

IN THE LIFE, ON THE SCENE: THE SPATIAL AND DISCURSIVE PRODUCTION
OF BLACK QUEER WOMEN’S SCENE SPACE
IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the spatial and discursive practices of black queer women (hereafter BQW) in Washington, D.C. Drawing from ethnographic research conducted within “the Scene,” a colloquialism referring to the transient collection of leisure spaces in D.C. produced for and by other BQW including book clubs, professional sporting events, private house parties, semi-public events held in mainstream venues, happy hours, and annual Black Pride Celebrations, I explore the way BQW actively bend, borrow, and queer language, space, and black cultural values to make room for their unique expressions of black female sexuality within black sexual politics, American popular culture, and the urban landscape. There are two key levels of analysis: (1) I examine the way BQW produce and maintain the “BQW Scene” within the context of a city that is both “gay-friendly” and majority black; and, (2) using critical discourse analysis alongside queer theoretical approaches to the study of affect, I analyze discourses of belonging, self, and others which manifest in my informant’s discussions of the scene. This dissertation demonstrates how BQW make sense of multiple, sometimes contradictory normative practices related to race, gender, sexuality, and class. In so doing, it explicates the interrelationships among race, gender, sexuality, and class as they instantiate themselves within space and discourse.

PREFACE

Family (fam-Lee), adj. 1. Meaning or referring to an individual who is same-gender loving; who identifies as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, and/or queer, or who practices homosexual behavior.

—adj. 2. Related to, or sharing common qualities with someone who is same-gender loving.

The word *family* within black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans language communities is an adjective referring to or describing someone who is same-gender loving in some way. The specifics of how they identify matters less than their being identifiable as someone who is “related” to other black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans people based on the shared experience of being black and being *in the life*, or actively engaged in the black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans community. *Family* functions similarly to an adjective of nationality. For example, “Are you Irish?” is similar to the construction of the question, “Are you *family*?” This question, “Are you *family*?” is a safe, discrete way of asking if someone is lesbian, gay, or bisexual. If they understand the question and answer in the affirmative, then they are indeed *family*.

I grew up a military brat, but spent the majority of my life in Atlanta. I was raised on New York house music. I thought RuPaul was the most beautiful woman in the world, played with action figures instead of dolls, and I never had to “dress like a girl.” And all of my family was *family*. My parents had the unique challenge and good fortune to choose their family. Almost all of their closest friends, my aunties and uncles, were black lesbians and black gay men--they were *family*.

I lived for the family house parties. Me, upstairs somewhere “asleep,” them downstairs dancing, drinking, smoking, talking loud and simply enjoying the company and sensation of being together. Sometimes the parties were massive and other times they were small. It depended on who was throwing the party and whether they had a tiny apartment or a big house. Sometimes they were barbecues and sometimes they were game nights, but they were always a good time and I always found an auntie or uncle willing to shelter me from my parents sending me back to

bed. And so I learned how to throw down on the spades table, talk trash, play the dozens, and how to dance at those parties. One of the most important things I learned at those parties, and which inspires this project, is that people who are marginalized always find a way to make space for themselves.

It wasn't until I was older that I would come to realize that my little queer life was not the "norm." My family was not in the books that I read in school or on television, and in church I came to understand that it was best to keep the truth of my family to myself because there were people, belief systems and forms of "common sense" that would construe the love my family had into something bad. According to these ideas, my family was "living in sin" and therefore I had to learn to "love them from a distance." I suppose the fear was that their "lifestyles" would rub up off, but nothing worked like that except maybe dirt. And so I realized that while I loved all my aunts and uncles because they were my family, they were too often forced to live in secret and shadow out of shame and fear for their livelihoods because something about them made their lives made them "dirty." And so my family didn't belong anywhere except in the spaces that they created for each other.

When I moved to Washington, D.C. for college in 2005, I was a racial minority at a predominately white institution. I helped to organize events and parties that catered to the unique cultural experiences of African, African-American and Latino students. I lived in what we affectionate referred to as the "Black House" whose intent and mission was to keep an "open door" on campus for students of color who could enter the Black House and simply be. Spaces like the Black House were important to us because our experiences were almost never reflected in the spaces we spent the majority of our time, like the classroom. And then in 2006, I fell in love with a woman. Finding spaces to *be* comfortably became even more of a challenge.

There were the steps of the dorm where the women's basketball team lived. All the black lesbians on campus seemed to congregate there. And there were Sunday nights when we'd watch *The L Word* together, again, in the basement of women's basketball team's dorm. While we made

due, these spaces never quite felt adequate. In the spring of 2007, I began dating the woman who would become my wife and she told me about the Black Lesbian Support Group that met on Saturdays near U Street. She was white but had nonetheless heard about this group and thought it might be good for me since I was going through a very tricky process of “coming out.”

On a late Saturday morning in the summer of 2007, I got on the Metro and made my way down to U Street. I walked past the barbershop where I got my haircut; walked across the street past the Footlocker where I’d purchased the shoes I was wearing, and walked into 1810 14th St. NW, the Lesbian Services Project (LSP). It was a small unassuming building with a purple awning. I walked past what appeared to be a reception area, but it was unstaffed. I wandered behind the desk toward what appeared to be meeting rooms and found one with chairs arranged in a large circle. There were a few women there who welcomed me. Soon, more women began to arrive. There were about 10 of us there, myself the youngest of the group, which I learned after introductions. After we talked and shared our stories, our challenges, and offered one another advice, we went to grab lunch together at a nearby restaurant. We laughed, we joked, and exchanged contact information. I had a great time with those women, many of whom I still have relationships with today. They introduced me to the black queer women’s “Scene” in D.C. and while I didn’t know at that time I would be researching and writing about black queer women in D.C., they inspired me. In my journal entry for that day I wrote, “I think I found my aunties in D.C.” This dissertation is about *family*; it’s about my aunties, their creativity, and their resistance to systems that would mark them as undeserving of spaces to simply *be*.