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Liberation and Gravy: An Engaged Ethnography of Queer and Trans Power in Georgia

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**LIBERATION AND GRAVY: AN ENGAGED ETHNOGRAPHY OF
QUEER AND TRANS POWER IN GEORGIA**

A Dissertation Presented

by

ELIAS BROOKS CAPELLO

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 2021

Anthropology

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DEDICATION

To all of those in the movement and to those who have yet to join us.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I did not grow up in a home with books. Folks from Thibodaux, Louisiana do not grow up to be scholars. We grow up to work at The Walmart, The DOW, or the federal prisons occupying the land. In particular, as someone from a predominately white working class background, people encouraged me at a young age to participate in the destruction of our families, the land and our communities.

My father worked two jobs to make sure we kept our house. He still had holes in his socks for most of my childhood. We grew up on the canned goods you could buy from The Dollar Store for 50 cents each. If I wanted to own a book as a child or adolescent, I had to wait until my birthday. My parents would save up to afford a yearly book for me. For the rest of childhood, I explored whatever I could find in the Louisiana public libraries. This meant topics such as the ones explored in this dissertation, such as anthropology, collaboration, trans stories, and queer social movements were not accessible.

Considering all of this, it still feels strange to call myself a “scholar”. It is a label that I feel like I am borrowing, and at any moment, I will be told to return “scholar” to its rightful master. I did not fully understand the class politics of “intellectualism” until I attended a department party during my first semester of graduate school. My button down had stains on it, and I did not realize I had to bring wine to the party, let alone, what type of wine. I felt stupid. I felt the same way I did when I stepped off the plane for an interview for a LGBT+ scholarship. There I was, in a grey blazer I bought from Goodwill, knowing nothing of San Francisco or key figures in LGBT+ history like Harvey Milk. I felt removed from a history that was supposedly my own.

The articulation of this dissertation is due to the help of many people from seemingly disparate communities. Mentors, friends, and lovers nurtured my talents. People around me allowed me to embrace my own intuition. They encouraged my thoughts, my passions, and my courage.

I view “acknowledgement” as a reciprocal process. I hope throughout this dissertation, I give thanks and respect to my mentors, chosen family, family of origin, and my ancestors in the search of justice. With this in mind, I would like to highlight the work of particular individuals.

I want to thank my social studies and history teachers in Ascension Parish schools, who taught me how to write meaningfully. In particular, Ms. Lambert who gave me a journal to document, practice, and develop my ideas. With the journal and her words of encouragement, I began to write powerfully about issues that mattered.

Similarly, I am thankful for my Ph.D. committee: Dr. Susan Shaw, Dr. Amanda Walker-Johnson, and Dr. Jen Sandler. While teaching me the social and cultural expectations of academia, they also gave me space to resist linear and simplifying narratives. They taught me nuanced critique is not enough and encouraged me to build my own articulations. Rather than trying to condition me to fit in better, they helped me grow to become a scholar that I want to be. Through asking tough questions, they made sure my research remained grounded. They showed me respect as a still-in-development scholar and nurtured my strengths.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the work of trans and queer scholars before me. As we continue to fight to liberate academic institutions, scholars such as Julia Serano (2007), Susan Stryker (2008), Dean Spade (2011), and Riley Snorton (2017) break the mold that we as trans people are put into. Their scholarship helped me understand power as it

relates to trans people in the U.S., and their words challenged me to see my own identity and experiences in relationship to a broader history of oppression.

Although they were not official collaborators, current networks of trans and queer scholars who look after each other enabled me to do this work. We sent each other calls for submissions, scholarships/fellowships, and job postings. We looked over each other's work and supported each other emotionally. Through these everyday actions, we helped each other navigate the cisnormativity of graduate school.

Some of us left academia altogether. Some of us passed away before graduating. And some remained within the system. In particular, I'd like to thank my colleagues Elias Lawliet and Bigelsu Summer for all of the emotional check-ins, the collaborations on online articles and blog posts, and making sure I remained on track to graduate.

Some trans and queer folks left academia altogether: they found other ways to heal. Some of us remained within the system, and some of us passed away before graduating.

I would like to thank my chosen family for shelter, safety, financial stability and guidance. In particular, three women that acted like mothers for me: Rachel Levin, Rebecca Marie Norris, and Carmen Cambre. Whether it was sending me socks during the harsh Massachusetts' winters or telling me when I was making a complete butthead of myself, they always had a space for me in their hearts.

Similarly, I would like to thank my three life partners: Em, Nova, and Cortez. As romantic lovers, they made sure I remained attuned to intimacy, love, and tenderness. They were patient with me throughout this entire process. I could not have done it without their emotional and financial support. They each made sure I set boundaries, enjoyed my 20s, and remembered to laugh.

Even though we have had tensions throughout the years, my family of origin remained supportive throughout my Ph.D. program and doctoral research. They often did not understand why I chose this career path over more lucrative options, but together we discovered what forgiveness means and how hard it is to practice.

Groups such as Queer Anthropology and Trans Studies Group held me accountable to a community of interdisciplinary queer and trans scholars. In particular, I would like to thank Cecilia Velasquez, Sonny Nordmarken, Joohyeon Han-Johnson, Justin Helepololei, Claudia Morales, and Eleanor Finley. Thank you for all of the intellectual and emotional dialogue over the years through the form of verbal conversations, emails, calls for publications, panels, feedback on proposals and writing, working for institutional change on campus, and sometimes, just over a hug, a cup of coffee, and/or tacos. Lastly, I would like to thank my colleagues and fellow organizers a part of the organizations described in this dissertation.

ABSTRACT

LIBERATION AND GRAVY: AN ENGAGED ETHNOGRAPHY OF QUEER AND TRANS POWER IN GEORGIA

FEBRUARY 2021

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This dissertation aims to better understand how self-identified trans activists in Atlanta, Georgia find and build community, by using queer and Black feminist community based methodologies such as participant observation, ethnographic interviews, participatory mapping, and auto-ethnography. In particular, I ask 1) How do trans people find and build community, safety, and understanding? 2) How do transgender activists create and enact place making that does not rely on policing and privatization?

To create and maintain safety for wealthy communities in Atlanta, Georgia, systems of policing and privatization are increasing. Although developers, city council members, and legislators promote Atlanta, Georgia as a gay friendly utopia of art and culture, privatization and policing push Black, immigrant, queer, and transgender communities to the fringes of Atlanta geographically, socially, politically, and culturally. This creates a paradox of safety for transgender activists and artists in Atlanta. Faced with transphobia, activists work to build interpersonal and community safety outside of narratives of safety used in privatization and policing.

To better understand this paradox, I bring in Black and Indigenous feminist ethnography, queer ethnography, and community-based methods. I analyze how settler colonialism shapes the migration and transition narratives of trans activists in Atlanta. I pay particular attention to how trans activists struggle with “authenticity”. I discuss the cultural displacement that trans and queer people face in Atlanta due to gentrification. I use ethnographic interviews and archival research to analyze public policy that seeks to “sanitize” Atlanta. I argue that due to a criminalization of public intimacy, trans people are vulnerable to violence under safety narratives promoted by public policy.

After discussing narratives of safety used by cisgender-led public policy, I use participant observation to discuss how trans activist-artists in Atlanta expanded and queered public intimacy. I shift to discuss how community members engage with “accountability” and “disposability” at a community level. I address how trans activists create and maintain “intentional” and “nurturance-based” community spaces. I pay attention to how trans activists hold responsibility for harm and create solutions to conflict outside of privatization and policing.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Role of the Artist

I fumbled as I attempted to lift my luggage into the back of a Toyota Voyager. The SUV was a sun faded green and rusted along the sides, and as I stepped into the car, the Uber driver nodded to me and grunted. He was wearing sweatpants and a gray t-shirt with an unrecognized sports logo and school name. For small talk, 'Tony' asked me where I planned on going after the Bradley International Airport; I smiled and told him that I was heading to Atlanta to conduct research. He looked up through his rearview mirror at me and furrowed his bushy white and gray eyebrows, "Atlanta? What are going to research? Big booty women and cars?" he cackled at himself. He smiled as he laughed, extended his arm out and turned his torso towards me.

Many queer theorists turn to Ahmed's (2006) work on orientation to understand the role that norms and bodies play into gendered and sexualized power. As Ahmed (2006) writes of bodies, our bodies are "spaces for action" that can put "some objects in reach and others not in reach." (66) Ahmed discusses two types of objects in queer phenomenology: "objects of perception" (27) and "objects that arrive." (37) For the latter, what is considered normal is created by a repeated rhythm of how our body acts over time. Tony's joke reflected a repetition of his own body actions over time.

I speak of alignment similarly to Ahmed's usage of alignment. For Ahmed, what we consider to be intrinsic identities, such as sexual orientation, is a process of alignment over time rather than a static state of being. I pull from Ahmed's queer phenomenology because it helps me understand how I can form my own body. Rather than a linear process of injecting (or sometimes rubbing the gel form) testosterone into my body and becoming a man, the process of

transitioning is a constant negotiation of the alignments others put onto me and relations I wish to take as my own.

Tony's "joke" was multi-fold in alignments. In one punchline, he attempted to align himself with me, across a wide age gap, to form a connection amongst ourselves as white men. The "joke" operates to play at the incompatibility of a serious institution such as "academic research" and serious agents such as a "PhD student" with the flamboyance, glamour, and vibrancy of a city like Atlanta. At its worst reading, the "joke" attempted to move us together into an implied criticism of Black communities and an objectification of Black women. As an older white male, he taught me my orientation to Black women: conquering parts of their bodies.

I begin with the story of my ride to the airport and Tony's joke, as a starting point because it represents the complicated positionalities I occupy. On one end, in public, I am read as a white cisgender man. On the other, I am a genderqueer person who was told by doctors and my parents, I was "born a girl." In this chapter, I use autoethnography and queer theory to explain how I came to the research questions that drive this dissertation. I came to fieldwork within the context of my own transition narrative and my own disorientation of my body narratives. In particular, queer theorists like Foucault, Ahmed, and Edelman helped formulate my questions and framework. In addition to queer theorists, trans and queer people I met in Atlanta helped me refine my research questions and framework.

Foucault (1990) traces how sexuality shifted from something you do to presumed stable sexual identities that you are. Ahmed builds on Foucault's notion of sexual identities becoming who you are, by suggesting that the heterosexual is presumed to be the baseline and is naturalized; it is queer people who are seen as having sexuality. (69) The natural position was for Tony to align my body relation, both as a presumed cis white male and serious academic, to the

body relations of presumed subjectivities in Atlanta. Ahmed argues this is the “vertical axis” or the “straight alignment” (66) institutions and people compare all other orientations to. For Tony, my body has status along the straight alignment if I conquer objects of desire: Black women. With the joke, the straight alignment centered assumptions of cisness, heterosexuality, and the objectification of Black women mapped onto a geography that positions Massachusetts as white and Atlanta as Black.

Tony missed what Ahmed refers to as “disorientation”, a process of unfolding normative alignments. Ahmed argues that “disorientation” is necessary to understand queer objects (158). While sitting in Tony’s car, I worked with several disorientations: a disorientation from cisness, heterosexuality, and the hypersexualization of Black women. As I reflected on how to respond to Tony, I got a notification on my iPhone that read “SIX YEARS ON T!!!!”¹. For disorientation, Ahmed argues:

“Moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that might throw the world up or throw the body from its ground. Disorientation can be unsettling, and it can shatter our sense of confidence in the ground.” (2006, 157)

In our first understanding of trans bodily narratives, we might see my orientation to masculinity as facilitated through the queer objects of testosterone cypionate and syringe needles. With a deeper glance, the disruption is not just the bodily transformation of six years of testosterone but other alignment journeys that come with my individual experience. With Tony’s joke, my disorientation was both in his alignments of white masculinity and my own shattering of notions of serious academic inquiry. My “shattering” is breaking down the road maps of gender and academia. Ahmed’s usage of disorientation and alignment helped me frame the questions that

¹ “T” is an abbreviation used for testosterone. I take a shot of testosterone cypionate weekly as part of my own journey with gender.

drove this dissertation. In particular, I ask how the orientation of shared queer identity and community occurs, rather than assuming community based on shared identities.

Another way to think of Ahmed's usage of orientation is Edelman's (2004) critique of the orientation of narratives of LGBT+ life. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, he focuses on how LGBT+ narratives in mass media and mainstream organizing for human rights still orient LGBT+ people toward the social institutions that ultimately exclude them. The teenager rejected by their parents, is told by supportive others that life will become better once they become parents themselves. The parent who loses their child to homophobic violence tells others to appreciate and protect their children, without considering the institutions that deny LGBT+ people parenthood or LGBT+ people who do not wish to raise children. Edelman argues that these narratives fall back on normative power structures of families. To weave this with Ahmed's synonymous usage of the "vertical axis of normative lines" with the "straight normative line" (66), even people who take up LGBT+ identities will orient themselves towards narratives of families that exclude them. Instead of re-orienting the power structures of families, familial orientation towards individualistic power structures remain. Parents remain powerful and children remain powerless subjects. Rather than queering our understanding of familial power structures, we take up LGBT+ identities and hope to align them with familial orientations that do not consider our own bodies as human. In this orientation, we (both trans and cis alignments) miss the possibilities of communities acting as families.

In this dissertation, Edelman and Ahmed's work helps design the research questions that drive each chapter. In particular, I use Edelman and Ahmed's usage of orientation as an alternative to LGBT+ inclusion models in social science research. Under this inclusion model, various peoples are grouped together, assumed to be monolithic, and assumed to orient

themselves towards their oppressors. Researchers frame rural queer and trans migrant narratives as escaping caretaker rejection or rural isolation, rather than looking for new possibilities of intimacy (Irwin et al., 2013). Queer and trans people are assumed to orient themselves towards urban life.

Using queer theory, I ask what trans and queer adults in Atlanta orient or align themselves with. For example, the *#YeehawAgenda* is movement to reclaim rural cultural life as Black and queer. In my fieldwork, the *#YeeHawAgenda* was prevalent at local and national levels. As I began my fieldwork, rapper, lyricist, and country artist Lil Nas X's collaborative hit single with Billy Ray Cyrus, *Old Town Road*, reached an estimated 8.7 million total units (Blake 2020). In Lil Nas X's album cover, he alludes to the struggles of rural queers by depicting himself on top of a horse, oriented towards high-rise buildings with neon lights. When Lil Nas X came out as gay in 2019 to the press, he highlighted the album cover's rainbow neon lights on one of the high-rise buildings and wrote on Twitter: "I thought it was obvious." At the local level, it is common to encounter Atlanta artists reclaiming their rural roots through drag. One such performer is Miss He, who is featured in *Wussy Magazine* as one of the top performers of the Atlanta drag scene. Her style focuses on using elements from the *#YeeHawAgenda*, she uses a cowboy hat, with professional slacks, and colorful make-up.

This dissertation challenges geographies of sexualities and gender to understand the paradox of safety that trans artists and activists are up against: on one hand the organizing potential of narratives of safety, and on the other the public policy limitations. To attract young professionals and consumers, real estate developers market Atlanta, Georgia as a gay friendly utopia of art and culture. To enforce this narrative, systems of policing and privatization of the city are increasing to create and maintain safety for wealthy communities. Despite campaigns of

national queer belonging, such as “love is love,” systems of policing and privatization push Black, immigrant, queer, and transgender communities to the fringes of Atlanta geographically, socially, politically, and culturally. This conundrum places activists, particularly transgender activists, in a tension of safety. Faced with transphobia, discrimination, structural violence, and lethal hate crimes, activists work to build interpersonal and communal safety. However, narratives of safety are appropriated and used to target transgender people through systems of policing and privatization. Thus, this dissertation aims to analyze the subjectivities and political agencies of queer and trans activists and members of transgender-led community organizations, particularly as they confront the tensions between structures and narratives of safety based on anti-Black, anti-immigrant, anti-queer, and anti-trans ideologies on the one hand, and processes of building safety for community members by activists on the other.

In order to untangle the safety paradox, this dissertation uses participant observation, ethnographic interviews, participatory mapping, and auto-ethnography to both better understand how self-identified trans activists in Atlanta, Georgia find and build community, and also to humanize, represent and translate this negotiation. This dissertation asks: 1) How do trans people find and build community, safety, and understanding? 2) How do transgender activists create and enact place making that does not rely on policing and privatization?

To answer these questions, I argue cisgender geographies of shame create a paradox of safety. Colonial shame relegates cisnormativity the normative orientation for all bodies to subject and conform themselves to, which determines which bodies, communities, and forms of pleasure are politically, culturally, and socially safe. Within this shame, gender variance can be commodified and utilized under capitalism. For trans activist-artists in Atlanta, surviving and thriving depends on a collective ability to reclaim and create new geographies of trans pleasure

and joy. In this dissertation, I attempt to illuminate the complexity of such a story—a story of collective joy for trans people.

I argue that trans activist-artists in Atlanta reclaim and create trans geographies of joy. I argue that trans activist-artists offer alternatives to shame and punishment by queering public intimacy, centering Black pleasure and joy, and engaging in nurturance culture. In order to tell this story, I open with expanding on the theoretical and methodological frameworks that shape this dissertation in chapter two. I connect concepts from community-based ethnography, queer theory, and queer ethnography to the methodology I used for my dissertation research.

In chapter three, I examine how colonial histories and geographies of shame and punishments still impact trans people in the U.S. Deep South. From ethnographic interviews, I suggest that trans people migrate to Atlanta to escape cisgender geographies of shame. However, once trans people arrive to Atlanta, they face new geographies of cisgender shame at the level of neighborhood policy, displacement, and within their own transition narratives. Through transition and migration narratives of activist-artists, I argue that trans people in Atlanta find their own stories are still haunted by colonial shame. Following the stories of trans migrants to Atlanta, I pay attention to how shame limits agents in their own definitions of their capabilities in Chapter four. In particular, I look at narratives of an “authentic” activist. I pay attention to how activist-artists navigated moral hierarchies of activism and agency.

After looking at geographies of shame at the self-definition level, I move to looking at how colonial shame shapes what is considered appropriate public intimacy. In Chapter five, I use ethnographic interviews and archival research to analyze public policy that seeks to “sanitize”

Atlanta. I argue that due to a criminalization of public intimacy, trans people are vulnerable to violence under safety narratives promoted by public policy.

With Chapter six, I shift to focusing on how trans activist-artists in Atlanta reclaim and create trans geographies of joy. I use participant observation to discuss how trans activist-artists in Atlanta expanded and queered public intimacy by centering Black trans pleasure. Although shame and punishment can be reproduced in queer and trans spaces, I argue that trans activists offered alternatives. In chapter seven and chapter eight, I look at how trans activist-artists engage in nurturance culture as an alternative to punishment. Chapter 8 addresses how trans activists create and maintain “intentional” and “nurturance-based” community spaces. I pay attention to how trans activists hold responsibility for harm and create solutions to conflict outside of privatization and policing.

Artistry

As I mentioned earlier, I came to Atlanta under my own transition narrative; I sought to re-frame my own story, disorient myself, and find new possibilities for being a genderqueer person. After taking testosterone for about six years, failing at getting others to see me as a real man, I leaned into that realness. I began to enact for my own joy; I began to wear earrings, lipstick, skirts.

I struggled with eight years of doing activism and feeling hopeless about my own future as a trans academic, artist, and activist. I came to Atlanta wanting to know about trans pleasure, joy, and liberation. I came to fieldwork believing there had to be another way that all of us could exist in this world and tired of hearing how terrible it is for trans folks.

Before beginning my preliminary fieldwork, I made connections in Atlanta with other trans folks who moved to the city from rural parts of the South. As I visited Atlanta over school

breaks, I became more interested in Atlanta as a site of queer migration. I am interested in how people come to associate the city as a “queer mecca.” As I begin to listen to queer and trans people living in Atlanta, I confront an overwhelming truth: similar to other urban areas, developers market Atlanta as an artistic epicenter, but remains adjacent and often, deliberately, fractured from the trans and queer Black communities through which artistic and intellectual gifts originate. Under the current model of gentrification of the city, white queers and trans people are tolerable if they stay in line with the social codes of happiness and wealth. In Atlanta there is a contradiction between wanting Black trans art but erasing Black, queer, and trans visibility and recognition.

In his essay, “The Creative Process”, James Baldwin (1985) illustrates that the role of the artist is to put a mirror up to the subject of their craft and to humanize deep struggles with oppression. (318) During my time in Atlanta, queer and trans people acted as artists. I define artistry broadly: it is a process of self-identification and cultural achievement. In the field, Black trans and queer people used art to engage in organizing, perform intellectual labor, and work towards humanizing oppressed peoples. Queer and trans folks utilized their skills in mural art, graphic design, and even sex work to fight for communal, political, and cultural changes. Throughout this dissertation, the people’s whose stories I share, were often people who would show up to a town hall on a Thursday then lead a BDSM art gallery downtown for community members on a Saturday.

I define activism similarly. Activism is both a process of self-alignment as well as an alignment with acting on a set of principles to further a movement. In adrienne maree brown’s *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017) they warn against basing movement work around individuals with particular qualities because this can lead to re-creating

the same power dynamics movements want to abolish. They warn of the consequences of movements dependent upon “charismatic leaders.” (99) For this dissertation, activism is not an inherent quality, trait, or explicit action that one person engages. Activism exists in relation to one another.

Early in my fieldwork, I ran into a problem with self-identification. I encountered other young queer and trans people who did not explicitly label themselves as activists or artists, even if they did make art, go to art festivals, support other artists, and attended artist workshops to build their skills. As one conference speaker said, “queer and trans people in the South hardly see themselves as historically significant.” This connected to activism. I met trans activists with official titles of leadership who struggled with self-validation.

Starting the Dissertation

After I passed my prospectus and qualifying exam defenses, I spent a couple of months alone before beginning fieldwork. In this alone time, I had three anxieties: 1. What if community organizers in Atlanta reject me? 2. What if I am not a good enough artist to do arts-based ethnography? and 3. How can I move through the world as a Ph.D. Candidate without dressing and speaking like an academic?

I began to pull my hair out. A condition I live with, known as trichotillomania, exaggerated by my autism and PTSD. During this dark period, I began to draw and paint watercolor sketches. My goal was to translate some of my anxieties of starting research, into a note taking method that could help put together a meaningful dissertation. While practicing my watercolors and sewing, I reached out to activists with the organization I planned to work with in my dissertation.

From the beginning of the project, Southern Fried Queer Pride made it clear that our collective goal was to make the research process and project last beyond the dissertation. Together, we workshopped solutions to this over the span of a few months during my preliminary fieldwork. We used our lack of access to the capital and academic institutions to our advantage.

A couple months into fieldwork, I went to a Queer History Conference and met Lolita Rowe, an outreach coordinator at Emory. It was by chance. I was waiting for the shuttle and we began to talk about how Walmart is a religion in the South. As we laughed, we talked about what we did for our careers, and she offered help. Lolita wanted to expand the collections to include trans and non-binary history, and I needed funding for the collaborative workshops and a way to sustain the project past my own dissertation. She knew about a grant application and had connections with an oral historian a part of the archives, who was looking for LGBT+ community groups. Therefore, we met with organizers of Southern Fried Queer Pride and put together a plan. I would continue to conduct fieldwork, observe events and meetings, I would host the sewing workshops, interview participants, write my dissertation, and then donate the photographs, audio files, and quilt panels to the LGBT+ Archives at Emory with the permission of each participant. The LGBT+ Archives would fund the workshops, offer equipment and space for the community exhibit and art show of the data, and would set up an internship for students to continue to collect stories through Southern Fried Queer Pride.

For Southern Fried Queer Pride, this brought in money for six community events, including the art exhibit about the qualitative research project documenting the group for an 18-month period. Additionally, we set up the opportunity for Southern Fried Queer Pride to continue to work with oral historians to document queer history and culture in Atlanta. The dissertation

facilitated discussions to work with Emory and the LGBT+ Archives to write grants for an eventual storytelling and research lab.

Finding 'Home'

Autoethnographic methods, driven by Black, Indigenous, and queer feminist ethnographers, are powerful because they allow the researcher to play with concepts of home. Home is both our home academic institutions and our respective fields; away is both our academic institutions and our respective fields.

I came to graduate school full of hope. As I packed up apartment in Shreveport, Louisiana a community of trans people and cis allies threw me a goodbye party. I sat barefoot in my jeans and white v-neck on the back of TJ's pick-up truck. TJ parked the truck behind my apartment because we did not have enough chairs for folks. I looked up at Marie, a trans elder, laughing with someone who is a grandmother of a transboy and wanted to know how to better support her grandson. I turned to look at my partner, Em, laughing with Alice, a transwoman that would be the new facilitator of the social support group I helped start. As I applied to graduate school, I started to transition Alice to leadership and she began facilitating and running the group.

As I got lost in my thoughts, an older transguy named Kevin who was a good friend of mine, came up to me and slapped me on the chest. "Hey, man! Save those deep thoughts for graduate school. I can't believe you're gonna be a doctor one day! Oh boy, I always believed in you kid, just look at what you did here. You changed this town. You changed me." He hugged me, patted me on the head, and sat next to me.

I remember being terrified but excited to leave Shreveport. I remember wanting to experience what it was like to have trans competent healthcare, wanting to experience legal

protections, and wanting to experience legalized rights. Kevin and I sat on the back of the truck together. Marie noticed us and said, “You look sad, kiddo. What’s up?” I looked down at the ground, “I’m scared to leave. I have family and friends here. I don’t want to leave this.”

She frowned, “if you turn down an opportunity of a lifetime because of our redneck asses, I swear I will drag you by your britches up to Massachusetts myself. You’re going to grad school.” Everyone else in the circle began to nod. Each chiming in on why they thought Massachusetts would be great for me, including the idea that I would have an easier time because Massachusetts is supposedly great for trans folks. When I got to graduate school, I quickly realized I came from a no-name town and no-name school. I did not speak correctly or in a way that signaled me as an educated person. I did not have the same accolades, experience, and prestige of colleagues. I also had no desire to compete with others.

I quickly experienced violence in the form of being told what my voice should be. I should tell a particular narrative as a trans person that makes money. At twenty-two, I struggled to find words for this feeling. That is when I fell in love with queer theory and queer anthropology. I remember struggling with narratives of maturity that excluded my body and gender expressions, then falling in love with Edelman (2004)’s notion of how heteronormativity positions queer people as immature and narcissistic. I fell in love with how Ahmed (2010) spoke words to how our narratives of happiness and maturity exclude trans and queer ways of knowing, relating, and growing. They transformed great pain and suffering into something that made the world better for others.

It is difficult to smell gas and be told there is no gas. There is gas everywhere else, except in my department and at my University. It is difficult to be funded, instructed, and encouraged to write and speak about the structural and political violence trans people face, but

told to keep quiet about your own struggles. I think about a saying my Maw-Maw used to tell me. When I was young, I often pretended to be physically sick in order to avoid school, because I experienced grade school as violent. Teachers constantly fought with my parents, attempting to convince them that I struggled because of my cognitive disability not because of bad behavior. Some teachers believed the narrative that I was just a bad kid. Unfortunately as a child, I believed I could be shamed and punished into being normal.

When I pretended to be sick, my Maw-Maw would take me on her errands. One year, when I was twelve, my hometown, Donaldsonville, Louisiana got a Walmart. My Maw-Maw took me to the grand opening, one day when I was pretending to have a stomach bug, as I stepped in, I very loudly asked, “what’s gonna happen to Sam’s Grocer?” Folks from my town who were shopping in the store looked over at my grandma. She halfway smiled at them and then down at me. She turned to face me and said, “Brooke-Ashley, sometimes people don’t like it when you point out their backyard is messy. You gotta let people enjoy things, otherwise, you’re gonna move through life and struggle my bae. Do you understand me, bae?” I nodded my head even though I did not understand what she meant until graduate school.

Something that I would later learn that is due to my autism, I have a tendency to blurt out and say the obvious thing that everyone else knows is not socially polite. Often times, it is connected to issues of social justice. As such, I struggled with feeling included in graduate school. As one older queer graduate student told me, “just smile and keep your head down.” My mental health began to plummet and I almost died by suicide in graduate school. On the surface, it looked like I was fine. I did what I was told to do and did it well-enough to earn fellowships, grants, and publications.

However, the subtle erasure and exclusion chipped away at my soul. Rather than be addressed by my name, sometimes professors refer to me by the name of another queer student in the department or another trans student who already graduated from the department. Another colleague, once emphasized that although she is cisgender, she knows what it's like for me because she studied "sexual deviance" in undergrad.

At twenty-three, I found myself facing suicide. I sob as I write this. Although I was deeply interested in Foucault, the politics of madness, I felt haunted by trauma. I knew about generational trauma and I read the Indigenous theorists who wrote about generational trauma. I knew punishing someone for being autistic was fucked up, but I found myself soul broken. One night, while walking back to my car from the library, I began to wander. I had not wandered since I was a young child. Wandering is one of most dangerous symptoms of life on the autism spectrum. It often leads to accidents, death by the elements, or death at the hands of the police.

I kept walking in the snow, without a jacket, just a t-shirt and jeans. My body just needed to be numb. As I walked, I began to lose a sense of where I was, who I was, or what I was doing. Luckily, I got a call from Marie and she helped ground me and helped me realize I was freezing, in Massachusetts, and needed to find my car. She helped me find my jacket and got me to my car. I eventually worked with my partners, my loved ones, and a therapist on how to keep myself safe while wandering.

The next day, I entered a new chapter of my life. I began to wonder, "what would it be like if we lived in a world where trans was the norm?" This is why I turn to Black, Indigenous, and queer theorists: they offer alternative ways of being and knowing in this world. I began to focus on theoretical and methodological frameworks, research questions, and people that brought me joy and pleasure. I focused on other departments, connections, and networks that supported

my work and publications. I built connections with other trans scholars even before leaving for fieldwork. In particular, I joined reading groups and online groups where trans professors put me on publications, told me of scholarship and funding opportunities, and shared advice about what we were going through in our respective departments. For example, the trans studies group in the WGSS department, allowed me to practice my prospectus presentation and practice defending myself. We would do this labor over pizza and also talking about our own interpersonal lives. It was one of my first experiences in trans success.

As I became interested in trans joy, I turned to queer anthropology and ethnography. Queer anthropology involves deconstructing the dichotomy between being “home” and “away in the field”. Specifically, it is important for how we do queer ethnography (Dahl, 2010). As part of deconstructing this dichotomy, queer ethnography acknowledges how queer ethnographers have access to intimacy and trust that other researchers do not have access to (Rooke 2010; Heckert 2010; Muñoz 2010). I expand on these concepts in Chapter 2.

In helping me understand the complexities of being “home” and “away in the field” I turn to Behar’s (1993, 1996) autoethnographic framework to address difficult topics. I realize that “home” for me is where I can feel safe enough to grow. This does not mean a lack of mistakes or harm, but rather, a certain level of understanding, reciprocity, and trust. In my fieldwork experiences, I grew as a person in a multitude of ways I did not expect. I changed. I began to ask from more in my relationships, career, and my life.

As part of this asking and growth, I found myself unloading bunch of boxes for the thrift store for Southern Fried Queer Pride’s #TRANSPWR Day. Instead of celebrating Transgender Day of Remembrance, Southern Fried Queer Pride reframed narratives of trans death and trauma porn and had a mini festival day celebrating the power of trans and non-binary people instead.

As part of that day, I volunteered with unloading boxes out of storage, taking the boxes to the community art center, and then unloading them and setting up the items. While unloading the boxes, I saw a copy of *Emergent Strategy* and *Pleasure Activism* by adrienne maree brown. I looked around and towards the coordinator, Taylor, and she said “Oh you can have them, whatever you find that you like you can take as a thank you for volunteering”. I nodded and gently tucked the book aside in my messenger bag. Up until this point, I had not read the book because it was expensive. Each time I checked bookstores I could not afford it and unlike some other books I was able to borrow (for a very long time) from tenured professors, I could not find it on their shelves. I found home in that moment.

Similarly, people in the field pushed me to grow outside of the Walmart in the West End of Atlanta, Georgia. As part of a street outreach campaign led by a Black trans prison abolitionist group for the *#SayHerName* campaign, I was standing outside the Walmart with “Shay” and “Auto”². Facilitators assigned Shay go with Auto and me because she was one of the most experienced activists and we were the youngest (in other words, the least experienced). We were handed a script to practice before leaving for the Walmart in the West End. The script was a suggestion of general questions and statements to ask. After practicing a bit, I began with the script:

Me: “Do you care about Black women?”

Shay: (laughs) “Well.. let’s see.. I am a Black woman” (continues to laugh)

At this point, I was blushing and looking down at the script.

Shay: “Nah, nah you need to relax, I’ve been around for a while now, doing this. If you wanna get better and continue to do this work, you’re

² For this dissertation, community members chose pseudonyms for themselves. I mark the pseudonyms by putting quotation marks around the first usage of their name. For example, “Shay” and “Auto” are pseudonyms that the people I met in the field gave to themselves.

going to have to be easier on yourself. Just a bit of advice.. now take it from the top”.

When we got to the site, we walked down the street to barbershops and sno-ball street stands to talk to people Shay knew. We talked about the trans people murdered in the previous year in Georgia. Most people knew Nino, but did not know a cisgender man killed her outside of a gas station. She was good friends with many of the Black men hanging out on the street that day. One of the men I spoke to was in tears when he learned the news.

“I.. I didn’t know.. when was someone gonna tell us? It wasn’t on the news or nothin!” He whispered in shock to Shay, as he shook the flyer in his hand. “Can I keep this?” He asked as he folded it neatly into his pocket and walked away.

While I was helping with the street outreach campaign, other white people ignored me. I thought my job, as the only white trans person there, was to talk to the white people about the violence that Black transwomen face. However, it was mostly just Black people who talked to me. Instead, the white people I encountered made eye contact with me then hurriedly looking away as if I had leprosy and they were going to catch it with eye contact. Some looked with widened eyes as they read my t-shirt, which had the group’s slogan “Solutions Not Punishment”. I overestimated my own pull with other white people. As each one passed to get into the Walmart, they ignored me and even moved their family away from me. At one point, an elderly white man sitting with his cane on a bench motioned for me to come over.

I asked him “Yes sir?”

He motioned to my shirt, “Do you really believe in what your shirt says?”

I looked down “Solutions Not Punishment?”

He nodded “So you think rapists and murderers shouldn’t be locked up?”

I shook my head “That’s not where I would jump to... there is a lot that shows that isn’t the majority of people incarcerated”

He shook his head “Bullshit! Bullshit, I had a nigger the other day hit me, that’s why I keep this cane. You can’t be hanging out with niggers like that”

I frowned and stood up “You have a good day sir”

He shouted “You’re a n*****r lover! N*****r lover! N*****r—lover!!”

I stood next to Auto, hoping they did not hear the man. I watched Shay ask a well-dressed Black man in a suit, who was leading two teenage Black girls to the parking lot, if he loved Black women. He nodded and laughed. She asked him if he had moment to talk about the violence Black women face. He smiled and said, “Black women don’t face violence”.

Shay shook her head and sat down. I sat down beside her. Auto was busy eating a sno-ball and talking to two young Black women. Later, on my way back to my friend’s house, Shay made sure I got on the right Marta train. We talked and I told her I was a researcher, trying to figure out what I am doing to study as part of my ethnography. She handed me her card and said to try to meet her at Bulldogs, a bar for butches of color in town. She patted me on the shoulder and said, “You can’t always be working... Justin Bieber.” I smiled. She left for her train transfer.

I tell the story of my involvement with the *#SayHerName* campaign day with Solutions not Punishment Collaborative because it speaks to both the geographies that I found myself having to navigate in Atlanta as well as the geographies that I worked with trans activist-artists to create. For a moment, outside the Walmart in the West End, trans activists worked to create a geography of safety for Black women. Although we all identified as trans, non-binary, and/or Two-Spirit people, we focused on a collective notion of prison abolition. As I tell in my ethnographic account, Shay, Auto, and myself faced various agents of colonial shame in our attempt to create a new geography. Instead of building on shame and trying to conform to punitive notions of safety, we sought to create a dialectic space where I had to face white supremacy in its many forms. We had to face white complacency, misogynoir amongst Black men, and white supremacy in the

form of verbal violence. This included coding me as “justin bieber”, recognizing my own privilege around my assumed white innocence but also, being able to be connected to other activists around my own gender queerness. This dissertation is an attempt at capturing a snapshot of the complexity of trans liberation.

CHAPTER TWO:

Literature Review

I want to offer an alternative to a linear story of knowledge; my story is not of a student who lacked knowledge, gained knowledge in the field, and returned home. Black, Indigenous, and queer ethnography facilitate such a project because of the challenges each discipline poses to how institutions produce and write research. Before I transitioned to life in Atlanta, I fell in love with radical academics who laid the foundation for which I can be a scholar and a human being. Books, articles, and radical academics were some of my closest friends during a time of exclusion and isolation. Through a literature review of the work I am in conversation with, I outline the epistemologies that shape this dissertation. I describe how Indigenous literature shapes the organization of the dissertation and how community-based research methods shape the design of the dissertation. I bring in urban and political anthropology to help frame the research questions posed in each chapter. Queer ethnography helps me further refine these questions, by helping me decide how to balance intimacy and trust in my account of fieldwork.

'Braiding Knowledge' As an Organizational Style for Storytelling

In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, Kimmerer (2013) weaves Indigenous storytelling with scientific knowledge as entry for re-evaluating our relationship to plants and ecosystems. She pulls in her own personal narrative as a member of the Citizen Potowami Nation and Indigenous stories she inherited through oral traditions. In this organizational style, she emphasizes the usage of circular time in Indigenous storytelling due to what she terms “spirals” of wisdom. (88) She argues that as the spiral of our lives widen, we reflect on the previous time with knowledge and experience. For Kimmerer,

knowledge is circular. I pull from Kimmerer's usage of circular storytelling in order to engage in circular knowledge production through autoethnography.

Along with Kimmerer's work, I pull from Miranda's (2003) usage of personal narrative to structure how I use autoethnography in this dissertation. In her article "What's Wrong with a Little Fantasy? Storytelling from the (Still) Ivory Tower," she begins with her story of the first time she read *This Bridge Called My Back*. Miranda emphasizes the monumental impact the book had on her life. However, Miranda wanted more, she wanted to tell her story. She emphasizes how women of color are still living legacies of violence. Deborah Miranda's work helps me understand how to look at the work of Indigenous women and Black feminist scholars, giving them recognition, but also recognizing this is not my own story.

I also connect with Miranda's struggle with "home." Miranda argues that the violence Indigenous women face is about how "we are always home, and yet never allowed to go home." (335) This sentence struck me in multiple ways. I felt simultaneously less alone and more alone in graduate school. I feel privileged to be able to read social theory. The first time I read bell hooks, Paulo Freire, Deborah Miranda, Susan Stryker, and many others---I felt as if I could breathe. To be able to write about the things I discuss in this dissertation (trans safety, migration, housing) is an enormous position of privilege.

Community Based Methods

Community based research literature influences the methods and design of this dissertation. Similarly to Indigenous scholarship, community-based frameworks and methodologies respond to the harmful practice of researcher extracting knowledge from a community and then leaving with reciprocity.

In response to this harmful legacy, as Gubrium and Harper 2013 suggest, feminist and postmodern scholars began to bring attention to issues of “power and trust” (1983) in ethnographic research. Scholars like Harraway (1988) critiqued the objectivist stance of social science research. In particular she argued that we create particular forms of knowledge through our affinities with the world. Our affinities can create what she calls “situated knowledge,” (581) expertise that can provide needed insight to scientific fields. Other scholars brought attention to the ways in which white, Western scholars exoticized groups marked as others (Asad 1973, Said 1979, Spivak 1988).

Ethnographers responded to feminist critiques with what Gubrium and Harper (2013) call an explorative juncture of reflexive and creative writing styles to represent a variety of voices. Although this work still focused on writing for scholarly audiences, Indigenous scholars like Linda Tuhiwai Smith pushed ethnography into the work of decolonizing the research process (Smith 2012).

Furthermore, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argues that research is tied to European imperialism and colonialism “through the ways in which knowledge about Indigenous peoples was collected, classified, and then represented in various ways back to the West.” (1) Through describing projects that are harmful to Indigenous peoples, such as the Human Genome Diversity Project, she details the imperialistic nature of scientific mythologies (both ‘natural’ and ‘social’). She highlights how “[m]any researchers, academics, and project workers see the benefits of their particular research project as serving the ‘greater good’ or as having an emancipatory goal for an oppressed community.” (2) However, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) argues, “belief in [this] ideal” is naïve. For Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), and this project, “sharing knowledge is a long-

term commitment” that includes more than reporting findings, but an actual knowledge-sharing process. (16)

A crucial aspect of participatory action research is the development of a long-term sustainable relationship with community members. It typically involves ethnographic interviews, participant observation, and some form of self-reflexivity amongst the research group. This can take the shape of digital storytelling, drawing, and/or photography. McIntyre (2008) suggests in order for community-based research to be successful there needs to be mutual interest in a “problem”, “self and collective reflection”, “joint decisions” on solutions, and there needs to be a coalition between “participants and the researcher” in every step of the research process. (1) I took each tenant outlined by McIntyre and incorporated into this project. Before beginning my dissertation fieldwork, I spent time with activists developing which questions we would like to research. These conversations required self and collective reflections, some of which I reflect in this dissertation. Throughout the decision process of fieldwork, I listened to myself, my committee, and community leaders I built close work relationships with. As mentioned in Chapter 1, interaction between community members and research institutions will remain after publication of this dissertation.

In thinking about community interaction with research, Black feminists and other feminists of color challenged scholars to think about race, along with gender, class, and sexuality (Combahee River Collective 1983; Collins 1986). The “Combahee River Collective Statement” called for understandings of the humanity of Black women. They argued that “the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly from our own identity.” (1983, 4) In addition to centering our identities in our research, the Combahee River Collective emphasized the need to provide an articulation of a class struggle in which workers are gendered and racialized. Not

only was it important to include Black women in research, but that inclusion needed to account for the ways in which capitalism interacted with Blackness and womanhood. As connected to this dissertation, the Combahee River Collective also rejected what they term a “pedestal” of the inclusion of Black women. I hope to write in a way that honors the mistakes and successes of Black activists.

In addition to the Combahee River Collective, Collin’s (1986) work builds upon Kuhn (1962) to argue that a paradigm consists of an ideology and those that practice the idea. Collins goes on to position the discipline of sociology as its own paradigm; she argues that “insiders” go through similar experiences and share a “common history” of “thinking as usual.” (25-26) For Collins, this “thinking as usual” comes with inconsistencies and taken-for-granted paradoxes. She argues that Black women as “outsiders” within academia make use of their oppression in three critical ways: 1. Self-definition and self-validation 2. Understanding how oppression is intertwined and 3. The importance of Black Women’s culture. Social science began to pay attention to the social and cultural worlds of women, critically reflect on who engages in the research process, and the depth of analysis of oppression in such research. Social science research began to question who is able to engage with research, how objectivity can be dehumanizing and lack the depth of multi-layered oppression analysis.

Johnson and Guzman (2012) warn against recruiting participants under “specific identity categories” (405) or using “taken-for-granted” (413) notions of who is the most “vulnerable” (417). They argue we must reassess studying the most marginalized as our entry into liberatory research (Johnson and Guzman 2012). Within this body of work, queer ethnography is more than using ethnography to research queer and trans lives. Rather, “queer” is always in development (Heckert 2010). As Browne and Nash (2010) suggest, queer methods allow for experiences to be

in movement, rather than stationary. Rather than just including LGBT+ people into ethnography, queering ethnography involves questioning the conventions of a stable subject in ethnographic research.

In re-thinking theoretical frameworks of a stable subject, Halberstam's "low theory" informs my ethnographic research methods (2011). Halberstam builds from the work of Stuart Hall (1991) to disconnect from normative ideas of success and failure. He aims to queer notions of success and failure. Halberstam argues that we should get rid of our current notions of success and embrace the rewards of failure and that failure is central to queer culture. There are two aspects of Halberstam's low theory that are helpful to community-based ethnography: 1. Popular culture can be a serious mode of inquiry in cultural critique 2. Queer subcultures share cultural knowledge through failure. From Halberstam, I pull the importance of our participants and ourselves failing in our research endeavors. This dissertation is an attempt at queering participatory action research and queering the collaborative process. I argue that such methodology can open space for non-linear and non-binary approaches to working with communities.

Queer Ethnography Helped Me Understand Which Stories to Tell

Queer ethnography helped me understand which ethnographic and autoethnographic stories were important to tell. Queer ethnography is more than using ethnography to study queer people. It is about applying queer theory to qualitative research methods to question normative conventions of time, maturity, subjects, performativity, and intimacy. Queer ethnography focuses on queering the field, queering intimacy with strangers, and queering the intimacy we have with ourselves. Particularly helpful to this dissertation, queer

ethnography aims to deconstruct differences between being “away in the field” and our home institutions, it examines access to intimacy and trust, and it interrogates taken for granted notions of community and alliance. In particular, I use autoethnography throughout this dissertation as a way to “queer” ethnography and, by extension, anthropology in three ways: 1) Queering the distinction between “researcher” and “observer” 2) Queering the borders between notions of belonging, and 3) Queering ideas of “insider cultural knowledge”.

Queering the Field

Queer ethnography queers the binary between being away in the field and at our home institutions. Latina and Black Feminist ethnography, particularly autoethnography, facilitates queering by allowing for researcher vulnerability. I am particularly inspired by Behar’s (1993, 1996) usage of “vulnerability.” (22) Behar (1993) argues that “vulnerability” (22) in writing is an art form that balances story-telling and constructing narratives that are transparent and “vulnerable,” (11) but not over-focusing on the self. For Behar, “vulnerability” (22) in ethnography is about a sharing of insider experiences that reflects and speaks to the needed context of a situation. For her, bravery in writing ethnography is about a balance between your own vulnerability and the vulnerability of people you write about. Behar (1993) positions vulnerability within the “connection, intellectual and emotional, between the observer and the observed.” (22) In this dissertation, I use vulnerability to queer the distinction between the field, the observed, and the observer.

McClaurin (2001b) argues for a “delicate balance of boundary blurring” in autoethnography (61). She suggests that Black feminist anthropology is simultaneously a way for Black women to use their identity as an entry point into ethnographic research but also a critical shift from theorization. Similar to McClaurin, I use my own identity as a point of entry for

ethnographic research but also as a departure from theory. In starting my own work, I struggle with the balance of vulnerability, using my own identity as a point of entry but also a departure, and I look to McClaurin to help me better understand how to write with balance. For “native” (51) ethnographers, McClaurin argues they “are not simply insiders, but former colonial subjects now conducting research among their own or similarly oppressed people.” (58) McClaurin argues that “autoethnography is dialogical in that it represents the speaker/writer’s subjective discourse, but in the language of the colonizer. In speaking the colonizer’s language, the “native” demonstrates her capacity to be both like the colonizer and unlike him.” (65) In speaking like the colonizer, using colonizer language, I aim to simultaneously show how like and unlike “him” I am.

When I spoke of “home” in the first chapter, I was struggling to find these words. I left queer and trans community in the Deep South in pursuit of an education. I came back to do research on people whose lives mirrored my own in some ways and departed in others. I feel trapped within two spaces.

Queering Intimacy with Strangers

Queer autoethnography positions identities as what Jones and Adams (2010) term “relational achievements” (200), rather than static identity groups. For example, Heckert (2010) discusses how even though he was out he was told by professional colleagues, family, friends, and strangers that he does not look queer, particularly out in the field as a queer ethnographer. Jones and Adams (2010) argue that “identity-as-achievement” allows researchers to be held responsible for the ways in which our identities are read outside of fixed divisions. (200)

In this framework, identities emerge from linguistic categories as well as cultural and social practices. During the first few months of my fieldwork, I lived with a cisgender man who did not know I was trans. To him, I did not read as trans. However, in the field, I am read by queer and trans people as a transgender man. For me, it was embodiment and how bodies are read that positioned me differently in different social circles.

Another example of “identity as an achievement” (200) as Jones and Adams (2010) term it, is how iced coffee was a queer drink in Atlanta. At meetings, participants would make small comments about how drinking iced coffee is queer. We signaled to each other that we were queer by drinking iced coffee, especially if we showed up late to work-meetings with the iced coffee in our hands. Instead of assuming my experiences as a transgender person are fixed, autoethnography allows me to queer my own story navigating my own story, transition, and fieldwork.

If we treat queer identities as “a type of person”, we rely on stereotypical performances inside and outside queer social spaces. One of the stereotypes that trans artists would make fun of were the names that trans and non-binary people chose for themselves. Particularly, it was common to joke about how non-binary people name themselves after inanimate objects such as “ember”, “emerald”, “stone”, “star”. For my colleagues at my home institution, I did not read as transgender because I did not fit the stereotypes that cisgender people have of transgender people.

In my own fieldwork, my clothes were often my citational practice. My clothes often aligned me with particular sexual and gendered groups. Often, my “stylish” outfits were how

people approached me in the field, asking me about a t-shirt, dress, or even earrings. As I wrote in my field notes:

We may not even try to pass. For passing, my mind goes to countless times I am reminded by cis people I do not “look trans”. But out in public, there are various ways I negotiate my transness. Sometimes I wear pronoun buttons. Sometimes I purposefully wear “feminine clothing”. In organizational meetings, I find myself dressing a certain way. Wearing my leather jacket and whitewashed skintight jeans, and pink Steven Universe shirt with Rose on it. This signals me as queer, it signals me as trans. Is this pink Steven Universe shirt, a show popular amongst queer young adults, what signals me as queer? It is my citational practice.

Queer “identity as an achievement” (Jones and Adams 2010, 200) allows for identities to change and shift in anthropology. As Jones and Adams (2010) suggest that as queer ethnographers, people read our gender and sexuality differently in diverse contexts, such as the field versus our home institutions. They argue that autoethnography can facilitate a constant negotiation and assessment of relationships.

Queering Self- Intimacy

Jones & Adams (2010) argue that there are cultural signifiers that tell people in the field that a researcher is queer without having to use an explicit label. Without having to explicitly name or position myself as “trans”, participants read me as a trans. Instead of explicitly labelling myself as a queer person, queer people read me as queer through cultural signifiers. In this type of queer ethnography, both the observed and the observer are insiders. Jones and Adams (2010) recount a story where a barista can recognize one of the researchers as queer because the researcher rented *The L Word* on DVD. The two were able to have a conversation about queerness without explicitly naming it as such. Jones explains that although the moment was small, it was one where both recognized each other. In this moment, the barista and the barista’s

wife knew that Jones was renting seasons of *The L Word* while away for fieldwork. She notes that in the conversation, there it is easy for the participant and the researcher to imply our identities without others recognizing these conversations as such. I found myself slipping into similar conversations while working on this dissertation. For me, such instances were centered around the Steven Universe t-shirts, the “cottage core” skirts, and the glitter lipstick I wore.

Queering the boundaries between the distinction between community and observer led me to journal my own experiences during fieldwork once a week for the 18-month period. I took videos, wrote notes, and drew watercolors of my experiences, my shifting questions and mentalities, and my emotions. Influenced by the theoretical frameworks for autoethnographic methods, I journaled my own experiences during fieldwork once a week for the 18-month period. I included observations about my own living space with other non-binary and trans folks. I did videos of my journey and did watercolor comics of my experiences and ideas. Additionally, I kept my own testosterone bottles to document how hard it was for me as a researcher to be trans in Georgia and still access my hormones. I noted how when I encountered people, they would say there were no clinics that gave hormones. I documented my experience with waitlists and my own journey as an activist.

To queer the borders between notions of belonging I documented my experiences as a growing activist but also hosted collaborative sewing workshops as a way to collaboratively discuss and co-create as what McClaurin names a “cultural repository.” (65) Queer insider cultural knowledge helped structure the interview questions for the project. I chose informal conversations and questions because of my training in community-based ethnography. Instead of focusing on the trauma and violence that trans people face in Atlanta, I structured the interview questions on experiences of safety, activism, and belonging. Rather than asking participants

questions like “what is your gender identity?”, I asked participants questions such as “how would you describe your relationship to the label of trans?” In my work, research participants aimed to develop friendships with me because of my queer aesthetics. For example, in Chapter 3 I talk about how I became close friends with an organizer named “Ange”. I became friends with “Ange” because they liked my glitter lipstick and asked me to do their make-up. I invited them to my kitchen table in my apartment and I sat and did their make-up. We bonded over our self-desire for pretty masculinity. In the interview with Ange, they use language like “you know,” “I got you man,” and “you know how it is.” Instead of fighting such tendencies, I aim to use methodology to lean into these experiences.

Co-Creating a Dissertation

I took three months of preliminary fieldwork to get to know activists in Atlanta. I left Atlanta in Fall 2018 for my comprehensive exams and prospectus presentation and returned to Atlanta in Spring 2019. When I got back to Atlanta, I had to re-start with getting to know activists. I knew individual activists and community members, but it was difficult to know when events were and where, getting rides to them, and paying for them. I did not know where to start. Using Facebook and Instagram, I was able to find out about a few rallies and protests, the oral history tour, and the volunteer training for the youth shelter. I made this my entry point. While at events, I tried to make connections and speak to others about how they felt the rally, panel, or training went. Quickly into this process, I found discrepancies from what LGBT+ groups advertised online, and which groups had a large presence in local queer and trans communities in Atlanta.

For example, people at my home institution encouraged me to be a part of Southerners on New Ground (SONG) and make SONG the focus of my dissertation. I was excited to learn from

SONG members, and originally planned to make connections. However, when I showed up to Southerners on New Ground meetings, they even admitted themselves they do not have a strong presence in Atlanta. Their structure was one where they had a mass number of people donate and volunteer to the Black Mama's Bail Out, but in terms of monthly meetings, potlucks, and rallies, attendance and participation was often lower than 10 people. Although this is not good or bad in and of itself, their low attendance carried into their presence at protests and direct actions in Atlanta. When I attended direct actions, SONG would send one representative to speak for 10 minutes. Instead, the rallies and direct actions were often planned by groups with smaller online presence like Community Estrella, Southern Fried Queer Pride, and SNAP Co. Additionally, these small organizations acted as many organizers full time income and job, rather than SONG where many organizers are given small stipends to cover involvement for one project.

For example, at the start of my dissertation fieldwork, I saw a friend who I met through SNAPCo post on Facebook about an immigration rally. It was in support of a transman who is an immigrant from China who I.C.E. held in solitary confinement. I showed up to the event and paid for parking downtown, which costed \$15 (a few months into fieldwork, I found myself broke because of the cost of parking and the entry fees for events). I showed up expecting a large SONG presence because SONG advertised the event. However, when I got there, it was organized by the Asian, Indian, and Pacific Islander Queer Alliance. I signed in with a volunteer from their group and she asked me to hand out water at the rally. We rallied for hours, chanting, and listening to speakers outside the courthouse where I.C.E. held immigration cases. Family members of the transman spoke about his case and their stories. A public elected official spoke, alongside immigration activists.

Through events like this, over time, I learned which organizations were showing up with genuine connections to local Atlanta trans and queer folks. I learned that I should focus on Southern Fried Queer Pride and the organizing they do. Slowly, over time, I stopped attending extra events and focused solely on attending events hosted by SFQP. Their events ranged from monthly meetings, to free clothing swaps, art shows and exhibits, poetry slams, marches, educational events, panels on topics like “call out culture,” trainings, and potlucks.

When I attended the potlucks, drag shows, and art shows, I saw young adults, especially Black and Brown queer and trans adults, critically engaging with safety, public policy, housing, gentrification, and public intimacy. It was in these spaces where people rallied behind rent control and understood and advocated for how sexual subcultures like kink play can radicalize notions of safety. All of it was run predominately by volunteers who had to work shift retail jobs, who were struggling with student loan debt, and who wanted to make a difference with their art. Additionally, there was a level of belittling that these young? adults faced because they used means, such as baking, crafting, and graffiti, that were not considered professionalized art. However, the one poetry slam event changed my life forever. At the center of the show, there was Ange, who was a Black non-binary person struggling with the masculine labels enforced on them. They stood in their boxers, with their packer bulge showing, naked from the waist up. Their breasts were out for the whole show to see. They had a white queer artist paint their body, in a rainbow, tree, and doves. Their whole body was painted as they read their poetry about the deaths of trans people in the South. Ange spoke in anger about the ways in which white supremacy enacts voyeurism on trans bodies. They spoke about their bitterness and anger towards the “inspection” society does to trans bodies and the courage expected of trans people. Ange spoke in tears about the ways in which cis people put trans bodies and lives on display.

For my fieldwork, I had permission from both organizers and IRB to show up to these events, take notes, and take photographs. I showed up to monthly meetings with notebooks, but for events like a community thrift store for TRANS PWR DAY, I brought my phone instead of my notebook. At the beginning of fieldwork, for the first seven months, I tried to volunteer for as much as possible. I did a lot of jobs that the inexperienced newbies to activism did. This meant I lifted boxes, worked the thrift store, and handed out water. Sometimes, this meant physically injuring myself. One time I cut myself on glass when lifting heavy bags with sharp glass in them.

Carrying Out the Dissertation

I spent a total of twenty-one months conducting fieldwork in Atlanta; I spent the first three months conducting preliminary fieldwork and getting to know organizations. I wanted to learn who was on the ground in Atlanta, what issues trans and non-binary people face in the city, and what would be a helpful dissertation to community.

In April 2018, I began initial contact with organizations through email, calls, and Facebook messages. Since this initial contact, building and maintaining the relationships necessary to build a collaborative dissertation is an ongoing circular process. In June 2018, I began to participate in-person at community events, volunteer at a LGBT+ youth homeless shelter, and show up to community art shows. Simultaneously, I began informal interviews with local queer and trans young adults about their stories. From these interviews and notes taken while volunteering with organizations, I was able to narrow down my interests in a dissertation proposal. After beginning to build relationships with activists, I moved back to Massachusetts for a semester to complete my exams and prospectus defense. This is a lifetime in the world of activists. By the time I returned in March 2019, I had to re-start with building relationships and trust with community members.

I did this by focusing on two organizations: a prison abolitionist group and an arts advocacy group. Trans people of color led each group and community members in Atlanta respect each group as “radical groups.” I spent my first two months of fieldwork volunteering at events and taking notes with the permission of the groups. It was not until June of 2019 that I hosted my first community-based sewing workshop and subsequently, began interviews. I spent time going to events, getting to know people, asking them informal questions, and attending parties. Quickly, everything began to blur together and writing field notes felt like the only lifeboat I had in a sea of overwhelming information about queer and trans life in Atlanta. As a research participant, Gilbert (who became my friend), once asked,

“Is everything starting to seem like work now?”

After spending about eight months back in Massachusetts, attempting to finalize and submit my prospectus and qualifying exams, I returned to Atlanta for another eighteen-month period. After securing IRB approval, I started observing community events, neighborhood planning unit meetings, marches, protests, and even my own home which would become an apartment full of trans and/or non-binary people. With collaboration, I identified activists that I wanted to work with and learn from within the first four months of fieldwork. I focused on finding stories and how best to share knowledge from activists. When I first reached out to potential co-authors, many people were interested in collaborating. However, we faced hurdles. The Atlanta Police Department arrested one of the people who originally agreed to co-author the dissertation for petty marijuana charges. It is hard to ask someone to collaborate on a dissertation chapter if they are currently “couch surfing”.

The biggest hurdle I had in completing a collaborative community-based ethnographic dissertation was the Institutional Review Board at my University. Although there is an expansion

of community participatory action research to include queer and trans community, there has yet to be a queering of participatory action research. Community based research on queer participants often use an inclusion model :using community participatory action methods and applying it to trans and queer communities (Stevens and Hall 1998; Fenge 2010; Wernick, Woodford and Kulick, 2014). However, this inclusion model assumes the LGBT+ community is homogenous, national, and static. A queering of participatory action research could open spaces for non-linear and non-binary approaches to working with communities.

For myself as a researcher, I was up against conflict and tension between institutional forms of consent and queer ethics. Even though community members specifically requested an art show, I had difficulty with getting the Institutional Review Board to approve the art show. In the revisions from the IRB, they had two questions:

1. How do you plan to do a community show of data without *outing* participants?
2. Even with pseudonyms won't people recognize the stories?

The Institutional Review Board saw a participant “being closeted” as providing a certain level of protection of identity. There is an assumption that even in a major urban area (such as Atlanta), LGBT+ community is small enough and so closely knit that community members would recognize pseudonyms based on the stories shared at a community art show of the data. However, keeping queer and trans people from our own stories is a major form of oppression that queer and trans people face.

In the field, people navigated identities in more complex ways than a binary system between “outness” and “closeted.” Although the IRB assumed that being “out” is a stable and separate category from being “closeted,” many participants made everyday negotiations on

outness. For example, one transwoman who worked at Starbucks talked about how she is out to her co-workers but not her manager.

Collaborative Sewing Workshops

For the collaborative sewing workshops, I pull from the tenants of community participatory action research. In particular, I aimed to engage in a long-term relationship with activists in the field, a reciprocation of knowledge, and a collective commitment to investigate research questions. I wanted to work with Southern Fried Queer Pride to not only use a medium that we were collectively interested in but also to show the results of the dissertation in a way that community members could directly engage with the project.

As I spent time in queer and trans community spaces, I notice that frequently queer and trans people center their advocacy, culture, and community around crafts. With thinking of a participatory and collaborative research design, I want to use a medium that participants are already using but also contribute and maintain sustainable knowledge production. In Atlanta, amongst artists, crafters are a large portion of the formal artistic events. Artists sold pronoun buttons, sex toys, soap, stitched items, cross-knitted items, and other forms of crafts at the Art Festival. Even beyond the arts festival, people were frequently meeting to learn new crafting skills, teaching each other how to sew, and working on community art projects. Therefore, I thought it would be good to take my own knowledge of sewing, particularly from my uneducated family, and teach people how to sew in open workshops. This method comes from both autoethnographic methods and community based participatory methods. It is autoethnographic because I used skills I learned from my family of origin.

Critical pedagogy and community-based literature influenced the sewing workshops and resulting quilt panels. Paulo Freire's work in re-thinking and re-structuring power in education inspires me. Freire fought to position teachers and students as collaboratively creating knowledge through collective introspection and dialogue. In his work, he focuses on using photographs to act as a reflection to communities, showing the everyday social and political realities that impact and shape people's lives (1973). This project engages with Freire's (2005) concept of dialogue. In particular, he argues that dialogue is critical to education because dialogue requires critical thinking. In this dissertation project, I used the sewing workshops as space for community members to speak collectively. In the workshops, participants talked about experiences of violence, experiences of affirmation, safety, and community. We talked collectively about what change for trans people should look like in Atlanta.

I depart from Freire's method of using photographs. Rather, I wanted participants to be able to engage with queer and trans imagination. At the time of my dissertation, there is plenty of research done on the troubles of being transgender in the U.S. As a trans person myself, I wanted to break away from pornographic and violent depictions. I learned from Indigenous and Black feminist anthropology that such a decision honored the humanness of my own self and that of research participants. Rather than focus on visuals of the problems people are already engaging in, I wanted to open questions that motivated trans participants to imagine new worlds. Worlds where they feel safe, experience chosen family, and experience community. This shift reflects a pull from Indigenous and Black feminist theory.

McClaurin argues that who we are personally and structurally needs to be a part of the way we design our research methods. She argues that autoethnography is a well-suited method to do this work. She argues autoethnography can function as "cultural mediation" and "as a

repository of cultural memory.” (67) Therefore, with the sewing workshops I aimed to host a collaborative dialogue but also establish a working repository of cultural memory. As I hosted workshops, I wrote about my own experiences. I journaled, made my own quilt square, and drew my own watercolors. McClaurin (2001) argues that autoethnography is more than self-reflexive but also collective. In this dissertation, I wanted to connect this form of Black feminist theory to my methods in a way that engaged with the self and the collective.

I hosted a total of five workshops. I hosted one in June as part of the Southern Fried Queer Pride Arts Festival. I hosted four sewing workshops: one during the Southern Fried Queer Pride Arts Festival, two during September 2019, and one during November 2019. I did not require participation in the study in order to participate in the workshops.

In the workshops, I taught the basics of sewing and quilting. The subject of each workshop was determined by community input from previous workshops and at planning meetings alongside with Southern Fried Queer Pride. I drew the advertisements for the workshops and Southern Fried Queer Pride posted them on social media handles.

At the workshops, I wrote on flip paper the three research prompts:

1. Where do you feel safe?
2. Who is your chosen family?
3. Where do you experience community?

When people walked into the workshops, I had the supplies laid out on a table and pronoun stickers laid out on a smaller table near the supplies. Cardboard cut outs were laid around the tables and there was an additional stack on the table. The cardboard was for each person to have their own workstation. The format included time for me to go over a few techniques and

then walk around the room, individually helping each person. At each workshop, someone set up music to listen to while we all worked. We would chat and co-work as shown in Figure 2.1. The workshops, outside of the one at The Bakery for the Arts Festival, were held at the Emory archives, shown in Figure 2.2. This created an interesting juxtaposition that I will analyze in a future chapter, as shown by the picture on the right in Figure 2.2 The juxtaposition was one of Black non-binary and trans folks creating crafts in front of portraits of the Deans of the College, who were cis white men.



Figure 2.1: Photos that I captured of the workshop participants working and chatting.



Figure 2.2: Photos that I took of participants working tougher on quilt panels and chatting.



Figure 2.3: Photos that I captured of participants in the workshop working together at The Bakery, the community art space.



Figure 2.4: Photos that Em took of participants working on their quilt panels.

Through my connection with Lolita, Emory gave me grant money to buy supplies for the workshops. As I mentioned earlier, I met Lolita at a Southern Queer History conference earlier in the year. She needed more interaction with local LGBT+ organizations and I needed money.



Figure 2.7: A picture of the supplies I was able to purchase through a grant at Emory.

At the end of the workshops, I gave people supplies to continue their quilt panels for the community art show. I had about ten people volunteer to complete panels. Although each workshop averaged about 24 people, I had only ten people, including myself, complete a quilt panel for the art show. One participant completed her quilt panel and posted about it on social media:

"Where do you feel safe?" was the question I tackled in Elias Capello's sewing workshop. Like me, this piece is colorful, bold, whimsical, and bursting out of frame. I feel safe anywhere I can be myself, which is usually in queer/lgbt+ spaces. I encourage y'all to participate in their workshops and research project!



Figure 2.8: A photo I took of Kendra's quilt panel in response to the research prompt, "Where do you feel safe?" In her interview, she mentioned how she feels safe where she can be silly as a Black queer person.

As I prepped for one workshop in my apartment, with all the sewing supplies laid out as I organized my notes and materials, my roommate asked me how I was doing. I told them I was overwhelmed and told them how draining it is to host the workshops. Each one is about 2 hours and it is draining. They noted that maybe I should include that in my dissertation. They mentioned my autism and how it might be a factor. I nodded and kept organizing my scissors for the project.



Figure 2.9: A picture that Em took of me setting up for the workshops one hour before each one. On the right, a picture of me practicing my teaching before the workshops.

During the workshops, I took pictures, field notes, and audio-recorded the conversations. Unlike other spaces hosted by Southern Fried Queer Pride, the workshops were intergenerational and often pulled in queer and trans people who were not interested in night life. An example of intergenerational collaboration is show in Figure 2.4, a self-identified non-binary parent working with their daughter on quilt panels. They talked about the importance of having space outside of nightlife to come together and have family time with community.



Figure 2.10: A photo I took of a non-binary parent and their daughter working on quilt panels for the workshop.

Audio Recorded Interviews

In designing the interview questions, I aim to bring in the theoretical frameworks I discuss earlier in this chapter. Urban and political, queer, and Black Feminist anthropology influenced the interview structure, questions, and format. As I met people through volunteering with organizations and conducting participant observation, I interviewed 30 migrants to Atlanta and audio-recorded their stories.

Using urban and political anthropology I structured questions to focus on feelings of safety, geographies of safety, and relationships to activism. I also pulled from queer ethnography to structure questions. Instead of asking participants their identity directly, I aimed to ask participants to tell their own stories of their relationship to safety, labels such as “trans,” and experiences of community.

Eight months into doing fieldwork, I began to conduct interviews. The first challenge was to determine who was “significant” to speak to and prioritize in interviews. In total, I talked to thirty trans people and audio-recorded the interviews and conversations. I use the word conversation purposefully. Often, the “interviews” turned out to be conversations between myself and participants about identity, migration, and safety. To make the list of who to reach out to, I looked for the following:

1. Involvement in organizing at some level (whether as a participant at an event or an organizer)
2. Self-identification as trans and/or non-binary

This included people I met at events and made connections with, people who I lived with during my time in Atlanta, and people who held official organizing titles who I had an ongoing rapport with. The conversations spanned racial, age, and gender demographics. I also listened to and spoke with people with varying relationships to activism. I recorded interviews using my i-Phone and transcribed them using Otter. During the transcription process, I had to go back and re-transcribe because the terminology, abbreviations, and phrases used by trans and non-binary people were not read correctly by the software program. Examples of this are “polyamory”, “cis”, “cisgender”, and “T.” Even further, for expressions like “T”, as a trans interviewer myself, who was out to participants, although I knew that “T” meant “testosterone”, I had to write such notes in the transcription files. The software interpreted such expressions as “tea.” When I donated the files to the LGBT+ Archives at Emory, I had to write in what these expressions meant.

Another struggle I encountered with audio recording interviews was voice dysphoria, particularly with transwomen and trans femmes. For these interviews and conversations, each participant gave me permission to audio record for my notes for my dissertation. However, some participants did not want their audio file shared with the LGBT+ Archives or the community art show. They often acknowledged the importance of sharing stories, but also struggled with not wanting people to hear how deep their voices were - and were generally uncomfortable with how others might perceive their voices.

Although each interview and conversation had followed up questions specific to each person and each story, there were interview questions that I kept the same for all 30 people I interviewed. These questions primarily focused on place, safety, and identity:

1. What is a pseudonym you would like to use for this audio file? What are the pronouns that you would like to use for this interview?
2. Where did you grow up? What were your motivations for moving to Atlanta?
3. What does safety mean to you?
4. Where do you feel safe?
5. What does it mean for something to be a safe space?
6. How would you describe your relationship to the label of trans?
7. How would you describe your relationship to activism?

Relating back to the “significant” voices and deciding which ones to focus on for my dissertation, I made sure to include a variety of racial, gendered, and economic bodied voices.

Writing Process

I began the writing process of my dissertation in February 2020, about fifteen months into fieldwork. As mentioned earlier, I wanted a dissertation that gave appropriate credit to the ideas of activists and one that highlighted the nuance of these relationships (researcher and activist). After collecting interviews and recording conversations, I analyzed the data, coded them by theme and organized chapters accordingly.

When I approached activists to co-write particular chapters, I already had working relationships where I would spend time with them. Usually I spent this time watching them smoke and we would chat about society, gender, and philosophy. During these chats, we built trust and with consistency over time, stability in our relationships. I picked which topics I wanted to focus on for each chapter, and then from there, invited activists to work on the two chapters that I thought would benefit from co-writing. As we went along with the year, it became clearer it was hard to get people to commit people to contribute beyond the sewing workshops due to the financial instability of many activists. Early in the process, an Atlanta Police officer stopped and pulled over one of the co-authors I invited to participate for being a Black transman. The police officer arrested him on the charges of illegal drug paraphernalia. After his release, we remained

connected and friends, but as he built back his own finances and life, co-authoring was no longer an interest. Similarly, with another potential co-author, they experienced housing insecurity while working on the project. I mention these two people in the acknowledgements as they provided emotional support through the project. I shifted my focus on collaborative space to be the art show scheduled to happen in July.

As I suggest earlier in this chapter, Black, Indigenous, and queer ethnography help facilitate a non-linear narrative of knowledge and research. By reviewing some of the literature I fell in love with, I outline the epistemologies that shape this dissertation. Indigenous literature shapes the organization of the dissertation and community-based research shapes the design. Queer ethnography guides the research questions and helps me balance intimacy and trust in my telling and translating of fieldwork.

CHAPTER THREE:

Trans Migration Narratives

When I first visited Atlanta for preliminary fieldwork, I focused on building connections with Solutions not Punishment Collaborative and Feminist Health Center. As I began to work with these organizations, I attended Southern Fried Queer Pride community events. It was common to witness an organizer work their desk job at the Feminist Health Center then go to an art show, drag performance, or party hosted by Southern Fried Queer Pride. One day, after leaving a particularly hard conversation with a cis colleague at the Feminist Health center, I checked my phone for local events. I saw that Southern Fried Queer Pride was hosting a Black and trans curated art show. I decided to attend in order to catch a break and possibly meet people who could become community.

As the *Off Tha Wall: A Black Queer Art Show* approached someone posted on the Facebook page that we would all be invited to wear black to mourn the death of Montell Newton and Kiwan Benson. Both were Black trans artists and activists in Atlanta who drowned off of Tybee Island on August 13th, 2018 (Saunders 2018). As Black, genderqueer artists they helped create and promote the Atlanta DIY punk, art, and queer music scenes that young adults (regardless of gender or sexual expressions) enjoyed and participated in Atlanta.

At the show, I felt awkward because I did not know the artists intimately but as I participated in the event, I took the moment of silence along with people who knew the artists well. People wore black, cried, and held each other. In addition to their artistic and activist careers, Montell and Kiwan were co-parents with other queer people and established polyamorous families. After a collective moment of silence, a person in a Southern Fried Queer Pride shirt asked us if anyone would like to speak. One unnamed person who introduced herself as a Black transwoman, said the following:

We think of Atlanta as a mecca but look at this. Don't get it twisted. This is due to the enslavement, segregation, and injustice of Black folks. This is the Jim Crow era. And I am angry. No, this isn't a hate crime, but the loss feels the same. It feels the same.

We sat in silence as she spoke. I sat with her words throughout my fieldwork. I became interested in understanding how Atlanta became known as a “queer mecca”.

Building on ideas of Atlanta as a “queer mecca”, I use ethnographic interviews and autoethnography to explore how trans people and myself come to Atlanta to escape shame and punishment. After migrants get to Atlanta, they realize that Atlanta consists of two contrasting geographies: cisgender geographies of shame on one hand and trans geographies of joy on the other. To describe these geographies, I focus on the stories of six activist-artists: “Mo”, “Taylor”, “Becks”, “Lee”, “Amelia”, and “Ren”. Through their stories, I bring attention to how trans people navigate their own migration and transition narratives within structures of settler colonialism.

Atlanta as a Black, Queer “Mecca”

I met Mo at a queer film night hosted by *Wussy Magazine* at *The Plaza*, in the middle of what used to be known as the gayborhood of Atlanta. An Urban Outfitters and straight cisgender bars geared towards lovers of craft beer now surround *The Plaza*. While living in Atlanta, *The Plaza* hosted a series of queer films and documentaries and for this film, I was meeting up with a friend named “Ange”. Ange is an organizer with Southern Fried Queer Pride and is often the person who decides which workshops get into the annual arts festival. They have almost a decade of experience in queer organizing in Atlanta. Early in my fieldwork, I wore blue lipstick with blue and green glitter to an Southern Fried Queer Pride event. Ange loved it and commented on my lipstick. They spoke of the limitations of gender placed upon them as a Black and perceived to be “transmasculine” person. We became closer through this conversation. Ange

invited me to the semi-regular movie outings with Mo. Anytime I spent with Mo, they spoke of how Atlanta has a reputation of being a mecca for Black and queer people. We continued to go see films together as a small group and when I announced I would be doing ethnographic interviews, Mo volunteered.

Mo is an Atlanta based filmmaker. They grew up in Atlanta but left for some time to “figure their life out” and came back for graduate studies in film. Mo is 31 years old and identifies as a genderqueer person. I asked Mo about what they thought of how Atlanta is for queer and trans folks, and Mo spoke of Atlanta’s reputation as a mecca:

I think that Atlanta has a reputation for being something of a mecca, both for Black people and queer black people or queer people in general. Um, I think that there are like, pockets of places that resemble that or that embody that embody that rather. But um, overall, I think it's still it it resembles the rest of the nation, not not like I don't know if I feel openly antagonized on the daily basis, but um, I just think that there needs to be a vast improvement overall in terms of policy that is supportive, not just that um, its because I think about like, say hiring in the state, like there's still the risk of being fired based on your identity, right?

In Mo’s response, they acknowledge that Atlanta has a “reputation” of being a mecca for Black and queer people. However, Mo also brings attention to the lack of civil and political rights for trans people in Georgia. In 2009, Atlanta passed a city-wide ordinance to expand workplace protections to include discrimination basis of sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Ordinance No. 2009-78). However, the state of Georgia lacks an employment non-discrimination protection for sexual orientation and/or gender expression.

Motivations for Migration

“Taylor” and “Becks” are both activists, organizers, and artists in Atlanta. Becks works in leadership for a major state-wide non-profit and Taylor is a co-founder of Southern Fried Queer Pride. Both Taylor and Becks moved from rural parts of Georgia to Atlanta.

I met Taylor for the first time in-person at *Off Tha Wall*. She is the co-founder of Southern Fried Queer Pride and sat at the welcome table. She greeted guests to the show, took donations, and took the microphone to open the moment of silence for Montell and Kiwan. Taylor grew up in Griffin, Georgia, a small town outside of Atlanta. In addition to leading Southern Fried Queer Pride, Taylor is a Drag Mother and performer. During the 2019 Superbowl, which the National Football League hosted in Atlanta (Culpepper 2018), Taylor performed at the Mercedes-Benz-Stadium. In her organizing career, Taylor speaks from her own experiences as a Black agender person and aims to reclaim being southern and queer. She emphasizes the magic of queer people from the rural South. Taylor moved to Atlanta to attend college and gain access to financial and career opportunities:

I moved here mainly for school, which was a scam. And eventually, I fell in love with everything else but school so, as most people do. For Taylor, college is a scam because the financial costs of college outweigh the limited employment opportunities and wage stagnation post-graduation.. In speaking of the economic struggles Taylor faced post-graduation, she talked about how during the day she worked for the Atlanta Pride Committee, as a way to maintain an income. On top of her job, she did “side hustles” as she described them that included her drag and music career. When I asked her about the role of a college degree in working for the Atlanta Pride Committee, she said she felt like she could have gotten the same job without a college degree.

However, when I asked Taylor about how she started her drag career, it started as part of the Gay Straight Alliance at Georgia State. Likewise, other Black and Latinx trans and non-binary folks that I met during fieldwork started their drag and/or activist careers in college. Organizers knew each other in college and remained in touch over the last decade through activism and organizing.

As with Taylor's story, Becks moved to Atlanta for an educational and financial possibilities. Becks works for a large LGBT+ statewide non-profit. He is one of only two openly trans people who work for the non-profit. Becks comes from a small town in West Georgia and speaks with a thick southern drawl. The software I used for translation could not pick up Becks' accent, so I translated his interview by hand. Becks identifies as a white transman and is 38 years-old. When I asked Becks about leaving his hometown, he offered the following:

There's no fucking industry. There's no jobs to be had out there. Like that's, there's really nothin. Um, I mean even folks that come back and start a business out there? [sighs] It has be very very specific on what they focus on, otherwise I mean, yeah there's just, there's not a whole lot out there.

There's folks that I know that I went to school with drive to Atlanta every day for work [clears throat] And still live out there because there's no jobs. Being gone this long, there's still no jobs [laughs].

"Becks" moved from rural West Georgia and was strictly looking for job opportunities. In addition to economic and educational opportunities, trans migrants moved to Atlanta in hopes to improve their overall mental health and well-being. In this search for better mental health, Becks mentioned wanting to escape the homogeneity and whiteness of rural and suburban areas of the South. When I later asked Becks about his motivations for moving to Atlanta, he told me:

I moved uh, I moved down here pretty much as soon as I could after graduating high school. Um, the closest like school to where I grew up is uh, University of West Georgia. Um. But that was like going to 13th grade cause everybody that went there was like folks I either went to school with or like knew from, like, they went to neighboring schools. Um, so yeah, I came to Atlanta pretty much just to, you know, as a queer and trans person trying to get out of a homogenous Southern Baptist um, very white [chuckles] area of Georgia

As Becks explains, migrating to Atlanta was about escaping as soon as possible. For white participants, like Becks, Atlanta promised to be an escape from homogeneity and religion.

This divide occurred throughout my fieldwork. For white participants, regardless of age, gender, or sexuality, they came to Atlanta to escape the confines of nuclear families, religious leadership, and transphobia. Rather than migrate towards a Black Mecca, the narratives of migration for white migrants were “escape narratives”.

To better illustrate how “escape narratives” interact with whiteness, I bring in the stories of “TJ”, “Amelia”, and “Ren”. I know TJ from my time as an activist and college student in Louisiana. At the time, I facilitated a social support group for trans folks in Shreveport, Louisiana. TJ moved back to Shreveport after moving away temporarily for college in Atlanta. A year after we met, I left Shreveport for graduate school and TJ left Shreveport for Atlanta. Eventually, he began law school at Georgia State University. During school breaks, I visited TJ in Atlanta. TJ allowed me to live on his couch during my preliminary fieldwork. We shared a two-bedroom apartment amongst six trans and/or queer people.

A few months after my time on TJ’s couch, “Amelia” moved into TJ’s apartment and stayed on his couch until she could find her own bedroom in an apartment. TJ, along with two of his roommates, helped her leave her transphobic mother by funding her plane ticket to Atlanta and allowing her to stay on the couch until she was able to become stable.

She was able to stay there, look for work for a few months, and create her own space when the group transitioned to a three bedroom. In her interview, she talked about how controlling and manipulative her mom was without directly acknowledging it. The escape to Atlanta was an escape from an abusive home and a journey in creating a new home.

I met Ren through mutual friends we share in the DIY artist scene in Atlanta. Ren is 21 years old and is a college student, who moved to Atlanta for college. Ren mentioned in their journey to Atlanta that they chose Georgia State in order to get out of the suburbs:

I chose Georgia State for a couple of reasons. Mostly cause I wanted to get out of the suburbs. I was just tired of the same, you know, homogenous way of thinking and felt like I had to get out the way I knew how, through college. I am the only one in my family to not go to college in state [Tennessee].

Ren and Becks, although separated by an age gap, both frame their journey to Atlanta as a form of escape. Similar to what Becks describes for the University of West Georgia, young adults from the rural and suburban South are followed by classmates from high school to college. This makes being able to come out, socially transition, physically transition, and transition into being an activist or artist difficult. When I sat down with Ren, he immediately told me about the physical changes he underwent on testosterone and had questions for me about my own physical appearance. He talked about how he was able to access therapy, hormones, and trans competent care in Atlanta and how he imagines such care is not available in the suburban area of Tennessee that he is from. Ren particularly enjoyed the anonymity of “just being a guy who is a DIY artist”, rather “than a trans person who is a DIY artist.”

To bring in Ahmed’s (2006) use of orientation, 10 of the interviewees orient themselves toward the anonymity of a large urban area. Of the 10 interviews that orient themselves towards anonymity, eight are white transmen and 2 are white non-binary people. As Becks mentioned in his interview:

And you know, and it was honestly kind of nice to be anonymous for once. In a small town where people know you, uhhh, you wouldn’t even recognize folks uh and think that “oh that person knows you” and they would be like “oh you’re one of those nicks kids, which one is your dad again” and stuff like that

you know. And so, it was always interesting that you know, I could come to a big city and just blend in and be another face in the crowd. I needed that.

Both Ren and Becks framed their journey to Atlanta as an escape from rural and suburban white communities, but also as an orientation towards the possibilities of anonymity and the impact of such anonymity on their careers.

Transition Narratives and Settler Colonialism

Becks' and Ren's motivations for migrating to Atlanta intersected with their own transition narratives. After spending time listening to transition narratives, I began to wonder how white, non-Indigenous trans people navigate settler colonialism in their own transition narratives.

Regardless of ancestry, gender variant people are forced into a colonial narrative of what it means to be someone who identifies outside of the bounds of gendered practices. With the colonization, mass killing, genocide, and the continued oppression of Indigenous communities resulted in major cultural shifts. One of these major cultural shifts was a change in gender norms.

In the field, trans people regardless of ancestry, would regularly refer to transphobia as a strategy of white supremacy and settler colonialism. Rather than see these forms of oppression as separate, activists argued transphobia and settler colonialism support each other in interlocking ways. In this connection, activists usually pulled a few specific examples of Indigenous groups having multiple gender systems (rather than two gender systems) as evidence of such a system. However, as a trans person with a complicated history around whiteness, I am interested in how transphobia is a strategy of white supremacy and settler colonialism.

In this way, I return to academic literature to try to “make sense” of the transition narratives of migrants to Atlanta. Miranda (2010) argues that prior to colonization by the Europeans, Indigenous people in what we now call California, maintained a culture of three genders: male, female, and “joya”. Miranda argues that “joyas” were spiritual leaders in their communities and their role was to help the deceased journey to the afterlife. She argues that killing off “joyas” is a crucial part of the genocide the Spanish enacted on Indigenous people’s (Miranda 2010).

More than the mere existence of Indigenous third and fourth gender people, I connect with Miranda’s argument that heteronormativity is a continued cultural violence imposed on Indigenous people (Miranda 2010). In her memoir, *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir*, she talks about her struggles with reclaiming her culture and history, along with being queer.

There are two pivotal points in U.S. history to my own story of settler colonialism and cultural violence: boarding schools and adoption. In 1819, Congress passed the Indigenous Civilization Act which allowed missionaries to “Christianize” Indigenous children (Trafzer, Keller, and Sisquoc, 2006, 10). Government officials, social workers, and missionaries separated Indigenous children from their families and brutalized them at boarding schools. Boarding schools did not allow Indigenous children to speak their Indigenous language and only taught them Christian values. Oral histories and archival research of the boarding schools tell stories of physical violence, corporal punishment, and Indigenous survivors struggling with suicide after attending the board schools. At the boarding schools, missionaries indoctrinated and punished Indigenous children into

Christianity and strict gender roles (Smith 2007; Evans-Campbell et al. 2012; Woolford 2015; Fear-Segal and Rose 2016).

Paxton (2006) argues that at schools like Richard H. Pratt Sherman boarding school, Indigenous girls were forced into a “Protestant ideal of true womanhood.” (174) For example, the school curriculum for Indigenous girls focused on giving them opportunities to become “dressmakers, cooks, and servants.” (174) Paxton argues that such a structure coerced Indigenous girls into Victorian ideologies of gender and encouraged paths towards domestic work.

My mother does not speak of her family’s history with boarding schools to me, but she continues to live with generational trauma in the form of addiction and mental health struggles. She struggled as a housewife and my father’s family blames my transness on my mother’s absence. From the few conversations I have been able to have with my birth mother, I know that members of her family attended a Catholic boarding school. Unfortunately, my grandmother died from lung cancer before I could record her story.

When I came out to my white father and white stepmother, they sent me to a boarding school. After developing a crush on a girl from my public high school, we sent each other text messages about how cute we thought each other were. My step mother found the text messages and my parents punished me for my flirtation and attraction. My parents stripped my room of everything besides a mattress and a few crucial belongings. They told me I was to go to boarding school, so that I could focus on academics and forget about exploring my sexuality and gender. They assured me I was pretty and that I

did not need to turn to being “transgendered” and I would grow out of my “tomboy” phase. They assured me that I still like “girl things” and I was not really a boy.

Louisiana School for the Mathematics, Sciences, and Arts opened in 1983 and was a part of a movement in Southern states to push education further (Ebarb 2015). The goal was to take the “gifted and talented” students from their hometowns and give them opportunities to take college courses, learn from educators with doctorates in their respective fields, and for them to achieve academically post high school. This boarding school did not punish me in the same way I suspect my maternal family’s instructors and superintendents punished them, but my teachers did not teach me Indigenous history or about the Houma people. Rather, the focus was on an assimilation into a professionalism that centered settler colonialism and heteronormativity. A crucial aspect of this assimilation, was the division between the girl’s and boy’s living quarters. Even though I came out during my senior year of high school, the administrators forced me to stay in the girls’ dormitory where I was subjected to name-calling, physical aggression, and one time a student pulling the shower curtain on me to check if I “had a dick yet.”

As I packed my bags for boarding school, my white stepmother emphasized how “disrespectful” and “bad” I was and that boarding school would “straighten me out.” She emphasized that “some kids cannot be helped, no matter how much you try, some come to you just too broken.” At that point in my life, I asked what such a statement could possibly mean. She could not tell me. My paternal family never could speak of the woman who gave birth to me.

This leads into another way in which white people enacted cultural violence against Indigenous people the U.S. government and Christian led programs encouraged white families to adopt Indigenous children. In the 1950s and '60s, Indigenous children were adopted into white families due to programs and narratives that promoted Indigenous families as unfit for children. Rather than sending children to boarding schools, they would be “civilized” and “saved” through adoption into white families. In 1978, the Indian Child Welfare Act legalized guidelines for the foster care system to help Indigenous children stay in Indigenous families and cultures (Barth, Webster, and Lee 2002; Dodson 2010; Jacobs 2014).

The Indian Child Welfare Act encourages social workers to keep children in Indigenous families or with the birth parents if possible. I lived with my birth mother until I was five years old. When I was five years old, my biological father petitioned for full custody under the grounds that my mother was unfit to be a mother. In the case, my mother signed over her rights as a legal guardian under the deal that my white stepmother would adopt me. Since my white father was my biological father, the Indian Child Welfare Act did not apply to me.

I grew up understanding myself as white and non-Indigenous. I did not grow up learning about the traditions and values of Houma people. When I was a child, I was lighter-skinned than my older sister. Strangers sometimes questioned the complexion of my sister's skin but we mostly ignored the comments. It was not until I left Massachusetts for fieldwork, that I reconnected with my mother.

Away from my own personal narrative, a large part of how settler colonialism impacts transition narratives is the interlocking nature between the pathologization of trans identities and settler colonialism. I think the interlocking nature of settler colonialism and gender variance remains through medialized transition narratives.

To apply Miranda's (2010) term of "re-naming" (260), Harry Benjamin re-named gender variant people by diagnosing them under Western medicine with "transsexualism." He applied the term "transsexual" to gender variant people and it marked a shift from the German usage of "transvestite" and the generally utilized "berdache" in the sociologies (Hirschfeld 2003; Roscoe 1998). For Harry Benjamin, the expression "transsexual" only applies to individuals who want to change their bodies to be in arrangement with cultural standards of sex (Benjamin 1966). Doctors associated wealth, whiteness, and the ability to look cisgender with being authentically transsexual.

To support the medical narrative, in the 1950s and 1960s, media narratives promoted the transition stories of white transgender people, such as Christine Jorgensen as the authentic and "good transsexuals." (Skidmore 2011, 271-272)

Benjamin left behind a legacy that upheld cisgender bodies as the type of bodies transgender people should strive towards. He had strict standards for who could be considered transsexual. For example, if you did not want to have a hysterectomy you could be denied hormones and other physical changes. Benjamin set standards of care based on what he called "real life tests." (Meyer et al. 2001 17) Structurally, Benjamin enacted his standards of care through his establishment of the Benjamin Gender

Dysphoria Association which later became the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (Lombardi 2010).

The real-life tests were a set of standards set by psychologists and physicians that a transgender person had to pass in order to access care. This often meant taking on white colonial gender roles, a traditionally feminine or masculine name, pronouns, and appearance at a workplace and be able to keep employment for at least two years (American Psychological Association 1980; Meyer et al. 2001). These standards encouraged trans people to move to cities where they are not known as their sex assigned at birth and to blend in there. A successful transition was one where a trans person could pull this off and go stealth.

This came up in the migration and transition narratives of white trans people in Atlanta. White trans people emphasized the appeal of the anonymity of large city like Atlanta in talking about their motivations for moving to Atlanta. Becks' and Ren's motivations for migrating to Atlanta intersected ability to physically transition and the presumed safety in anonymity. Previous work in trans studies, by Adair (2017), found that white trans people preferred online spaces to discuss their transition because of an assumed safety in anonymity.

In transition narratives, safety from anonymity is assimilation into whiteness. Per medical guidelines, through real life tests, anonymity is needed in order be seen as a real transgender person by U.S. medical systems. Anonymity not only promotes a medical narrative but is also a privilege given to white trans people. TJ, Amelia, Ren, and Becks did not uphold themselves as the only authentic trans people. Rather, they were shaped by the medical narratives and afforded privileges of safety due to their relationship to whiteness.

Imbedded within colonialism, there is a common belief that there is a before and after of transitioning for transgender communities. For example, in order to access care Becks spoke in his interview how doctors and psychologists referred to his transition as “when he was a girl”, rather than using language that indicate Becks was always a man.

Another element of a colonial narrative of gender variance is the assumption that there are only two genders. Cisnormativity assumes a two gender system in which both genders are static and permanent. Cisnormativity is an element of heteronormativity and it is a culturally-supported and socially-maintained system that invalidates people’s own understanding of their gender bodies. This often includes noting transgender people by the wrong gender and treating their bodies as objects (Ansara and Hegarty 2014).

In the 1980s, there was a shift in medical discourse of gender non-normative bodies in which trans placed as a gendered disorder instead of a sexual disorder. In this shift, trans people could access health care but only if they conformed to gender binaries. In this way, pscyhologists imposed a gender system that sees gender as static and permanent. Mental health professionals and physicians held cisgender bodies as the ideal that transgender people should ascribe to. Within this orientation, happiness is associated with cisgenderism and suffering is associated with transgenderism.

In response to the literature produced by McHugh (1992, 2014) and Raymond (1979), public institutions that previously provided care to transgender people closed permanently. As public institutions closed, private institutions opened and were willing to provide care to transgender people for astronomical financial burdens. For example, although TJ migrated to Atlanta in order access better healthcare, he still had to travel to Florida in order undergo a double mastectomy.

The doctor that oversaw the procedure is a plastic surgeon is able to make a living off strictly performing double mastectomies for trans people. TJ paid \$7,5000 for the surgery and had to wait a year and a half on the wait list.

To guide private institutions, the WPATH (World Professional Association for Transgender Health) began to publish medical literature and recommendations for mental health professionals, surgeons, endocrinologists, and general care providers. As mentioned previously, in the harmful legacy of Harry Benjamin, these standards emphasized “passing” various forms of gatekeeping and testing (Lombardi 2010). According to WPATH Standards of Care, a mental health professional had to diagnose a transgender person with the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in order for the transgender person to be able to access hormones and/or surgery (Meyer et al. 2001).

White trans people moved to Atlanta in order access therapists and centers who would prescribe them hormones, whereas Black, Indigenous, and/or Latinx trans people found alternative “black market” ways to get hormones. Regardless of diagnosis, U.S. health insurance companies did not cover hormones and surgery. Rather, patients had to meet the diagnostic criteria in order for a doctor to prescribe hormones and/or surgery. This involved transgender people having to prove their gender to a therapist in order to receive a letter that stated the transgender was in fact, transgender.

In the late 1990s, the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV, shifted from using the word “transsexualism” and re-named the diagnosis to “gender identity disorder.” (33) According to the DSM IV, gender identity disorder is:

In boys, the cross-gender identification is manifested by a marked preoccupation with traditionally feminine activities. They may have a preference for dressing in

girls' or women's clothes or may improvise such items from available materials when genuine articles are unavailable. They particularly enjoy playing house, drawing pictures of beautiful girls and princesses...Girls with Gender Identity Disorder display intense negative reactions to parental expectations or attempts to have them wear dresses or other feminine attire. They prefer boys' clothing and short hair, are often misidentified by strangers as boys, and may ask to be called by a boy's name. Their fantasy heroes are most often powerful male figures, such as Batman or Superman (American Psychological Association, 2013; 576).

The diagnosis misgenders. Still imposes a binary that patients should align themselves with.

Intersecting with this imposed binary, are racial, linguistic, and cultural preferences. A "boy's name" in the religious and cultural practices of Islam is different than a "boy's name" in Christian religious and cultural practices.

Additionally, in order to meet the diagnostic criteria, the patient must have known about their transgender identity from a young age. Some clauses of the DSM IV claim that most transgender people now and can vocalize their discomfort with their assigned gender as young as the age of 3. Anyone who took longer to find words to voice their discomfort would have a hard time receiving the diagnosis.

Lastly, the DSM IV and previous iterations emphasized suffering in the diagnosis. In order for psychiatrists to diagnose you with "transvestism", "transsexualism", or "gender identity disorder", patients had to suffer and be able to vocalize that suffering to their therapist.

Transgender people had to reiterate what they hated about themselves and what they wanted to change about themselves to get treatment. This practice does not allow for transgender people to be free to be themselves without shame. Their story becomes a painful life story, even if they did not struggle as much as others have. This results in many transgender people feeling they must not be trans enough since they had an easy transition.

Instead of teaching transgender people they have a lot to offer the world by virtue of being transgender, cisgenderist work teaches us to pity transgender people. Cisgenderist work

argues that any trans person who has not suffered must not really be trans. I further discuss the process of authentication in Chapter 4 and Chapter 8.

In 2011, the World Health Organization of Health and the World Professional Association for Transgender Health began to encourage physicians, endocrinologists, and surgeons to move to an informed consent model of care (WPATH 2011). A couple years later, in 2013, “gender identity disorder” was changed to “gender dysphoria” in the 5th edition of the DSM (American Psychological Association 2013).

Ren continued his story of his journey to Atlanta and told me about how he “came out” to his family as trans shortly after he moved away for college. When he came out, his family met together on Skype to talk about how his physical transition will impact the family. Ren noted that his family was okay with him being “non-binary” but when he moved to Atlanta and came to know himself as a “transman”, that is when his family had a hard time. When he came out to his family as wanting to take testosterone and have “top-surgery” (a double-mastectomy to reduce breast tissue in the chest) his family held the meeting. At the meeting, each family member, except Ren, explained how Ren’s physical transition would impact the family. At the end of the meeting, Ren’s family put his transition up for vote:

Ren: My parents did not take me coming out as a guy well [chuckles] like at all. When I told my mom, she called everyone in the family, my dad, my sister, [and my sister’s husband on Skype and made me sit down with all of them. So they could each tell me how this would impact them.

Me: As if they had input on your transition?

Ren: [chuckles] Yeah, like they gave input on whether they thought I was masculine enough or truly trans. And how they were hurt by me starting testosterone without consulting them first.

Me: And what was the role of your sister’s husband?

Ren: I don't know, man. But it was weird.

I connected to Ro's story because my Southern family of origin acted the same way when I began testosterone. My parents would cry and ask how I could hurt them that way. When I got top surgery (removal of breast tissue on the chest), my parents cried and mourned the loss of their white daughter's boobs. Families who see boys and men as white girls send them to conversion therapy, bible camp, boarding schools, cry over their deepening voices and the loss of breast tissue, and even host family meetings to vote on how the guy's transition impacts the family. In TJ's interview, he talked about how his family sent him to "bible camp which was essentially conversion therapy". When TJ arrived to camp, he quickly realized it was a conversion therapy camp where he was "treated for being a transvestite" and "living a life of sin".

I highlight TJ's story as it relates to the history of the American Psychological Association that I outline above. When TJ came out, the DSM V still diagnosed "gender dysphoria" as a mental illness. In TJ's transition story, he told me how his parents used such a diagnosis as proof that he was "not truly transgender" because they argue that TJ engaged in "feminine behavior" in his childhood. This lead his parents to believe that the best thing for him was to put him through conversion therapy.

I connected to Ren and TJ's story. When I came out to my white father, he sighed and said "I guess you are your mother's child". He emphasized that his daughter was dead to him. Up until I started to take injectable testosterone, my light-skin allowed me to be white passing. But as I started hormones, I began to be read as a light-skinned Brown man. I recall a violent moment in my first year of graduate school. I was driving to the campus library when I stopped shortly at a red light and caused the truck behind me to almost hit the back end of my car. The driver

became angry and followed me to a nearby gas station that I stopped at. As I got out of the car, the driver got out of his truck and began to yell “wetback” at me and told me to stay “in Holyoke where [my] kind is”.

I was able to shake off the event and go to the library to continue to write my term papers for my graduate seminars. As I told other graduate students about the incident, my white friends assured me that I was “white like them”. I feel as if the way in which others read the color of my skin is dependent on how they read my gender. While I present masculine in public, others read me as a miscellaneous light-skinned Brown person.. In academic circles where colleagues know that I am trans, colleagues read me as white.

For me, in regard to my family of origin, getting rid of my breasts through a double mastectomy, acted as a divorce from my father’s side of my genealogy. When my paternal grandmother died, all of her straight and cisgender grandchildren inherited parts of her land. Although she was my primary caregiver, her children denied me any access to the family land.

During my fieldwork, I began to reconnect with my birth mother. I began to connect with other Indigenous queer people. For example, Taylor, often spoke at length about what it is like to be Black and Indigenous. She had a different story from my own. When she was a child, Indigenous people in her family gifted land to her grandparents:

Taylor: I come from a family of sharecroppers. We were actually gifted the land by Indigenous people in the area. We grew all sorts of stuff, like grain, corn, peaches. We also had pigs, chickens, and cows. At any given time, I could look outside and see my grandfather working in the fields. That’s a sense of pride for me.

Although Taylor mentions her connection to her family of origin, she continued to talk about how she does not mention being transgender or queer to her mother. She emphasized the importance of Black queer chosen family, because for her, she gets to retain parts of her upbringing and culture, while also being able to express herself fully.

Along with college, Taylor also moved to Atlanta in search of chosen family. At the sewing workshops, participants disclosed similar motivations. For the “Who is your chosen family?” sewing prompt, people spoke about how they moved to Atlanta in search of chosen family. As participants sewed illustrations of their chosen families, they spoke about how they developed relationships in Atlanta that they did not think would be possible elsewhere.



Figure 3.1: Amelia’s quilt panel in response to the prompt “Who is your Chosen Family?”

As shown in Figure 3.1, Amelia participated in the sewing workshop and chose to do a panel on giving birth to her daughter. For Amelia and her partner, it was important to disengage from medical narratives of child birth because of the historical treatment of trans and gender people by Western medicine. She emphasized that they hired a doula for the process because they did not trust hospitals to provide adequate care to their family. She also emphasized how in her panel, she wanted to naturalize the idea of trans and queer people giving birth.

Ethnographic interviews suggest that trans people migrate to Atlanta to escape cisgender geographies of shame. Such escape can and often does co-exist with educational opportunities. Although participants referred to Atlanta as a “mecca”, trans people still face old and new geographies of cisgender shame. I highlight the lasting impact of colonial shame on transition narratives. Outside of how settler colonialism shapes our bodily transition narratives, I shift to describe how chosen families can be disruptive to cisnormative views of family and social capital.

CHAPTER FOUR:

“Authentic” Activists

Just as activists in the field had their own models for what makes an activist recognizable as an activist, I am influenced by my own sense of queer idealism. To unfold my own sense of queer idealism and tell the stories of activist, I ask who is empowered to take up the label of “trans activist”. I explore how trans people in Atlanta come to think of themselves as gender-specific activists, and how this orientation shapes approaches toward other social and political issues. In particular, I delve into the struggles of authenticity for Barbara, Rafael, Sloan, and Estrella.

While living on TJ’s couch, he pointed me to an online resource for housing in Atlanta to help me find a permanent housing situation. After a few months of looking at the online page, I saw a posting by Barbara and Sloan, looking for a roommate. Together we found an apartment in the North Druid Hills neighborhood of Atlanta. During the early months of living together, Barbara worked for the Human Rights Campaign. As her roommate, I noticed she worked eight hours a day, six days a week. One Friday night, when she got off work, we drove to the laundromat to do our laundry together.

While on our way to the laundromat, she asked if we could stop to cash her check. As we stopped, I began to ask her about her job. She explained how the Human Rights Campaign outsourced their labor, in that she did not work directly for the Human Rights Campaign but another field campaign underneath the larger organization. Each day she asks for donations from people on the street and she earns \$11/hr an hour to do so. If she is able to meet her quota each day, she could get a per-hour raise of a few cents. As we transferred our clothes from the washer

to the dryer, Barbara continued to explain that if she does not meet a certain minimum of donations for three days, the campaign manager can fire her.

As we sat waiting for our laundry to dry, she continued to explain how at the beginning of her job she enjoyed working with other transwomen. She mentioned how she graduated from college earlier this year and needed a job to pay for her to move to Atlanta. She paused and shifted in her chair. She then began to explain how the job was becoming stressful and impacting her health negatively. At the beginning of her work, she was able to meet her quotas, but as she started estrogen and spironolactone, she started to fall behind on her quotas.

Barbara felt like her changing body hindered her ability to get donations. She felt like she had no one to talk to about the subtle transphobia she experienced as a canvasser. I watched as Barbara spent eight hours a day in the Atlanta summer sun and only earned small raises (on the scale of cents) each week if she met her quotas.

A few weeks later, Barbara bent over in severe abdominal pain. She left work early and took herself to the emergency room. Sloan and I hurried to the hospital to join her and act as support. After waiting a few hours of waiting in a hospital room, a doctor walked in and told us that Barbara was “just experiencing abdominal cramps from you know...”. The “you know” was in reference to Barbara taking estrogen. Sloan and I asked Barbara if she could stay home from work, but she refused. The campaign manager only allowed Barbara to miss three days. On top of this, if she did miss a day, she would struggle to meet her quota.

While working for the Human Rights Campaign, she was unable to pay for her hormones, medical bills, and life accidents. Within the first few weeks of her job, she got into a car accident and was unable to pay the damages and car insurance fees. As her roommates, we spotted her

rent money, grocery money, and tried to work out reciprocal agreements. However, this stress caught up to Barbara and eventually and she quit her job.

Barbara did not have many options for employment and she was unable to pay rent while looking for work. She did not have a family safety net to fall back on. As a household of young trans and non-binary people, we did not have a family safety net to fall back on either and did not make enough money to cover her portion of rent. Although we would not have thrown Barbara out of our apartment, as young trans people ourselves, we were unable to cover Barbara's portion of rent. Luckily, Barbara had a friend who worked for Starbucks and recommended becoming barista. Starbucks covered Barbara's hormones and medical bills under the insurance plan they offer to employees. She began to be able to afford bills, groceries, and rent. After a few months of working with Starbucks, I sat down at our kitchen table to interview Barbara about her experiences. When I asked Barbara about her relationship to activism she responded:

Activism? Um, it's definitely something I've wanted to do more of. I've just, like I'm a white trans woman so I don't, I know that the bulk of transphobia isn't towards me, but there's still that fear of harassment and just being marginalized. So not even specifically with activism but just like going out and doing stuff. At all. It's hard to get out of the house and go out in publicly and broadcast myself. I'm always. I'm kind of a pussy bitch baby

Barbara's positioning in lines 3 and 4, strikes me, particularly how she positions herself racially in relationship to transphobia. Although Barbara was one of the first people I interviewed in my fieldwork, other white transgender people contributed similar conversation. What is at work in Barbara's statements about transphobia? I became interested in how white trans people positioned anti-Blackness in relation to transphobia. I became interested in how narratives of violence and priority facilitated self-efficacy of people's own experience of violence. From Barbara's comments I began to understand

that many white transgender people (including myself) lacked the tools on how to talk about how transphobia comes from white supremacy while also acknowledging our own experiences in transphobia as valid and authentic struggles.

Additionally, comments like Barbara's reflect a moral hierarchy, similar to the ones that Dave (2012) encountered in her fieldwork. In her work, Dave (2012) argues that lesbian activists in India often had to pull on intersectionality in order to authenticate their own struggles. Dave relates this to a performance of authenticity. She argues that in establishing struggle, lesbian activists had to navigate narratives of types of activists as "more authentic", poverty struggles as "more dire", and particular people as "more deserving of relief" (98). Barbara considers racialized transphobia to be more authentic and deserving of justice than her own struggles. Instead of highlighting poverty, like in Dave's fieldwork, Barbara highlights race. In Barbara's story, she works to validate the overall struggle against transphobia, by placing it within white supremacy, but in order to accomplish this she diminishes her own story. Intersectionality is used a way of priority-making and as a short-cut to explain the movement to others.

After spending time discussing and writing in graduate level seminars about intersectionality and Black feminist critical frameworks, I had my own definition of intersectionality that is at odds with how activists used intersectionality in the field. I came into the field with an understanding of intersectionality as specific to the legal struggles of Black women. However, activists used "intersectionality" as a term expansively, to mean a broader set of colliding identities and experiences of oppression. In particular, I became interested in how activists used the term "intersectionality" to fight for legitimacy. At a monthly planning meeting, an activist brought in a pamphlets

with a citation and paraphrasing of Crenshaw's (1991) usage of intersectionality and related it to the violence Black transwomen face.

Even further, I became interested in how trans people use narratives of intersectionality to position themselves as “more authentic” or less authentic activists. In response to Barbara, I laughed uncomfortably and paused. Barbara continued:

You know? So like.. activism is really important and in my previous job with the canvassing at the human rights campaign, like the um, my criticisms with HRC aside I felt like I was really doing activism. Because even if people aren't donating, I was still talking to like a 100 people a day in Atlanta. And telling them that like in 28 states you can still be fired for being lesbian, gay, bi, or trans and that felt good but it felt safer for me because it was my job. Whereas if I'm not working for somebody, like going out, I feel like, I have less agency. when I'm working, I'm just doing my job I'm just part of the crew but like doing activism outside of that, where I'm like, I have more agency, I don't know. It's very hard for me to get out there and pop off.

As highlight by Barbara's story, in the field, I observed tensions around the distinction between activist and organizer. This connects with previous community based work down with youth organizers and activists. Silver (1998) found that organizing spaces, particularly philanthropic spaces can re-create class struggles through social movement aims. Additionally, Bishop (2014) found that in a small non-profit with youth organizers, language acted as a way to signal one's status in a movement. She terms the language that activists use “critical literacy” (52) that organizers learn outside of classrooms and college degrees. She asserts that programs that want to avoid reproducing class struggles should teach youth key language and communication tools that are specific to social movements.

Although I came to Atlanta with years of experience with trans organizers in Louisiana, I still had particular “critical literacies” to learn in the field. Community

members saw and spoke of the label of “organizer” as more palatable, professional, and respectable. In contrast, community members saw the label of “activist” as an aggressive word that was temporary and based in individual bravery and strength. As Barbara suggests activism comes with more agency than being an organizer. Barbara signals her own hesitancy over this agency. When I asked Barbara whether she considered herself an activist, she sighed and responded,

Because I don’t do a lot of the leg work, no I don’t think so. Like. I’m like very outspoken and I’m very, I do activist like things but I’m hesitant to call myself an activist because I’m not out there, like doing workshops, working organizations, and stuff like that. I think I considered myself an activist when I worked for the human rights campaign but other than that, I hesitate to tell myself that.

Interestingly, Barbara’s focus on “leg work” implies that the word “activism” is associated with physical labor, whereas “organizer” (or “advocate”) is associated with professional labor.

Shortly after I interviewed Barbara, I spoke with Sloan, my other roommate during a large part of my fieldwork. As a Black trans person, they avoided work at the Human Rights Campaign. Rather, they went into the food service industry after college and hoped to save up money for graduate school, all the while working on their creative fiction novels. They would regularly catch me walking around the apartment, stop me, and ask if something worked in their novel. When I asked Sloan about their relationship to activism, they responded:

I think that I’ve been greatly restricted by my work schedule. And I think that’s a thing that a lot of people can relate to probably. Because I wanna be more involved but after eight hours of running around a restaurant, lifting heavy things, like there’s stairs in my restaurant that I have to walk up and down at least twenty times a day, like, after doing all that and getting home at 11:30pm, I would lay and dread and think about having to wake up at 7am to make it to a protest at 9am. You know what I mean? ... I think that I find myself so exhausted by day to day life that thinking [12] about protesting in any capacity just doubles my

exhaustion. It's like, I wanna be more involved but it sucks that I don't feel like I can be more involved unless that I'm actively protesting and stuff.

Similar to Barbara, Sloan associates *activism* with the on-the-ground work of community organizing. However, unlike Barbara who focused on the moral difference between activism and organizing, Sloan focuses on the amount of labor they perform. For Sloan, the barrier to labeling one's self as an "activist" is about how working a regular job to afford rent keeps them from engaging in protests. Sloan emphasizes how they perform physical labor for their job and are unable to continue provide labor for a movement. Sloan mentions how after working in the food service industry for eight hour shifts they do not have the energy to go to a protest. Later in the interview, Sloan mentions how even thinking about a protest drains them.

In addition to time constraints due to shift work, and exhaustion from the jobs that activists need to eat and shelter themselves, there was also a tension between participation and mental health. A couple of months after I interviewed Sloan, I was able to meet Rafael over coffee. Rafael is someone I met at the beginning of my fieldwork at a trans immigration protest. As we sat down with our coffees, Rafael described his relationship to activism:

I would say pretty, not non-existent but pretty uh, relaxed, pretty laid back. The thing is, because I've in the last two, three years had to deal with a lot um concerning trauma concerning mental illness. Um, all these things I haven't had the opportunity to engage in with the community as much as I'd like to. And because it's heavy stuff, it's like, it's heavy stuff.

I mean, it's like going to a protest is the sort of thing that would drain me like I'll have to take a four or five hour nap after I go to a protest or something like that like it. It takes a lot of energy on my part. So I have to be kind of careful. And uh, just kind of conscious about how it's going to affect me, especially if I have something to do later that day or something to do later that week something you know, I don't know.

It's it's just something I can't I it's not something I can just like, participate in and expect nothing to happen or like expect everything to be fine afterwards. Um, so I don't know. I'd like to I would love to be more involved and more active.

But something just feels a little prohibitive. Yeah.

I was struck when Rafael said his participation was non-existent. Two months before the interview, I saw Rafael participating in a small protest and memorial over the death of Roxana, a trans Latina immigrant who died in a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement van due to medical negligence. Rafael played a critical role in lighting candles and holding signs. For Rafael, protesting systems of policing is exhausting because of the mental work of still having to exist in a system that use the same systems of policing. Across life circumstances, several activists spoke of similar feelings of mental exhaustion.

As Rafael spoke, I thought about Taylor, one of the co-founders of Southern Fried Queer Pride, worked several side hustles to keep afloat. I thought about the exhaustion I felt after visiting women being held by I.C.E. Part of this exhaustion comes from having to navigate several social and political issues at once, all the while proving your fight against transphobia as important to dismantling white supremacy.

As I try to make sense of this, I look to Dave (2012) who uses the term “hierarchies of worthiness” to refer to the priority-making she witnessed lesbian activists in India engage in (98). In the context of my own fieldwork, non-profits, public policy, and straight, cis activists considered immigration, incarceration, and poverty as more authentic struggles than transphobia.

Barbara, Sloan, and Rafael’s stories contrast with Estrella’s story. Estrella reclaimed what Dave (2012) terms “incommensurability.” (138) Dave uses “incommensurability” to describe the tension that lesbian activists in India felt between being Indian and being lesbian (138). Estrella reclaims the ways in which being an Indigenous (Otomí-Chichimeca) migrant is not culturally compatible with being a transgender woman who lives in Georgia. Immigration activists did not understand Estrella’s fight for access to hormones while in solitary confinement. Spending time

with Estrella also taught me the ways in which trans organizing in Atlanta was inaccessible to her. Beyond language barriers, other trans activists read Estrella as not “radical enough” because she used language such as “transgendered”. Although she experiences interlocking systems of oppression, she struggled with others not seeing her as an authentic activist.

Part of this authentication is the politics of mourning. As I mention in Chapter 2, it is important to consider who is allowed to be human and how we work towards collective humanity. Butler (2004) poses the question: “...what makes for a grievable life?” (20). Although her work focuses on terrorism and violence in the narratives of war in the Middle East, her framework of questioning what forms of violence are seen as terrorism connects to Estrella’s story.

The first time I saw Estrella speak at a community event, it was for #Trans Week at Georgia State University. She walked up on stage in a flower crown, a long skirt with trans pride flag colors (pastel pink, baby blue, and white stripes). Estrella walked with a chain around her ankles and she repeated “For my safety...” in Spanish. She told the audience the story of how I.C.E. put her in solitary confinement, for her own safety, after an inmate at the detention center stabbed her. She became suicidal during her time in solitary confinement. After sometime of developing a relationship with me, Estrella spoke to me of how she got through her time, she told me she would think of the chickens back home in her family’s yard.

Butler (2004) argues, “our own acts of violence do not receive graphic coverage in the press, and so they remain acts that are justified in the name of self-defense, but by a noble cause, namely, the rooting out of terrorism.” (6) For Estrella, the violence of detention by I.C.E is justified because she was seen as a disturbance. Guards justified solitary confinement as a “noble” strategy to “protect” Estrella from the other detainees.

Immigration activists in Atlanta failed to see how the struggles of transgender people connected to the struggles of immigrants. Even further, immigration activists who did understand that transgender women face horrific violence at the hands of I.C.E. did not know how to find transgender women in the system and provide care for them. On the contrary, LGBT+ activists who fought for transgender women often struggled to fully understand the violence undocumented people in Atlanta face. At events, undocumented people were mentioned but there was a lack of material, strategic changes. That work came from Estrella herself.

Murray (2015) argues that this is deeper than an intersecting systems of violence with each activist group not understanding the other component, but rather it is about a legal and cultural system that justifies who is queer enough to rescue through granting asylum. That is, cisnormative institutions code queerness as a certain level of suffering. Legal processes of asylum expect immigrants in the U.S. and Canada to represent their queerness and suffering in a way that can generate pity from legal systems, non-profit organizers, and other agents who seek to grant citizenship to immigrants (Murray 2015).

After witnessing Estrella speak at protests, rallies, and meetings for months, a mutual friend introduced me to Estrella at a housing justice meeting. The coalition was led by straight cisgender people, but included language about transphobia. Jordan, Estrella, and myself sat in the back and listened. We were the only trans people at the meeting and we could feel the stiffness in the air. In the stiffness, Jordan interrupted the meeting to introduce me to Estrella. She immediately took to how I spoke differently than my academic colleague who introduced us. She kept asking Jordan “He’s an academic?” Jordan nodded and assured her I was a Ph.D candidate and someone who had experience in activism. She reached her hand out and touched my emerald green earring and told me she loved it. As we began to talk, we shared about our relationship to

being Indigenous. She proudly affirmed her own Indigeneity, being Indigenous and from Mexico, and I spoke about how my birth mother is Indigenous but I did not grow up with Houma family in Louisiana. She nodded knowingly.

A couple weeks later, I got a message from Jordan on Facebook. He asked me if I could go with Estrella to meet with three transwomen at the Irwin Detention Center. I.C.E. was detaining and inmates were abusing the three women. I told Jordan I only know a little bit of Spanish, enough to catch the main parts of sentences but would not pick up on subtle nuances. Jordan sent me a laughing emoji and said that he did not know any Spanish but was still useful to Estrella. He assured me that many of the transwomen at the Irwin Detention Center knew English and would be able to speak with me. Jordan begged me to go because he felt drained from the previous month's visit. I assured him I could take Estrella to the detention center and be with her during the visit.

Irwin County Detention Center opened in 2009 and is located in Ocilla, Georgia. The facility houses cisgender male and female detainees. In 2010, Irwin County Detention Center began to take immigrant detainees. Of the 1,201 beds total, 512 are assigned for immigrant detainees (Redmon, 2010; Cole and Shahshahani, 2012). In 2012, the American Civil Liberties Union of Georgia received letters from family members of detainees and launched an investigation into the conditions at the Irwin County Detention Center. However, their focus was unintentionally on cisgender bodies. For example, one of the areas that they rated the Irwin County Detention Center poor at was "female hygiene". Female hygiene does not include transgender women (Cole and Shahshahani, 2012).

The next morning, I woke up around 5:00am to head to Tucker, a town outside of Atlanta to meet with Estrella and bring her to the Irwin Detention Center. The Irwin Detention Center was approximately four hours outside of Atlanta in, Tifton, Georgia. Tucker is a working-class suburb outside of Atlanta.

As I walked up to Estrella's front door, there was a mattress propped up against the window of the house. I later found out that was the mattress Estrella slept on while staying at her friend's house. I waited a few more minutes and Estrella came out of the house around 7:55am. She apologized by saying "Sorry, I thought it was 8am" I nodded and said "No, you're perfectly on time". We walked down the driveway to my car and got inside. I set up the address in my phone as Estrella bucked up in the passenger seat.

As I left Tucker to get onto the interstate, Estrella and I began to talk. She had many questions for me:

"What do you do for work?"
"Do you work for an organization?"
"When did you start hormones?"
"Does your family accept you?"
"Are you here for Southern Fried Queer Pride?"

Estrella's questions struck me. This was my first time meeting someone who had been detained, brutalized, and dehumanized by I.C.E., and she wanted to talk about my process of getting on hormones. Trans activists in Atlanta considered Estrella to be a more authentic activist than myself and yet, she chose to talk about how hormones made me have a great beard, become handsome and become passable. After asking me about my process of getting on hormones, Estrella commented "I could never tell. You.. what's the word.. pass?" I smiled and nodded. After talking about how she perceived me as passable, she wanted to know more about the trans dating scene in Atlanta. We chatted a little bit about who was dating whom in the trans activist

scene. She giggled and smiled. I took another sip of Dr. Pepper and tried my best to embrace that this is where our conversation was going.

I realized I was giving into narratives of trans exceptionalism I had to stop and acknowledge my own priority-making. I expected Estrella to come in with knowledge about how nobody “passes” in terms of gender presentation. I did not consider discussing my physical transition as much of a priority as discussing Estrella’s story of injustice. Estrella considered my own gender euphoria over my beard as a priority, even though I did not.

After discussing the dating lives of activists, she began to discuss activist groups in the area. She said that the “Latino groups” do good work, but “some of them are very conservative, so they don’t care about us, our community”. We both sat in silence after she spoke that truth.

Estrella began to play rap music in Spanish. She informed me the music was created by a “transgirl”. While Estrella played the music, we passed a giant billboard on the side of the interstate. It was a picture of Donald trump in a suit with a blue sky and white clouds behind him, with a bold large text print that read: TRUMP DELIVERS ON HIS PROMISES. Throughout the drive, there were billboards that read: YOU WILL MEET GOD CALL *** FOR TRUTH. At one point, there was a building that read in green letters: THE PLANTATION HOUSE right behind a Shell Gas Station near an overpass that we drove under.

As we pulled into Tifton, the small town where the Irwin Detention Center is located, Estrella asked if we could make a stop at the Dollar Store. As walked into the Dollar Store she walked towards the food and drinks section. I told her that we could pick up food from an actual restaurant or fast food place. She shook her head and said that she wanted food from the store. In the aisle, she had me translate the cans of Vienna Sausages to see which flavor she wanted. I

gagged because of my experience of having to eat Vienna Sausages while experiencing the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. She grabbed a few cans of Vienna Sausages, bread, and two large bottles of orange Powerade. I asked her another time if she really wanted to eat this for lunch. She nodded and hurriedly walked over to the make-up section. I helped her read the make-up labels. She bought some eyebrow pencils and walked over to the checkout counter.

After checking-out, we went back to my car. Estrella made herself a sandwich out of the Vienna Sausages and bread and then hurriedly put on her make-up as I drove down the road to the detention center. I expected the detention center to be far out but the Irwin Detention Center was down the street from the Dollar Store. It was weird to think of how close it was to the Dollar Store.

We pulled up to the detention center and it was a dirt parking lot with a sign that read Irwin Detention Center. Outside, I could see Black men in orange jumpsuits playing basketball on the other side of a wire fence. Going into the night and the morning, as well as the drive, everyone kept referring to it as the Irwin Detention Center, but for some reason I thought of it as strictly as an ICE detention center.

We got out the car and I could feel an oppressive heat on the back of my neck. I could feel the climatic weight of where we were located, out in the middle of nowhere north Georgia. It felt hotter out here than it did in town by the Dollar Store. Estrella fanned herself and commented on how hot she felt. When we walked in, on our right, there were two women in officer and guard uniforms with clipboards. One of them, a black woman, asked us if we had an appointment. We both said yes. She asked if we had car keys, and I handed mine over to her. The other guard walked up closer and asked if we signed in yet. She was white, with long blonde hair in a ponytail. She asked us, “Do you know the names and alien numbers of who you are here to

see?” Estrella nodded and handed the guard a small slip of paper with three numbers written on it. The guard frowned and said there were only two names on the list. When she handed us the list, Estrella insisted that the second name was wrong, that we did not know anyone by that name. Estrella insisted on her own list of three names. She told the guard that she came yesterday and asked to visit everyone the list. The guard looked at Estrella and pointed to the names on the list and said “Is she... is she in the same... situation as the others?” Both Estrella and I said yes and nodded our heads eagerly. The guard nodded and added the third woman to our list.

We were each given red and white clip on badges, mine read “VISITOR 17” in bold black print. As we sat down, Estrella said that this guard was nicer than the one last time. We were directed to three black plastic chairs to sit down in. We waited for about three hours before we could be let in. During that time, I watched as a Black woman in a guard uniform took a Mother’s Day gift basket and balloons home with her.

Estrella saw me looking at the balloons and patted my shoulder. She wrapped her arm around me as we sat in the chairs. We waited a few minutes in silence, then Estrella turned to me and smiled and said “Is she the same.. what did the guard say... situation?” And laughed. I laughed too. We made eye contact as we laughed. Then Estrella patted my shoulder, “How are you feeling, honey?” I nodded and looked around. I told her, “It is weird to see how normalized it is. I think what messes me up is how there is so much normal stuff around human captivity, as if we don’t have real life humans in cages behind these walls... Like there is even a Pepsi machine”. She patted me on the shoulder. “It’s going to be OK, Papi” As we sat in silence, I listened to the Pepsi machine beside me running.

After a few hours, guards ushered us inside the detention center. I thought I was going to throw up on the grey carpet. Ever since my own grandfather died in a prison, I had a hard time with detainment of any sort.

Estrella immediately walked to the corner to get two black plastic chairs, and we set them up on the other side of a grey wall, that had a clear window with a phone on either side. The women sat in orange jumpsuits. The younger one grabbed the phone first. She had a mask on her face, that Estrella asked her to take off. It was the first time they were meeting, and Estrella explained in Spanish that we were a trans activist organization. The woman looked at me and asked a question I could not understand. Then Estrella told her I was a transgender man; I could understand Estrella explaining that to the woman. Then they began to talk about her case. Her name is Marla and the other one's name is Camilla. Camilla did not make eye contact with me and when I looked at her, she looked away. Estrella asked me to keep time, only allowing 30 minutes per person.

When I told Estrella, it was time to switch soon, she kept talking to the first woman. After about ten more minutes, she finished, and they switched to talking to Camilla. There were no clocks on the walls of the room, I just had my phone, which was several hours off the actual time, and I did not know what time we entered. So, I just took my best guess as to what was 30 minutes.

After sitting in the chair next to Camilla for a bit, Marla motioned for me to sit in the cubby next to Estrella and Camilla. I sat down and she motioned for the phone, so I picked up the phone. She was smiling and looking at me up and down. I paused "Hello?" She said "Hey, are

you Estrella's boyfriend?" I laughed and said "No" and she said "You're just her friend?" and I said "Yes, something like that" and she said "Oh good, you're very handsome".

I laughed because that was not what I was expecting. Especially given that the women were in horrendous situations; with being sexually abused and harassed and being kept in the men's facility that is a general detention center. Marla asked me how long I've been on hormones and she noted that I look like bear with how much hair I have. I smiled and laughed quietly. She asked if I wanted bottom surgery.

I was in shock. I was the researcher, but she was asking deeply personal questions of me. She then talked about how she dreams of having her own kids, so she does not want to transition until she can go to a sperm bank. She asked me what I do for work, and I said I was a PhD Candidate. I told her about my research. She told me how she dreams of becoming a ballerina. She talked about how her hearing is in two weeks.

While she talked about her case, guards came in to tell us we were out of time. The guard shuffled me out along with Estrella.

We walked out of the facility silent and somber. We drove to Macon in silence, the first town between the detention center and Atlanta. After I filled up the tank of my car, Estrella began a Facebook live video in Spanish about the news she received, which was that the letter she wrote to ICE was successful and she got the transwomen to stay in the same unit together at the Irwin Detention Center. She joyfully shouted "YES" several times in my car and got me to say hello on the video.

After this, we got gas and stopped at Golden Corral because that's where she wanted to stop. Even though I paid for gas and snacks, Estrella insisted on paying for lunch. She was

ecstatic about Golden Corral, a restaurant that I resented my poor grandparents taking me to growing up. After we ate, Estrella excitedly got an ice cream cone and ate it in the car. She promptly fell asleep, loudly snoring, in the passenger seat as I drove us back to Tucker.

When she woke up, she had more questions about my physical transition. She emphasized that she has yet to have the opportunity to talk to a transgender man about the physicality of transitioning. She asked me when I started to grow my beard.

I expected to decompress with Estrella. I expected profound conversations about migration, suffering, and other topics I thought were more important. Rather, Estrella wanted to eat some ice cream, nap, get on Facebook, and ask me about my beard.

Before I spent time with Estrella, I thought of her as the real activist. While spending time with Estrella, I realize that this was my own priority-making and projection. On the way back to Estrella's friend's house, she apologized for taking up my time. Her apology for taking up space reminded me that many of us struggle to see our work, time, role, and actions as valid in liberation.



Figure 4.1: The photos Estrella took with her phone and posted to Facebook from the day.

Dave argues that queer activism requires constant negotiation and compromise in creating and sustaining across lines of difference (2012). Before going to the Irwin County Detention Center with Estrella, there was an impending feeling amongst activists that there was not enough time for their work. Although queer and trans activists in Atlanta did similar work, these negotiations took tolls on their bodies and mental states. This narrative shifted as I spent time with Estrella. Even though she was building a network for transwomen detained by I.C.E., she made time to buy make-up at the Dollar Store, eat ice cream, and admit to her own assumptions about transmen. She made space for herself to be fully human.

Throughout my fieldwork, I continued to drive Estrella once every other month to the Irwin Detention Center. I slowly transitioned from someone who provided rides, to someone who helped by making calls to find lawyers for the women being held by I.C.E. I organized with a small team of other trans activists to fundraise for “Community Estrella”. From this work, Southerners on New Ground (SONG) invited Estrella and I to participate in the Black Mama’s Bail out. SONG Atlanta struggled to find trans women to bail out for their Black Mama’s Bail Out and they needed people with experience in how detention centers label trans women and how to find transwomen in the system. Estrella and I had experience with navigating how the system tracked immigrants by their legal name and how this leads to organizations not being able to find transwomen in male detention centers. Additionally, women who are not out to their families become invisible to bail out organizations. I continue my role with “Community Estrella” in finding and speaking to transwomen who experience violence.

In this chapter, I illustrate how trans people in Atlanta struggle to self-identify as activists due to imposed moral hierarchies of authentic struggles. I pay attention to the question

of: who is empowered to name themselves an activist? From the stories of activists who struggle to see themselves as such, I point to how experiences of suffering and oppression causes shame determines who is considered an “authentic” activist. I argue that narratives of shame create moral hierarchies of what type of labor constitutes as an ‘activist’ and by extension, who is an authentic activist. I contrast these geographies of shame with my connection and experiences with Estrella, who fits the ideals of an “authentic” activist. However, Estrella embraces her own fullness, complexity, and creates space away from shame and punishment. I point to how her story illustrates a path away from authentication and posturing, and focuses on how we can show up for one another.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Public Policy Narratives of Safety

In the sweltering heat of Georgia, on the second day of my preliminary fieldwork, I went with David and Maria on an oral history tour of downtown Atlanta. The tour was on foot and trolley. I met David and Maria at the Civil Rights Research Institute in Atlanta and they introduced themselves as organizers and scholars. Maria spent time as an organizer in the Latina lesbian movement in the 1980s and transitioned to becoming a historian. David spent time in the “homophile” and gay rights movements of the 1970s and transitioned to becoming an amateur archivist. As part of the LGBT+ Atlanta History Project, they host the tour once a year during June. While on the tour, David and Maria took us to sites that were once LGBT+ bars, sex dungeons, bookstores, leather stores, and cafés. Many of these sites are now parking lots, Starbucks, or a local restaurant. At each site, it was difficult to listen to David and Maria speak of how radical LGBT+ organizing used to be and how those spaces are now gone, along with the radical politics.

The tour focused on the Little Five Points neighborhood of Atlanta, which Maria told us used to be known as “Little Dyke Points” since it was a primarily a space for working class lesbians of color. She talked about how as a young adult, she could bar hop to various locations that were a combination of working-class leather bars, dungeons, and book stores. Little Five Points, or as Maria called it, “Little Dyke Points” is adjacent to Midtown and is considered to be the business and “bar district” of the residential zones of Midtown.

In the early 2000s, a wave of wealthy white and heterosexual families moved into Midtown and the surrounding areas. With this migration, I am interested in how geographies of trans pleasure became displaced out of Midtown. Through archival research and ethnographic interviews, I learned that public policy dictates what forms of desire are appropriate for public intimacy. Public policy in Atlanta codes white cisgenderism and heteronormativity as safe, and trans desire as dangerous. White heterosexual families worked with neighborhood watch committees and the Atlanta Police Department to criminalize queerness and displace it out of Midtown. In the push for appropriate forms of public intimacy, neighborhood watch committees and councils target trans people as unsafe, too intimate, and too dirty for public space.

Sanitizing Black Queer Culture for the Sake of Families

In 2001, Peggy Denby and her husband moved to Midtown and worked to change “the community to meet their standards.” (Schafer, 2008, 4) As Denby told the *Southern Voice*, a gay journal in Atlanta, about what motivated her to create and participate in neighborhood watch committees, “I moved to Midtown from Buckhead, probably about 2.5 miles, and what I saw was disgusting, the open sex, the open drugs, and I don’t know anyone who likes that.” (Schafer 2008, 4) She became critical of predominately Black gay bars that were popular at the time,

namely: The Phoenix, Backstreet, and Bulldogs. I argue that the neighborhood watch committee led by Peggy Denby, the Midtown Security Alliance, and the Atlanta Police Department worked together to create geographies of shame under the guise of making Midtown safe for families.

In the early 2000s, Black queer bars in Atlanta, such as The Phoenix, Backstreet, and Bulldogs, were community centers and epicenters for Black queer culture. For example, Black queer bars in Atlanta were many different styles of dance from the Deep South came together to form new styles of dance.

From my own archival research, I realized that Denby played a major role in closing Backstreet and the Phoenix. Due to an anonymous tip from the neighborhood watch committee about men wearing leather and ill-fitting clothing, an undercover officer observed the bar, located on Ponce de Leon Avenue, and witnessed two men engaging in oral sex. The bar closed in 2006 (Schafer 2008). From my archival research, I learned Denby and the Midtown neighborhood watch committee worked with the Red Dog Squad a part of the Atlanta Police Department, to raid bars in Midtown from 2008 to 2011.

In 2008, white heterosexual and cisgender residents of Midtown began to host town hall meetings with the Atlanta Police Department. In the meeting notes and newspapers that covered the meetings, white heterosexual residents used dehumanizing language to refer to Black trans and queer people. For example, the *Georgia Voice* reports that the Lieutenant of the Atlanta Police Department said the following at a town hall meeting, “it reminds me of spraying for roaches, and after you’re done spraying they just come back.” (Schafer 2008, 4) In this instance, “cockroaches” refers to sex workers or anyone perceived to be a sex worker.

Along with “cockroaches”, the neighborhood watch committee and Atlanta Police Department named the ordinance “Save our Adolescents from Prostitution” or S.O.A.P for short (Bagby 2013, 7). When the *Georgia Voice* covered the town hall meetings, residents and police officers regularly referred to the ordinance as “S.O.A.P”. Beyond the implication of cleaning the streets by getting rid of sex-workers, the idea of saving the adolescents from sex workers is critical to how Midtown became a cisgender geography of shame.

In the proposed ordinance, a police officer could arrest anyone on the street who could be perceived as a sex worker. In the town hall meetings, residents and police officers implied that sex workers and transwomen of color are synonymous. Transwomen of color attending bars in Midtown were targets of S.O.A.P. just by simply walking while trans on a public street.

In the meetings leading up to the ordinance, Denby emphasized her own safety, “nobody seems they’re concerned for our safety except for us.” (Schafer 2008, 4) Peggy Denby, the Midtown Alliance, two neighborhood watch committees, and the Atlanta Police Department worked together to propose “S.O.A.P” in 2013.

The Atlanta business coalition, Midtown Alliance, controls the regulates the guiding coalition between residents and local officials (Stone 1989; Fowler, 2001). The Midtown Alliance, as Fowler (2001) argues, “create[s] a planning agenda that overwhelmingly places the needs of the business community at the forefront.” (5) The Midtown Alliance formed in 1978 and still works as a connection between residents and elected officials for decisions on how communities and businesses use the land in Atlanta in Midtown (Midtown Alliance 2020).

Police raids occurred alongside the neighborhood watch town halls. One such raid was the 2009 Atlanta Eagle Raid; the Red Dog Squad arrested eight employees for serving alcohol in their underwear without a permit. According to the *Georgia Voice*, police officers shoved and held patrons on the ground. One patron reported a police officer holding them down against broken glass and hearing slurs such as “fag.” (Bagby and Schafer 2009, 5) The raid was in response to two anonymous complaints that on July 5th John Best, the president of Southern Bears, hosted a party at the Atlanta Eagle at which patrons bought drugs and had sex. 62 patrons reported that the Red Dog Squad mishandled patrons, roughed them up, and yelled racist and anti-gay slurs (Bagby and Schafer 2009).

The dehumanization had a lasting impact on trans folks in Atlanta. As Taylor spoke of Midtown:

It's always so interesting to me because you know, Midtown has been kind of our designated gay district. But Midtown when it became the gay district was way more low income and kind of run down because this was like the late 80s it was the 90s it was like the drug center. It was like the sex work center and now it's like skyscraper and high rise and condo center. And people still try to like, think that the gays go there but it's just like, it's just the cis white gays that have that kind of capital. So I don't know. It's tragic.

As Taylor expresses, the gayborhood of Midtown shifted from predominately low-income communities to wealthy communities. With this shift, the appearance and popularity of high rises and condos pushed queer and trans people who could not afford such housing to the surrounding areas of Midtown.

Connecting this shift to the dehumanizing narrative of “spraying for cockroaches” and naming a city ordinance “S.O.A.P”, gentrification of Atlanta is about the restriction and

punishment of public intimacy and what is allowed in public space. Drug usage, sex work, poverty, Black communities, and queer bars were lumped in together through narratives of safety that positioned those realities as too intimate and unsafe. In particular, Peggy Denby emphasizes the “openness” of the activities she deemed disgusting. Her emphasis was on the “open sex” and the “open drugs”. Instead of criminalizing such activities directly, poverty is indirectly criminalized by associating poverty with activities that Denby did not want to see.

This narrative took hold of Midtown and shaped public policy what is considered appropriate public forms of queerness and what is considered inappropriate forms of queerness. Neighborhood watch committees and the Midtown City Council placed surveillance cameras throughout Midtown. For example, the Midtown City Council placed cameras in Piedmont Park, which is a park that is known by locals to be a historical “cruising” site for gay men (Howard 1997; Fleischmann and Hardman 2004).

As queer and trans communities moved out of Midtown and Little Five Points to surrounding neighborhoods, chain restaurants and corporations put rainbow flags in their place. Instead of seeing men in leather and transwomen walking on the street, Midtown became a place of luxury condos (Doan, 2015).

Displacement of Queer and Trans Community Spaces

The harmful narratives of people like Peggy Denby had a lasting impact on queer bars and other common meeting spaces for LGBT+ people in the 80s to early 2000s. As Jason, a community organizer who works at Charis Books and More spoke in his interview:

Me: What do you see as pressing issues for trans folks in Atlanta?

I fear that Atlanta is going to become San Francisco, the San Francisco of the South, right? Like it's going to become a city that is gutted of its soul that cannot

sustain the people who want, who made Atlanta what it is. And so everybody who used to live here will move to the suburbs or a lot of people already have.

I've worked so hard to build community here but I can see how how little it takes how how fast it can happen that that all of the creative things that make it land on what it is can be erased right? Like and co-opted in ways that just make it like fucking Atlanta Disneyland you know? Like, Ponce City Market like I think about you know I think about gay bars there used to be all these fucking gay bars on Ponce like in the stretch where Ponce City Market is right? There used to be like four bars.

Um, and there's Friends is it still called Friends? Or is it called something else now? On ponce, but there's one gay bar there but there used to be you know, I used to go from like the Claremont to where I think it's called Friends used to be called Rico's and then there was another bar and then there was Model T's and like you could go to all these different bars and um, then go finish the night at The Majestic, right?

Or maybe go to a movie at the Plaza and those things are still there. But they're there as kind of this weird, like hipster Disneyland instead of like, real places. I don't know, they just don't. Everything feels sort of gutted of its, of its um, of what it felt like before. And I don't know, maybe that's just what getting older is like. I don't know.

As Jason describes, he fears Atlanta becoming “like a hipster Disneyland instead of like, real places.” By real places, Jason is referring to historically queer and Black cultural sites such as the “fucking gay bars on Ponce” that became Ponce City Market. Ponce City Market is currently a boutique restaurant, produce, and bath items market targeted towards affluent young adults. To help better understand the impact of what Jason refers to as “gutting,” I interviewed Southern Fried Queer Pride organizers directly about finding physical community space of their own.

During my fieldwork, Southern Fried Queer Pride organizers and members brought up how the organization is looking for a physical space of their own. Throughout my fieldwork, we had to rent space from other art spaces, galleries, and community spaces. We were dependent on

renting from The Bakery, a community art center. We often used free space such as Charis Books and the Neighborhood Church. As Taylor described about the challenges to finding a physical space for Southern Fried Queer Pride, they talked about the following:

Well, I think that, so getting a physical space we wanted to buy because when you rent developers can just offer a lot of money to your property owner, your landlord and you're done with it. When you own a property, you have a little bit more to say in being bought or whatnot. But obviously being a DIY queer org with like no paid staff or anything.

Um, we don't have that kind of capital to just buy something. And we've worked with the DIY queer and art scene in Atlanta for long enough that we know how it kind of usually happens and it happens in cycles. They'll be like this new art group, they make, they rent out a building, they start developing a community, they have lots of people, then I start looking at what they have, and then two, three years into what they're doing, they get bought out, everything is gonna get shut down and shifted.

As Taylor explains, renting plays a role in the gentrification of community art centers in Atlanta. If organizations are renting a space, rather than owning the space, developers can buy the land around the community center and drive up the costs of rent.

In terms of community space, this particularly happened with Atlanta's Beltline.

Many businesses, community centers, and spaces for leisure were turned into parking lots, luxury condos, and bike lanes. Instead of having community centers where people can come together to create art, art was placed along the Beltline that was sanitized of radical history and Black politics. Sometimes the Beltline will commission Latinx and Black queer artists to do this art, making the layers of the gutting of culture even more complicated. As one artist I interviewed said, "If you have to pay rent you have to pay rent. I did the mural I did because it paid well and was also great exposure for my art. With rising rent costs, I am already living with two trans folks." For artists and community organizers, it is a cycle similar to what Taylor mentioned. As rent costs rise

for housing, studio space, and community space, artists are coerced into taking projects that might feed into the very system that can result in their ultimate displacement.

Six months after my interview with Taylor, The Bakery announced on Facebook that it will be relocating. Throughout my fieldwork, The Bakery acted as a DIY artist space and was queer and trans affirming. As I mentioned earlier, SFQP rented space from The Bakery to host events. The Bakery announced on Facebook that it no could afford the rent costs on the Atlanta Beltline.

Not wanting to be dependent on spaces like this and learning from the mistakes of past organizers, Southern Fried Queer Pride leaders like Taylor want to buy their own land and their own community center. As Taylor describes in their own journey of moving from rural Georgia to Atlanta, many of the queer and trans organizers who took part of Southern Fried Queer Pride were migrants to Atlanta. As an organization, Southern Fried Queer Pride is deliberately and intentionally a Black led organization. When organizers are hired to speak at events, preference is given to Black, Latinx, and/or Indigenous queer and trans artists and organizers. In the structure of the organization, white people are welcome to attend events but are not given leadership roles, payment, nor invited to speak on panels, rallies, or artists talks. Along with the focus on representation, there was mindfulness around how the Black representation in the group is from rural and suburban areas outside of Atlanta. Therefore, organizers wanted to be mindful of displacement to local Black communities and neighborhoods. As Taylor describes, this mindfulness is a delicate balance:

Um, and there's also always the conversation around gentrification. And I think sometimes groups uh do that terrible, weird thing where they kind of just insert

themselves into local communities, completely forgetting about like the culture that's already there.

And that's something that we obviously want to avoid at all costs. So when we're looking at places to rent, we want to make sure that we're already a part of that community that we're not like, you know, moving into the east side where all these people are that we don't know.

We want to be around people that we've been working with around communities that we've been involved in uh places where majority of SFQP members already live. So right now that's looking like the Metropolitan Studios in the West End. Majority of us live in West or Southwest Atlanta. We've had events there over the years and kind of just makes the most sense right now. And I think, you know, spending two, three years developing some kind of capital so that we can eventually buy a bigger place that we can have as our own. Uh, that's the goal. Hopefully, it all works out but but yeah.

Southern Fried Queer Pride's method, especially in response to the displacement other community spaces like Charis Books and More, was to build connections with local community members. Southern Fried Queer Pride built these alignments based in geography, rather than sexuality, gender, or race. At these events, Southern Fried Queer Pride focused on Southern culture as a connecting point across generations of people, for example, in hosting monthly potlucks. where young trans and queer people met with older LGBT+ folks and straight, cis allies. Many of these straight cis allies were Black women from local neighborhoods sitting down to have a meal with young trans folks.

For example, I met Carla at a potluck. Carla did not have her own transportation or her own way of making rent. So she was dependent on rides or public transportation to get out to the events. However, since the style was potluck and casual, she felt comfortable getting to know people through these events. She also felt included by being able to bring a dish each time for younger people to enjoy. In these informal meet up spaces, connections with local communities were made with the idea of laying the groundwork for a local community center.

While on the oral history tour in 2018, we stopped at Charis Books and More, one of the last remaining LGBT+ cultural sites in downtown Atlanta. Charis Books and More is the oldest feminist bookstore in the U.S. South. It opened in 1975 in the Little Five Points neighborhood of Atlanta (Chestnut, Gable, and Anderson 2009). Quickly in the process of observing and participating in trans and queer events in Atlanta, I became familiar with Charis Books and More because Southern Fried Queer Pride hosted many events in the community room. In this process, one of the lead organizers and employees of Charis Books and More mentioned how activist organizations such as Southerners on New Ground got their start in the community room.

At the beginning of my dissertation fieldwork in 2019, I got to participate in a few community events at Charis Books and More in March, but in the following month, Charis Books and More moved their location (after 44 years in Little Five Points) to Agnes Scott College in Decatur due to displacement.

In March 2019, Charis Books and More hosted a goodbye event. When I walked in, there were several white women greeting me and directing me to sign the photograph of Charis. Near the photograph, there were instructions telling me to sign with my name. After signing the photograph, I walked over to Jason, the director of Charis, whom I recognized from previous community events. I asked him about the store's location and what prompted the move. He began to talk about how for years the rent for the building has gone up and they are unable to keep up with the costs. He talked about how the neighborhood around them, Little Five Points, is shifting. Jason talked about how yoga studios and libertarian bars are taking over the neighborhood. He continued, "And I'm sure that the yoga studio will go out of business, then become a boutique shop. That's the cycle."

A few months after I spoke with Jason at the goodbye to Charis event, and after he recovered from top surgery, I sat down with Jason to interview him about his experience as the director of Charis Books as well as his experience as he described himself “an Atlantan Native.” I asked Jason about what he sees as top concerns for trans and non-binary folks in

Atlanta, he told me:

What I love about Atlanta, is that I think Atlanta is distinctly southern city, culturally um which in part means that it's a Black city, um to me anyway, and the Atlantic benefits from the cultural and, like, emotional creativity of Black people. But what that but that's meaning it always has been exploited, but it's really being exploited right now. But I think it's really being exploited right now. By people want to take all of the artistic uh, not just you know, historically It was like the musical contributions and stuff like that but what I see happening right now, and Charis even plays a role in this, um, but I tried to be really thoughtful about how we play a role in this is that Black art is being used to push the edges of gentrification, more and more and more in this city. Um, so like If you look at the mural projects that have happened, right, like um, it's sort of like send in Black artists like pay Black artists to go make art in places, to then make those

neighborhoods palatable to white people. Um, and so the arch

gentrification piece feels really deep to me and really scary um, and really scary around and honestly, it's part of why I shepherded the move of Charis to a place that is already very white. Um because Decatur has already been gentrified. Decatur is not historically white, but it is now. And so I felt like one thing we could do as an organization is not contribute to the gentrification of the new neighborhood, right?

As Jason described, he felt as if Atlanta is exploiting Black artists. He describes how Black artists get paid to make murals throughout the city, but only so that those murals make it “more palatable to white people.” As Jason described, when planning the move of Charis Books out of the historic Little Five Points, a place they could no longer afford, they chose an already gentrified neighborhood: Decatur. What is interesting about this area, is that when I interviewed a trans person who used to work as a bartender in Decatur back in the 1990s, there used to be

several lesbian bars there. Decatur was known as a lesbian neighborhood, something that older transmen in the study noted in their interviews as important cultural sites.

Jason was familiar with this history, as a transman from Atlanta, and someone who spent time in the lesbian bar scene as a teenager and young adult. Although Charis Books and More was displaced from Little Five Points, they were able to maintain the capital necessary to continue renting and form a merger with an area college to move into Decatur. Since Charis Books and More started as a feminist lesbian bookstore, some considered the move to be reclaiming history in a small way.

Jason told me how for the last 44 years, Charis has acted as a bookstore, community center, and informal shelter. As we spoke, one person came up to Jason and thanked him because for a year, Charis let them sleep on their front porch. As the person left, Jason turned to me and continued saying that many people slept in the parking lot of Charis because of the anti-drug policies of shelters. He said that he has had to perform CPR and put ice on a person after they woke up from overdosing. Instead of calling the police, Jason said it's Charis's policy to perform first aid first. From there, he transitioned to talking about how important an empowering set of politics is to building a community space. During this discussion with Jason, I asked him about how Charis Books acts as a community space. He mentioned how a group of radical Black queer women got together at Charis and founded Southerners on New Ground.

At the grand re-opening in May 2019, I pulled into the parking lot for the new location which was much bigger than the parking lot in Little Five Points. As I walked up, I tucked my camera into my messenger bag, and a white woman in a blue jean jacket with various buttons on it smiled and waved at me.

I stood amazed by the layout of the place. It was much larger than the previous location and there were students and alumni from Agnes Scott College, wearing t-shirts to signal such affiliation. I smiled and walked around, taking in the new building. Unlike the previous location, there were now stands of Agnes Scott College paraphernalia being sold, such as covers for license plates, mugs, t-shirts, and pens. I wondered if that was part of the deal of the merger. As I walked towards the back of the building, I saw Jason wearing a light suit jacket with a purple boutonniere with a matching purple hanky in the suit pocket. He smiled and said “Elias! I saw your email, I promise I will sit down and chat with you soon” and shook my hand, pulling me in for a hug.

After some time, employees shuffled the crowd out onto the front lawn for the ribbon cutting. There was a giant purple ribbon across the front porch. Jason stood in the middle with several women on each of his sides. They went through and introduced themselves. As I stood there, I took out my own camera to video for my own field notes. As I recorded, I stood at the back of the crowd and noticed that many people had their phones and cameras out, recording the event as well. There were three sections that Jason had people cut ribbons for. On the front of the porch, under the “Charis Books OPEN NOW” sign, he invited two of the founders of Charis Books to cut the ribbon. He told their story of how when they met, one of the white women was the other’s “younger friend and roommate.” Everyone laughed. For me, this is an example of how activists can transform queer pain into collective queer joy. The women smiled as they cut the ribbon and the elders on the porch clapped. People in the crowd shouted in happiness. Jason then motioned three more women onto the porch, one Black with long dreads, and two others who were white women with white short hair. He introduced them as faculty at Agnes Scott College and board members for Charis Books and told the story of how Charis and Agnes are

beginning this merger. The women then cut the ribbon and thanked Jason for his service to the organization and bookstore.



Figure 5.1: The grand opening of Charis Books and More on Agnes Scott College Campus.

Individual Displacement

Interviewees who lived in Atlanta since the early 2000s felt the impact of sanitizing Midtown. As Ty, a Black transman in his 40s spoke, he felt as if his neighborhood in Southwest Atlanta has increasingly become focused on a particular type of family. When I asked him further what he meant, he said:

Now that house has been flipped three times to three different white people. The composition of my neighborhood in the last 13 years has moved more and more towards whiteness, towards affluence towards youth, towards families.

Me: Um, so you mentioned um, the shifting demographics of your neighborhood. And you mentioned how it's shifting more towards families, but how, what are ways in which like you noticed that in your neighborhood is shifting more towards families?

Ty: Um, so I should say, there have always been families living here but it's been um more um multi generational families, um black families that had a broader in my perception, anyway.

Ty's observations about the shifts in his neighborhood over the last ten years point to the ways gentrification of Atlanta has focus on the white nuclear family. Ty explained how in his historically Black neighborhood of Atlanta, many homes consisted of multi-generational

households in the 1980s. He pointed out that with the gentrification of Atlanta, his neighborhood is shifting to two caretaker households with one set of children. Along with this shift, is a shift to flipping homes and a flood of white families. The trans people I talked to in Atlanta emphasized the importance of gender and sexuality to this displacement. As Ty continued to explain what he meant by the shift in his neighborhood:

Ty: Less like straight heterosexual mom, dad and two kids.

Me: Yeah? How do you see that?

Ty: Um, pushing a baby and walking their dogs at night. Like that's what shifted is like now I see all these people on the street walking their children and their dogs um and they all appear to be white and appear to be heterosexual and cisgender although obviously, you know, all those things are, you know, those are all I'm sure they I expect actually it really interesting there are two.

Although gentrification displaces trans and queer communities, Ty mentioned how complicated displacement is even in his own neighborhood:

The other thing that's happened is more queer people of course, you know, queer people are part of gentrification. So uh, there's a household at the end of my street. That's two queer white people that I know are involved in like Southerners on New Ground and other and they hung out a trans flag and I was like, who are these trans people on my street?

As Ty described, queer individuals can contribute to gentrification if they are able to assimilate to whiteness, heteronormativity, and cultural cisness are able to benefit from and engage in gentrification. Since gentrification includes the constraining of public intimacy, particular identities, bodies, and cultural norms can assimilate into the cultural norms set out by gentrification.

Trans Housing Insecurity

Although the Atlanta City Council passed a “fair housing” ordinance that protected transgender people from housing discrimination in 2000 (Ordinance No. 2000-79), trans people experienced housing insecurity due to gentrification. Interviewees spoke of struggling with rising rent costs and a lack of a financial safety net from their families of origin. For example, Eden, a white trans person in their early 20s who moved to Atlanta and experienced homelessness, expressed in his interview:

Me: And how would you describe your living situation?

Eden: Very tentative. Actually I had a bout of homelessness kind of had a long bout of homelessness for about seven months around a year and a half ago. And ever since then, I've been kind of on the brink of homelessness every month. So right now I just paid my rent so 30 days, but I'm not sure what happens after those 30 days.

Me: So, with with navigating homelessness in the city, what did that what did that look like for you?

Eden: Um, for a while I was out of Atlanta for about three months, I tried to move with another trans friend. And we ended up becoming homeless within 24 hours due to some like glitches, like transportation problems. And so we were living on the street for about three months. And we were able to come back to Atlanta and fortunate enough to have friends let us sleep in their living room until we could get up enough money to move into the basement of somebody's home.

Me: So you talked about logistics, like a logistical thing that happened in terms of transportation, to not have housing for that. You talked about security deposits, what are some other barriers that you had in terms of finding housing?

I'm really just spread rent and making three times the amount of rent in order to be able to sign a lease on a place. Because for me, that just doesn't happen for me. And most of the jobs that I've had, I don't make three times the rent and be able to provide pay stubs.

When Eden moved to Atlanta at 20 years old, he could not apply for a formal lease at an apartment complex because he did not make the minimum salary nor did he have his parents to sign off on the lease. For many young people, they can secure an apartment by asking their parents signing off letting the landlord know that someone makes money to support this young

person. Eden mentions how he could not make “three times the rent,” which landlords require of tenants in Atlanta if they do not make the minimum salary or have someone to co-sign with them. This practice leaves him in a vulnerable position of month-to-month renting without a lease.

Eden could not afford that, so he moved out of Atlanta. When he attempted to move back to Atlanta with another trans friend. However, “due to transportation glitches,” they lived on the street for about three months. During that time, a car hit Eden. Now, the medical bills he struggles to pay also puts him at risk of being unable to afford rent.

As I mentioned in Chapter 4, at the beginning of my preliminary fieldwork, I crashed on TJ’s couch in Midtown, Atlanta. TJ had a two-bedroom apartment with three people already living there, sometimes four or more depending on the relationship status of people living in the apartment. He paid \$600 a month for rent to stay in the living room of the apartment and had a shōji door separating his bed from the rest of the common living space. While staying there for a couple weeks, TJ told me that young queer and trans people moving into the city for the first time used the couch as a place to crash. At one point, we needed to make space for an additional friend of ours, so I slept in the bed with my friend while another friend of ours lived on the couch.

As I stayed at TJ’s place, I started to attend events and speak to other trans young adults about their struggles with safety. The impact of gentrification on housing, community centers and meeting spaces, and cultural displacement of queerness kept coming up as important factors to safety. In particular, having autonomy and ownership was a deep desire in order to feel safe for many young trans and non-binary folks. As I mentioned earlier, through these experiences I met Eden. When I asked him what safety meant to him, he replied:

It used to be something different, but now safety just means having a place to sleep at night having a kitchen having enough money for food. Safety has always been my friends that have been coming out feeling supported feeling by the people that are close to me in my life. A lot of my friends have moved away in the last year and so that's been really tough coming long distance friendships. So, in the past, maybe safety being around my friends, but now it means more of just having a space to myself.

As Eden spoke, after his experience with “couch surfing” as he told me, what he valued in safety and security shifted. Safety is as simple as having a home and enough food, as well as having a space to herself. When I asked a trans person with stable housing about important issues in Atlanta, he responded:

Avery: Housing, 100% housing Atlanta is rapidly gentrifying, it has the fastest rising rents in the nation. San Francisco still has the highest overall rent costs, but um they kind of stagnated. And Atlanta is rising fast, and we'll probably meet that within the next couple of years.

Um, a lot of queer and trans people that I know right now are not only like living with a roommate, but living with more people than should probably be living in an apartment like a two bedroom apartment with eight people staying in it, because three of them can't afford rent on their own.

Um, or it's three people who manage to find an apartment or a house that they can afford. And having a couch and an air mattress ready at any given time so that someone who gets evicted or loses their roommate or can't pay their rent can come and stay if they need to.

Avery spoke a similar situation I found at TJs, in which many trans people lived in apartments shared amongst multiple adults, often with far more adults than there were bedrooms. In my interview with Jason, he mentioned how the housing crisis is a prominent issue to safety for trans people:

Um, I think that queer and trans people I think the housing crisis is massive, right? I worry a lot about, like I was saying earlier, like, if you don't feel safe, even in your bedroom um if you don't feel ownership, I don't mean legal

ownership, but just like a sense that you have the right to control the conditions of your living space. I think that it's really hard to feel empowered to control almost anything else about your life. And um, seeing the way that rent has skyrocketed in Atlanta over the last five years, um and particularly rent as opposed to mortgages, right? Like mortgages have not skyrocketed at a commensurate rate. Um, so it feels like a very extractive economy, right

As Jason mentions, housing is critical to a sense of safety. To have control and autonomy of the conditions of your living space is to have a sense of stability and safety. He points out that rent has skyrocketed whereas mortgages have not in Atlanta. He points to the problem not just being lack of housing, but a lack of affordable housing, particularly for people who are in the vulnerable position of renting. Avery, Eden, and TJ all had stories of moving from Midtown to other parts of Atlanta. Eden moved to the Candler Park neighborhood, Avery moved to the West End with their partner and several other Black trans activists, and TJ moved to the Toco Hills neighborhood.

In conclusion, I argue that public policy narrative of safety harm trans people due to what is considered appropriate public intimacy. Rather than targeting the gender expression and identities of trans people explicitly, neighborhood watch committees, city ordinances, and police officers deemed queer bars, sex work, and other forms of intimacy unsafe for children. In this manner, the public policy of Atlanta works to promote settler colonialism. The gentrification and subsequent displacement that trans people face is to make the city safe for white reproduction. Gentrification of Atlanta supported white reproduction and considered it to be a safe form of intimacy in Atlanta for public life. Criminalization and displacement impacts trans people who cannot assimilate into this form of public intimacy.

CHAPTER SIX:

Queering Public Intimacy

Southern Fried Queer Pride organized events around a model of abundance. Organizers and members looked for queer and trans talents, contributions, and gifts instead of focusing on the ways in which public policy, police departments, schools, and other institutions criminalize, displace, and marginalize queer and trans people under capitalism. This strategy works to expand and queer public intimacy and to reclaim and create trans geographies of joy. As brown (2019) writes of pleasure activism, it is about “reclaiming” and centering the pleasure of marginalized and oppressed people. (13) She suggests that pleasure activism is about shifting from a framework of shortage of resources and pleasure to limitless sources of pleasure.

Although some activists and organizers I met in Atlanta suggested that Southern Fried Queer Pride is not a political organization because of their focus on art, I argue that SFQP’s focus on artwork, potlucks, craft workshops, BDSM events, and even clothing swaps, centered queer and trans pleasure which is a deeply political project. Southern Fried Queer Pride

organizers argued that such a focus on pleasure is necessary. Rather than fighting for inclusion into “appropriate” public intimacy, activist-artists fought to expand and queer public intimacy through pleasure-based art and organizing.

Pleasure Based Organizing

Southern Fried Queer Pride organizers created trans geographies of pleasure and joy in expansive ways. One such event was the TRANS PWR thrift store day. In March, I volunteered to be a part of the preparation for the thrift store that was going to be a part of the TRANS PWR day that Southern Fried Queer Pride hosted. In the previous weeks, we accepted clothing and item donations at different locations in Candler Park and the West End of Atlanta. I volunteered for hauling, sorting, and organizing the donations. While hauling the donations from the U-Haul center to Neighborhood Church, we took a selfie as a group every time we accomplished something. Once we got the donations to the church, we sorted all of the bags by sizes and type of style, as opposed to separating clothing based on gender.

As Taylor parked the U-Haul at Neighborhood Church, I walked up to unload the truck. As we unloaded, one of the people that helped us load up the truck handed me things from the back. She told me, “you move fast, so I’m going to keep giving you heavy stuff.” Maria and Lux kept asking if I was okay. The white transmasculine person told me I was “getting the masculine treatment.” I laughed and said that AndroGel did not make me that strong. Taylor overheard me and laughed out loud, tossing their head back.



Figure 6.1: The donations we were expected to sort. I am in a black shirt and white jeans. I learned my first lesson of fieldwork; I came in expecting a formal meeting with my notebook and pens. Instead of a formal meeting, we used the monthly planning meeting to sort the donations. Taylor took this photo.

As we stored items, people grabbed things for themselves to take. Early on in the process, we came across a sequence dress. Someone held it up and asked, “Um, what should we do with drag?” Taylor told us to create a separate drag pile, which mostly consisted of costumes, dresses, hip pads, and silicone breast adhesives. After we made the separate pile with the dress, people continuously held up dresses that we might think were drag and asked the group out loud. At one point, Maria held up a dress and asked if it was drag. It was white with some white sequence, and Taylor said no, and Maria asked are we sure, and Taylor said, “if it is drag, it is a bad drag. Don’t put that in the drag pile.” Some of the more curious items that we sorted were an

old DVD of transguy porn and lace panties with a cut out for a strapon. When Maria picked up the lace panties to show the group, they said, “brings a whole new level to femme power top!” I laughed. Someone said, “fuck, this is cute” when they picked up an item and then looked around, asking if they should curse in a church. As we continued to unpack and sort clothing and items, someone who was wearing a black fishnet top with skinny black jeans was sorting the shoes and mentioned under her breath, “yeah, we are at a church, why are we even at a church?”

A week later at the thrift store day itself, I asked Taylor about hosting events at the Neighborhood Church. She shrugged:

Taylor: They give us free space. So we have our meetings and potlucks there. It’s [Neighborhood Church] not well suited for our art or drag shows, but we have had workshops there. We usually do our kid appropriate events at the church. This is why we need our own space—so we are less dependent on free spaces like the church.

On the day I worked the thrift store, I put on a blue vest with gold suns and prints on it, with bronze buttons, that brought me a lot of joy. It was the vest that a good friend, a trans comrade, made for my commitment ceremony from his own hands. I put on a jacket over the vest and drove out to The Bakery for my volunteer shift. I arrived at The Bakery around 10:30 am, parked my car in the dirt parking lot where pollen collected on the edge of the water in the potholes. I got my camera out, the one I bought for fieldwork, and took pictures of the surrounding area. I walked out of the gate, which had two signs. One sign explained how The Bakery is a “DIY” art space located on the Atlanta Beltline and is a part of the 5th Neighborhood Planning Unit.



Figure 6.2: I took this photo outside of The Bakery. The front section is called the “front porch.”



Figure 6.3: I took this photo of the exterior of The Bakery



Figure 6.4: I took this phot of the harassment policy sign outside The Bakery. It reads:

What is The Bakery? The Bakery is a growing arts and information hub with a DIY ethos that provides an accessible and safe space for everyone, including queer and marginalized communities. Nestled between the Adair Park, Capitol View, and Oakland City neighborhoods, we are a multi-faceted arts complex that focuses on community engagement, the environment, education, and new technologies.

Code of Conduct: The Bakery is dedicated to providing an empowering experience for everyone who participates in or supports our community. Because we value the safety and security of our staff and guests and strive to have an inclusive community, we do not tolerate harassment of our staff or guests in any form. Our Code of Conduct was created to clearly define what we mean by a harassment-free experience, so that our community and those that support it are clear about our intent and have access to procedures for addressing issues, should they arise.”

Harassment: We are committed to our mission statement and equally committed to providing a harassment-free experience for everyone regardless of gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, ability, physical appearance, body size, race, ethnicity, age, religion, or socioeconomic status. We do not tolerate harassment of staff or guests in any form. Staff or guests violating these rules may be sanctioned or expelled permanently.”

Gender & Pronouns: Here at The Bakery we respect how individuals identify themselves. This means that we used individuals’ chosen pronouns and names. Additionally, we provide our guests and patrons with a gender-neutral bathroom because no one should have to feel uncomfortable about which restroom to enter.”

I walked out of The Bakery lot and walked to the Beltline, which was a bike trail with a tiny house parked on one side of it. After taking pictures, I walked back to The Bakery. I walked

towards the trans pride flag painted on the side of the building and saw a white tent with people setting up under it. I assumed it was for the thrift shop. It was chilly, around the 40s, so I was hoping it was not outside. I walked up and saw a sign that said Veggie Side Grill on the tent with the white guy I noticed from the Bi+ Georgia event (who asked us if we could set up chairs) walking around and asking if this group needed help. I kept my distance because of the sign; I figured it was a different event from ours.

After a bit of waiting, I helped two other volunteers set up the tables for the thrift store. Organizers instructed us to separate the boxes by types of clothing and sizes. Similar to other events by Southern Fried Queer Pride, the items at the thrift store were by donation based on how much someone could afford. We left this decision to each individual rather than police their own access.

What struck me about my experience with the thrift store, is that I had never been around this many trans people with such few cis queer allies in such an intimate and small setting. There were at least 70 people in attendance. I saw a person shorter than myself, with brown hair, black glasses, and chino pants with cowboy boots. He had a pin on his collar that was an opossum with “HE” written on it. He picked up a professional black blazer and put it on, with a woman standing next to him. Her name tag read “Natalie, She/Her.” The guy who tried on the jacket said, “oh no, it’s too big.” Natalie said, “well the way to tell is to lift your arms.” He lifted his arms to the sides, “like this?” Natalie shook her head and said, “No. Straight up in the air, that’s how you tell... yeah like that.” I continued to sit with the other volunteers at the front of the thrift store. I watched a middle-aged white woman with a very tense expression walk into the thrift store. She stood beside me and beside her stood a young teenager who was presenting in baggy,

dark clothes, and a snapback hat. The teenager had short hair. The woman looked down at the kid and asked if they wanted to start looking for clothes.



Figure 6.5: I took this photo of the Art Gallery was where the thrift store was held. Symbolically, the clothes, the trans, and genderqueer people shopping for them, were displayed as “art.”



Figure 6.6: The photo on the Left that I took: Three thrift shop patrons looking at the drag pile, one noting that they need a new boa for their burlesque number. Right: Auto pulls out a jean material that people around us do not know what it is, but Auto says it's a collar for a drag king. It's several pairs of jeans sewn together in a poncho shape with a hole for the neck and shoulders.

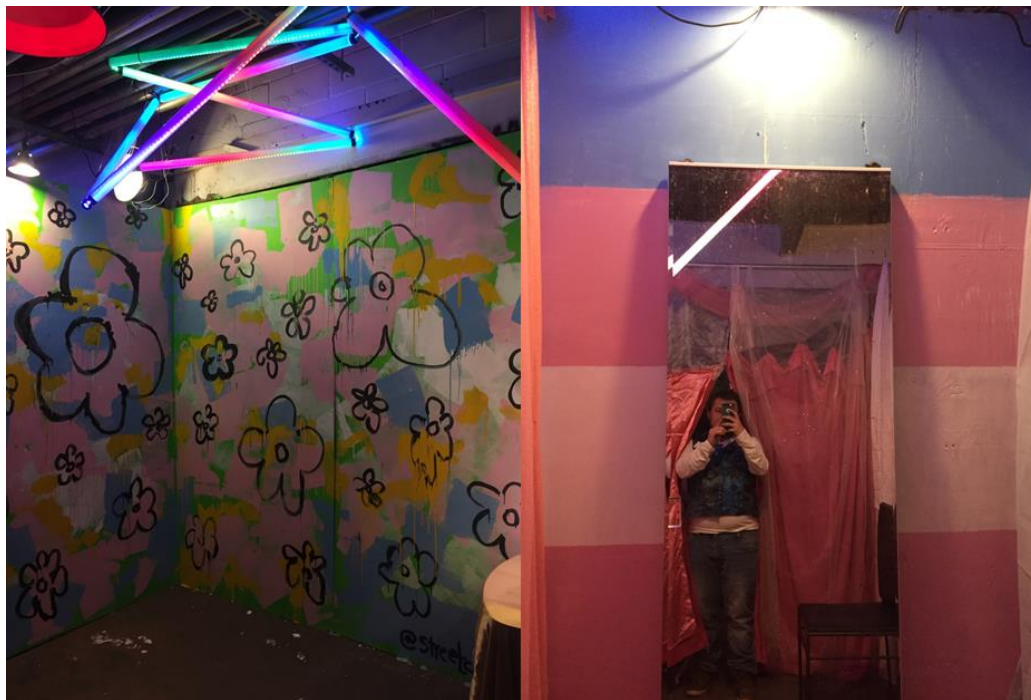


Figure 6.7: Left: the photobooth for the free professional headshots. The photos were free for trans and non-binary people. However, SFQP still paid the photographer who was a transwoman. Right: The dressing room which was painted by a cis person in the trans pride colors.



Figure 6.8: I captured a photo of one of the hang out spaces of The Bakery, an installation with recycled plastic and lights with a couch underneath. It is dark and is a space of intimacy for many queer and trans young people.

At one point, as I walked around the thrift store, I noticed the drag pile was low. I mentioned this to Taylor, who agreed and together we pulled out another box that had hip pads in it. That is when I met Cara, who was on the other side of the drag pile looking at dresses. She and Taylor talked about her drag, which she based on seasons, but doesn't have a look for autumn yet. Taylor found some silicone breasts and put them up on their chest for laughs. I snapped a photo shown as Figure 6.9.



Figure 6.9: As I walked around and re-loaded boxes and tables with the boxes on the ground, I came across Taylor chatting with another drag queen (Poli-Nation/Winter Solstice), and they came across silicone breast implants. Taylor lifted them to their chest to be funny. Taylor is a drag queen and is agender and let me take this photo of them.

After I got my food, I sat and at a table outside, and Jane joined me to chat for a bit. After chatting, I headed back into The Bakery where the tables were. I sat down for a bit to charge my phone and saw three people setting up a health table. They had information sheets from the CDC on estrogen hormone therapy and testosterone hormone therapy. I walked up to the table and introduced myself and asked if they were from the CDC, they said no that they were just Emory nursing students and heard about the event and asked to have a table. They just got the documents from the CDC website.

Around 4:30 pm, I went outside to sit by the smoker's circle. I sat down next to Casey, who was smoking a flavored vape that would blow smoke into my face, which smelled like fruit or some perfumed scent. Casey turned to me and said that he would be leaving soon, but it was nice meeting me. The person in the red beanie asked us if we lived here in Atlanta, I turned to them and said, "yes." They said they lived in Savannah and drove the two hours to get here, someone commented on how long of a drive that was. The person kept speaking and told us how there was only a support group for trans people in their town, but otherwise, there was nothing. And that people in the group can be gatekeepers. They talked about how they wanted to move to Atlanta. After a bit of chatting, they got up and said they were about to head out because of the drive.

I saw Gilbert walking towards me, and he said, "Oh, there are you are! I was looking for you" I nodded and said, "oh, I'm sorry; I was just getting some more food." As we walked up the stairs together, I mentioned how tired I was and how I've been there since 11 am. He asked, "Is everything starting to seem like work to you now?" I nodded and said, "yeah, cause my friends are also my research participants." He laughed and went inside.

The morning after the event, I woke up to check Facebook while eating some cereal before typing up my field notes. I read a post by the person who organized the Bi+ Healthy Living that stated the following:

The spaces that Southern Fried Queer Pride provides are so invaluable to the lives of trans, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, and queer people in the south. In no other spaces have I ever felt so comfortable expressing myself and trying new things without much anxiety about judgment or ridicule. Check them out. Go to their events. Donate to their organization. They're doing such good work.

With this organizer's statement and through my experience with the thrift store, I learned how activists negotiate pleasure and safety. With pleasure activism, safety is prioritized and

maintained, but not in harmful ways. Instead of safety being an enemy of pleasure; pleasure centers safety. Similarly to adrienne maree brown's argument about pleasure activism prioritizing vulnerable groups (2019, 13), the priority of the space as a trans explicit space created a level of safety and community that open spaces could not facilitate. Not only was the event a pleasurable experience, it was a deeply intimate experience.

Expanding Public Intimacy

As I highlighted in Chapter 5, public policy narratives of safety attacked the "openness" of poverty, sex work, and drugs in Midtown, Atlanta. Rather than constrain queerness into forms of intimacy that are palatable for white families, Southern Fried Queer Pride hosted a series of sex work art shows aimed to teach the public about sex work as well as empower a variety of types of sex workers. One example was *Buss It Open*, where Southern Fried Queer Pride hosted an art gallery, a sex work panel, and other workshops that helped expanded public intimacy by aiming to keep trans, queer, and/or disabled sex workers safe from the criminalization of sex work.

As I walked into the Murmur Art Gallery, in downtown Atlanta, there was a large silicone pink dildo shaped like a penis suction cupped to the door, facing the street. On street, there were several small groups of people herded together with cardboard signs, blankets, and shopping carts. Each group prepped together for the night ahead of them. Photos of a dominatrix plastered the glass display outside of the art gallery, along with a neon sign that read: 'how nice'. I was struck by the orientation of the dildo, photos, and the neon sign towards the street. Although neighborhood watch committees, the Red Dog Squad, and white cis women like Peggy Denby aimed to end such open eroticism, there were still pockets of queer people engaging in

blatant eroticism. Not only were organizers and artists engaging in eroticism, such movement work aimed towards a broad public. Instead of keeping the artwork, workshops, and demonstrations locked up on college campuses, formal panels, or conferences at expensive hotels—the art was facing and open to the street. Anyone could come and experience the artwork in the gallery. The event was free with a suggested donation, which is slightly different from other events hosted by Southern Fried Queer Pride, such as Drag Shows, which are donation by a sliding scale. In order to support Black artists, Southern Fried Queer Pride encouraged people to donate to the organization, purchase the artwork, and donate to individuals who were panelists, demonstrators, and performance artists.

Southern Fried Queer Pride advertised Buss It Open through their Instagram and Facebook by circulating a flyer with a person who read as a Black femme on top of another masked Black body, running a riding crop down the back of the masked person. On the flyer, it read that the open gallery started at 6pm, discussion and panels started at 7pm, and the performance started at 8pm. In the description of the event, organizers emphasized how Buss It Open is open to anyone who wants to experience it from 6pm to 8pm, but that at 8pm, performance artists and filmmakers will be showing sexually explicit visuals and engaging in kink scenes.

I took my time walking around and looking at the artwork in the gallery. The work was mixed media. On one wall, there were paintings of blue and black figures with long penises, and the hands in the paintings were stroking the shaft. Next to these paintings, were photographs of a dominatrix and a submissive. On the middle wall, there was a horizontal line of photographs of a dominatrix and their submissive, under the photos were receipts of transactions into Venmo with amounts such as \$10,000. Between these prints, was an announcement about craigslist no longer

having personal ad listings as a “safety” measure. On the next wall, there was mixed media of photography and letters painted in red about a story of a professional dominatrix and her client. Next to these, there were photographs (black and white) of a naked person with their bits covered by a black square.

I watched a middle-aged white woman, walking by herself, look up at the poster of the dominatrix and walk into the art gallery. She squished her nose at the art on the walls. After taking her time looking at all of the art, she walked out of the gallery somewhat shaking her head. She left without donating any money.

The Murmur Art Gallery does not have air conditioning, so as the sun went down, it became cooler outside than it was inside. I stepped outside to jot down notes on my phone and get a breath of air. I wrote that the street “reeks of urine” and has groups of homeless people, mostly cis men, around in different huddles. One white man walked outside to smoke a cigarette, and a Black person in leather walks up and asks for a cigarette. They had boots up past their knees, with a leather jumper covering the rest of their body. The man gave the person a cigarette and they started to chat. A group of women walk behind me, in a hurried fashion, and one says, “don’t look, this don’t look nothing like” and stopped talking as they got closer.

I went back inside to sit down for a bit. I watched as people walked in and around the art gallery and took seats in the folded chairs and white bench. People in leather started to show up, a variety of harnesses, outfits, etc. I got hot again so I went back outside. As I stood outside, there were two white women, one in a skintight black leather dress, and another in a red tight dress, with a fur coat over her. Both smoking cigarettes and talking. As I stood there, a group of people walked behind me on the sidewalk. One of them, a black woman in nice clothes, shouted

towards the white women smoking “are you gonna do me next” and laughed with her friends. One of the women, the one in black, said “Depends, how much are you willing to pay?” The black woman kept walking, awkwardly away.

As I walked back into the gallery, artist-activists began to set up chairs for a roundtable panel on sex work. All the panelists identified as Black and trans with the exception of one Black bisexual cis woman. The panelists began with introducing themselves and their work. One panelist introduced themselves as a preschool teacher and professional dominatrix. Another panelist introduced herself as a survival sex worker. After a few introductory questions and answers, the audience began to ask questions. The conversation focused on how we engage in safe sex work with new legislative restrictions. Panelists discussed the impact of the censorship of Craigslist and Tumblr, stating that they used those sites to properly vet clients and stay safe in their own practice. During the panel, I watched a Latinx artist prep her paints to body paint a non-binary Black activist. Her child sat next to her as she prepared her station. While some people on the street were uncomfortable with the presence of certain forms of intimacy and wanted to censor the artwork, inside the art gallery, it was safe to express a public intimacy. Instead of framing such labor and movement work as dirty, and such openness of eroticism as unsafe for children, activist-artists worked to help watch the children that did come to the art gallery and panel. Rather than censor the whole event, organizers informed participants as to what type of materials and topics would be shown and discussed at the show and it was up to each individual parent. With this, organizers asked children to leave before the live performances began.

Queering Public Intimacy

Along with expanding public intimacy, trans and queer activist-artists queered public intimacy by confronting forms of criminalization that came from public policy narratives of safety in Atlanta. Along with confronting the criminalization of sex work, Southern Fried Queer Pride confronted the policing and criminalization of public forms of art, such as graffiti. For example, in order to advertise the Southern Fried Queer Pride Arts Festival at the Bakery, members of Southern Fried Queer Pride got together and “tagged”—or graffitied—Krog Tunnel.

Krog Tunnel is on the outskirts of the Candler Park neighborhood and acts as a community board. Zoss, Klein and Splitlog (2020) call Krog Tunnel a “palimpsest”, meaning that the tunnel is covered with imagery, symbols, and writings.⁽³⁾ A trail connects the Beltline to Krog Tunnel. Many of the works of art tagged on the tunnel are community announcements, proclamations, and advertisements for events. Due police and neighborhood watch committees cracking down on graffiti and vandalism in Atlanta, artists and organizers are limited to designated areas of permitted graffiti. Krog Tunnel is one of the permitted places that people can legally engage in graffiti. Holmes (2014) argues that even if issues are unresolvable, public art can foster conversations and arguments about local controversies. Even further, Schacter (2014) argues that although graffiti may be “ugly” (161) to developers, graffiti is an important counter narrative to public policy in cities.

I participated in the tagging of Krog Tunnel as both a member of Southern Fried Queer Pride and as a researcher. I walked up to the ridge of Krog Tunnel around 11:00am. Taylor and Lux were on the top of the tunnel, painting over the previous graffiti in a white coat of paint. It was early May and we scoped out a few spots on and around the tunnel to advertise for our arts

festival in June. As I approached Taylor, I asked about painting up the advertisement a month in advance and if they were worried about someone potentially painting over it. Taylor told me, “if it has a date on it, it does not get painted over, people respect the dates.” Later in the conversation, Taylor also mentioned that the weather was still nice, not too hot yet, and that’s why, “I like to do this event earlier in the year, because June would be brutally hot.” I nodded. As more people approached, the group of about five of us, began to look out on the street below as Lux and Taylor painted. Julia, an older white lesbian, mentioned how different things looked since she last visited a year ago. She pointed to the high-rise luxury condos and mentioned how that part of the Atlanta Beltline is undeveloped. Behind where we stood, only a couple of feet away, there were train tracks. We sat on top of the tunnel, with our bare feet dangling down, as we chatted and laughed.

After we finished the first coat of white paint, Taylor guided us down the ridge to the shade. As we made our way down, people drank water and ate some snacks. Lux sat on the ledge and talked to Avery. We were all discussing whether “queer time” was real when I snapped the photo of us talking shown in Figure 6.10. As I turned to Lux, I asked how often they come to do the tagging. They said that this was the first time they went to this event (I found out from when they added me on Facebook a couple months ago that they use they pronouns). Lux mentioned “I feel like I don’t know and can’t do any of the art stuff, but I like to get messy and can lift things, so I like coming to those events.” I said, “Yeah, that’s right, you were lifting the boxes for the thrift shop.” They nodded and said “Yeah! And I kept getting angry because I wanted to lift the heavier ones, but they kept giving them to you even though you still needed help carrying them!” I laughed and said “Yeah, and I said, “testosterone made me strong but not that strong.” Jennifer and Lux laughed.

After a few minutes, Taylor walked up to us. Lux, Taylor, Jennifer, and I went to put on the second coat together, and the other two stayed down below. As we got to the spot, we saw Cortez walk up with plastic bags of spray paint, mops, and brushes and containers of various sorts. As Cortez met with Avery on the ground level, along with the two other people, they motioned to throw the paint roller sticks as a javelin up to the top of the tunnel. Taylor came up from painting and said “You better not! I am not getting arrested today!” Cortez shook their head and still motioned to throw the stick, and as they did, it fell on the sidewalk of the tunnel. Taylor shouted out “Cortez! If you hit a car or someone... make sure that there isn’t anyone walking!” Cortez motioned to throw the stick again, and successfully threw it to Lux, who this whole time was holding up their hands saying to throw it and that they could catch it. They were standing by the train tracks in their bare feet on the rocks. Cortez went to throw the next one, which made it up on top of the ridge, but Lux could not catch it. With the sticks for the paint rollers, the process was much easier, and we finished within minutes.

By the time we all went back down to let it dry, Cortez opened the cans of paint, small paint rollers, and spray paint. Taylor told us to take the paint and “write gay shit everywhere.” Taylor also said, “Paint over stuff with a date that has passed, so be sure to check a spot and an event, and if it hasn’t passed don’t paint over it.” Cortez took a pink can and started writing “gay shit #SFQP” with a trans symbol on a column part of the tunnel. Then wrote “SO GAY” on the sidewalk.”

As some of us finished the banner above the tunnel, the rest of us continued to tag. Together, a group of about four of us, blocked out a tagging spot by painting the background in periwinkle and writing in white and pink. Since the people working on the banner finished before

us, they came down to join us. As shown in Figure 6.11, we did the hashtag of “#SFQP” with handprints and some phrases about the events of the festival.

As we stood there, Taylor looked at their phone and made a noise. Cortez asked them what is wrong.

Taylor: Alok, people are wanting them to be a part of the festival.

Cortez: Alok?

Taylor: Yeah, they are the one who purposefully wears terrible ugly clothes. They are known as someone who steals work from Black femmes and transwomen and actually taking money from them, but they are still popular. Even though they have been known to steal money from organizations and Black women.

Syd: Wow that is not even an original form of stealing

Taylor: Right? [chuckles].

Taylor: They posted that they will be in town during the festival and people were like, you should be a part of the SFQP festival. And I’m like uhhhh.....

Me: So that puts us in a bad position?

Taylor: Yes, exactly.

We all fell silent for a bit and then Taylor asked if we could wrap up our pink lettering.

As we stood there, two men came up as they were walking along the beltline and tunnel.

While walking for the pedestrian signal, they asked us what we were painting. Taylor said that we were painting for “Southern Fried Queer Pride, our arts festival which will be June 26th and for five days.” The men looked confused and said “Oh” and continued to watch us for a few more minutes. As I looked around, I saw a car with two black people in the front pulling down their window and taking pictures of us with their phone. Trip Advisor lists Krog Tunnel as a tourist attraction on the Beltline.



Figure 6.10: Avery and Lux chatting while on break during the tagging day.



Figure 6.11: The tagging I helped with, along with Julie and Jake. We painted the hashtag to promote the social media of Southern Fried Queer Pride.



Figure 6.12: I took photos of Taylor getting up near the railroad tracks on top of Krog Tunnel to paint the name of the Arts Festival and dates. Lux painted over the previous graffiti with white and then Taylor did the colors.



Figure 6.13: Shot of the block that Krog Tunnel is on that I captured and what the advertisement looks like from the street where pedestrians walk.

A week later, as I was checking my Instagram story (which became a good way to check what events and issues organizers were focusing on), Taylor posted that a school fundraiser campaign painted over the Southern Fried Queer Pride advertisement. Immediately, I thought back to how Taylor told us as we painted to be sure not to cover up events that have not occurred yet. Our event, the Arts Festival, had not happened yet.

I see this covering as connected to what Ty mentioned as his own experience of gentrification in Atlanta. Gentrification aims to make public spaces “safe” for white families. This incident relates back to the narrative of family utilized by developers, neighborhood watch committees, and individuals like Peggy Denby who were aiming to make Atlanta safe for children. Instead of immediately covering up the school fundraiser advertisement, we spoke to the leaders of the campaign to better understand why they covered up our advertisement.

As we approached the people who covered over our advertisement, they mentioned how the word “queer” is not family friendly. Taylor emphasized how the art festival has many family friendly events including workshops, artist markets, and a thrift store where families can get gender affirming clothes. The leaders of the school fundraiser campaign deemed the word “queer” as unsafe for families.

In this dialogue, Southern Fried Queer Pride worked to queer public intimacy. Instead of censoring our own language, we emphasized that such language is family friendly. We asked the school fundraiser campaign leaders to question their own notions of what is family friendly and invited them to the arts festival. After speaking to the fundraiser campaign, they agreed to allow us to paint over their advertisement and re-tag our own advertisement in the spot we scoped out. Taylor made an emergency call for volunteers and four people were able to make it out and re-paint the banner over the tunnel.

Queer and trans activist-artists also painted murals along the Atlanta Beltline. The Beltline intends to transform an old rail line around Atlanta into “light rail, green spaces, and real estate projects” by taxing residents gradually (Immergluck 2009, 1723; Ordinance No. 05-0-1733). While tagging Krog Tunnel is community-driven, the Beltline commissions individual

artists for pieces, complicating the decision for artists. The call for murals heavily focuses on increasing visibility and restoring the cultures of communities of color. However, in these calls, commissioners push out queer and trans artists of color for straight and cis artists of color.

As I spoke to artists who chose to do murals on the Beltline, I realized that some saw it as a way to preserve queer culture and fight against the white heteronormativity of gentrification. As shown in Figure 6.15, Maria painted a mural based on a queer Latinx femme and Black femme in a relationship together. She interviewed the couple and took their portrait. She promoted her mural by using the hashtag of #OurLove. On the opening day of the mural she enlisted help from friends and community members that came out to support her work by asking us to paint flowers at the bottom in yellow. This help even included my own, as shown in Figure 6.15.

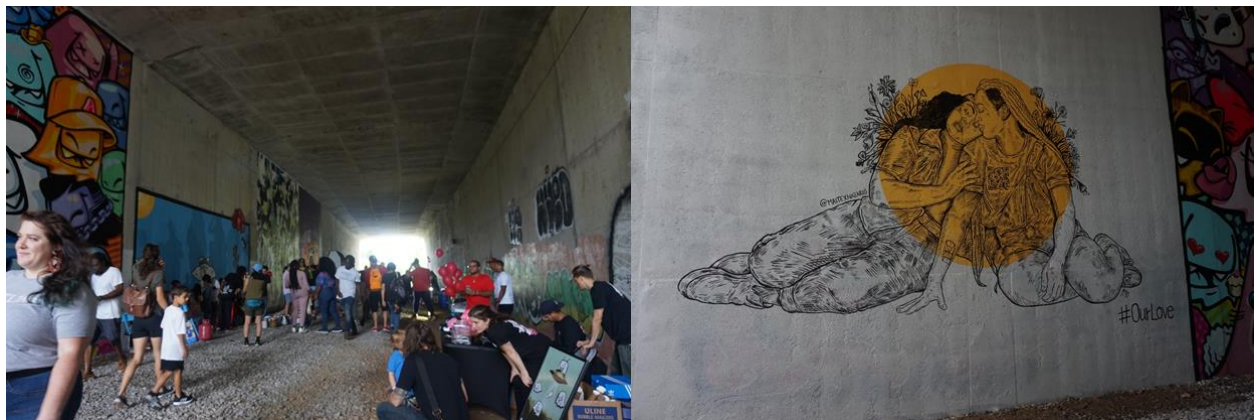


Figure 6.14: A photo I captured of Maria's Mural on The Atlanta Beltline



Figure 6.15: At Maria’s opening day of the mural, they invited people from community to paint flowers down at the bottom. I painted along with Jax. I am shown in the yellow shirt with Jax in the blue shirt in this photo that Maria captured.

As I painted with Jax, we talked about how we did not feel like we were artists. We were unsure of what Maria wanted beyond the instructions of taking yellow paint and painting a flower. Jax kept looking over at my flower and asking me what kind of flower we should do. In the process of producing art together, we were exchanging queer intimacy. We shared our names, pronouns, and talked a bit about how we came to our names. In particular, Maria talked about the importance of having community members paint the flowers underneath the couple in

the mural so that the flowers supported them. It was a practice in how we could come together and resist the erasure of our legacies.

Next to Maria's mural, as shown in Figure 6.15, there were other murals. One focused on cartoon characters and asked for help from the Atlanta community by playing music, giving participants cups of paint, and asking them to fill in with the colors. The music acted as a timer and people who passed by did not have to meet a community requirement of being queer.

Anyone could look at Maria's mural, but to get a cup of paint and brush to participate, you had to explicitly identify as part of queer community. She invited us by announcing: "it's open for people who are a part of the queer community." If you felt a part of the community, then you were. Once again, trans artists were opening space that projects like the Atlanta Beltline seek to displace, criminalize, and erase. What struck me most about Maria's plan for the mural, was the emphasis on flowers and yellow. Contrasted with the gravel of the tunnel, the industrial feel of the white concrete wall, we were painting yellow flowers out of gravel.

When I asked Maria about the color choice, she related the mustard yellow paint used to what she called "queer joy." Maria emphasized how the two lovers in the mural are engaging in "femme on femme" touch but it is not overtly sexual. Rather, she wanted to depict deep queer affection and intimacy outside of an explicitly sexual context. As I mentioned earlier, Maria based on the mural on a real-life relationship. She spoke on how she chose the couple not just for representation but in hopes to restore and maintain the Black and Latinx queer culture of Atlanta.

Maria's mural, #OurLove struck me because of the emphasis on queer joy in a public space. Rather than give into the narratives and embodiments that allow for assimilation into safety in Atlanta, Maria depicted two queer femmes of color caring and loving each other. Out of

their love, we see flowers coming up out of their shoulders and backs. The flowers signify growth from their love. In the mural, the sphere of yellow paint creates a center that focuses on the touch between the two lovers. As I look at the mural, I see that it resists the displacement queer and trans people face in Atlanta. The mural centers queer on queer joy and is open for onlookers who visit the Atlanta Beltline to witness.

This was the Atlanta that developers, neighborhood watch committees, and individual white heterosexual ciswomen like Peggy Denby wanted to avoid, erase, and criminalize. And yet, here were young queer and trans people, making Black queer erotic art, making sex work safe, and making it accessible to the public by expanding and queering public intimacy. Trans artist-activists fought to expand public intimacy through pleasure-based art and organizing.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

Safety Within Spaces

During *Peach Fest*, a drag beauty pageant hosted by Southern Fried Queer Pride, a white burlesque performer stepped onto the stage in a white sequined bunny outfit. She stood out; she was the only white feminine performer. All of the performers before her, transwomen and transfeminine people of color, chose predatory animals such as leopards, cheetahs, and various reptiles as their costumes for this category of competition. “Mia” was the only performer to choose an animal that is typically prey. As Mia danced and took off her clothes, lyrics with references to Jacqueline Kennedy played. I felt tension as she put up a mirror to white femininity and assumed innocence; I blushed at her performance. The mirror both made me uncomfortable and inspired to look at my own performance of white femininity. The crowd cheered as she gently took off her pearl necklace to mark the end of the number.

After her routine, Taylor walked on stage with a microphone and asked the performer what inspired her to choose a rabbit for her costume. Mia responded “Bunnies are just my spirit animal.” The crowd fell silent. The crowd stopped tossing bills to the stage and some members began to boo. I turned to Dan, a white friend I was standing next to and we just exchanged silent stares. Taylor asked us to “give it up” for Mia, but people in the crowd continued to boo. I looked around at the few people I read as white in the crowd: none of us making eye contact with each other. The performer kept smiling and walked off stage. Later that night, Mia approached me in line for drinks.

As she approached, she smiled and waved. I was one of the only people read as white left in the crowd. Having a desk job to work in the morning, my friend Dan had already left for the night. I nodded as she approached and asked her how she felt about her performance. I met her

earlier in my fieldwork, when a childhood friend of mine hosted a burlesque show in East Atlanta. The burlesque show was different from the *Peach Fest*, most of the performers in the burlesque show were white and experienced in the scene, with the exception of one Black femme performer.

In Mia response's to me, she shrugged and offered that she could be better. I smiled and nodded my head. After I got my drink, I told her I needed to go speak with someone at the ticket counter. Later that night, I sent Taylor a Facebook message to let her know how uncomfortable I was when Mia mentioned her "spirit animal." Taylor let me know that she already spoke Mia backstage and educated her on why "spirit animal" was an appropriative and harmful response. After the *Peach Fest*, I never saw the performer at the drag shows I attended again.

I tell this story because as I spent time with trans activists and artists in Atlanta, I became interested in how community members engage in accountability. I became interested in Taylor's practice of what academic and non-academic literature refers to as "call-in culture" versus "call-out culture." Although Mia chose the wrong language to describe her performance, community members never called her out publicly. Burlesque and drag shows continued to invite her to participate, even if she chose not to. Along with this story, I became interested in what activists and artists meant by accountability, how it relates to queer belonging in Atlanta, and the function of disposability. In this chapter, I argue that a critical part of whiteness is an assumed innocence from accountability. I point to moments where white activists, including myself, use innocence to argue for our comfort rather than the safety of oppressed peoples. Along with assumed white innocence, I am interested in the role of shame and punishment. I argue that organizations like Southern Fried Queer Pride offer alternatives to shame and punishment, and push for what they

term “nurturance culture.” The focus on “nurturance culture” expands notions of safety to accommodate for moments of growth, discomfort, and accountability.

On White Innocence

To return to Mia’s performance, I thought the real missed conversation was how her performance shed light on how the assumed innocence of white femininity interplays with notions of safety that protect white supremacy. After a few months passed, my childhood friend “Auro” asked me to drop him off at the bunny performer’s apartment. He wanted to make amends for his past mistakes in his interpersonal relationship with her, and both of them wanted to give a romantic relationship another chance. For some time, the bunny performer labeled Auro, a white transman, as a toxic person.

Later that night, Auro called me crying and asked me to come pick him up from the bunny performer’s house. He and I sat in silence as I took him to get some McDonald’s and decompress on my couch. After eating for a bit, I asked him if he wanted to talk about what happened. Auro mentioned that he and the bunny performer got into a fight, she began to throw things. I asked him why they began to fight. He shook his head and did not want to talk about it.

The next morning, as I made him breakfast, he began to tell me that Mia began to touch him in the middle of the night without consent. He told me he resisted and that Mia suggested that he must not be very into women. She suggested that testosterone made him gay. I held him and told him that he was going to be okay.

I had no idea how to help Auro, nor did I know what to say. The best thing I could think to do was to sit with Auro, hold space for his pain and confusion, and then continue to check in on him to see if he wanted any accountability process. He expressed that he did not want

anything to happen; he wanted to forget about it. Months passed before I saw Mia again. I saw her at a thrift store, she did not make eye contact. Later that day, she posted on social media about the toxicity of transboys and transmen—and how we will defend the boy’s club.

At first, I was confused and hurt by her posts. I assumed the target audience was my friend and I. However, as I spent time reading academic and non-academic literature about the assumed innocence of white femininity, I realized as Haga (2020) suggests, this conflict has a history; the violent historical narrative of whiteness as innocence. I thought about my own relationship to whiteness as innocence. In particular, how at the beginning of fieldwork, the prison abolition group with which I volunteered for the *#SayHerName* campaigns nicknamed me “Bieber.”

Griffin (1998) suggests that a critical part of positioning whiteness as innocence is that white people will fall onto gender oppression to avoid discussing race, as she notes about her experiences in classrooms as a professor. I thought about the bunny performer. I thought about my own usage of my trans identity, my experiences as an autistic person, to avoid speaking about my associations with whiteness. In particular, I think about one experience I had with Shay during a *#SayHerName* campaign day. She asked me, “Why are you here Bieber? Why do you show up?” I answered, “Because as a trans person, I believe in the abolition of prisons.” Shay responded, “I think it’s interesting that you didn’t answer that as a white person as well.”

On Shame and Shaming

Along with white innocence, a critical part of whiteness is enacting shame and punishment. Bassichis, Lee, and Spade (2015) argue that there are three main narratives to the shaming that leads to criminalization: the “hero mindset”, “scapegoating”, and “underserving

and deserving victims” (39). In queer and trans communities, law codes whiteness as innocence through anti-bullying efforts, anti-discrimination, and anti-hate crime legislation. All of these types of legislations are passed under a guise of safety. These laws aim to protect LGBT+ people by increasing punishments for those found guilty of physical and/or emotional violence against LGBT+ people. As Puar (2017) suggests in her analysis of the death of Tyler Clementi, there is an underlying flaw in this: such legislation assumes identity, sexuality, and bodies to be static. Such legislation assumes that the only people who do harm to queer and trans people are cisgender and straight people. Such legislation requires that individuals prove their queerness and/or transness to the state. Murray (2015) argues that this process is based in white and Westernized notions of queer identities, bodies, and relationships. Bassichis, Lee, and Spade (2015) argue that such legislation does not keep survivors safe; rather, such legislation works to further support the prison industry.

This state-imposed narrative of safety impacted people I met in the field. ICE held Estrella in solitary confinement for “her own safety.” While detained, another cismale detainee assaulted Estrella and stabbed her. Instead of finding a solution, the ICE guards placed Estrella in solitary confinement for five months. In her speeches at community events, Estrella wore chains around her ankles and repeated “for my safety” in Spanish. She argued for self-determination of survivors of harm.

Towards Nurturance Culture

At the November planning meeting for Southern Fried Queer Pride organizers, we discussed events to host in the year 2020. Ange proposed leading a “CANCELLED” workshop. Taylor followed Ange’s proposal with the example of the white performer at the *Peach Pageant*. She mentioned how some members in community space wanted to boycott the performer from

drag shows, but instead, Taylor took the performer backstage and explained how using “spirit animal” is offensive and appropriative.

As we sat at the table, some members of the meeting shifted in their seats. One member, who I read as white and feminine, raised her hand to speak. Taylor nodded. The community member asked Taylor about the difference between harm and abuse. She mentioned, “That is nice that ya’ll did that. But what about comments that are worse than that?” Ange sighed and looked at Taylor.

In the meeting, we had to come to an agreement on goals for the CANCELLED workshop. We decided that the starting point would be to define what we mean by “cancel culture” or “call-out culture”, what we mean by “accountability”, and what we mean by “disposability”. Ange emphasized the importance of leading this conversation, as we want to build spaces of community and safety, but people do cause harm. They suggested we start with asking how to make space for that harm. We decided that our goals as a group for the “CANCELLED” workshop were to: 1. Establish our own working definition of cancel culture 2. Invite community members to acknowledge the ways in which we engage in cancel culture 3. Give tools to confront conflict and harm in queer spaces and 4. Suggest solutions for traumatized queers.

We brought together people from Solutions Not Punishment Collaborative and created a booklet and a panel of people to facilitate the workshop. A few months later, Southern Fried Queer Pride posted on the Facebook page that they needed volunteers for the night, so I signed up to help set up and work the event.

Taylor and Ange assigned me to work the sign-in table for the event. At the sign-in table, I was in charge of greeting everyone, getting them to sign up for future Southern Fried Queer Pride events, and handing them the pamphlet that we co-created as organizers. Figure 7.1 shows the pamphlet I handed to people as they walked into the discussion.

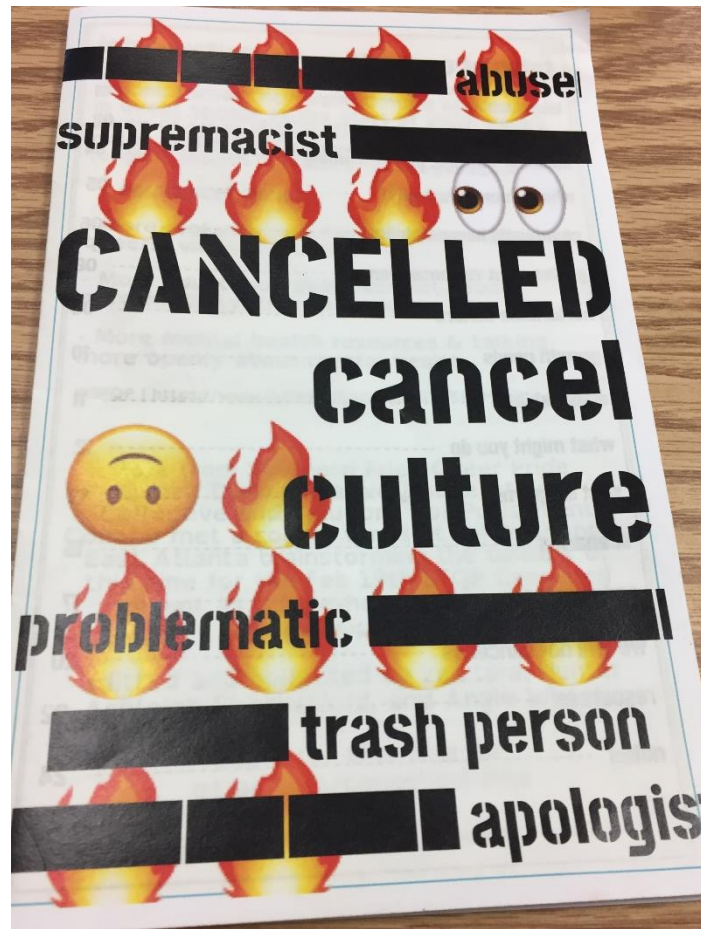


Figure 7.1: The pamphlets I handed out to participants in the CANCELLED discussion. SFQP and Solutions not Punishment Collaborative co-created the pamphlets.

The room quickly filled up with community members. As the meeting began, I asked Taylor if it was okay if I listened and participated in the discussion from the greeting table. At the beginning of the workshop, the facilitators, sitting at the front of the room, asked us to go around and share our name and pronouns.

To begin the conversation, the panelists directed us to the page on canceling. “Zen”, the person who identified themselves as an Indigenous and non-binary person, asked us to reflect on what canceling means to us. They directed us to a space on the page to draw or write out our thoughts about what canceling means. After some time, Zen asked participants about our own answers. One participant, who identified herself as using she/her pronouns in the introduction, raised her hand, “Cancelling is when someone calls another person out for their bad behavior.” Another participant added onto this definition, to include calling someone out on social media.

Venegas (2016) defines a call-out similarly to the definition used by participants in the discussion; a call-out is a mechanism to bring attention to problems and conflict. He argues that call-outs can help individuals articulate their political positions and sometimes can operate as a step beyond mere acknowledgement of a problem. Ross (2019) argues that such practice is based in shaming others and is problematic. She suggests that call-out practices happen when members of communities think of oppression as individuals rather than systems. Matei (2019) argues that there are healthy ways to call someone out. What she refers to is known as “call-in” culture amongst queer activists in Atlanta. Call-in culture is when we pull someone in privately, ask them questions, support them, and educate them on their harmful language and/or behavior (Rodriguez-Cayro 2018).

Ange asked us, “What happens when we cancel those in community?” Rather than calling-out individuals in community, the panelists argued that cancelling is about calling-out repeat harm doers that are powerful, famous, and have cultural capital.

The panelists argued that calling-out individuals in community, people who have little power or just as much power as us, is actually what they called “mobbing”. Zen emphasized the

difference between targeting someone with notoriety, fame, and capital and targeting someone who is in community. Zen argued that when we target members of community for harmful actions, it is different from when we target celebrities who engage in harmful behaviors. When we target community members, we might deny the person responsible of services and capital they need to survive, rather than hold them accountable for their actions. Zen emphasized the importance of the direction of power in cancelling. Cancelling is a direct-action strategy when community members direct it to towards someone in power. As participants discussed in the workshop, when community cancels other community members, it can become a form of mobbing. Venegas (2016) argues that this form of mobbing not only makes call-outs lose their potential to address community problems, but it also creates agents who surveil the behaviors of others to maintain a consistent notion of community safety.

In response to Zen's critique of mobbing, we began to speak about our own experiences of harm. One participant asked what about cases of prolonged harm and asked what we saw as the difference between harm and abuse. As we tried to come to an agreement about the distinction between abuse and harm, Hunter (one of the panelists) mentioned that if we take the perspective of the survivor, how we might approach the question. She argued that in both cases of harm and abuse, we must focus on what would be restorative for the victims of the harm. As she spoke, some participants interjected to give their own testimonies of how cancelling can erase the voices of victims. As a survivor of harm, one participant felt as if others did not consider her voice when going public with the abuse that she experienced.

One of the lead Black trans femme organizers of Southern Fried Queer Pride, with whom I regularly attended meetings and events, interjected. They were sitting in the back of the room and softly mentioned, "Sometimes people take to social media to call someone out because they

feel powerless. They feel as if that's all they have left and the burden is left on them, to get help and support." I nodded my head and as I looked around, so did other participants in the discussion.

I was struck by "Lee"'s comment. Lee continued to suggest, "And what happens, that I see, is that folks will remove themselves from community space." Hunter and Zen nodded their heads and suggested that the role of community is to support such people in getting help. As Russo (2019) argues, "we often place the burden of responsibility" (110) of confronting violence on people who experience the harm. However, due to various reasons, including "trauma" and "fear," (111) people who experience harm do not "seek services." (110) Russo (2019) argues that when the responsibility to come forward lands solely on the survivor, it often leads to "isolation and shame." (112)

Dixon (2020) argues that as activists who care about harm, we should spend less time judging survivors. This includes both judging the feelings of the person who experiences harm, but also their actions. Russo (2019) suggests that this is part of the failure of social work models of repairing harm. (113) She argues that we should reject the top-down model of care. Shank (2020) and Russo (2019) suggest that restorative justice models of care should do work "with" the survivor of harm, rather than "for" them. (113) This includes sitting with survivors to address their goals and what is possible.

After Lee's comment, Hunter directed us to a page on community in the pamphlet. She asked us how we define community and directed us to answer in the space provided. I drew in my own answers as shown in Figure 4.2. I placed "open-heart", "listening", "support", "liberation", and "freedom" as values upholding community members for me – who were trans,

non-binary, bi+ folks, ballet classmates, folks in academia, and Louisiana folks. My community answer looked vastly different from others, as I learned as people shared. Even though the room was full of trans and non-binary folks, hardly anyone listed trans as its own form of community. Rather, participants and facilitators talked about the assumed intimacy between trans people that is often based in “fake posturing”.

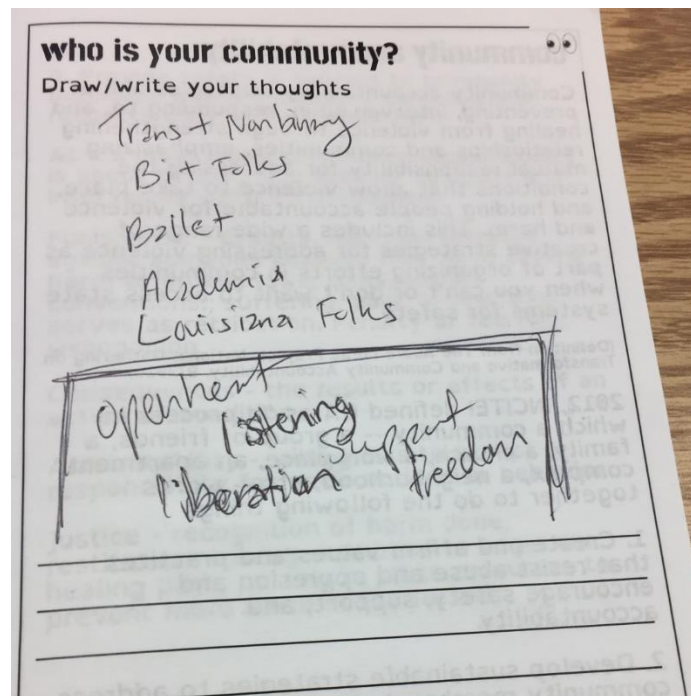


Figure 7.2: My diagram of what community is to me.

After we each got a chance to draw our own community map, panelists directed us to the page on community accountability. The page defined words like “consequences”, “punishment”, “accountability”, and “justice”. The pamphlet defines accountability as:

Willingness to accept responsibility for one’s actions or behavior.

One participant, who introduced herself earlier in the workshop as using she/her pronouns, Black, and trans, raised her hand and fought back on such a definition. She suggested, “people

can be willing, apologize, but not actually change their behavior, so I have a problem with this definition.” Other participants nodded in agreement.

Haga (2020) suggests that our eagerness for and attention to accountability is not enough. Rather, we all need skills and training to enact accountability. Russo (2019) takes this a step further. She argues that accountability is not an individual practice or singular action; she argues that accountability is the community’s responsibility and that we need to pay “attention” to what is “produced through harm.” (9)

Towards the end of the CANCELLED workshop, facilitators directed us to a page on nurturance culture. Facilitators asked us to draw or write out what we feel like we need for our own growth. A participant who introduced herself earlier as a “proud as fuck Black transwoman” raised her hand and admitted, “this sounds good, but I don’t know how we actually do this in everyday. Yeah, everyone has intrinsic value but what if they fucked up so many times, you’re tired. You are tired to even deal with it.” Participants in the workshop nodded silently and looked towards the facilitators. The facilitators nodded and Ange responded, “Well, I think that is where community approaches are important. Instead of you as the individual teaching the person about the harm, we host events like this in order to help educate people and give them the tools to deal with conflict in healthy ways.” Hunter frowned at the statement. She added in, “I want to push back on that. Some of us have the tools but are tired and there are better people to delegate the task to. So instead of responding with punishment, because we are tired, we send the person to be educated by a group. This can be even for things that you just don’t feel like providing labor for. You can refer people to others who are also experienced and knowledgeable.” Participants nodded in silence.

I thought about the #SayHerName training and awareness campaign I did with Shay and Auto. I thought about the patience that Shay demonstrated towards my mistakes. Instead of being reprimanded for making a mistake, she encouraged me to continue with the script. She helped me go to the Walmart and stand up against a man who called me a “n****r lover.” She taught me how to both hold space for my hurt but also to center the people whose safety we were focused on. She showed me how to center the safety of others in a way that, although a man yelled at me, I could contextualize that I was okay. I could go home and be okay after the event.

Organizers argued that in order to interrupt cycles of violence in community, we must create conditions for sustainable growth and healing. They argued that punishment perpetuates violence and centers those who have done harm as objects of violence.

Nurturance Culture, as defined by Southern Fried Queer Pride, relies on an orientation towards growth and healing over an orientation towards power, domination, and coercion. In nurturance culture, everyone’s needs matter equally and everyone has inherent worth and dignity. It argues that everyone deserves healing, especially victims of harm. It acknowledges we are first introduced to harm by being harmed. For Southern Fried Queer Pride, they relate this mentality to decolonization.

Samaran (2019) argues that under colonization and Western notions of family, what she terms “human dependency”(9) is treated as a financial exchange rather than a human need. She argues that punishment disconnects us from each other and further drives shame, instead of restoration. Samaran (2019) suggests in nurturance culture, the responsibility to mend harm is on the community, which allows for every individual to feel secure enough to be authentic. Rather than punishment, consequences and boundaries should be used in order to ensure safety. She

argues that such consequences and boundaries can lead to individuals who experience harm to know and feel that they are “cared about, protected, and heard.” (4)

During the workshop, a non-binary person mentioned their experience with sexual assault. In their testimony, they mentioned “of course this person was a cisguy.” When they shared the comment, two white self-identified transwomen got up and left the room. They went to the “cool down” room down the hall from the workshop. The “cool down” room had a facilitator waiting for anyone who arrived to the room, along with chairs and pillows. I overheard one of the women begin to speak to the facilitator in the “cool down” room about how she felt hurt by the comment of the non-binary participant. The facilitator left the room to get one of the facilitators, Zen, to talk with the upset participant. The participant shared what bothered her about the comment. She emphasized that was a difference in feminist alignments. She felt hurt by the comments because it felt similar to comments about how “boys will be boys.” She emphasized how this type of rhetoric, that people assigned male at birth are intrinsically violent, leads to transwomen being portrayed as violent and predatory in the media. Zen agreed and asked the participant what she would like from the instance. The participant did not know. Zen offered to bring it up to the group. Zen asked if the participant would like to return to the workshop, but the participant said that she would go home.

In speaking of nurturance culture, facilitators in the workshop emphasized how stepping towards nurturance culture is “decolonization” at work. “Decolonization” was a term that facilitators used but participants in the workshop did not use. A participant asked what we meant by decolonization, and the panelists looked at each other. Zen spoke on how decolonization is often thought of as material reparations, such as land restoration. Hunter continued:

Hunter: However, in queer spaces, I think it's taken on a new meaning. We live in this movement of Indigenous, Black, and poor white people coming together in queer movements, right? But not everyone does decolonizing work. In this instance, we are talking about how demolishing systems of policing, even in our communities, is necessary to our freedom.

Ange: I think also... it's important to recognize that showing up as trans folks doesn't mean we are necessarily doing decolonial work. It still needs to be something with teeth. I feel like in many queer spaces, it's thrown around without real reparations or tangible change.

The participants in the workshop nodded in agreement with Ange. One participant went on to talk about how they felt as if restorative justice is a part of decolonization.

Tuck and Yang (2012) warn against the vague usage of decolonization to mean general social justice programs. Rather, decolonization should focus on connections to land, material reparations, and structural changes. More importantly, they argue that attempts at social justice reform may have tensions and incompatibilities with decolonization. These incompatibilities are critical to queer and trans activist-artist spaces, because many queers are working across differences in relationships to settler colonialism to advocate for the liberation of trans and queer people. Incompatibilities are critical to narratives of safety and power. When queer and trans activist-artists in Atlanta argue for safety, they collectively mean to center the safety of Black, Indigenous, and Latinx people. However, these claims lack material reparations and repatriation.

Similar to Tuck and Yang's (2012) frustrations with the usage of decolonization as a "metaphor" (1), I find activist-artists in the field use decolonization as separate from the fight for Indigenous sovereignty. I think the important tension to consider is: how is solidarity built in this context? Southern Fried Queer Pride is led by Black, Indigenous, and Latinx leadership but has white, non-Indigenous participants in the meetings, shows, and events. Solidarity can be full of tension, contradictions, and conflict (Tuck and Yang 2012).

In activist-artist spaces, trans and queer people are separated by social, cultural, and political institutions from their own histories and genealogies. For Indigenous leaders in the group, buying land for the community center was a priority but so were workshops like CANCELLED. Members of the group, particularly white members, expressed frustration over buying land for a center versus renting an already established building. Black non-Indigenous members emphasized the history of gentrification and the displacement of Black folks in Atlanta; Indigenous leaders emphasized the importance of being able to use the land for food and garden projects. However, buying back the land is not the same as reparation.

On June 12th, Rayshard Brooks was killed by a police officer at a Wendy's in Atlanta. Southern Fried Queer Pride launched a GoFundMe campaign for raising money to buy land and a building for a community center. As I looked on the page, white queer people donated money under the intention and guise of "reparations". One anonymous donation read "from my white guilt" along with a \$70 donation. The center is intended to be led by paid "Black and brown queer people, disabled folks, and others marginalized by systemic injustice." Southern Fried Queer Pride leadership did not use "decolonization" on the fundraiser page, although part of the land itself will be used by Indigenous queer, trans, and/or Two-Spirit people in a gardening project that intends to grow crops and share cultural knowledge between queer Indigenous elders and younger queer Indigenous people. Southern Fried Queer Pride did not label this section of the project, or name it. Rather, they raised money during a moment in which white liberals in Atlanta wanted to give money to local groups in response to the death of Rayshard Brooks.³ The

³ Two weeks after the murder of Rayshard Brooks, I went with Southern Fried Queer Pride to paint a mural for Rayshard Brooks at Krog Tunnel in Atlanta. As we got to the tunnel, there was already a large mural dedicated to him specifically. We painted two more murals: one focused on "Black Trans Lives Matter" with pictures of trans people who are still alive and people who were murdered by the police, along with another mural that reads "Abolish the Police".

white liberals posting on the page used the language of “reparations”, “white guilt”, “reclaiming land”, and “decolonization”.

The CANCELLED workshop alone did not provide clear answers as to how language like “decolonization”, “restorative justice”, or “nurturance culture” works in queer communities. To answer this, I had to spend more time with Southern Fried Queer Pride.

At every Southern Fried Queer Pride event, even large festivals and drag shows, there are no police. At meetings, organizers discussed at length which venues in Atlanta would allow large gatherings without police presence. For this, we were often dependent on DIY art spaces with no air conditioning or other structural struggles. In addition to being allowed to gather without the presence of police, we looked for spaces with gender neutral bathrooms. In these discussions, we often emphasized the importance of not “gender policing” other people’s bodies. In order to prevent this, we only hosted events at places with gender neutral bathrooms.

For large events, Southern Fried Queer Pride hosted volunteer trainings. As part of my fieldwork, I attended the volunteer trainings as well as the events themselves, and took field notes at both. For marches, cook-outs, and parties in rooms without air conditioning, where heat exhaustion is a large concern, volunteers were trained on making sure everyone is getting enough water. For the annual arts festival, Southern Fried Queer Pride hosts a series of large parties and drag shows. I attended the training in order to volunteer for a night shift.

In the training, Taylor emphasized how the crowd that comes at 8:00pm to 11:00pm, usually does not do drugs and is a “much easier shift to handle.” However, she told us that the 11:00pm to 2:00am crowd is much harder to handle. Taylor told us that we should expect attendees to come to the party already with alcohol, weed, or other drugs in their system. She emphasized that it is up to us to decide if the person is not healthy enough in that moment to

enter the party. Taylor told us that in these situations, we should encourage the person to go home and be sure they have a ride home. She told us how the parties associated with the festival have a discount code for the shared rides. Taylor emphasized that if the person still does not want to go home, that we should call her or another leader that is on call, so that they can encourage the person to go home and pay for it with Southern Fried Queer Pride money.

Taylor emphasized to never call the manager of the venue or the police. She emphasized that this could result in the death of members of our community and that we would rather “they get home safely, we want everyone to get home safely”. One of the white volunteers in the training asked Taylor what we should do if conflict in the form of yelling or shoving were to break out. Taylor responded:

“Good question. I don’t think we ever had that happen. But if it does happen, please call Cortez or myself immediately. We will de-escalate the situation. I should also say that most of the performers and the DJ have de-escalation training of some sort that we do with Solutions not Punishment Collaborative. So any of those people will be able to help as well. I also try to divide the volunteer teams up between people who could restrain anyone who is being obnoxious without injuring themselves or the other person.”

We all nodded and sat in silence while we thought of more questions. Another participant asked Taylor if there was any training on first aid or responding to drug overdose for volunteers. Taylor and the participant continued to talk to one another:

Taylor: Unfortunately, no. But when working any event, not just the large parties at festivals, you should walk around and take note if someone looks isolated, dizzy, exhausted, or scared. Not like, “oh this person looks suspicious” but as a “as a fellow community member, you don’t look too good, let’s talk and see what’s up”. This is something you should do at every event. Note who looks bothered and ask them if they would like a moment to talk, drink water, or step away from the event. If the person is throwing up or is in severe need of help, be there for them as best as you can. If they are going in and out of consciousness, then it is time to bring them to the hospital. Many queer and trans folks don’t have health insurance so we need to ask them if they want an ambulance or a ride to the

hospital. We also need to be sure someone stays with them and gives the EMTs their legal name and makes sure they get the care they need. Also, all of this can be prevented if at the front door you notice that someone seems like they already had three or four drinks.

I saw this volunteer training as a strategy of “nurturance culture.” Nurturance culture focuses on preventative strategies. In this case, the training acted as a preventive strategy so that party-goers, volunteers, and organizers could have a safe time without involving the Atlanta Police Department. As volunteers, we were given the communication tools we needed to divert the problem to other solutions rather than being alarmed and depending on authorities to solve the problem.

I came to fieldwork believing in the potential of community accountability but unsure how to enact such culture. Trans activists point towards accountability processes that do not deem people as disposable. Resolutions center on preventative and educational strategies, as well as holding individual parties responsible for their actions. Trans activists in Atlanta show that consequences are separate from punishment and disposability; safety comes from the community’s responsibility to handle harm with boundaries and solutions rather than punishment and exclusion.

CHAPTER EIGHT:

Shifting Towards Intentional Spaces

Outside of community and academic spaces, strangers met me with contempt and rage towards the idea of “safe spaces”. One time, I was taking an Uber back to my apartment during fieldwork. As we rode in the car, the driver started up small talk. She asked me what I did for a living. I told her I was a PhD student in Atlanta for fieldwork and that I also teach at Savannah College of Art and Design. She nodded and then asked me, “You don’t do any of that safe space safe whatever bullshit do you?” I paused and fell silent. I asked her what a safe space was to her, something I had been asking trans and non-binary activists for months. She got frustrated with the question, “You know, how they are babying the college students these days. They need to grow up. With rooms with pillows and coloring books to decompress, they are babying the students. And don’t even get me started with teaching students about diversity.” I fell silent. I was tired and had just come from an all-day training as a faculty member.

“Safe zones” came into popular usage by way of student life programming in colleges that focused on building LGBT+ allyship. Trainings consisted of a team of college students, faculty, and staff put together curriculums to combat the homophobia in schools (Poynter and Tubbs 2008). People could undergo the training and then earn a sticker that noted them publicly as a LGBT ally (Ballard et al. 2008). From there, academics began to critique “safe spaces” for a “neoliberal focus on security and surveillance.” (Quinan 2016, 361) Feminist and queer discourse began to critique such spaces for the lack of structural change (Quinan 2016). However, news stations such as Fox News critiqued “safe spaces” for being too soft on students. “Safe space” became a euphemism in colleges for spaces dominated by minorities and/or oppressed groups in colleges, without proper tracing back to the roots of the phrase being in

“safe zone” trainings. Soon the critique you began to see on Fox News of “safe spaces” was outlandish caricatures of universities such as the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, using Carebears to decorate bulletin boards in college dorms.

“Safe spaces” in colleges is different from safe spaces in community. A classroom setting has a different structure of power than community space. As hooks (2003) argues, “...there is safety in learning to cope with conflict , with differences of thought and opinion.” (89) Going into the field, I was interested in how activist-artists held space for the contradictions of safety within themselves, at events, and at the community level. In ethnographic interviews, the sewing workshops, and in community spaces, trans artist-activists differentiated “safe spaces” from “intentional spaces”. I became interested in “intentional spaces” and how trans activists worked to create such spaces. In particular, I became interested in how trans activists hold responsibility for harm and create solutions outside of privatization and policing.

I asked each interviewee: “What does safety mean to you?” Some trans and non-binary people laughed at the question. One Latinx non-binary person answered “What is even safety? I have no idea. I have never felt safe in my entire life”. In interviews, it was difficult to get people to speak about safety because of their lack of experience with feeling safe. As Eden spoke in his interview:

It’s hard for me to describe something I never experienced. I live with so much anxiety. I’m on medicine but still I feel unsafe. I don’t what safety looks like.

As Eden described, it was hard for interviewees to imagine their own safety. However, the sewing workshops helped prompt participants to imagine safety. I met Kendra at a sewing workshop in September 2019 and interviewed them in October 2019. For their quilt panel, they chose the research prompt “Where do you feel safe?” They depict a Black woman sticking out

her tongue. Kendra emphasized in their interview that they chose this image because they feel safest where they can be silly as someone who society perceives as a Black woman. In their interview, when I asked them about what safety means to them, they responded:

Safety.. safety is where I feel like I don't have to constantly look over my shoulder and be worried, will I get hurt. I feel safe when I'm with other Black people....the presence of queer people is also a must

Kendra associates feelings of individual safety with being able to feel at peace with one's surroundings and the ability to express themselves as fully human. In this, Kendra focuses their quilt panel on Black joy and silliness. They position the ability to be silly as the ability to feel fully safe in one's environment.



Figure 8.1: Kendra's quilt panel.

Rafael, at Latinx transman whose story I share in an earlier chapter, spoke similarly about what safety meant for him:

I mean well whenever I think about safe space like I'm thinking about like where I'm gonna be able to, where I'm gonna be able to be mustachioed. And what spaces can I do that like can live free to express myself in the way that I'd like? And like not feel like not be conscious of it. You know, like, forget that I have this like, I don't know, like You like you just forget all your worries because you don't have to worry about it like straight up, it's just like, yeah like yeah it's just something you can forget about I don't know I don't know if that makes sense.

Rafael emphasizes that a safe space is where he can express himself fully, which includes being “mustachioed” (wearing a glue-on mustache). Similarly to Kendra, he highlights what he calls “not having to be conscious of it.” For Rafael, a safe space is where he can relax and express himself without concern of violence.

Mo relates safety to a peace of mind that comes with the presence of other Black queer people. For Mo, a Black transman whose story I share in an earlier chapter, talked at length about safety and whiteness:

Me: Yeah, what does it mean for something to be a safe space for you? Like what are the what are what are the things in a safe, like space? Like what's needed there?

Mo : Um, I'd absolutely say like the presence of Black people um, you know it and that's also something that's developed recently I used to go to um, predominantly white schools and um, had some experiences there that I realized contributed to my anxiety even though I didn't realize how it was contributing or, or what was eliciting those feelings. Um, but I kind of learned to articulate that in that sometimes I would feel like I was trying to prove a proximity to whiteness in my behavior that kept me on edge. Um, but I don't deal with that so much anymore. Um, I would also say the presence of queer people is very important.

For Mo, safety is about not having to placate to whiteness and as he says “prove [his] proximity to whiteness.” He emphasizes how “proving” his “proximity to whiteness” kept him from being

able to relax in a space and fully express himself. Ange, connected the process of proving one's proximity to whiteness when they explained the complications of safety for them as a Black non-binary person:

With safety, I think about the policing of Black folks and communities, you know? Like, what about the person who wants to get a little high, wants to have a party, wants to be a little loud. There used to be a lot of block parties in the West End. You wanna just ride around with your friends, right? But you have white folks calling police on that. I want to feel safe in being loud.

For Ange, safety is about being able to express oneself as fully human, which includes partying, smoking weed, and being loud.

When speaking with trans and non-binary activists directly, they emphasized the difference between wanting members to be safe as individuals and critiquing the impossibility of maintaining this safety at a community level. Activists fought for safety in terms of adequate housing, environments free from bullying and harassment, and adequate means to make a living. Organizers, activists, and artists in the field made a distinction between “safe space” and “intentional spaces.” As Taylor told me in her interview,

I don't really believe in safe spaces. I believe like intentional space, I do believe that people can create spaces where the intention is to, you know, whether the intention is like to affirm trans people or to give space to like Black and Brown folks like I believe in intentional spaces.

Taylor explains how she feels as if a safe space is not possible at the community level. Rather than guaranteeing a “safe space”, she can organize a space or an event centered on affirming a particular group of people. An example of this type of work is No Boys Allowed, an annual party that Southern Fried Queer Pride hosts that centers people who do identify as a boy. In the description of the event, Southern Fried Queer Pride states how the party centers people who do not identify as a boy. In the flyers, the narrative focused on promoting safety through creating

space to “wear those leather skirts” without fear of others harassing them. The advertisements also focused on building femme connections (friendship, romantic, and/or sexual).

Rather than exclude people based on their gender expression, the party focused on people who dress and express themselves in feminine ways. Entrance to the party was based on self-definition. This event centered the safety of femme people (cis, trans, and otherwise identified) who expressed feeling unsafe at dance parties with cis men, trans men, and other masculine people. With this event, the safety of femme people was centered but it is not labelled as a “safe space.” To enforce this process of self-definition, activists hired trans identified bouncers in order to inform people that this party focuses on the safety of femme aligned people. And if they did not feel safe, to let someone now in a pink triangle arm band, and that person will handle the situation.

Taylor continued to explain how a “safe space” is a lofty ideal, rather than a reality that organizers can enact:

And so, yeah, I think that safe spaces are a dream and there was like, a good, you know, two three year period like 2012 2015, where every single person was clearing out the safe spaces and safe space that but they weren't actually looking at like, how those spaces were keeping people safe. Like having a bunch of queer people together isn't a safe space. A lot of the harm that queer people experience is from other queers.

People assume that safety is based on just throwing a bunch of queers together, but we can harm each other. So there is an assumed trust that is not actually built there. And therefore, we can harm each other.

Taylor emphasizes how centering identities at events and in spaces still does not make it safe for those involved. She emphasizes how she believes that queer people experience violence from other queer people, particularly in interpersonal relationships. Taylor continued to explain how common harm and abuse is in romantic and sexual relationships amongst queers. She spoke from her own experience as an organizer, and talked about how she gets reports of particular people

causing harm and how she does not have the capability to ask that individual to step away because of the size of some Southern Fried Queer Pride events. Taylor also emphasized how she did not see this type of “gatekeeping” as restorative. She emphasized that she did not see identity as enough to ensure safety, rather, that we must be intentional:

Like it has to be like intentionally done. So I think the phrase, intentional space is more appropriate. Because we do make spaces with the intention to do this or do that. But safe space is just a fairy tale term.

Taylor went on to explain that with intentional spaces, we can intentionally make space for the experiences of a group of people and center their stories. We can intentionally set up decompression spaces (similar to the CANCELLED workshop I discuss in chapter seven). We can intentionally center particular accessibility needs at an event and be clear in our communication with others about which accessibility needs we cannot meet.

Intentional Community Spaces

In thinking about intentional community spaces, I often recall the #FreeChin protest I attended in May 2019 in front of the immigration courts in downtown Atlanta. I was scrolling through social media, with Atlanta activists coming up on my feed. I noticed that someone had marked “interested” in an event, so I clicked on it to learn more. The event was listed as organized by the Queer Asian Alliance and Southerners on New Ground (SONG). For the protest, organizers expected us to sign up to be there, giving our legal name, preferred name, email, and phone number in case anything happened to people who attended the protest. On the form, it also asked if there was anything else we would like them to know, in case of arrest.

On the Monday of the protest, as I got into my car to go to the library to print some materials before the protest, I got a text at 9:37am that read:

Hi Elias, it's Shabab with #FreeChinNow. If you're here with the conference, we're meeting in the lobby at 11:30am for a quick training and then heading out to the action at noon. If you're meeting us there directly, we will be on site by 12:30pm. Can you let me know where you will be joining us?

I responded with: I'll be meeting ya'll on site at 12:30pm, if that's okay.

Shabab responded: "Sure thing, thanks for the heads up!"

After her response, I went to the public library to work on my Wenner Gren application for an hour. Since I was not a part of the conference, and already attended similar trainings with Solutions Not Punishment Collaborative, I did not feel comfortable attending the training. I reached downtown by 12:20 and found public parking a few blocks away in a garage. I had to walk about 11 minutes to reach the address, but I didn't mind because it was warm compared to Massachusetts. The protest was at 180 Turner Dr. in SW Atlanta, which is the field office of ICE in Atlanta. As I walked up to the protest, I looked around for people who looked like they could be a part of the protest.

I noticed people with tie-dyed wrist bands and undercuts. In the parking lot, there was a white woman, a woman with "proud queer Asian" on her shirt, a toddler with a rainbow flag near their car. The online page advertised SONG and the Queer Asian Alliance as the organizers of the protest. I saw someone in a tutu skirt and a tank top with a clip board, which looked official, so I went near that group of people. Media people began to unload their equipment from their cars.

So I waited in the parking lot with people. Soon enough, a person who was about 4 inches taller than me, with flipped up black hair, and a red shirt introduced themselves to me.

They gave their name and said they use they/them pronouns and asked me my name and pronouns, in return. They asked how I heard about the protest, and I said that I was a part of SONG and that I had recently moved into the area. They said “wow you are really getting into it quick!” I laughed and nodded. They said they were the police liaison and that they didn’t expect any altercation but just wanted me to know that. I nodded and said thank you. Quickly after, someone wearing a sari and long black hair who was about 6 ft’ came up to me and introduced their name, then shook my hand and asked if I had a task I replied that I did not, so they gave me some bags of water to hand out and I thanked them.

Having a task during the event, in this case handing out water, eased my mind as someone new to the group and relatively new to Atlanta. This allowed me to feel that I was a part of the community and it was a task I could do. As I discuss in Chapter 7, community accountability as strategies that aim to prevent, respond, and heal from violence through strengthening relationships. I discussed Southern Fried Queer Pride’s focus on solutions rather than turning to state systems of safety. Rather than be dependent on state forms of safety, we collectively engaged in our own safety by handing out water and making sure protestors were safe from dehydration. In this, solutions are also about holding people responsible for what they can do. As a new person to Atlanta, that built relationships over time, handing out water was within my activist skill level. It was not my place to speak at the protest, but rather it was my responsibility to act as support for protesters.

Chin is a Chinese immigrant who I.C.E. detained in solitary confinement because he is a trans guy. The Fulton County Detention Center told the media such a policy was “for his own safety”. I.C.E held him in solitary confinement for 15 months by the time of the protest and was

not receiving proper medical care. Not only was Chin not receiving the medications he needed at the proper dosage, but he also reached a point of wanting to harm himself due to the isolation.

During the event, leaders of the organization spoke and emphasized the importance of community care over cages. Members of Southerners on New Ground held up a fabric sign with sewn letters that read “Care Not Cages” and people continued to chant it out. I joined in and began to shout “care not cages!” When talking to activists after the event, for them, the “Care Not Cages” sign signaled the solidarity between immigrant and Black trans folks. As trans people, we considered it our imperative to fight against all forms of cages and provide care to communities. From the perspective of the institution, I.C.E. held Chin in solitary confinement to “protect him” and “keep him safe” from the men’s prison. However, holding him in solitary confinement led to more health problems. The system prefers the comfort of other detainees, immigrants, guards over the safety of Chin. This time the language was coded as, “we are doing this for your safety”. After the protest, I took notes on my laptop and drew up the watercolor shown in Figure 8.2.



Figure 8.2: A black and white photo of the doodle and watercolor I did after attending the #FreeChin Protest

The protest was one of my first encounters with what Taylor emphasized as “intentional space” in the field. Building off of the experiences activist-artists expressed in their interviews, I pay attention to how intentional spaces focus on who is centered in a space and how harm is held and solved in a space. From assigning me a task to hand out water, to having everyone check in, and to explaining the signs and chants everything was done with the intention of breaking down cages. Other events while in the field, like the #T4Tea event, would list on the event page a statement such as the following:

“We say safer because entirely safe spaces do not exist. We are, however, intentional in spaces we create”—Southern Fried Queer Pride, #T4Tea

The intention of this event was to center the voices of trans people in the experiences we bring to the table. As organizers a part of Southern Fried Queer Pride told me in conversations, in order to actually engage with safety we need to make our intentions clear and follow through on those intentions. We can be intentional but we cannot always be safe, and there are people’s whose safety we do not have in mind (i.e. white people, cis people, and people a part of systems of policing). While in the field, the connection between accountable spaces and self-accountability became apparent. In acting accountable to one’s self, trans folks in the field argued that we must counteract narratives of endurance, resilience, and grit. These narratives of “bravery” or “courage” play into the trauma porn that dehumanizes us. Rather, in resisting narratives of bravery, we put down the expectation that our bodies are vessels for resilience. Our bodies and our lives become vessels for wonder, play, growth, and community.

Accountable to One's Self

Through my field work, I have learned that a large part of accountability to one's community is accountability to one's self. During a book talk that Southern Fried Queer Pride co-hosted with Charis Books, the non-binary author Jacob Tobia, talked about trans narratives and the injustice we do to ourselves when we tell our stories. For Jacob, they wanted to speak outside of the trauma porn expected of trans people and tell a humanizing story of their own life. When asked about some of the complications around these narratives, Jacob responded with "We dissect ourselves before they can cut us". In that way, as trans and non-binary people, we do not allow ourselves to show up authentically. We fall into a trap of thinking we can avoid harm by telling cisgender people what they want to hear of trans narratives and stories. However, what if we were forced to listen to ourselves? What if we actually spent time with ourselves and our own subjectivities?

In their book talk, Jacob emphasized the creation of the stage. From femme aesthetics to the language we use, to the posturing we make through aligning ourselves with zodiacs. Inevitably there are some aspects of authenticity that are shared as a community. However, Jacob also highlighted the importance of accountability to that authenticity. That as we learn and survive from trauma as trans people, we begin to think of our bodies and our lives as battlegrounds and do not know how to leave those battlegrounds. We become trapped in a never ending loop of pain and this becomes a mechanism to avoid accountability.

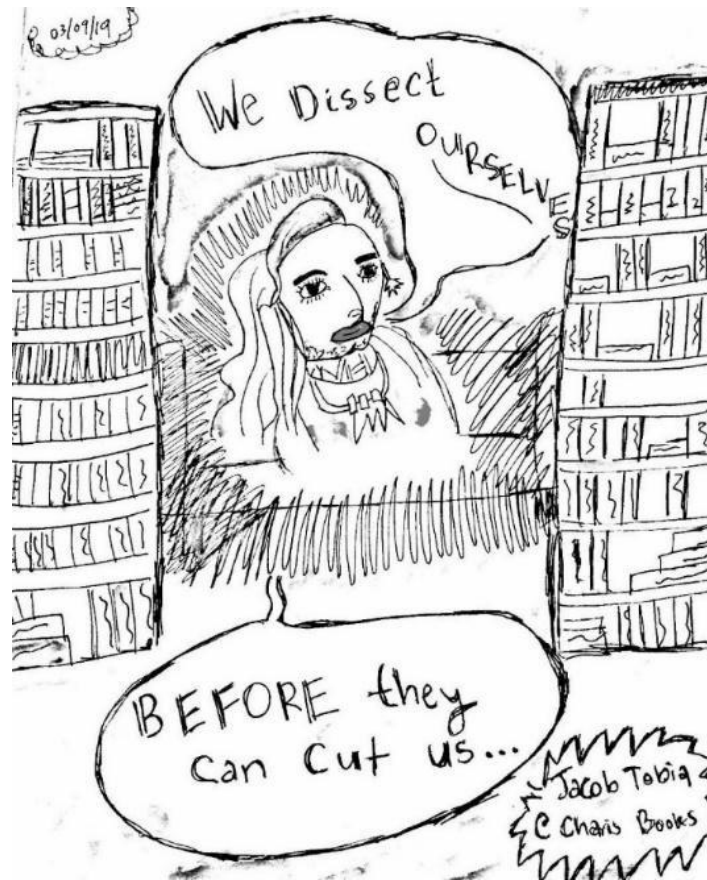


Figure 8.3: Black and white copy of the watercolor I drew in my field notes during the Southern Fried Queer Pride book talk.

Chosen Family

As part of my conversations with trans and non-binary people in Atlanta, I asked each person what chosen family meant to them. One of the first answers I received was from a Latinx transwoman who told me “chosen family who you are full self with. Chosen family holds you accountable, your whole self accountable”. This speaks to the complex ways in which being able to show up as a fully gendered and sexualized selves is a way in which we hold ourselves and community members accountable. In this, responses to “what does chosen family mean to you?” varied amongst people. Amelia, a 28 year old queer person who migrated to Atlanta to escape a hostile family, said the following of chosen family:

Chosen family is people that I don't have to hide any aspect of myself from. With my blood relatives there are a lot of things that they don't know about me. And I actually made a comment a couple years ago I was like, you know, I cuz I met the roommates at two to one b-con I had made a comment online I was like, I feel like the people at the two two one b-con they know me better than my family does that I live with. And a couple years later here I am living with the people I met at 221 B-con⁴ and they are my family. And so I'm not afraid to be myself around them.

In Amelia's description of chosen family, she does not directly reference her chosen family's sexuality or gender expressions, but yet the connection through cosplay subcultures. Amelia's roommates were people who, in earlier months of my fieldwork, I stayed with. I knew from this experience that they were also trans and queer, similar to Amelia. This connects to Hunter mentioning "false intimacy" in the CANCELLED workshop I pay attention to Chapter 8. This "false intimacy" refers to an assumed trust and community between people based on shared sexual and/or gender identities. Activists labeled such assumptions as "false intimacy" because it is not how community is build, especially not how chosen families are built. Amelia's quote highlights the difference between community and chosen family. In Atlanta, people built chosen families based on additional commonalities, such as cosplaying, versus simply being based on sexual and/or gender identity.

In interviews, people directly reference this as a "special bond." Even if they were supported in their gender identities with their families of origin, they still craved being seen and heard within their chosen family. As Alex, a 30 year old trans immigrant said:

Funny, I was actually having this conversation about a month ago with a straight friend who were very, very close to. And topic chosen family came up. I think I was actually talking to her about this. And she went what do you mean by chosen family and I had to sit down explain it. I kind of been gay all my life and I sometimes forget that other people won't know what we talk about because I talk

⁴ "221 B-Con" is an annual cosplay conference in Atlanta.

about things like this quite openly with anyone that's not uh. It's not like it wasn't the 80s or the 70s where you pretended you weren't gay.

It kind of took me by surprise for a moment that someone wouldn't have a concept of chosen family and and I explained it as for a lot of us as we grow up, we will always be on that side of different.

And so you surround yourself with people who might not be the same but can empathize and understand offer guidance for the journey that you're on. Especially in this part of the world, people are disowned. They are absolutely from the excommunicated from the community they're a part of. So, I have no choice but to create a family where they feel safe where they can be themselves, where they don't have to worry about the religious arm or, you know, homophobic dad.

The close friend, who is cis and straight, who did not know what “chosen family” is, struck Alex. This contrasts with how Alex sees chosen family as a concept that comes naturally to him as a trans person. I resonate with how Alex mentioned that chosen family is about more than acceptance, but rather about to see someone who is on a similar journey. Rather than emphasize gender and/or sexual identities, he emphasizes the journey itself and the ability to provide empathy for another’s journey within and outside of community.

As Alex continued,

I think it started as something about protection. Back when LGBT were downside allies. But I think now it's much more about creating a network of people that understand you. It's great that people are accepting these days. It's great that we can be in straight spaces, and it's great the street people want to come into our spaces. I say that until there's a bachelorette party and I suddenly revoke all wants for mingling and mixing. Uh, and I think that's all brilliant. But I also think that will for the moment only go so far.

Alex went on to talk about the limitations of chosen families. He talked about how his chosen family is “vaguely queer but not always queer” and overlaps with other immigrants, who could also be straight and cis. Along with Alex Lee’s explanation of chosen family, he discusses chosen family as a form of protection.

In the field, I learned this was connected to the “special bond” that some trans people related to their chosen family. As Mo, said in their interview:

Hm, chosen family are people who are not related to you by blood but who you have like a special bond with that fits the description of what blood ties are supposed to embody um, that um, some people choose it out of necessity. And some people choose just because like the bond is so strong.

Um, and I want to bring up my friend, again, because when I say friend, like, they're really more like a sibling to me. Um, and it's really just kind of like, I don't know where I would be without them. Um, even with having a mostly supportive nuclear family, like I, at this point, can't imagine like living without my best friend. Um, or being without my best friend. Let me put it that way. Yeah, so I think I think that it's about bonds and about community and everyone needs to feel supported. So in situations where folks don't have that they build it.

In the interviews, similar to Alex and Mo, people spoke very generally of people who do not have family having to build it. However, in the field, I saw that Southern Fried Queer Pride worked to build this chosen family and in these events, that is where I saw how connected accountability was to chosen family. Although Southern Fried Queer Pride organizers complicated and problematized traditional narratives of chosen family, they still hosted events like potlucks, community panels, platonic Valentine's day events, and other social events meant to build chosen family. At these events, trans and queer people depicted chosen family as a small sub-section of community. Whereas someone's community might be “queer activists”, a small group of people within “queer activists” could be someone's chosen family. This small group of people, your chosen family, holds you accountable when you say or do something harmful to the larger community.

As members attended these events and meetings over the years, they built their chosen family and grew as people. As I spent time in the field, I encountered young queer and trans people learning and growing from the advice they received from chosen family.

Relationships formed through events hosted by Southern Fried Queer Pride passed down this type of knowledge.

In the field, trans activists distinguish “safe spaces” from “intentional spaces”. Intentional spaces center the safety of oppressed groups, while pushing for collective growth. Southern Fried Queer Pride focused on creating intentional spaces for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous trans people to explore, grow, and experience pleasure. In centering Black pleasure, Southern Fried Queer Pride organizers maintained Black, Latinx, and Indigenous safety without punishing people who enact harm. For safety within community, Black trans and non-binary people argued that safety is where they can experience joy, silliness, and make mistakes without fear of violence.

CHAPTER NINE:

Cultural & Social Geographies of Trans Joy

What if we lived in a world full of trans joy? Such a world is not far from our reach. During my fieldwork, I had the pleasure of witnessing trans joy. I witnessed trans laughter, trans friendship, and trans safety. At the TRANS PWR event with SFQP that I discuss in Chapter 8, my friend Sam approached me as I was unloading clothes and sorting them for the thrift store. Sam came out earlier that year as genderqueer on Facebook. They turned to me as they silently cried and said “I don’t think I ever witnessed so many trans people in one room. I want to just stand here and soak it in. Want to join me?” I nodded and we stood in silence together. I watched people who I read as white with “they/them” opossum pins on their jackets laugh with one another. I watched as one person asked how dresses for the workplace should fit, and another person bent over to show her how to tell if a dress is long enough. We watched as people entered the room, many looking for gender affirming clothes for the first time. For a moment, we basked in trans joy, before having to return to our daily lives full of closets, violence, exclusion, and constricting cisnormativity⁵.

I think about this particular day often because as Brown (2000) writes, “space does not just represent power, it materializes it.” (3) I came to fieldwork interested in how space actualizes power. As I discuss in the introductory chapter, space creates heterosexual and cisgender agents (Ahmed 2006). In Michael Brown’s *Closet Space*, he argues that “the closet” is not just a metaphor for having to hide parts of ourselves; the closet is material and it exists at global, regional, local, interpersonal, abstract, historical, and imagined “scales”. (20) Brown

⁵ I use cisnormativity similarly to Cohen’s (1997) usage of heteronormativity to mean the habits and systems that are set up for heterosexual relationships. Cisnormativity means the ways in which institutions naturalize cisgender bodies, identities, and ways of knowing. I agree with Samaran (2019) who argues that the language we use to name power should center transness, because it more accurately describes gender and sexual oppression for everyone.

(2000) argues, closet space allows for queer desire to be marketed in urban regions. This is the paradox I discuss in the introductory chapter. On one hand, Atlanta promotes and markets itself as a safe space for queer and trans people, particularly artists. However, on the other hand, queer and trans people face displacement, criminalization, and erasure. As one participant said, “it [gentrification] creates an Atlanta where people love queer culture but not queer people.” I found that queer and trans culture come to be commodified and criminalized under capitalism. For example, at one of the intersections at Piedmont in Midtown, Atlanta there is a large AT&T funded rainbow crosswalk. However, when speaking to trans and queer people who live in Atlanta, many struggle with homelessness, economic insecurity, job discrimination, and criminalization.

Scholars write extensively about the complicated terrain of neoliberalism and queer space (Buckland 2002; Jeppesen 2010; Leap 2010; Stella 2013; Casey 2013; Shah 2015; Spade and Willse 2014). In Atlanta, a landscape of increasing privatization, sex—as defined by Berlant and Warner (1988)—is negotiated by public and private influences such as neighborhood watch committees, police departments, home owners, schools, queer shop and bar owners, and activists. While there are explicitly sexual geographies in Atlanta, there are also institutions such as public sidewalks and parks, schools and universities, agents such as neighborhood watch committees, home owners, police officers, trans and queer activists, and cultural systems such as white supremacy and cisnormativity that embed sex in everyday life.

In Atlanta, this public space is structured by heteronormativity (Berlant and Warner 1998), which gives preferences to heterosexual identities and bodies. Queer geographies in Atlanta which were previously relegated to private space, such as queer book stores, queer bars, and gender variance are displaced, eradicated, and criminalized. As we could see in Jason’s story

of Atlanta becoming a “hipster Disneyland” and the subsequent displacement of Charis Books, gentrification results in what queer ethnographers and theorists name “homonormalization” or homonormativity (Casey 2013, 142; Berlant and Warner 1998, Shah 2015).

In the narratives and stories of trans activists in Atlanta, the city is a discursive site that is critical to the imagined ideals of sexuality and gender. Within the imagined sense of Atlanta as a queer mecca, trans activists created what Leap (2010) terms “moral geographies”, in which trans activists positioned harm as located in neighborhoods of Atlanta rather than on individual agents. (189) In response to the privatization of Midtown, trans activists located a moral geography of cisnormativity within Little Five Points rather than on individual agents within the neighborhood.

I combine and refine what Brown (2000) terms “closet space” and what Leap (2010) terms “moral geographies” as histories and geographies of shame. In conversation with Black feminist and Indigenous anthropology, I argue that shame, and consequently punishment, is a settler colonial and white supremacist project. Shame creates a narrative of security of which whiteness is innocent and safe. It creates a false narrative of safety that promotes “cis desire” as safe, palatable, and family friendly. Upholding the image of palatable cisgender desire is the image of trans desire, which is too Indigenous, too Black, too nude, too dangerous, and too sexual for public space. Weaponized shame creates a commodification of trans and queer desire; cisgender desire needs the fetishization and exclusion of trans and queer desire in order to sustain itself. Shame allows for queerness and transness to be commodified for profit, and shame prevents trans joy, security, and authenticity.

From ethnographic research, I suggest that trans people in the U.S. Deep South migrate to Atlanta looking for community as a way to escape cisgender geographies of shame. However, trans people find Atlanta and their own stories are still haunted by colonial shame⁶. Such shame is present in bodily transition narratives and neighborhood design and policy. Shame led white cisgender homeowners to design neighborhoods and the public, with an idea of intimacy that positions the cisgender figure and familial relationships as safe. To enforce this cisnormative ideal of public intimacy, police officers created special squads to target trans people who used public sidewalks, spent time outside bars, and spent time in parks. Neighborhood watch committees likened trans people to cockroaches.

This shame impacted trans artist-activists' own perception of themselves. As I discuss in Chapter four, shame limited Barbara, Sloan, and Rafael's own evaluations of their capabilities. Shame led activists to give into moral hierarchies of activism, in particular placing direct actions as more important than other forms of activism.

Shame and punishment can be reproduced in queer and trans spaces, particularly through the ways in which shame and punishment were present in individual transition narratives and ethnographic interviews. I argue that trans artist-activists in Atlanta offer alternatives to shame and punishment by queering public intimacy, centering Black pleasure and joy, engaging in nurturance culture, and by speaking to histories of death and the ghosts of settler colonialism in creative and artistic ways. In essence, trans artist-activists in Atlanta are working to create and maintain new geographies: geographies of trans joy, pleasure, and liberation.

Histories and Geographies of Colonial Shame and Punishment

⁶ I use "haunted" similar to how Ahmed (2015) and Subramanian (2014) use haunted to refer to the histories and systems that produce and maintain colonial agents and institutions.

Assimilation into settler colonial ideas of civility depended on fitting European moral codes around sexuality, and as Miranda (2010) suggests there are several movements in U.S. history of which gender variant people are what she terms “re-gendered” and “re-named.” (Stallings, 2020; 263, 260) Spanish colonizers used shame and punishment to enforce European gender roles onto Indigenous communities and renamed them as “joyas.” (256) If an Indigenous person did not perform the type of labor expected of them due to Spanish notions of biological sex, colonizers gave out punishment or even murdered them. For those that did get to survive for minor violations of gendered notions of labor, they were often outcasted by both colonizers and their Indigenous communities (Miranda 2010).

In conversation with Miranda (2010), I argue that U.S. doctors used a similar method of shaming and re-gendering gender variant people in the 1960s and 1970s. Doctors re-named gender variant people into “transvestite” and “transsexual.” In this re-naming, gender variant people were diagnosed as a sexual disorder. To accompany medical narratives of gender variant people, Skidmore (2011) argues that U.S. media emphasized what made a “good transsexual.” (271) In this narrative, white transgender people who fit gendered and sexual norms were upheld as the standard to which every other gender variant person should align.

I argue that such assimilation, which continues today, is about an assimilation into whiteness and cisnormativity. In the 1990s, doctors and psychologists in the U.S. began to re-name gender variant people into a gender disorder, rather than a sexual disorder. To place an identity group into diagnostic criteria, is to shame them. It weaponizes medicine and becomes an apparatus that forces everyone (both cis and trans identified) to fit into gender norms. Rather than use medicine as a way to allow trans people to make decisions for themselves, trans people in Atlanta found themselves having to pitch a narrative of escape from their old bodies in order

to receive the care they needed. In order to access hormones, trans people had to shame their old towns, old lives, and old bodies in order to access better realities.

As I tell in the stories of Ro, Bex, Taylor, and TJ, gender queer people moved to Atlanta looking for communities of care. With Ro's story, I highlight how he had to defend his transness against his family. As he told his story, he recounted how his family was worried about the consequences and potential shame they would face. Ro's family emphasized how the physical transition would impact them and what other people in the community thought of the family. Ro expressed to me that he felt as if his autonomy was being put up for a vote.

I read this as evidence of how cisnormativity promotes a false narrative of safety. By focusing on their own comfort, Ro's family attempted to navigate a cis geography of shame. Rather than enforce punishment for Ro's gender defiance, Ro's family expressed fear of punishment through social isolation. Rather than work with Ro to create a new geography, they out-casted Ro. Simultaneously, Ro also made the decision to leave and look for community in Atlanta. As Miranda (2010) argues, Spanish colonizers used fear of shame and social isolation to convince Indigenous communities to outcast third gender people. Ro's family, a white cisnormative family, is afraid of their own tool of oppression.

In Chapter four, when I discuss Estrella's story, I paid attention to Estrella repeating "for my safety." As Estrella told me, the Irwin County Detention Center is a men's facility. However, she amongst other trans migrants, were placed there due to their sex assignment at birth. The detention center followed a colonial geography: divide women and men in confinement based on Western medical standards of biological sex. There is an assumption that this division keeps

people safe. However, as an Indigenous transgender migrant to Atlanta, Estrella was in a position of precarity.

During my time with Estrella, she helped me realize that part of colonial shame was telling Indigenous gender variant people that they must undergo isolation for their own safety. After another migrant attacked Estrella, I.C.E. guards put her in solitary confinement. They told her it was for her own safety. Estrella survived six months of solitary confinement. Rather than address the systems that put Estrella in a vulnerable position amongst other migrants, I.C.E. and the Irwin County Detention Center forcefully re-gendered Estrella.

The Tongue

Along with Black, Brown, and Queer theorists, I visit the tongue as a site of geography: both geography of shame and geography of pleasure. The tongue is queer; its power speaks across time and space. I speak, make-love, and fuck with my tongue. The tongue is deeply erotic; it is both a site of colonization and decolonization. The tongue is both our individual and collective embodied voice.

I sometimes use my tongue to apologize and downplay my own power. I apologize for taking up space and being human. During my second month in Atlanta, I attended an artist talk hosted by Southern Fried Queer Pride in downtown. As I walked in, I approached someone wearing a blue jean jumper and blue mohawk. I apologized. I apologized for needing to ask where the bathroom was. She laughed and told me I had nothing to apologize for. As she insisted to shake my hand, she asked me if I was an artist. I looked down at my boots and then back up, “Uh, I’m not really an artist. Just... I appreciate art” I nodded as if that was a sophisticated

answer. She laughed again and asked me what I do. I told her about my dissertation. She nodded and said, “it sounds like you are an artist... maybe it is time to think more of yourself.”

With this story, I show the way in which colonial shame is embodied in my own tongue. My own embodied colonial shame shows up as a way to limit my own artistic voice, presence, and knowledge. In this dissertation, I use autoethnography to highlight the ways in which my own “diseased” tongue emerges. In my experience of graduate school, colleagues did not wish for me to use the word “cisgender” or to name “cisgender culture”. These are critical moments in attempt to cut my tongue. As a twenty-two year old scholar, I took it as my learning. My tongue must be cut, or as L.H. Stallings puts it, “ a distinctive manifestation of colonization is gendered and sexual disease of the tongue.” (2020, 11) The lack of a name for cisgender ways of knowing is part of the oppression trans people experience. I cannot give cisgender people their name; my tongue is cut off for such an act. In this way, I learned that it was my burden to educate those around me or face the repercussions of their ignorance. My tongue became a tool that was not my own, or as Lorde (2007) suggests, it is a “primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns.” (113) As she argues, such a tactic is a diversion from liberation.

In chapter four, I visit the geography of the tongue by asking who is empowered to label themselves as an artist-activist. In conversation with Dave (2012), I pay attention to how activist-artists created “moral hierarchies” of activism. For example, I include an excerpt from Barbara’s interview, in which she refers to herself as a “pussy” because she does not engage in direct forms of action or protest. In addition to Barbara, I share the stories of Sloan and Rafael, who struggle to participate in activism because of limitations imposed on them by capitalism.

I also share bits of Estrella's story, who demonstrates how much our tongue has power to create geographies of trans authenticity. Estrella made use of what Stallings (2020) terms the "slow tongue manifesto", which focuses on both "form and aesthetic." (11) I think is the gift Estrella gave me. She let me witness the gift of slow time. I argue that such moments were mini-geographies of trans joy and pleasure. Estrella paid attention to slowness and aesthetic, and each of these moments were mini-geographies of trans joy and pleasure.

Every time I drove Estrella out to visit the transwomen detained by I.C.E., she put her make-up on in the car. Each time, she emphasized how important it was to her to have "her face" on "before seeing the girls." While we rode in my car, she played a trans hip hop artist whose lyrics reclaimed trans identity from religious trauma. I would watch and sing along with Estrella as we rode out to the Irwin County Detention Center. It was important to Estrella that I sing along with her. We developed a saying, "fuck the cis" and would say it anytime it a cis person came up. It was a pleasure to witness Estrella putting her on make-up, rapping in the car, and making me say out loud "fuck the cis." Along with our "fuck the cis" joke, Estrella invited me and other activists to dinner after every rally and protest. In this space, we often laughed, ate good food, and talked about any cuties we might have our eye on.

Along with rallies and protests, Southern Fried Queer Pride hosted potlucks at the local Neighborhood Church. Although we never spoke about legislation, strategies at protests where we fought back against the police, in these spaces we shared information that eventually led to organized tactics against the police with Black Lives Matter protests. The potlucks acted as an entry point for people who were not previously involved in activism to build connections and eventually show up to protests and direct actions. I argue that in these geographies, such as eating food together, we created networks and chosen families that went against the

cisnormativity and whiteness of the everyday institutions and geographies we have to navigate. In this trans geographical point of pleasure, we put down the closets imposed on us.

Geographies of Trans Pleasure

In the ethnographic story I open this chapter with, Southern Fried Queer Pride creates a “counterpublic”---defined by Warner (2002, 62) as formed in contrast to the gendered norms set out by cisgender geographies of shame in Atlanta. As Berlant and Warner (1998) argue, a queer counterpublic creates possibilities for new dialogue. They call for the creation of these geographies, as they suggest “...the radical aspirations of queer culture building: not just as a safe zone for queer sex but the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is no longer referent.” (548) In Atlanta, Southern Fried Queer Pride centered queer counterpublics in trans pleasure.

In my account of the TRANS PWR thrift store day, an outsider could possibly just observe an adult woman asking for the first time how a dress fits for the workplace. At the worst reading, an outsider might see someone they perceive as a “man” trying on a dress for the first time and deem such knowledge and space as too sexual. As an insider to this counterpublic, I read it as a deeply intimate experience of sharing queer and trans knowledge for the benefit of a trans person. This example is not based in resisting heteronormativity or sexuality alone, but resisting cisnormativity, which accounts for both sexuality and gender. It is a geography where the cisgender body and way of life is no longer relevant.

When I practice pleasure, I cite a type of joy that is grounded in Black feminist theory, scholarship, and community. I begin to refuse cisgender geographies of shame. Similarly, trans artists and activists in Atlanta refused assimilation into cis geographies of shame and normative

standards of public intimacy. I feel responsible to tell this story, because as Cohen (1997) suggests, queering public intimacy is the potential of queerness and queer politics. It is our job as scholars to document the agency of those who do not conform to binaries. Even beyond non-conformity, it is a political strategy to focus on pleasure—as defined by brown (2019) as our ability to experience joy as well as our ability to share joy with others, for oppressed communities. Southern Fried Queer Pride reclaimed and created space to engage in pleasure-based organizing and sexual decolonization to create new trans geographies of joy.

In conversation with Black feminist theory, I use Brown (2000)’s concept of space as a material form of power, and ask: what are the geographies of pleasure for trans folks? As I described in chapter six, Southern Fried Queer Pride hosted several events that centered the pleasure of Black trans and queer people. One such event was Buss It Open, which Southern Fried Queer Pride hosted in downtown Atlanta at the Murrmur Art Gallery. As I wrote in Chapter six:

As I walked into the Murrmur Art Gallery, in downtown Atlanta, there was a large silicone pink dildo shaped like a penis suction cupped to the door, facing the street. On street, there were several small groups of people herded together with cardboard signs, blankets, and shopping carts. Each group prepped together for the night ahead of them. Photos of a dominatrix plastered the glass display outside of the art gallery, along with a neon sign that read: ‘how nice’. I was struck by the orientation of the dildo, photos, and the neon sign towards the street. Although neighborhood watch committees, the Red Dog Squad, and white cis women like Peggy Denby aimed to end such open eroticism, there were still pockets of queer people engaging in blatant eroticism.

By engaging in open eroticism and centering Black trans and queer pleasure, Southern Fried Queer Pride enacted what Lorde (2007) argues is the power of the erotic. Lorde (2007) locates the power of the erotic in the feminine and argues the power of the erotic is often “misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the

plasticized sensation.” (28) Rather than erotic power coming from the feminine, with Buss it Open, the power of the erotic came from Black, Indigenous, and Latinx trans people who expressed a variety of gendered erotic power.

In chapter six, I discuss a white middle-aged white woman who walked into the art show and turned her nose up at the artwork in the gallery. As Lorde (2007) argues, the erotic is often mistaken for what she calls “pornographic.” (28) This is critical to abuse of power; the middle-aged white woman could look at artwork consisting of nude Black, white, and Indigenous trans bodies as pornographic. When we mistake the erotic for the pornographic, we begin to value the comfort of the oppressor over the safety of the oppressed.

In my own journey with fieldwork, I connect to Lorde (2007) when she states, “for as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation...” (58) The erotic allows us to place trans geographies within ourselves. It acknowledges that even with colonial shame and punishment, we already have the power within ourselves. We can give up shame.

In the space that SFQP created, I watched as other trans people put down shame. After the art gallery, during the sex work panel and the film showings, several trans people walked around nude. I watched as transmen, took off their shirts and walked around in their boxer briefs. Some had undergone top surgery and some did not. I looked down at my own shirt. Even though I had top surgery eight years ago, fear of the erotic, which Lorde (2007) connects to shame, led me to remained ashamed of my own top surgery scars. I was afraid of my own desires for love, unable to see my own body as worth touching, and worth pleasure. Rather than put our trans

bodies up for cisgender consumption and gaze, we took pleasure in experiencing our bodies together, in a space that was open to the public in Downtown Atlanta.

Nurturance Culture

Southern Fried Queer Pride is actively reclaiming and building the caring communities that Miranda (2010) suggests is critical to decolonization. She argues, that we must, “work to heal the wounds inflicted by shame, internalized hatred and fear.” (277) To do this work, and to move away from geographies of shame and to create geographies of joy, trans artist-activists in Atlanta enacted what Samaran (2020) terms “nurturance culture.” (17) As Samaran (2020) suggest and as Southern Fried Queer Pride built, when we center trans people and trans led spaces, we make safety more real for everyone. I witnessed artist-activists reclaiming geographies of trans joy and pleasure.

One of the critical ways in which Southern Fried Queer Pride created nurturance culture is that they fostered community connections, rather than centered romantic relationships. As Cullors (2019) suggests, “We need a culture that does not epitomize, isolate, and center romantic relationships. We need to cultivate a society that encourages community and fosters love for our community.” (1692) Instead of focusing on romantic relationships, Cullors (2019) argues that we should build broader connections as a way to engage in transformative justice⁷.

SFQP encouraged familial networks outside of romantic relationships and family assigned at birth by hosting holiday events, potlucks, and non-alcohol centered social events. These events included cook-outs, picnics, and hiking days. During my time at these events, I witnessed queer and trans people emphasize the importance of platonic intimacy, platonic touch,

⁷ Mingus (2019) details transformative justice as a framework that uses model meant to reduce harm to create ways to solve problems outside of policing.

and queer platonic care. Such an ethos was not anti-sex or anti-pleasure framework, but rather, organizers took an expansive approach to pleasure. For the TRANS PWR Day, there was an emphasis on forms of connection, family, and platonic care. At the event, Taylor opened with acknowledging an expansive definition of care and family, away from romantic and sexual intimacy. Rather, this space was for building queer friendships and queer family. This created a different culture when there was harm. Rather than taking sides, which Cullors (2019) warns leads to isolation, the community called-in both parties to speak to organizers and facilitators.

In chapter seven, I detail the story of a white burlesque performer that relates her bunny costume to a spirit animal. Rather than call-out the performer, Taylor pulled the performer in and talked to her about her comment. A few months later, as a group, Southern Fried Queer Pride decided to host a cancel culture workshop where people could come together and have a dialogue about harm. I recount this story because it details the layers of harm that may occur in spaces of difference. Rather than dismiss this difference, SFQP worked to create space for all members of community, and to address the harm done. Instead of focusing solely on the people who experienced harm, SFQP worked to transform our own sociality so that our community as a whole could live in more liberatory ways.

Another crucial element of the geographies of trans pleasure that SFQP created and maintained through nurturance culture, is the absence of police. At large parties, events, and rallies, Southern Fried Queer Pride refused to work with the police. SFQP worked to maintain safety without police or policing on several levels.

The week before the yearly arts festival, I underwent training with other volunteers with SFQP. Even though I already spent eight months volunteering at SFQP events, they had a special

training for the arts festival parties. At the training, Taylor emphasized that at the parties, we could expect close to 600 to 800 people. In order to prepare volunteers, Taylor walked us through on what to ask and how to respond if someone came to the party who seemed as if they were not well mentally. She emphasized that we want people to have fun, to drink, and people are allowed to do drugs, but we should be on the lookout for people who seem heavily under the influence. She trained on us on how to ask the person if they would like some help, a ride home, or a trained medical responder to check-in with them. After Taylor spoke, we all had a discussion about whether or not we wanted to call an ambulance. Taylor emphasized that we should avoid ambulances at all costs because they often discriminate against Black and trans people.

In order to avoid having to call an ambulance, Taylor emphasized to us the importance of checking people and gauging their mental awareness before entering the party. At the party, there were volunteers stationed with pink arm bands, as designated people to go to if a person passed out, was dehydrated, or got into a physical or verbal altercation with another person.

As part of this strategy of safety, we put allocated funds to Uber rides for people to get home after the party. Rather than expect community members to pay for their rides when they got home, we organized with Uber to pay for the first 200 ride requests coming from the location of the party (at The Bakery in Southwest Atlanta). The critical aspect of our parties was that we wanted to create an environment where trans and queer people felt safe enough to dance, express themselves freely, and connect with community without the presence of police.

Another level that SFQP enacted safety and nurturance culture without policing, is hosting gender specific events without the policing of identities. I had the privilege of attending one of these events, #T4T, whereas the other two I did not feel comfortable attending (*No Boys*

Allowed and *Jutinx*). With #T4T, which stands for trans for trans, in the advertisements for the event, we emphasized that it would be a space that centers trans people and our romantic relationships. We (Jessie, Kae, Micky, and I) emphasized how important it was to us that this be a conversation between trans people. In the panel and discussion, we did not police identity. Everyone was given space to talk, but we focused the conversation on trans relationships from the perspective of trans people.

For No Boys Allowed, a similar structure of self-regulation was put in place. SFQP left it up to community members to decide if this was an event for them. In the advertisement for the party, SFQP stated the purpose of the event and who it was intended for. They emphasized that they will not police identity and that community members get to decide if this event suits them.

Conclusion

While working on edits for this dissertation, I attended a virtual walk through of the space that SFQP intends to buy in 2021 to act as community land. At the meeting, we workshopped potential names and we decided to name it the “Monte Carlo Community Center.” Seasons asked if we had permission from the family to name the center that, and Ange said that we did have clearance from the family. After we decided on a name, we talked about what we intended to do with the place. Currently, it is an old run down warehouse in the West End of Atlanta. After years of building with the local residents, Taylor felt comfortable putting the community center in the West End and argued that we would not be contributing to gentrification.

With this dissertation, I tell the story of trans people who escaped cisgender geographies of shame and worked to reclaim and build new possibilities: trans geographies of joy and pleasure. With these geographies, I draw attention to how organizers centered Black trans

pleasure, and the impact this had for all trans people involved. I highlight the emphasis on agency and our collective ability to come together before and after conflict. I argue that safety is possible without the presence of police, and SFQP is doing the work to enact such a culture.

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