Chapter 11

All the Lesbians are White, All the Villages are Gay, but Some of Us are Brave[1]: Intersectionality, Belonging, and Black Queer Women's Scene Space in Washington DC

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Introduction

Gill Valentine (2007), Natalie Oswin (2008) and Yvette Taylor (2011) challenge feminist and critical geographies to engage intersectional analysis in theoretical and empirical studies of sexualised spaces; to deal with the way race, gender, and class are mutually constituting of sexuality and therefore of social space (Somerville, 2000; Johnson, 2003; Collins, 2004; Cohen, 2005; Ferguson, 2005; Johnson and Henderson, 2005). Based on my ongoing ethnographic research[2] with Black queer[3] women (BQW) in Washington DC, I employ a framework of intersectionality to attend to the ways BQW talk about their experiences of race,

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1   The title of this paper is a borrowing from the anthology *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women's Studies* edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith and published in 1982. Their collection highlighted the need for studies that addressed the specificity of black women's experiences.

2   The data includes 37 ethnographic interviews I conducted with 37 self-identified Black same-gender loving women in DC alongside ethnographic field notes from 15 months of participant observation in Black queer scene spaces in and around DC. I am forever thankful to all the participants who shared their time and their insights with me.

3   I use queer as theorised in E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson's *Black Queer Studies: An Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 'we want to *quare* queer – to throw shade on its meaning in the spirit of extending its service to "Blackness". … just as "queer" challenges notions of heteronormativity and heterosexism, "Black" resists notions of assimilation and absorption. And so we endorse the double cross of affirming the inclusivity mobilized under the sign of "queer" while claiming the racial, historical, and cultural specificity attached to the marker "Black"'. (p.7). All of the individuals quoted in this chapter self-identified as Black or African-American women who were lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer.

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gender, sexuality and class in 'urban gay space'. By attending to spatial practices that BQW employ to *make* space in the city alongside the discursive practices they employ to discuss when they feel in place/out of place in the city, I argue that the dominant spatial orders which help to define the cosmopolitan urban landscape effect the way BQW 'do' race, gender, sexuality, and class. As Valentine suggests, 'when individual identities are "done" differently in particular temporal moments they rub up against, and so expose … dominant spatial borderings that define who is in place/out of place, who belongs and who does not' (Valentine, 2007, p.19).

I begin this chapter by contextualising BQW scene space in Washington DC within the ongoing conversations regarding subjects within urban gay space. I then move on to analyse how individual identities are 'done' differently, and how BQW discuss their sense of being in place/out of place within the urban sexual landscape. To do this, I offer examples from three different but similarly positioned BQW in DC – Kay, Alaire, and Tomar.[4] I highlight their experiences because their lives overlapped in interesting ways, and yet each negotiated their place in DC in different ways. Further, by focusing on three individuals, I am able to perform an intersectional analysis that begins at the individual and works outward (McCall, 2005; Valentine, 2007). What emerges from this chapter is that as we analyse the way BQW discursively negotiate their sense of belonging in the urban landscape, we can see the way that their race, gender, sexuality and class are *felt* unevenly across various kinds of social space.

BQW Scene Space in Washington DC

The BQW scene in DC is made up of a transient group of events including book club meetings, social support groups, weekend trips, bowling nights, women's professional sporting events, house parties, biweekly happy hours, and private parties in commercial venues which take place in DC and its neighbouring suburbs. Organised by and for other Black lesbian/bisexual/queer women and their allies, BQW scene spaces are unique in that Black images, language, musical forms and cultural practices are central to their character. Many BQW socialise in 'mainstream' venues throughout the city as well, often in large groups. House parties are also a fairly regular way that BQW socialise, many preferring house parties over commercial venues. There is only one Black gay club, the Delta, and it was not frequented often by many of my informants though many had gone at some point during their time in DC There are no Black lesbian bars or clubs in the city, the only one closing in 2013 after just four years due to poor patronage. Most

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4 Informants were given the option to use their real name or to remain anonymous. Respondents who chose to remain anonymous were given the option of choosing pseudonyms. Tomar chose to use her real name, while Kay and Alaire are both self-selected pseudonyms. At the time of the interviews, Tomar (35) had lived in DC for 5 years, Kay (25) had lived in DC for 1 year, and Alaire (31) had lived in DC for 9 months.

of my informants cited the club's poor location, far from other centres for night life, and the fact that there were no means of public transportation to get to and from there since taxis rarely travelled along that route.

> The most like visual marker of that scene is kind of like in the entertainment, party circuit-like that's the best way to kinda like tangibly be like, 'this is where they are, this where you can find them'. (Timi, informant interview)

The most visible BQW scene spaces are parties thrown by Black lesbian event promoters who rent out space in venues across the city to host parties. These parties and happy hours often take place during a club's off-peak hours and they frequently change nights, venues, times, and sometimes end all together without warning.[5] During the Spring and Summer the parties are most frequent. Keeping up with where parties and happy hours would be (and who would be at which party) often involved following the party promoters on various social media outlets including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Rather than taking place in gay bars or venues, most often BQW scene spaces are carved out of what might normally be read as mainstream or heterosexual space. The most notable example of this is the monthly day party at a popular strip club in DC hosted by a Black lesbian event promotion company once a month. The party which takes place between 3pm and 10pm, during the club's off-peak hours, features erotic dance performances by the club's regular performers as well as visiting 'stud', or masculine presenting, performers. Here queer approaches to space are particularly instructive in considering the way that BQW *make* scene space; how BQW produce the 'signifiers' of Black same-gender loving women's identities and make sense of those signifiers within scene space (Valentine, 1993).

Following Browne and Bakshi who read space as 'performative and becoming', we can ask how enactments of race, gender *and* sexuality, along with relationships between bodies and the discursive practices that occur in and around those spaces work together to produce BQW scene spaces (Browne and Bakshi, 2011, p.180). According to Jon Binnie (1997, p.223), 'space is not naturally authentically 'straight', but rather actively produced and (hetero)sexualized', therefore the strip club is not 'naturally authentically' a heterosexual space, and when BQW occupy that space, they racialise and (homo)sexualise the space. Whether or not they do so in order to 'disrupt', or 'queer' said space, is not necessarily my interest here.[6]

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5   See Cattan, N. and Clerval, A., 2011. Un droit à la ville? Réseaux virtuels et centralités éphémères des lesbiennes à Paris. *Spatial Justice*, 3, [online] available at: <http://www.jssj.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/JSSJ3–3en1.pdf> [accessed 22 June 2014] for similar patterns of lesbian spatial practices in Paris.

6   Michelle Carnes has argued that Black same-gender loving women's erotic dance parties are disruptive to dominant heteronormative and homonormative ideologies and space-making practices. Carnes argues that as these once 'secret' spaces became public knowledge, a coalition of middle-class Black gays and lesbians showed concern as these

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Instead, I mean to suggest that because BQW organised, occupied and *performed* Black same-gender sexuality in the space, it *becomes* a BQW scene space. Black women dancing together, Black women dancing *for* one another, flirting with one another, buying each other drinks, exchanging phone numbers, talking about the quality of the DJ, smoking on the patio while talking about their relationship with their mother, using the men's bathroom, helping one another put on makeup, spending *too* much time in the bathroom stall, all of these become a part of the *texture* of these spaces which BQW actively produce. Thus, any space including a strip club, hookah bar, a restaurant patio, a rooftop deck, or someone's backyard can *become* a BQW scene space. The BQW scene in DC that I describe is similar, though not the same, as the (white) gay and lesbian scenes studied by geographers interested in the patterns of urban gay and lesbian leisure (Valentine, 1995; Binnie, 1995; Skelton and Valentine, 2003; Leap, 2009).

Scene space is 'paradoxical' space where one has the opportunity to be made to feel safe and comfortable while at the same time being exposed to risks such as social exclusion and abuse (Skelton and Valentine, 2003). It is also space where forms of sexual citizenship are tied to access to resources (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004; McBride, 2005; Taylor, 2007; Visser, 2008; Browne and Bakshi, 2011). The more money you have, the younger you are, and the more beautiful, the more likely you are to 'fit' in the scene and have the ability to move between the BQW scene and the mainstream (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004; Binnie, 2011). Certainly some of these BQW scene spaces are more 'queer' than others, that is some work in service of homonormativity while others actively work against forms of normative ideologies (Visser, 2008; Browne and Bakshi, 2011). The biggest difference here is that BQW scene spaces are constructed around the putative desires and experiences of *Black* women, and these spaces have unique histories grounded within the racial and sexual politics of the DC urban terrain.

Rochelle Thorpe (1996) demonstrated in her study of Black lesbian spatial practices in Detroit from 1940 to 1975, Black women differed from white gay men and white lesbians in their styles of socialising, their use of space and the ways that they construct their daily lives-styles that were shaped to combat systems of power and exclusion such as racial segregation and homophobia from within and outside of the Black communities where they lived. In DC, there is no 'Black gay village' and yet DC exists in the Black queer imaginary as one of few Black Gay Meccas in the country, rivalled only by Atlanta (Johnson, 1998). In sexual geographies of Washington DC, emphasis on gay men's movements across the city rather than their production and maintenance of 'gay ghettos' has produced rich information about the complex ways gay men utilise the city's landscape (Leap, 2003). Similarly, emphasis on the geographic knowledge of transgender

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erotic dance parties went against the homonormative (assimilationist) images of Black LGBT people in DC as 'respectable'. Carnes, M.M., 2009. Do it for your sistas: Black same-sex-desiring women's erotic performance parties in Washington D.C. PhD Dissertation, American University, Washington DC.

people in Washington DC demonstrates the importance not only of the political economy of the city's landscape, but also the precariousness built into the way those viewed as gender and sexual dissidents occupy city space (Edelman 2011). These studies contrast with the way that many white gay and lesbian urban landscapes and commercial territories are mapped and framed, often around the existence of 'gay villages' in cities, or the existence of lesbian neighbourhoods and suburban enclaves (Bell and Valentine, 1995; Weston, 1995; Bouthillette, 1997; Retter, 1997; Lo and Haly, 2000; Valentine, 2000; Podmore, 2006; Visser, 2008). Studies of gay and lesbian urban geography which focus on lesbians' uses of 'gay villages' in the Global North, or their formation of distinct 'lesbian villages' often completely miss the unique ways BQW socialise and experience urban contexts where being a person of colour produces a unique set of experiences of social space (Puar, 2006; Puar, 2007; McKittrick and Woods, 2007; Tucker, 2010). Discussions about Black LGBT people and their relationships to social space are ongoing (Ferguson, 2007; Walcott, 2007; Johnson, 2008; Holmes, 2011; Matebeni, 2011; Bailey, 2013; Bailey and Shabazz, 2013; Catungal, 2013; Livermon, 2013; McGlotten, 2013), but remain rare in the literature of sexual geographies contributing to the dearth of theoretical and empirical analyses of BQW's experiences in the urban (and rural) landscape. This is largely because the sexual geographies literature is rarely interested in the ways that sexuality, gender, race, and class are co-constitutive and thus simultaneously affect both the experience and the production of space; an omission corrected if critical attention were to be given to the theory of intersectionality.

Doing an Intersectional Analysis of Sexual Space

Intersectionality refers generally to the theory of multiple, 'intersecting', or mutually reinforcing categories of identity and/or oppression including race, gender, sexuality and class. Women of colour feminisms are responsible for the theoretical intervention which holds that multiple aspects of one's identity and multiple forms of oppression come together to characterise the experience of women of colour (Beal, 1970; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981; Hull, Bell-Scott and Smith, 1982; Carby, 1983; hooks, 1989; King, 1988; Collins, 2008). It took shape as 'intersectionality' in the work of critical race theorist, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995). Crenshaw's intervention was prompted by what she saw as the problematic nature of identity politics, which she saw as ignoring intra-group difference, or the differences that might be found within a group of women, or within a group of people of colour as they made claims in a court of law. She argued that one of the fundamental problems with identity politics was that it forced an individual's identity to be categorised according to an impossible either/ or binary: you were either Black, or a woman, for example. The effect was the relegation of 'the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling' (Crenshaw, 1995, p.357). Ultimately, intersectionality, especially within women

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of colour feminist scholarship, has been used to destabilise the claim that feminists can speak for all women, and to address the inattention given to race, ethnicity, class and differences in sexuality between women (Nash, 2008).

While existing as a kind of buzzword throughout the social sciences, the theory of intersectionality has been deployed in a number of ways (McCall, 2005; Brown, 2012), often in ways that do more to muddy our understanding of the 'co-constitutive' nature of categories of difference (Puar, 2007). In many cases intersectionality is deployed under the assumption that 'attention to additional intersections will get us *to* 'etc.', allowing us to replace 'etc.' with an endless list of intersections' (Nash, 2010, p. 1). This chapter is not about *adding* race to the discussion of sexuality and gender, nor is it about re-centring intersectional analyses in geography on Black women, rather it is about asking how Black queer women in Washington DC experience their raced, gendered, sexualised, and classed subjectivities; how their talk about their experiences in social space reveal 'the mechanisms by which these systems of exclusion are replicated and recreated' (Nash, 2010, p. 1) both *in space* and through linguistic practices. By viewing race, gender, class and sexuality not only as 'co-constitutive processes', but also as 'distinctive and historically specific technologies of categorization' (Nash, 2008, p.13) we do more than simply name differences between BQW and white queer women, for example. Instead, we ask how, when and *where* categories of difference make a difference. By tuning into the lived experiences of BQW – captured analytically through the work of ethnography and through attention to the role of affect in linguistic practices – we come to see the ways that social categories are experienced and felt in terms of inclusion and exclusion.

Building on Williams's (1977) cultural theory of the structures of feeling, the 'affective turn' in the humanities and social sciences has demonstrated the social power of affect. Feelings and emotions are approached from the perspective of their performative, social, and cultural natures (Berlant, 2001; 2011; Cvetkovich, 2003; Probyn, 2005; Ahmed, 2010; Eng, 2010; McElhinny, 2010; McGlotten, 2012). What emerges is the idea that emotions and feelings are not at all personal, but are themselves socially, linguistically, spatially and temporally bound. Sara Ahmed (2006) has been particularly instructive in thinking about the ways that subjects 'orient' toward familiar objects within social spaces. According to Ahmed, 'the starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the here of the body and the where of its dwelling' (Ahmed, 2006, p.8). Knowing how subjects orient to other people and to the *texture* of various social spaces, allows us to understand the particularities of how certain configurations of race, gender, sexuality and class 'feel' and 'impress' upon those subjects. One way of ascertaining how subjects *orient* is through their linguistic practices of taking a stance. Taking a stance, we learn from John Du Bois, is a means by which individuals position themselves in relation to others (Du Bois 2007: 163). Du Bois describes stance as a dialogic *act* that presumes interlocutors are taking up positions about an object in order to align with one another. When an individual takes a stance they rely on the semantic resources of appraisal which allows them

to 'negotiate emotions, judgments, and valuations' (Martin 2001: 145). In this sense, we might say our emotions, judgments, and *tastes* reveal our social location.

In the following examples, Kay, Alaire and Tomar discuss their experiences in various kinds of social spaces across the urban landscape. I chose these three from among my sample of 37 women because their biographies overlapped in interesting ways. All three had gone to predominately white high schools and grew up in middle and upper-middle class homes. Tomar and Alaire both had gone to law school following college at predominantly white institutions and were practicing law in the city. Tomar and Kay were both involved in local women's rugby: Kay as a fan and friend of several players and Tomar was one of a few Black women who played in one of the local clubs. Alaire, who had lived in the city for the shortest amount of time (nine months), had mostly straight friends, and at the time of our interview was actively seeking out more gay and lesbian friends. Tomar's circle was made up primarily of the white women who she played rugby with, and Kay had what she referred to as a diverse group of friends, though they were mostly white lesbians. Each spent the majority of their leisure time in predominately heterosexual or white lesbian spaces, which was not the case for most of my informants who spent the majority of their time socialising with other queer women of colour. As Kay, Alaire and Tomar make statements about their feelings of comfort and safety within the urban landscape and make statements about their preferences for certain ways of socialising, they reveal their social and cultural locations within social space. They also expose the dominant spatial orderings that organise those social spaces.

You Don't Have to Explain Yourself: Intersectionality and Discourses of Intimacy of BQW Scene Space

Example 1: Kay – 'It feels like you don't have to explain yourself'

01   NL: What does it feel like to be in a space with majority Black women?
02   Kay: It feels like you don't have to explain yourself.
03   It feels like people understand
04   and even though you're not the same person
05   and you don't have the same experiences
06   and you may think of yourself completely differently than they do,
07   that there are just certain things you just don't have to explain.
08   And those are, you know, just the experience of being a person of colour in
        the world.
09   The experience of dating, sleeping with, loving women, you just don't have
        to explain that.
10   And it's … it's something that there's always a piece missing for me.
11   Like I feel like when I'm with white gay women

12   there's always that element of they don't quite get the experience of being
         of colour,
13   and when I'm with Black straight women
14   I feel like they don't understand that there's this whole other element
15   and I kinda just, you know, don't seem Black enough for whatever reason.
16   So that just never having that space of like 'you understand these
         different elements',
17   it's like being with people who do.
18   And not just one, not just two but a whole variety of people
19   who do with their own differences among themselves
20   that is what feels good, you know.

In Example 1 above, Kay lists a number of feelings associated with being in a
space where there a majority of women of colour who are queer, or same-gender
loving: 'you don't have to explain yourself' (line 1.02), 'people understand' (line
1.15), 'an understanding of these different elements' (line 1.16–1.17), 'not just
one, not just two but a whole variety of people who [understand] with their own
differences' and ultimately, these together are what 'feel good' (line 1.20). Kay's
description of this particular BQW scene space, a house party hosted by a black
woman, reveals that it is an instantiation of a kind of spatial ordering where one
need not choose between being Black, or a woman, or a woman who dates, sleeps
with, and loves other women (line 1.09). On the contrary, in a BQW scene space,
those experiences are given room to be 'done' all at the same time, absent the need
to explain their nature to the other people in the room because you are familiar
with one another on account of your shared, though unique, experiences of these
intersections. As Kay says 'even though you're not the same person/and you don't
have the same experiences/and you may think of yourself completely differently
than they do/[…] there are just certain things you just don't have to explain' (lines
1.02–1.04). By not having to explain your experiences of the intersections of race,
gender, and sexuality in BQW scene space, there's literally the space to talk about
all of the other things. That's what feels good about being in BQW scene space.

     In BQW scene space, the constitutive 'elements' of race, gender, and sexuality
are already understood (line 1.07–1.08). When among white lesbians, in contrast,
the particular aspect of herself that they don't 'get', or do not understand, is
the way that her experience of being a person of colour in the world affects her
experiences as a lesbian. Black feminist scholars have levelled this same critique
at white feminists who in attempting to outline 'women's problems', were unable
to acknowledge the differences between women, especially the way that race and
class augmented one's experiences as a woman (Carby, 1983; Lorde, 2007; Collins,
2008). Kay faces a similar challenge with Black heterosexual women who don't
understand that her experience as a lesbian augments and complicates her Black
womanhood (Beal, 1970; Hall and Fine, 2005; Johnson and Henderson, 2005).

     Black feminist scholar Eveylnn Hammonds observed over two decades ago
that approaches to analysing Black lesbian sexuality tended to take the form of

discussions of 'differences from or equivalencies with white lesbian sexualities, with "black" added to delimit the fact that black lesbians share a history with other black women' (Hammonds, 1994, p.136). What Hammonds and others have observed about this kind of approach to studies of people of colour is that 'tacking on' race to the discussion of sexuality 'obfuscate[s] rather than illuminate[s]' (Hammonds, 1994, p.136) the specific conditions of Black queer women's life in America. Mignon Moore's *Invisible Families: Gay identities, Relationships, and Motherhood among Black Women* (2011) stands out as one of few contemporary discussions of Black lesbian life in America that attempts to follow Hammonds in illuminating the specificity of Black women's everyday experiences. Moore analyses identity, relationship formation and motherhood among black gay women, using intersectionality as the lens through which she reads the complex relations that are embodied in their everyday lives (Moore, 2011, p.216).

Returning briefly to Ahmed's notion of orientation and Du Bois's conceptualisation of stance, being understood then is related to having one's race, gender and sexuality be felt as familiar to those in the room, or to be able to relate around common, familiar objects to those with whom you are speaking. Kay indexes white lesbians and Black heterosexual (or straight) women here as contrasting figures in her depiction of what it *feels* like to be in BQW scene space. In her dealings with white lesbians and Black heterosexual women being 'understood' was experienced as a loss, as the 'piece missing' in those interactions and spaces (lines 1.09). As Valentine argues, one's 'ability to enact some identities or realities rather than others is highly contingent on the power-laden spaces in and through which our experiences are lived […] in particular spaces there are dominant spatial orderings that produce moments of exclusion for particular social groups' (Valentine, 2007, p.19). In spaces with white women 'the experience of being of colour' (lines 1.10–1.11) is not a part of the dominant spatial orderings of the space, and in spaces with Black heterosexual women, lesbian sexuality is not a part of the dominant spatial orderings. In Valentine's terms, when Kay is in white lesbian space her experience as a person of colour rubs up against and thus 'exposes' the white, dominant, spatial ordering that defines who is in place/ out of place. Similarly, when she's with Black straight women it 'feels like they don't understand that there's this whole other element and I kinda just, you know, don't seem Black enough for whatever reason' (lines 1.12–1.13). A transnational adoptee that self-identifies as Black and was raised by white parents, Kay would later describe being made to feel out of place around Black Americans. Thus exposing the persistent investment of the borders of Blackness and nationality (Johnson, 2003; Ferguson, 2005; Eng, 2010; Puar, 2007). In Example 1, however, she contrasts the feelings of being 'out of place' because of her race, sexuality, and ethnic identity with the feeling of being 'in place' in BQW scene space where all of her experiences can be fully 'understood' (line 1.016). Lauren Berlant's discussion of intimacy is particularly instructive here as it points to the kind of discourses of belonging that travel with some women's descriptions and narratives of BQW scene space. Of intimacy, Lauren Berlant says:

> Intimacy … involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way. Usually, this story is set within zones of familiarity and comfort … Yet the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness. (Berlant 1998, p.281)

In this formulation we might think of the BQW scene space that Kay describes as being an institution of intimacy – a collection of spaces where BQW *belong*. Whether or not one feels comfortable there, just as whether or not one's marriage is actually happy, people remain invested in its production and reproduction. I want to suggest here that BQW understand scene space to have the *potential* to offer happiness, comfort and safety against the set of dominant spatial orderings that characterise many BQW's everyday lives (Thorpe, 1996; Richardson, 2003; Hall and Fine, 2005; Fogg-Davis, 2006; Moore, 2006; 2011). So while the things shared in BQW scene space including race, gender and same-sex desire are often not enough to create meaningful and lasting bonds between women, that there are such spaces where you can find other Black same-sex desiring women is a unique opportunity within the urban landscape. It produces a sensation of intimacy, familiarity and closeness among Black same-sex desiring women where other kinds of differences can be explored. Where race, gender and same-sex desire were shared, I found that other kinds of differences, most notably, differences in class, came to the foreground in my informants' discussions of belonging (and not belonging).

Most Comfortable, More at Home: Class and Modernity in the City

Alaire had recently moved to DC, and at the time of our interview, June 2013, had not yet been in DC for a year. She'd recently graduated from law school and soon after began working at a firm in DC She describes her social network as consisting of several 'quadrants of friends', most of whom were straight. She had begun to meet more lesbian and gay friends through her sibling who lived in the area and by going out, but for the most part her social network was primarily made up of loosely connected groups of straight friends she'd formed relationships with in law school, college and work. As we will see in the example below, Alaire constructs a modern gendered subjectivity focusing on her ability to move through the random, unknown parts of the city how she wants, and on the diversity of her social network. In effect, she describes herself as a modern subject with great flexibility in the cosmopolitan urban terrain. As a BQW she was not restricted in her movements throughout the city. How she spent her time *depended*, and as the examples show it greatly depended on negotiations of race, gender and sexuality.

Example 2: Alaire – 'It depends'

01 It depends,
02 I can hang with my straight friends

03   and we go to you know a random bar or lounge, or whatever.
04   Or I can hang out with my gay friends
05   and we'll go to a gay dominant environment
06   or if I choose to go to one of these venues listed in Phatgirlchic.com
07   I go to wherever they're hosting events,
08   you've got Bravo Bravo –
09   They take a lot of heterosexual environments and book them for a certain
          number of hours

Neoliberalism is often used to describe the cultural project of capitalism, and most notably refers to the complex changes occurring globally within political economies as a result of the hegemonic spread of capitalism (Hodgson, 2001; Harvey, 2007; Duggan, 2012). These changes facilitate the flow of capital upward and Westward all while promising 'happiness', 'freedom' and 'choice' to those who tend to benefit the least from the expansion of capitalism (Duggan, 2012; Ahmed, 2010; Berlant, 2011). The underlying assumption legitimising neoliberalism's promises is that 'it is your right to buy whatever you want'. To which we might add 'you can buy *wherever* you want'. This assumption warps citizens into consumers, rights into products, and makes the city a cosmopolitan marketplace.

Alaire enjoys a certain level of freedom of movement in the urban landscape. Alaire uses similar discursive pattern to describe going to straight spaces and gay spaces: 'I can hang out with my straight friends and we'll go to a random bar or lounge, or whatever' (line 2.02–2.03) and 'I can hang with my gay friends and we'll go to a gay dominant environment' (lines 2.04–2.05). She has the option to 'hang out' with either a group of straight or gay friends, but the places that they go are not necessarily interchangeable (lines 2.03 and line 2.05). With her straight friends she is able to visit 'random bars and venues' and with mostly white gay friends, she goes to 'gay dominant environments' which are not random (Binnie, 1995; 2004). However, when describing being in BQW scene spaces listed on the Phatgirlchic website, there is not a group of friends she can 'hang with', instead she describes going alone, 'I go to wherever they're hosting an event' (line 2.07). Because she hadn't yet established a group of Black gay friends, she went to many BQW scene spaces alone. Also, unlike the random bars or lounges, or the gay bars she goes with straight friends and white gay friends, built into BQW scene space as discussed earlier, is a level of uncertainness about *where* events will be hosted. In other words, while she has considerable freedom, her choices are not without constraint. Her choices are contingent, as she says, 'it depends' (line 2.01). I followed up with another question to get her to describe what her choices depended on.

Example 3: Alaire – 'I think, yes, I have a natural affinity'

01   NL: Well it sounds like you spend your time in a lot of different places.
02   Do you have an affinity for clubs, parties, events, or whatever

03   where there are other women who partner with women?
04   Do you feel more drawn to those places as opposed to going out
05   to a straight club or a straight bar?
06   A: It's so interesting you ask, because um recently went out, I went out this weekend
07   this Saturday night to a straight venue. And I go out to straight venues all the time,
08   I grew up going to straight venues, but which …
09   I like, to like switch it up, um.
10   You know, it's hard to say. Um. I mean, I think, from a relationship standpoint like
11   you know, if I were to find, meet someone, I yeah I would probably want to go out
12   to a lesbian gay bar.
13   You know, versus a straight bar venue. Um. It all depends on my mood really.
14   I don't … I think, yes, I have a natural affinity to go to lesbian and gay bars because
15   you know, I want to feel comfortable, most comfortable.
16   That's not to say I don't feel comfortable when I go to straight venues but
17   you know, I just feel more relaxed, and feel more accepted and be more myself.
18   And that's not to say I'm not myself when I go to straight bars, but
19   you know you just feel a little more like at home.
20   You know, there are like-minded individuals like yourself under one space.
21   So it's nice.

I believe the nature of my inquiry (lines 3.01–05) called into question her sense of self as a modern Black subject who *is* equally comfortable with straight friends in straight bars, in gay spaces with gay friends, or alone in BQW scene spaces (Example 2). Asking if she felt *more drawn*, or if she had an *affinity* to lesbian spaces placed her in the position of having to justify her earlier claims (Example 2) that her choice simply depended (line 2.1). At the heart of the inquiry is *how* she manages to be in all of these spaces as a Black queer woman, and how she is able to live at the intersection of various identities and negotiate space in such a way as to feel 'in place' in the different kinds of spaces. Rather than ask her to discuss the group that she most identifies with, I asked her if she felt more comfortable in spaces where she could 'feel' a sense of familiarity, or sameness, in relation to her sexuality. The answer to the question reveals how she orients more or less toward particular aspects of her race, gender, and sexuality depending on the space she's in.

She begins by commenting on the question. 'It's interesting you ask' (line 3.06). After a short pause, she goes on tells me that she had gone recently to a straight venue, she regularly goes to straight venues, and 'grew up going to them, but which … ' (lines 3.07–3.08). Alaire pauses, seemingly at the cusp of a narrative that never materialises. Instead, she says that she simply likes to 'switch it up' (line 3.09). It was not that straight places were uncomfortable – she has

friends to go with, she has money to spend. Being comfortable in those spaces was not a problem. However, there was a difference in the *kind* of comfort since it would be in lesbian space where she would likely meet someone romantically (line 3.09–3.11), therefore it would be in these spaces where expressing her sexuality would be most accepted without any need for caution or pause on her part. By the end, Alaire admits that lesbian spaces feel different. She feels *most* comfortable (line 3.15), *more* relaxed, *more* accepted, and *more* like herself (line 3.17). Additionally, it was where she felt 'a little more like at home' (line 3.18). Alaire continued by sharing her thoughts about BQW scene spaces including the quality of the space where the parties were hosted, the composition of the crowds at the various parties and happy hours, and her overall opinion about the scene. When I asked her to tell me about some of the straight venues that she went to on a regular basis, she had little to say about them, and her reason for not having anything to say about them further revealed her lack of orientation toward the individuals in the space and the spaces themselves:

Example 4: Alaire – 'It's not really my environment'

01   NL: So tell me about some of straight clubs you go to.
02   Do you feel the same away about the crowd?
03   Crowd is older in this place? Younger in this place? Not quite professional
          in this place?
04   Do you feel like there's more of a range? Or less of a range?
05   [6s Pause …]
06   *Or are those things that you even notice?*
07   A: I don't really notice it because I … I don't care. Because it's like,
08   it's not really my environment. I don't claim that space as my own.
09   I'm just like, 'Whatever, I'm just because like, I'm here with my
          straight friends'.

Alaire does not 'claim' straight space as her own, and therefore does not care enough about the space to make any observations about the spaces (lines 4.07–4.08). And while earlier she suggested that she was comfortable in straight venues (Example 2 and Example 3), she provides no sense of what or to whom she orients toward in those spaces except her straight friends (line 4.09). This stands in opposition to her experiences in lesbian space (Example 3). In effect, while she does not wish to suggest that she's uncomfortable in straight venues, her lack of discussion of what comfort looks like in those contexts suggests that there was not the same sense of it feeling 'like home' (line 3.19).

The metaphor of 'home' features prominently across my informal and formal interviews with BQW in Washington DC. It would be difficult to make a general claim that the women I spoke with conceived of the scene as being 'like home' as a result of being ostracised and excluded from their families of origin (Weston, 1997; Skelton and Valentine, 2003). With the exception of two of the women in my

sample, all of them had informed their families that they were lesbian, bisexual, or queer, or their families had simply 'figured it out' (Decena, 2008). Whether or not their families were 'okay', with their sexuality, all of them had maintained fairly strong ties to families. More than half of the women I spoke to were still in the midst of dealing with their immediate family's *ambivalence* toward their sexuality, and rather than dealing with being exiled from family, they had to negotiate *how* they interacted with their family around their sexuality (Decena, 2008).

'Feeling at home', and other conceptual metaphors about belonging were evoked to describe being at ease and experiencing an overall sense of comfort when being in the midst of other Black queer women. It was like being amongst people to whom one is related, and it was characterised as the release of particular kinds of social pressures. And yet, feelings of comfort and belonging in BQW scene space were not ubiquitous, or themselves expressed absent any tensions or contradictions. Part of my interest in addressing this sense of belonging that many (though not all) of my informants talked about is to suggest that the BQW scene in Washington DC is itself constituted by discourses of familiarity and intimacy between Black women. While Alaire may feel comfortable in straight leisure spaces, it was not her 'environment', it was not 'like home', and therefore it wasn't space that could produce particularly strong judgments or stances. Stance-taking presumes that an individual wants or needs to position themselves in relation to others. Alaire takes no stance on straight space and therefore abstains from aligning with heterosexual spatial and cultural practices because those spaces and the people within them are not as familiar as other Black women. Familiarity here does not necessarily mean friendly, and intimacy does not necessarily mean a kind of copasetic closeness. The scene's social networks are fractious, made up of numerous social cliques that are loosely connected, and yet BQW scene spaces function as sites where various informal social cliques integrate based on the *promise* of familiarity and of intimacy (McGlotten, 2012). If the BQW scene is constituted by discourses of familiarity and intimacy, then when one *does not* have a narrative of 'intimacy', following Berlant (2001), then the result is often seen in one's inability to get 'connected' to the scene.

Tomar was from the mid-west and following graduate studies had moved to DC with a former partner. Tomar described the excitement that she and her partner experienced after both getting jobs and deciding to relocate to DC. Noting DC'.s existence in the Black gay imaginary as a Mecca for Black queer women, Tomar says that she and her partner said to one another: 'We're going to have Black lesbian friends when we move to DC'. But in the example below Tomar describes how being in 'rugby culture' prevented her from getting connected to other Black lesbians in DC.

Example 5, Tomar – 'It felt like we were Black participating in rugby culture'

01   T: You don't, Black people aren't playing rugby.
02   NL: Yeah, it requires a lot of space.

03   T: It requires space and I think it requires sort of a @
04   cultural competency @.
05   It's like you're only going to get exposed to it.
06   It's like Black lacrosse players.
07   Like well who plays lacrosse?
08   So I think it's about, you know, it's about ^class
09   and it's about. having achieved a certain level of education.
10   because those are the two avenues through which you're going to be exposed
           to anything,
11   you know what I mean. well not ^anything, but just >certain things. right.
12   And so I felt like rugby was just one of those things. [2s]
13   ^Which would be >fine
14   because at least if you meet a Black woman playing rugby
15   you know she's going to be educated,
16   you know she's going to have a certain background.
17   […]
18   Um. you know.
19   met a couple of young ladies *rap on the table*,
20   I mean, there are a couple of Black women that play for the team,
21   um, but again, the culture, we were all kinda caught up in rugby culture.
22   It wasn't really the culture of being,
23   it didn't feel like the culture of being Black in DC,
24   it felt like we were Black and participating in rugby culture.

In line 5.01, Tomar says plainly, 'Black people aren't playing rugby'. The underlying assumption here being rugby is predominately white and therefore, the type of women of colour involved in rugby would be those who had spent lots of time in predominately white institutions and who had grown up with middle- or upper-class privilege (lines 5.14–5.16). In lines 5.08–5.11, she names the two avenues through which one might be 'exposed' to rugby, her analysis astoundingly similar to a Bourdieusian analysis. Sports such as rugby and soccer are primarily popular amongst those who play sports 'for fun', rather than because it might afford them access to higher education in America (Kelley, 1997). In America such sports are basketball, football and track (Kelley, 1997). Habitus makes it such that *tastes* remain relatively stable within class groupings because there are few opportunities for those without access to a 'certain background' as Tomar might describe it, to be exposed to those particular activities. Therefore, the way Tomar moved throughout the city, primarily with and among white women, meant she was not gaining access to the Black queer life, evidence that Black women are, in general, not socialising in the same way as white lesbians (Thorpe, 1996). When Tomar did meet Black women playing rugby, they were similarly positioned as her: they had college degrees from either prestigious or predominately white institutions and had a class background similar to hers. Tomar sums up experience plainly when she says that when she was with other Black women who were

playing rugby, 'it didn't feel like we were participating in Black culture, it felt like we were Black and participating in rugby culture'.

Tomar cites a fundamental predicament best exposed when performing intersectional analysis. While she can participate in rugby culture and (white) lesbian culture in DC, her race continues to manifest itself as an unresolved mitigating factor affecting her experience of that space. While she might not feel 'outside' of rugby culture in most instances, being one of few Black women playing rugby makes her race a salient feature in that space while her sexuality and class are less so. Similarly, Tomar cites her class position as affecting her experience of Black queer women's scene spaces.

Example 6, Tomar – 'But this is how I am'

01   There's also a class difference, because, I think, because.
02   I'm trying to be nice …
03   I kinda feel like, the way that they socialised
04   and the things they were into and then I would talk,
05   and this is how I speak all the time
06   and so some of these people were like,
07   'you can turn that off, you don't have to talk like that, you're with us.
08   You can just hang out'. And I'm like,
09   'but this is how I am. Like I'm kinda weird that way',
10   you know sometimes I dress down a little bit, but I can't,
11   I feel like if I'm using slang it doesn't sound authentic coming from me.
12   It's just me trying to fit in. I've kinda gotten over that, so now I'm just myself.

In Example 6, Tomar makes sense of being in BQW scene space and feeling 'out of place', because of the way that she talked. She reports being told 'you don't have to talk like that' (6.07). However, Tomar was familiar with African American speech ideologies (Morgan, 2002; Alim, 2004) and relies on them even here. In line 6.02, Tomar says 'I'm trying to be nice', a form of what Marcyliena Morgan would call 'pointed indirectness', an African American speech style of signifying which relies on the hearer understanding the true nature of the contempt which she holds for the intended target of critique (Morgan, 1996, p.407). By saying 'I'm trying to be nice', I know that Tomar has *tempered* her evaluations, but means them much more harshly than her tone might imply. By informing me that 'this is how I speak all the time' (line 6.05) referring to the fact that she rarely used slang and her general style of speech suggested that she was well educated and likely from the Midwest since she had what might be heard as a relatively accent-less way of speaking. The way Tomar talked was viewed as being out of place, as not fitting within the proper set of behaviours in this particular BQW scene space. Since the way she spoke was how she talked all the time, she felt out of place. So not only did Tomar find herself closed off from the BQW scene because of the fact that she socialised primarily with white lesbians, but she experienced

being 'irregular' even in a space where she was *supposed* to feel normal. This calls into question the fetishisation of 'gay spaces' as utopian spaces that don't also come wrapped up with their own assumptions and normative projections. It also calls attention to the fact that in this particular BQW scene space, it was *not* the performance of middle-class behaviour that was valorised. This contrasts with the findings of Taylor (2008) who found that working-class lesbians in the UK participated in 'commercial' scene spaces but felt that the spaces were unable to provide a safe and comfortable space for expression of their classed and sexual identities. Taylor's findings do, however, stress the importance of tuning into subjects' experiences of 'the material and embodied intersections of class, gender, sexuality and age, shaping inclusions and exclusions and a sense of being in or out of place' (Taylor, 2008, p.524). Tomar was middle-class, highly educated, and her discomfort here was precisely because of 'the class difference' she cites. This was common among the middle-class women in my sample, their discomfort often being directed at being in spaces that were 'too young', or spaces that they perceived as being working-class. These were the spaces where they didn't feel comfortable, and yet these were the most common and visible forms of BQW scene spaces.

Conclusion

Finding one's place on the scene involved a complex process of representing self in relation to others and in relation to certain kinds of space (Hill 1995; Modan 2008; Leap 2009; 2010). What emerges from this analysis is the way that each of my informants differentially foregrounds and elides certain aspects of her race, gender, class and sexuality negotiating her sense of belonging based on *where* she found herself. Kay demonstrates that the experience of being with other BQW is intimately bound up with sharing a sense of familiarity, not just around being a woman who loves other women, but also of being a person of colour in the world. When Kay describes feeling 'good' in a room full of women that were both different from her and the same, we come to understand the way her body was *impressed* upon by those familiar aspects of the women around her. The instantiation of this moment of intimacy was unlike the feeling of being with white lesbians or Black heterosexual women. This is not unlike Alaire's description of scene space as feeling like 'home' in lesbian space.

Alaire also demonstrates that while the cosmopolitan urban landscape encourages unrestricted movement and access to spend your money, certain spaces offer an opportunity to be *more* yourself. The neoliberal city might proclaim to offer happiness, freedom, belonging, however, Black same-sex desiring women know that it is not necessarily their comfort, happiness and belonging that the city is structured around. They might feel 'free' to go anywhere in the city, they don't always *feel* free to be *themselves* in those spaces (Example 3 and Example 4). Black queer women in DC not only desire a level of access to the urban landscape

where their particular cultural, gendered, and sexual expression is fully articulated allowing them to be recognised as full citizen-consumers, but also desire the safety, comfort and certainty of spaces which allow them to be *most* comfortable and *more* themselves. This desire points to the fact that BQW are often required to be less of themselves in spaces organised around ideals of whiteness and heteronormativity. BQW scene space is not just 'gay space', or rather it isn't just space where one's sexuality is understood. Instead, it is a space where one's race, gender and sexuality are felt and lived as the experiences that they are. And yet even BQW scene space cannot offer a universal sense of comfort for every BQW (Example 6). When race, gender and sexuality are shared (Example 1), then other differences become foregrounded, as was the case with Tomar's class (Example 5 and Example 6).

In bringing empirically grounded analysis of BQW's experiences to bear, I hope to extend the work of critical geographies of sexuality interested in lesbian, bisexual and queer women's experiences of commercial and non-commercial gay scene spaces (Valentine, 1993; Bell and Valentine, 1995; Weston, 1995; Binnie, 2004; Visser, 2008; Browne and Bakshi, 2011). I also hope to encourage critical geographies to utilise intersectional analysis to draw out differences among gays and lesbians. Jon Binnie (2011) has called for the incorporation of class analysis into the geographies of sexuality, and as we consider class, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom, we cannot disregard the issues of race. Race is intimately bound up with notions, discourses and theories of class (Lacy, 2007; Shapiro, 2004; Thompson, 2009; Brodkin, 2012). Valentine suggests that while feminist geographers have shown interest in 'intersectional types of issues they have tended to limit their analyses to the relationship between particular identities such as class or gender rather than addressing the full implications' of a theory of intersectionality (Valentine, 2007, p.14). Space is not simply a passive backdrop for the unfolding of the drama of the intersections of race, gender, class and sexuality, but rather when we pay attention to the way that these intersections are actively produced and lived *at the same time* in social space, we come to see the way the intersections themselves are produced and recreated. We also see the ways that individuals negotiate their relationships to the city and their critical investments in social space.

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