, it has also impacted her ability to engage her desires. She stifles her own sexuality or sexual expression based on connotations attached to masculinity.

### **Impact of Sexual Violence: Victim blaming and internalized oppression**

Some of the participants responded to sexual trauma by internalizing damaging messages that resulted in feelings of shame and guilt. Danielle found solace in the fact that her primary partner was asexual after being in a sexual relationship with Jordyn in which sex was demanded of Danielle against her will. Her partner, Jordyn, would use sex as a way to access power in her own life, and in the relationship. This manifested in heteronormative gendered ways. Although Danielle expressed a desire to have varying



types of sexual encounters to include penetrating her partner with a dildo, Jordyn would not allow it. In fact, the only type of sex that Jordyn did allow was aggressive, and sometimes painful, intercourse where she was penetrating Danielle. When asked if she had ever engaged with sex against her will in that relationship, Danielle responded:

Often. She likes straps that are really hard. Not necessarily the flesh ones that had a lot of motion. Because it was about power. Look at this big hard thing I want to fuck you with. And that shit hurt. So I was like, well it's almost over. So I kind of put up with that. But for her, her motivation for sex was power. To feel powerful. Not necessarily raping me, but kind of. Kind of. I never said...well actually that's not true.... I did say no a lot. But then I would just kind of shut up and just take it. [...] Sometimes, even if I did start off really in to it after a while I would just be over it and just kind of check out. Oh um, yea that's probably why when the partner of five years suddenly wanted to have sex I was like no. I'm not doing this ever again, because I didn't want to.

Danielle's description of her sexual relationship with Jordyn is indicative of one that lacked consent and desire. Her inability to feel empowered in that relationship was due to her partner's use of sex to gain power and unwillingness to allow Danielle to explore and express her own sexual desires. It is understandable, then, that Danielle would find safety and comfort in a non-sexual intimate relationship. It is also reasonable that she would be triggered when her partner decided that the relationship would suddenly shift to a sexual one without Danielle's consideration.

**Victim Blaming.** These experiences with women have had a grave impact, not just on Danielle's sexual self, but on her self-identity and ability to access community.

There was some blame placed on her coming out, stating that there was a time when she thought, “I should have just stayed in the closet to avoid all of this mess.” Victim-blaming by way of internalize oppression (in Danielle’s case homophobia) was a common theme in the ways some of the participants responded to their experiences of sexual violence.

For example, both Marco and Kason suffered from various forms of internalized sexism and femmephobia. Femmephobia is defined as “prejudice, discrimination or antagonism directed at someone who is perceived to identify, embody or express femininely and toward people or objects gendered femininely” (Blair & Hoskins, 2014, p. 25). Marco was date raped while in college. She had not openly claimed her lesbian identity nor did she outwardly express her masculinity. In her words, assimilating to heteronormative gender norms made her vulnerable to rape:

I recognized who I was at 9 but was aware of myself enough to the point of ‘you know what, I better start conforming’ otherwise I don’t want to be chastised’ or cast out for being a lesbian. [...] So I was a young adult trying to live a lie in school [and] I think living that lie kind of left me open to being caught in that situation. I got caught up one time when I wasn’t watchful - trying to conform, trying to be normal. So, now I guess I’m a little more watchful [...] of the opposite sex.

Marco internalized messages that blame victims instead of centering the perpetrator of the assault.

Kason, like Marco, also expressed sentiments of internalized shame. However, for Kason, unlike Marco, it was her female body (not necessarily her femininity) that was to

blame. She blamed her body for being a site of sexualization and questioned whether or not she was potentially trans for a while.

Honestly [masculinity] made [my healing process] harder, because it messed up my identity for a while. I didn't like my body. I was already masculine so I thought, maybe I'm transgender. Anyways, I'm not transgender I just didn't like my body. I just kind of feel like overall I hated my body. Maybe if I didn't have this body this wouldn't have happened. But I feel like it stifled it just because I didn't understand that masculinity doesn't mean that you can't be vulnerable. It doesn't mean that you can't be emotional. I thought masculinity meant that I was the pleaser, and it's up to me to please my partner.

Victims of sexual violence experiencing feelings of guilt and shame is a common response. What is unique about these cases however, is how these responses impacted their self-identification as lesbian, masculine-of-center women. For these women, female masculinity served as both a catalyst and a hindrance to their healing process and ability to access desire.

**Internalized Oppression.** Five of six participants demonstrated a relationship between masculinity and desire. For example, Marco expressed that the hardest part about her sexual relationship with her partner is that her partner desired to penetrate Marco, but Marco has kept that sexual act off limits until marriage:

I've never been penetrated by another woman, so she would be the first. And I told her that she would have to be my wife if that were to ever happen. [...] So, it's a little bit of guilt with it because technically I'm not being as open as she is being open with me. You know [...] the bible says the bed of marriage cannot be

defiled. So it's kind of like well, we're married so it's different. We [are] under covenant, but we're not technically married. So, I guess it's just my mental thing.

When asked why she felt penetrative sex from a woman should be held until marriage, she replied, "I guess that masculine-of-center-ego." Although Marco expressed a desire to be sexually open with her partner, she deflected to hegemonic gender ideations about sex that states masculinity does not get penetrated. This ideation is typically used to denounce homosexuality (or homosexual sexual acts) as appropriate for men. Here, Marco adopted it as a masculine woman. Even further, she used religion as a way to validate this decision, an institution that has traditionally been used as a mechanism to demonize homosexuality. Conversely, as a leader in the church, she referred to the bible as a way of both recognizing her covenant to her fiancé and validating her gendered ideologies about appropriate sex. It makes sense that penetration would be a difficult sexual act to engage in as a victim of sexual violence. It is not clear, however, if her adversity to penetration was tied to her victimization, or her gender expression, or a combination of the two.

I can go back to that moment at times if I'm not...if there is a moment of vulnerability so to speak. Cause even though I've never been a touch-me-not, there are certain places that she would touch and I'm like I don't necessarily feel comfortable with that, cause that's leading to another level of vulnerability I'm not ready for.

Marco's description of vulnerability was directly related to femininity. When asked how this occurrence impacted her sexual relationships she explains, "Past relationships it probably has, because it's been more so of, I have to not be vulnerable because I don't

want to be reminded of my femininity. Cause I couldn't trust you with it." For her, femininity meant vulnerability and there was safety in her masculinity. The tendency to name vulnerability as feminine - and further to associate those moments with shame seem to portray femmephobia.

**Femmephobia and Femme Pride.** For some participants, femmephobia may be a way to name the process of dissociating with one's female body (as we see with Kason), "feminine" sexual acts (as we see with Marco), or in using femme bodies as sexual objects of validation (as we see with Phoenix). This process was the not the same for all of the participants, as some found safety in their femme sexual positioning as "submissive" or the "bottom." For example, Star who identifies as bisexual, shared that she enjoys being the more submissive sexual partner and, in fact, finds agency in that positioning.

I'm kind of awkward when it comes to sex. [...] I like to be submissive but I'm still versatile. I like for someone else to be in control, but only in the ways I want them to. [...] I don't really like to kiss too much, but like for the rest of my body to be touched. She fills the dominant role, and I think that it's comfortable and easy for her. I don't think it's necessarily what has to happen, she's versatile too.

But that works out. That's a good balance that we have.

Although she was submissive in that she did not typically initiate sex and allowed her partner to dictate the sexual activity and level of sexual aggression, she still felt in control of her sexual self and the sexual encounter.

### **BDSM, Desire and Empowerment**

A recurring theme was kink sex and BDSM as potential sites for sexual empowerment and healing. Five (of six) participants shared that they intentionally engaged elements of aggression and power exchange in their sexual activity. This section explores the potential of BDSM as a fertile site of agency for survivors of sexual violence (Weiss, 2011).

**Questions of Desire.** Danielle shares that her most empowering sexual encounter was with a man that did not use his penis during their sexual encounters. They engaged in kink sex and he preferred to use dildos and sex toys as opposed to his own penis. What made this sexual encounter empowering for her is that it required her to know, name, and ask for what she wanted:

Growing up as a little fat black girl, you're taught to take what you can get. It ain't even gotta be good. The fact that somebody likes you is an indication that you're worth something so you should take that opportunity. And you kind of learn not to desire anything because you don't get it. And it could be because you don't desire that you don't get it. But that's not what I was taught. I was taught don't want anything. Don't ask for anything. Just take what you can get. I learned from Eric, to ask for things, to desire things through BDSM. Even as a bottom, he taught me to ask for things from him that I wanted.

For Danielle, the explorative aspect of kink sex, the process of trying new things and naming what you want, allowed for a sexual experience that was empowering (Haines, 2007; Rubin, 1993; Weiss, 2011). It was also a way to unlearn the harmful internalized scripts that fat bodies are not worthy of autonomous desire (Harding, 2008).

**Power and Play.** Phoenix described herself as a “Top,” or dominant in the bedroom. She shared, “as a top it just allows me a certain level of power that comes in to having control around what’s happening [...] I’m daddy. A certain level of confidence plays out there.” Power and control during sex was a gendered act for some of the participants, and was illustrated in a number of ways. For Phoenix it is seen in her positioning as “daddy.” For Kason, her power was personified in her penis.

Well I found my sexy and my sexy is my masculinity. So I’ve learned I could just be myself. Or I could do this, which others may say is super masculine, but my partner likes it and I feel sexy doing it. So I’ve always wanted to wear a strap. I thought that I would walk around with it, until I realized that that’s not going to work because people could see it. It’s something I wanted to do, I craved to do, but it was also weird so I kind of sucked at it. So through everything I learned my masculinity and I learned how to do it right. I found what works for me and my partner. My penis is one with me. And I thought I had to have a big huge one. I wanted a big one, and my partner was like this isn’t [going to work], and I was like, no I want it to be big. For me big was like power. When in actuality I was doing more harm than good. But I also think that I wanted it so big because it was not what hurt me. The penis that hurt me wasn’t that big. Wasn’t that wide. But now I’ve been able to be comfortable with my penis so the penis is like an extension of me. So now I have a penis that would look like me if I had a penis. So I guess I’ve developed a love for penises. Not like sexually, but to have sex with my partner.

For Kason, power, masculinity and the literal ownership of a penis was not simply about desire, but a way of fighting back against her predator. Her penis, and the power that she feels with it, were indications of sexual empowerment and healing.

Audre also provides insight on how BDSM and the kink community serves as a resource for survivors.

I think that's where the poly and kink world just really has a handle on healing.

There is so much in the poly world and the kink world that I really appreciate that the lesbian world is just kind of catching up on. Like explicit consent. Whenever I'm playing with someone or even when I'm explaining my poly structure to someone inherently there are questions or statements just about my own boundaries in terms of safe sex, in terms of what I'm in to, what kind of positions I want. Even down to where in my house I want to get down. [...] Or even the concept of being like 'this is what I want' like 'this is the curated experience I'm trying to create' that kind of conversation I think is very foreign to most lesbians that I'm intimate with. And so, I think that those conversations are really empowering. To think about and determine and curate what you want to happen to your body as if it were a dance like some kind of art. That's the best kind of experience I can think of for someone who has lost autonomy or at some moments didn't have control of their body or what happened to them" (p.6).

These participants provided insight into how playing with consensual power dynamics can lead to feelings of sexual empowerment and agency.



**Sex as a Mechanism of Healing.** All participants agreed that sex can be healing, although not all of them felt they had experienced healing through sex. For example, Star shared:

I hear people talk about it and it sounds really cool. I don't know how to do that and I wish that I did. But I never take the steps to access that because it seems awkward [...]. [Sex is] something that feels good sometimes but as far as it feeling healing and transformative – no.

Star identified as someone that was still on the path to empowerment and healing. She did not like to talk about sex, hence her use of the word “awkward” when describing taking steps to access sex as a mechanism of healing. She shared:

Sex is really complicated. It's not something that I was ever taught how it was supposed to be or feel or look like and even in my adult life when people want to talk about sex, I'm like that actually is really uncomfortable.

The discomfort with sex could be closely tied to her experience with sexual violence.

However, it is also worth noting sex positive feminist claims that the existence of silence as it pertains to female sexual pleasure within a sex negative culture can also be a barrier in survivor's ability to access healing in sex (Riggs, 2008). This was evident when the majority of the participants struggled to answer the question *what motivates you to have sex?* Star and Danielle did not have an answer at all, and others, such as Marco, described their motivation as being dependent on their partner's desire to have sex, but unable to name their sexual motivation independent of another. Audre provides some insight on why this may be the case. She stated:

I think I haven't fully gotten in to my own sexuality yet. Like on my own. My sexuality. Not my sexual experiences related to other people. And a lot of the other women that I talk to are in similar places. Like they discover a lot about themselves when they are with someone else. Or when someone is like "Do you like this?" And there is not a lot of like self-exploration that happens or that gets talked about.

Here, Audre described the traditional sexual scripts that socialize women to be sexually passive while men are socialized to be sexually aggressive. Silence around sex and desire can create dangerous sexual climates for everyone, particularly survivors. Audre shared:

I think this frame of silence that happens a lot where you don't talk about what you want or you don't talk about safe sex or you just kind of default to 'alright now you're going to penetrate me and I'm going to lay here' I find it mechanical and I think anything mechanical can become dangerous quickly. Assumptions can become dangerous quickly.

Nonetheless, there are women that have been able to access this sense of autonomous sexual exploration that Audre describes above.

For example, Phoenix shares how masturbation has served as a way to access healing and empowerment.

I actually masturbate a lot because [...] for me it's very meditative. It's very much of how I center myself and be present and here and in the moment. Through that sex, through that pleasure. [...] I think I deal with a lot of feelings of not feeling attractive, not feeling desirable, not feeling lovable. And I wasn't actually someone who masturbated a lot before, but as those feelings became more intense

in my life I actually found masturbation as a way to practice loving myself though giving pleasure to myself. And even through being able to fantasize within that masturbation. That actually has played a lot into ways that I help myself feel better about myself.

For some, being able to access desire by way of your partner is essential to replenishing the trust lost as a result of sexual violence. Several participants described that one impact of sexual trauma was the loss of trust in others, inability to access intimacy with another, and a loss of trust in oneself. For Marco, being able to find a partner that she can trust and feel vulnerable with (although she is still working through some barriers) was essential to her healing process. She stated, “The crazy part about being empowered is to be vulnerable to a certain extent. That’s the key. That there is a large level of trust.”

For others, being able to explore sexually is a marker of healing. Kason described that her comfort with her sexual self and willingness to try new things despite the possibility of being triggered was an indication that she was determined to have ownership over her own sexual pleasure.

I’m comfortable with me, I’m willing to try new things. I’m able to notice whether I like something but maybe it’s a trigger for me. So maybe down the road I can try but right now it’s not a good idea. So I would say I use [sex] to be closer to my partner [and] I use it for pleasure. [...] So I would say that overall it’s kind of well-rounded.

For Audre she shared that casual and un-attached sex is an indication that she is progressing in her healing process. She believed that the opportunity to center her own desire and pleasure and remain present in her body would be a benchmark.

It's funny because now that I think about this I don't think that I could only learn this through casual sex. But part of what intrigues me is the idea of getting down with a stranger and being able to only focus on my pleasure. Because when I get down with someone for the first time I'm often not very present in my body. I don't usually get off. I'm desiring but I'm not so there. I think it's because of nervousness and the idea of wanting to please someone, even if I'm bottoming and their fucking me. I think it would be a benchmark for my healing if I were able to say 'Yo, I got down with this person that I don't know and I stayed in myself and I didn't take it further, and I just walked away.'

These cases illustrate that there are different ways to approach sex as a mechanism of healing.

### **Community Lead Space: Re-imagining the survivor and centering desire**

All participants answered the same question: *what would a survivor lead space focused on female sexual desire look like?* The purpose of this question was to create an opportunity to envision culturally competent intervention resources that intentionally encouraged survivors to think critically about desire. The responses varied, but there were some consistencies. For example, several of the participants expressed that it was important to have a space that was intergenerational, inclusive of trans and gender-non-conforming people, and affirming.

**Re-imagining the Survivor.** Participants identified themselves (and those that represented their identities) as target populations for this space. Meaning, those who were masculine-of-centered envisioned a space that was curated for survivors that were masculine-of-center. Some participants even considered spaces that were inclusive to

cisgender men who were survivors of sexual violence. The premise behind this was to analyze the role that masculinity played in hindering the healing process and journey towards sexual liberation. Kason shares her views on this point:

I think it would be helpful to have maybe masculine men who have been through it just to see. Because I think sometimes as a masculine woman you try to put yourself on the same path as a masculine man. So you think ‘oh, men don’t cry, men are strong.’ So almost showing that men are valuable too shows that you can be vulnerable. Kind of like bridging the gap. Kind of like victims can look like anything and we all deserve equal healing, equal space to heal.

Kason’s references to protest masculinity (Lane-Steele, 2011) is not to say that female-masculinity or queer masculinity is not autonomous or transformative. However, it does call in to question how limiting scripts of masculinity can be for not only cis-men, but can similarly impact women who are in need of services and resources.

Phoenix also shared similar sentiments in desiring a space that allowed for masculine-of-center women to examine how their masculinity made them targets of violence. She also suggested that a space that both complicated and interrogated how female-masculinity can be toxic would also help free survivors up to explore their desires in ways that do not implicate or harm femme/female bodies. She shares, “I feel like we would figure out how to deal with a feeling of entitlement [to femme bodies], both by males and masculine of center folks.

In addition to spaces centered on identity politics (the process of determining values and priorities based the group identity such as race and sexuality), participants also

discussed a desire to have conversations that included relationship and sexual structures that were non-monogamous. Phoenix shares:

[B]ecause I exist in a relationship with someone who is poly, also being able to have more conversations around how woman-to-woman relationships can make sex that is more than just you and that other partner. Particularly when we are talking about engaging in more poly forms of sex such as threesomes or even larger groups of sexual partners. How can people who have experienced sexual violence from men – who have not had consensual sex with men, how do we create ways to feel safe?

The participant's envisioning of this community space demonstrated an envisioning of potential victims with varying gender identities, sexual orientations and relationship structures.

**Centering Desire.** Participants were also asked to envision a space that centered desire. Some expressed a desire to have more spaces that involved both their body and their community in their healing process. For example, Star described a space that took place in a “home” and where an outcome was to “build relationships” with those present. Similarly, Audre spoke of creating a curated experience that involved community involvement and bodily sensations. She expressed:

It would be in a home. It would be a space [...] kind of like a gallery where you go through and look at different paintings but instead of paintings it would be various sensations that people would do to each other. Or they would go through different stations and it would be everything like the scent of lavender, and at this

station experiencing the feel of fire. Just different kind of touches and scents and sounds and people journaling or responding to each of those things. And then talking about what was their desire. Like where was it? Where did show up? Where did it go away? Where was it accompanied by other things like feeling triggered or feeling angry or feeling embarrassed? And really mapping out how desire get couples with other things. And then I would want each person to create the things [they] want. Like these five things. And I want them done to me or I want to do them. And then you know that way it has the feel of a play party but not quite because it's a little bit more facilitated than that. And it's not all sexual although it can be. I think that would be really beautiful and hot and I think would lead to more openness around expressing desire.

Audre's description of her community space incorporated the process of exploration and self-analysis as it related to desire. In her space, survivors were encouraged to try sensations and then process how those sensations made them feel. It was not an expectation that everyone would feel good or even safe by that manner. However, the goal was to name your desires (and boundaries). It seems that this naming and knowing were key elements in sexual empowerment and agency for many participants.

## **Conclusion**

The findings provided insight on the unique experiences of Black queer survivors of sexual violence as they attempt to navigate sexual and romantic relationships. In addition to heavily researched mental, emotional, and physiological responses to sexual trauma, participants revealed responses that were specific to their queer identities. For these participants, internalized shame was more than a symptom of a culture that blames

victims for their sexual victimization, but also a symptom of homophobic and sexist cultural scripts that deem non-heteronormative identity deviant. Additionally, those that did not prescribe to traditional gender norms found themselves subject to gender-based violence and further sexualized trauma. However, participants demonstrated a desire and dedication to accessing pleasure and agency in their sexual relationships. Through play with power and control, survivors are able to explore their sexual desires with their partners safely and consensually.



## Chapter 5: Discussion

This research study centered the voices of Black queer women and is theoretically based on Black Feminist Thought, which approaches Black women's sexuality as a site of for agency and resilience (Lindsey & Johnson, 2013). This study analyzed if and how six Black queer women with histories of sexual violence were able to access desire, pleasure, and empowerment in their sexual relationships to other women. According to national reports, approximately 23percent to 40percent of Black women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetimes (Black Women's Blueprint, 2015; White House Council on Women and Girls, 2014). However, according to Tillman, Bryant-Davis, and Smith (2010), culturally competent intervention services are lacking for this population. Further, services that center the experiences of queer and trans Black women are even more scarce (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2012). The lack of feminist empirical research that approaches desire from an analytical lens in which queer and black feminist theory intersect has resulted in a debate about sexual violence, desire, and gender socialization that erases the experiences of Black queer women.

This research study builds on the historical feminist debate regarding sexual violence by adding to contemporary sex-positive feminist research. This study is unique because it both centers the experiences of a population that is typically discounted or misrepresented in empirical research, while also demonstrating the complexities, nuances, and diversity within the Black queer population. This Discussion chapter will put research findings in conversation with existing literature as well demonstrate how this study can serve as a resource to service providers, researchers, and Black queer survivors alike.

## **Black Queer Gender Presentation and Performance**

It is established among researchers and service providers that survivors of sexual violence will experience negative effects to their sexual selves that are directly or indirectly related to their sexual trauma. Common responses can include, but are not limited to, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and impulsive sexual activity or negative self-esteem (Bryant-Davis et al., 2010; Tillman et al., 2010). Other responses include possible episodes of flashbacks, re-traumatization and anxiety during sexual acts (Haines, 1999). Several participants identified with these typical responses as survivors. Some participants discussed experiencing flashbacks during sex and needing to pause or stop the sexual activity. Others shared how their experiences with sexual violence impacted their esteem as sexual beings, and ability to navigate sex without restraints or inhibitions.

However, Black queer women in this study also expressed unique responses related to their gender and sexual identities. One response was to internalize messages as it pertained to gender ideation and expectations. For example, several participants internalized scripts of protest masculinity in an effort to feel empowered or find safety as sexual beings. Lane-Steele (2011) defines protest-masculinity as the act of masculine-of-center women adopting notes of Black hyper-masculinity as a mechanism to either avoid harm, or gain acceptance, from their Black male heterosexual peer groups. In this case, some of the survivors relied on heteronormative gender scripts to regain a sense of empowerment lost due their sexual violation. This also manifested sexually in a number of ways.

Some participants relied on models of male sexual aggression, such as the size of their dildo, their ability to overpower their sexual partner, or their lack of willingness to participate in certain sexual acts that are deemed inappropriate for black hyper-masculinity. In one regard, these actions allowed the participants to create a sense of power and control within their sexual lives, at the same time, the reliance on protest masculinity as a source of protection also proved to limit their ability to explore their sexual desires and ultimately find other forms of sexual pleasure. Even further, the adoption of protest masculine ideations resulted in the rejection of stereotypical feminine characteristics and sexual embodiment.

This occurrence in the data is known by scholars as femmephobia (Blair & Hoskins, 2014) and is consistent with anti-sex feminist views that power within sex reflects patriarchal gendered ideologies regardless of the sex of the sexual partners (see MacKinnon, 1989). Femmephobia is defined as “prejudice, discrimination or antagonism directed at someone who is perceived to identify, embody or express femininely and toward people or objects gendered femininely” (Blair & Hoskins, 2014, p. 25). This is relevant to this study because participants demonstrated notes of internalized femmephobia, either by devaluing sexual acts traditionally gendered as feminine or by way of internalized victim blaming (such as blaming their female body for their sexual violence).

However, Black feminist *queering* of the anti-sex discourse calls us to apply a *both/and* analysis. For example, findings also show the ability to transcend gender ideations were indications of healthy sexual relationships and enabled high desirability and sexual empowerment. Anti-sex feminists would argue that it is the very existence of

power and domination that result in the sexual victimization of *all* women; however, this study found the opposite to be true. Meaning, some participants adopted heteronormative gender performances as a means to gain control of their sexual selves, thus resulting in a more liberated sexual experience.

Hence, it is important to resist the urge to demean women for their desire to intimately incorporate their readings of gender in to their sexual experiences – particularly for survivors that rely on their gender as access to safety and agency. Instead, we should seek to determine ways to create affirming sexual environments that expand the existing scripts pertaining to gender so that women have a kaleidoscope of performances to choose from. This allows space for Black queer survivors to re-articulate their sexual experiences in a way that acknowledges the impact of trauma (in this case by internalizing limiting gender ideations) while also demonstrating the ability to create their own rules for sexual engagement (see Miller & Stacks, 2015).

### **Accessing Desire, Empowerment and Healing: Kink/BDSM**

This study finds that sex can be healing when the survivor has co-authorship in the sexually curated space, without judgment, and room for open exploration. Stacy Haines, author of *Healing Sex: A Mind-body Approach to Healing Sexual Trauma* (1999), discuss how positive motivations for sexual healing include a desire to have the ability to communicate ones sexual boundaries, needs, and make one's own sexual choices (p. 2). The authors write:

A sex-positive, non-judgmental attitude will be your most valuable asset in sexual healing. [...] Because sex was used against you as an instrument of harm rather

than of healing, it is important to learn about the positive self-affirming expressions of sex (p. 13).

In this study, such expressions often meant eroticizing power and control– a fundamental aspect of kink sex (Pitch, 2014).

The prevalence of sexual practices seen in sub-cultures such as the kink sex and BDSM (bondage - discipline, dominance – submission, and sadism – masochism) community among the participants is an indication that there is validity to sex-positive claims that women can be sexual subjects as opposed to strictly objects of desire (Filipovic, 2008). Scholar and therapist Nomi Pitch (2014) suggest that the principle rules for BDSM should encourage a sexual environment that is “safe, sane and consensual” (p. 70). Participants that expressed a desire to play with consensual power exchange (either as the dominant or submissive sexual partner) also expressed that such sexual practices allowed them to be present enough in their bodies to explore sexual desires and boundaries. Some expressed that “topping” within the sexual relationship assisted with their self-esteem outside of the relationship. Further, the ability to aggress, take control (or relinquish control for that matter) within their sexual relationship increased vulnerability and trust within the relationship for some participants. Staci Haines and Margot Weiss, scholars of sexual trauma and BDSM, supports the claim that safe and consensual BDSM sexual practices can elicit healing for survivors of sexual violence. They share that some practitioners of the sex sub-culture that are also survivors may reenact scenes of sexual trauma as a way to help “re-write the way the story ends” or simply help the body unlearn the trauma that was encoded on to it (Haines, 1999; Weiss, 2011). It is worth noting, however, that research has dispelled the myth that practitioners

of BDSM are more like to have histories of sexual violence (Ritchers, de Visser, Russel, Grulich & Smith, 2008; Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013). This study seeks to validate the argument that there is utility in the sexual practice for survivors as opposed to perpetuate myths.

### **Community and Resilience: Black queer women caring for one another**

Two participants acknowledged the benefits of utilizing professional mental health services such as licensed therapists. They did so with the recognition that professionalism is a relevant term that is coded based on power, privilege and access. For example, Kason, recalled her positive experiences with a therapist, and Marco shared that her fiancé has an educational background in psychology. However, this project acknowledges the experiences of the target population as holders of subjugated knowledge (cite) fertile with resources and information about how to facilitate healing for themselves. Therefore, it was important to also gain insight how participants envisioned resources and spaces that were curated for and by Black queer survivors and that focused on accessing one's own desire.

Participants shared their visions for a community space led by Black queer women. Three participants shared the need for an intergenerational space where wisdom and lived-experiences could be shared. Marco stressed that because sexual violence was such a taboo subject for "older generations," having an open dialog with "younger people" may help "free them up" from shame and stigma. Next, participants envisioned a space that was less "institutionalized" and more community centered. For example, participants described the location of this community lead space as being in someone's

home. The rationale was to curate an environment that was comfortable, where participants could build a rapport and hold each other accountable.

The desire to have an intergenerational space that feels like community building and not a focus group or therapeutic space in the traditional sense is not surprising considering the research. Tillman, Bryant-Davis, and Smith (2010) identified a lack of Black intervention specialists and culturally competent centers to be a barrier to African American sexual assault survivors accessing resources. They found that Black women had a mistrust for services with predominately white staff for fear of furthering racist stereotypes about Black hyper-sexuality or Black male deviance (2010). They recommend adopting a “strength-based approach to counseling” that considers culturally relevant approaches to healing such as “positive religious coping, social support, storytelling and social activism” (p. 67). This study finds validity to Tillman, Bryant-Davis, and Smith’s recommendations; for example, Audre used the descriptor “art gallery” as she described a curated experience, involving all of one’s senses, as participants’ explored desire in a physical way. I conclude that Black queer survivors desire therapeutic spaces that reflect their lived experiences, political perspectives, and that encourages community involvement.

### **Implications**

This research is as a resource for Black queer women survivors, Black queer women whom are partnered with survivors, as well as mental health professionals and community activists interested in serving this population. The findings suggest that there are unique implications to surviving (and experiencing) sexual violence as a Black queer

woman. The participants interviewed provide a wealth of knowledge that illustrate those implications as well as ways to access sexual desire and empowerment as survivors of sexual violence. I recognize that survivorship is an autonomous journey that varies from person to person; however, the stories shared could potentially provide language and/or validation to experiences that some may experience in isolation.

Additionally, participants provide insight on what survivors need from their partners to feel safe and empowered in their sexual relationships. Communication and openness to express their sexual desires were indications that the sexual relationship was safe. Conversely, judgment and gender-policing hindered participants' ability to explore their own desire and access healing from their sexual violence. Finally, several participants share positive responses that a partner can take in moments when they are triggered. Again, I recognize that re-victimization and triggers are based on the individual; however, this research provides recommendations on how partners can navigate their relationship with survivors that can potentially enable sexually empowering experiences.

### **Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

The primary researcher's identity as a Black queer woman present both benefits and potential limitations to this study. Feminist research ethics calls for researchers to have an invested interest in the population that they seek to study. With that, my having an in-group status served a benefit in building rapport with, and maintaining accountability to the community of study. I approach this research with tools and insight on how to engage the Black LGBT community in a way that honors their agency and



affirms their identity. I did this by asking empirical questions that assume the participants to be experts of their own healing process. In addition, my investment in this community grounded my ethical responsibility to report the stories collected honestly while acknowledging the complexities of living at the axes that is the Black queer woman's experience.

There are other limitations to the present study. First, the majority of the population researched (5 out of 6) also identified as activists or advocates. Because of this occurrence, generalizability to the broader Black LBT community is difficult. Next, this project does not account for the experiences of trans women who are survivors of sexual violence. Again, failure to include this population make it challenging to generalize findings to the entire LBT community. According to a national report on LGBT intimate partner violence, transgender women of color comprised 14percent of the IPV homicides in 2012 (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, 2012). There is a need for more research to determine how Black trans women access sexual empowerment within a social and political climate that continuously exploits them. Such research should seek to determine how one's trans identity assists in her ability gain agency.

More research on the peculiarities of masculine-of-center women's experiences with gender-based and sexual violence is needed. Such research should also consider how concepts such as desire, healing, and agency are implicated by female-masculinity. This research should center the voices of masculine-of-center women in masculinities studies as feminist research seek to expand the current scripts of masculinity.

Finally, the majority of the participants (5 out of 6) were in relationships with other survivors. Considering the prevalence of sexual violence committed against black women, this finding is not surprising. However, research examining same-sex couplings and the ways they navigate survivorship within their sexual relationship is needed. It is important that this research does not limit its scope to monogamous relationships, but should consider how non-monogamous relationship structures and models serve Black queer women in their journey towards agency and desire. Such intellectual concerns would garner a wealth of information about the needs, limitations, and desires of survivors for those interested in creating prevention and intervention models that are culturally competent and beneficial to this community.

## Appendix A

### Interview Questions and Scripts

**Introduction.** Thank you again for choosing to participate in this study. I am very interested in seeing how Black queer (an umbrella term for lesbian, bisexual and same-gender-loving) and trans\* (or gender non-conforming) women who are survivors of sexual violence are finding ways to locate pleasure and desire in their sexual relationships with other women. Please feel free to take your time answering the questions. You should feel free to refuse to answer any question. I want to learn your story to determine how we can influence efforts to create resources that center the experience of Black queer and trans\* survivors. I also want you to know that I am willing to answer any question that I ask you as well as any other questions that you may have after the interview.

1. What about this research study made you interested in participating?

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS: What obstacles, if any, do survivors have to overcome in their sexual relationship? How do survivors address these obstacles when they encounter them?**

1. Tell me about your current intimate relationship.
2. What is the best part about being in a sexual relationship with your partner?
3. What is the hardest part about being in a sexually relationship with your partner?
4. Have you been able to access empowerment in this sexual relationship? If yes, how? If no, why do you think that is the case?
5. What motivates you to have sex? What motivates your partner? How do these motivations compare?

**RESEARCH QUESTION: How do Black queer and trans\* women describe a community space led by survivors focused on female sexual desire?**

6. How has your sexual self been impacted by your past experiences with sexual violence?
7. What are your thoughts to the idea that sex can be healing?
8. What role, if at all has desire played in your healing process?
9. What would a survivor led space focused on female sexual desire look like? What are three outcomes from that meeting?

**RESEARCH QUESTION: How do survivors cultivate healthy sexual relationships?**

10. Does your partner know about your history with sexual violence? Why did/didn't you feel it necessary to disclose?
11. Finish this statement. My sexual self is someone who is \_\_\_\_\_
12. What have you learned about what you need in a sexually committed relationship in order to feel safe?

13. What advice would you give partners of survivors?

***Closing questions***

1. If you were to write your sexual partner a thank you letter what would it say?
2. If you were to write your sexual self a thank you letter what would it say?
3. Do you have any questions for me?

## **Appendix B**

### **Resources**

The following are LGBT inclusive resources for survivors of sexual violence. Please feel free to use them if needed.

### **Local Resources**

Women Healing Women, Inc.  
www.surviving2thriving.org  
404-944-6409  
Imai@surviving2thriving.org

Dating Violence Prevention Center  
www.datingviolence.org  
678-789-3017

Georgia Network to End Sexual Assault (GNESA)  
www.gnesa.org  
404-815-5261

SPARK Reproductive Justice NOW  
404-331-3250  
www.sparkrj.org

Real Inspiration Ministry  
404-284-3113  
1164 Richard Road  
Decatur, GA 30032  
rimatlanta@gmail.com

Rehoboth Fellowship Atlanta  
404-621-6814  
www.makeroom4me.com

Unity Fellowship Church Movement  
404-599-8243  
www.unityfellowshipchurch.org

### **National Resources**

National Sexual Violence Resource Center  
717-909-0710  
www.nsvrc.org

RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network)  
1-800-656-4673 (telephone hotline)  
www.rainn.org

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