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WHAT HAPPENS AT FREAKNIC CANNOT STAY AT FREAKNIK: CENTERING BLACK
WOMEN'S STORIES AT ATLANTA'S BLACK COLLEGE SPRING BREAK (1983-2000)

by

KIMBERLY KABRIA OGLESBY

Under the Direction of Akinyele Umoja, PhD.

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2021

ABSTRACT

From the 1980s to 2000, Atlanta's Freaknik festival was a unique Black spring break celebration that attracted thousands of Black college students and young partygoers to the city for one weekend. In its two-decade existence, this event became a Black cultural phenomenon centering music, fashion, food, and social gathering that remains in the historical memory of an entire generation of Black Americans in the twentieth century. Previous scholars have used Freaknik as a comparative space to make analytical arguments surrounding culture, gender, and politics. However, this intrinsic collective case study will provide an extensive historical account of Freaknik that focuses on Black women's experiences and will place them in their sociopolitical, cultural, and racial context. Through archival research and oral histories, this case explores the intersectional components in Black women's experiences at Freaknik and reveal the impact of their convergence on Black women's lives in Atlanta.

INDEX WORDS: Black women, Freaknik. Freaknic, Atlanta, Black feminist thought, 20th century, intersectionality

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2021

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May 2021

DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to my brother, Anthony Gregory Oglesby Jr, my biggest supporter. Even though I never got to tell you about it, I hope, as you watch over me that I make you proud. Love you forever.

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I cannot forget to acknowledge my fantastic cohort! Y'all are some of the most brilliant, most inspiring people I have ever met. I love y'all so much. Thank you for going through this journey with me!

Lastly, I must acknowledge the men and women who took their time out to share with me their experiences at Freaknik. This project would NOT have been possible without you. Thank you for trusting me and allowing me to tell your stories.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AUC – Atlanta University Center

CAU – Clark Atlanta University

GSU – Georgia State University

GRCC – Grady Rape Crisis Center

ITC - Interdenominational Theological Center

SCLC – Southern Christian Leadership Conference

HBCU – Historical Black Colleges and Universities

NAACP – National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

SGA – Student Government Association

Georgia Tech - Georgia Institute of Technology

PREFACE

Many questioned why I decided to write about Freaknik. I certainly did not intend to. As a matter of fact, I was born right in the middle of its existence (1996). So, by the time I moved to Georgia when I was four, Freaknik was over. My interests in this party revolved around two things: Black women's voices and Atlanta. Since attending Georgia State University and learning about Black Atlanta, Freaknik was eventually spoken of. I never heard of it before as my parents were too old at the time to have been involved. I must have overheard it in a conversation or maybe even in class. I was intrigued. What is a Freaknik? I searched for it on the internet and found the 2015 Atlanta magazine article written by Errin Haines Whack and Rebecca Burns.¹ Ironically, that is the year I graduated high school and started college. In the article, I read many familiar voices like former Atlanta mayor Kasim Reed, Jermaine Dupri, Sharon Toomer, and Ryan Cameron sharing their experiences about the event. I learned about the who's, what's, when's, and where's, fueling my knowledge about Black people and their triumphs and battles in the "City Too Busy to Hate."

When I finished reading, I thought, why don't I look on YouTube to see what this event actually looked like? Well, I got more than I bargained for as the videos posted, whether they were authentic or not, showed an atmosphere that looked fun and familiar, but they made me feel uncomfortable. In the videos, often filmed by males, women were objects where their chests and behinds were the film stars. It reminded me of some sexual harassment trauma I dealt with when I began navigating the party scene as a college student. I knew how I felt about being touched unwantingly or treated like a sexual object or piece of meat where I was reduced to my bodily

¹ Whack, Errin Haines, and Rebecca Burns. "Freaknik: Rise and Fall of Atlanta's Most Infamous Street Party." Atlanta Magazine, March 18, 2015. <https://www.atlantamagazine.com/90s/freaknik-the-rise-and-fall-of-atlantas-most-infamous-street-party/>.

assets. It did not make me feel good, and the women I knew around me kind of overlooked this feeling or accepted it. So, I wondered how were those women having so much fun? Were they accepting this treatment? What was I doing wrong? Was I overreacting? Were there other women who felt like me?

As I moved into graduate studies and the decision to determine my thesis topic became imperative, I thought back to my discovery of Freaknik. I thought what if Freaknik was told from a woman's perspective? Why weren't more women talking about their experiences at Freaknik? Did they not want to, or were they being overlooked? When I decided to take on this project, I didn't realize the different stories I would get that would surprise me and convince me to want to go. I talked to so many women who smiled at their memories regardless of if they experienced some negative interactions, which I found pretty odd. What made Freaknik so special?

At that point, I knew I was on to something way bigger than little ole me. My work may upset some people, but it also may be praised by others. All I know is I only intend to retell the stories from the mouths of the people. I want to show the significance of Freaknik as well as its problems. No one thing is ever all good or bad, and we should not expect Freaknik to be any different. Therefore, I hope this work is only the beginning of unraveling honest truths while also celebrating our people. We are human, and no one should expect us to be anything else. I hope this work encourages more women to speak up about their stories. I hope this work helps us all to understand and define what Freaknik meant to the Black community and Atlanta at large. My work is only for my people, which includes Black Americans, Black Women, and Black people rooted in the South. God Bless and enjoy!

1 INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 1983, the D.C. Metro Club, a group of Atlanta University Center Consortium (AUC) students, continued their selected club theme of "Return of the Freak" and put together a picnic on campus for Spring Break.² They named it, Freaknic to pay homage to popular songs like "Le Freak" by Chic and "Freak of the Week" by Funkadelic.³ Following popularity among the AUC students, it became annual, jumping from park to park each year. By the late 1980s, the growing celebration became nationally recognized by its mention in Spike Lee's 1988 film *School Daze* and a 1989 episode of *A Different World*.⁴ By the mid-1990s, the spelling of the name changed to Freaknik as the small park picnic became more of a three-day partying weekend with concerts, night and day parties, celebrity pop-ups, and deliberate street congestion to dance, drink, and have fun with other partygoers.⁵ In other words, as attendees of Freaknic attracted more students from outside of the AUC, centralized organization from the DC Metro Club weakened. Freaknik took on a life of its own, attracting more than just college students but also other young adults looking to enjoy the cultural sensation.

Likewise, Freaknik naturally had an impromptu atmosphere and, by 1993, demanded city officials' attention. The 200,000 people coming to visit the city and the massive traffic jams that impacted the city's flow attracted a large amount of media attention.⁶ Shopping malls, hotels, parks, bars, nightclubs, and restaurants were overflowing with Freaknik participants visiting from all over the country, looking to meet people, and have a good time. This study expands on

² Toomer, Sharon Correa. "The Origins of Freaknik." *The Atlanta Journal and The Atlanta Constitution*, April 24, 1994. G7.

³ Thompson, Krista A. 2007. "Performing Visibility: Freaknic and the Spatial Politics of Sexuality, Race, and Class in Atlanta." *TDR (1988-)* 51 (4): 27.

⁴ Quiros, Ansley L.. "Partying "The Atlanta Way"? Freaknik and Black Governance in 1990s Atlanta." *Atlanta Studies*. September 26, 2017.

⁵ "FREAKNIK!" 2013. *Ebony* 68 (6): 130–34.

⁶ Newman, Harvey K. 1999. *Southern Hospitality: Tourism and the Growth of Atlanta*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press. 238.

the academic discourse of Atlanta's Freaknik by further exploring and retelling Black women's Freaknik experiences while placing such encounters in the socio-political and cultural context in which they existed. Centering Black women's experiences at the Freaknik festival from 1983 to 2000 in this research places value on Black women and their intersectional positionalities in a cultural space.

Media coverage of Freaknik exhibited Black culture, celebration, and youth. However, this media coverage was presented through the racist and sexist stereotypical lens that projected activities and parties of Freaknik as wild, lewd, and disorderly. This media portrayal directly aligns with assessments of Black bodies, according to scholars such as Ronald Jackson. He argues that Black bodies are a text to be read as alien when the behaviors are not complicit in every sense of the dominant cultural norms.⁷ Freaknik celebrations were not complicit with dominant cultural norms. As a result, mass media criminalized this Black youth celebration and conflated all coverage of this event to the participation of wild animal-like people. For instance, communications scholar Marian Myers states, "Freaknik coverage in *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution* from 1994 to 1996 placed the event within a racialized context that blamed locals rather than students for any acts of violence and initially failed to recognize sexual harassment as an issue."⁸ Massive criticism arose of Atlanta officials' mismanagement of this event as reports of violence, rape, and looting were spotlighted by the media. On Saturday, April 22, 1995, writers from *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* published an article titled "FREAKNIK '95 Scenes," which detailed how video camera usage influenced young men's boldness and randy behavior as they encouraged several occasions of sexual harassment to young women at

⁷ Jackson, Ronald L. 2006. *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media*. SUNY Series, the Negotiation of Identity. Albany: SUNY Press. 55.

⁸ Meyers, Marian. 2004. "African American Women and Violence: Gender, Race, and Class in the News." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21 (2): 102.

Freaknik. Such details included the story of one 20-year-old woman who was "exposed unwillingly when a young man undid her halter top while another focused his video camera. A large group of men surrounded her, and someone pulled off her top. She panicked, screamed, and, trying to get away, fell to the ground. Three friends grabbed her and helped her get away." The young men's reasons for their behavior involved trying to film women and "take their picture" in the name of fun.⁹

The following Monday, staff writers at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* published the full-page article, "Freaknik '95: Sexual Issues," in which Atlanta Police Chief Beverly Harvard, Dr. Peg Ziegler, the executive director of the Grady Rape Crisis center, and a few other partygoers expressed their dismay at the sexual behavior of men and women displayed at the 1995 Freaknik festival. One comment given by a 21-year-old student described how she and her friends were chased by 40 men when they stopped for lunch. In the aftermath of the chase, she said her short red dress was ripped, the pink ruffle pulled off, spaghetti strap torn, and her zipper pulled down.¹⁰ The next day, Kathy Scruggs, a staff writer of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, published another article, "FREAKNIK AFTERMATH," which briefly described the nearly 2,000 charges filed for several criminal offenses including sexual assault, harassment, and rape against women. Such offenses investigated at the time included the confirmed hotel rape of a young woman, a niece of a city employee, along with three other young girls who were 12 and 13 years old.¹¹

⁹ Hagans, Gail and Plummer, Don STAFF WRITERS. 1995. "FREAKNIK '95; SCENES; Video Flirting: Young Men with Cameras Say Filming Young Women Is an; Instant 'in.' But Officers Say Some Women Were Harassed." *The Atlanta Journal and The Atlanta Constitution*, April 22.

¹⁰ Scruggs, Kathy and McDonald, R. Robin STAFF WRITERS. 1995. "Freaknik '95; Sexual Issues." *The Atlanta Journal and The Atlanta Constitution*, April 24.

¹¹ Scruggs, Kathy STAFF WRITER. 1995. "Hundreds Were Charged with Violations during Freaknik.; FREAKNIK AFTERMATH; Half of Arrests Were Visitors; Counting the Crimes: About 2,000 Charges Were Filed, with Offenses; Ranging from Looting to Rape, 153 Cars Were Impounded and 1,184 Traffic; Tickets Issued." *The Atlanta Journal and The Atlanta Constitution*, April 25.

Moreover, Freaknik 1995 should be considered the climax of the cultural phenomenon because thousands of people defied Atlanta's warnings to enforce order. T-shirts reading "They told us not to come, but we came anyway," "You can't stop what you didn't start," and "Freak the mayor" were extremely popular.¹² Kathy Scruggs, a journalist from *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, wrote, "Atlanta Police Chief Beverly Harvard said she wants no surprises when hundreds of thousands of college students drive into the city for this year's Freaknik bash, only to be met by an army of police officers ordered to enforce the laws strictly. And that goes for everybody - even jaywalkers from Atlanta."¹³ Such a tone from the police and lack of support from Atlanta officials eventually discouraged attendance in the following years.¹⁴

Hence, 1995 is the year when the embrace of this rebellious spirit could have left more Black women even more susceptible to men's sexual predatory attitudes and objectification of their bodies; thereby, resulting in an increase in the sexual exploitation of Black women at Freaknik. Such objectification and treatment waned women's attendance causing the male to female ratio to increase and a higher frequency of men crowding dancing women. So much so that during Freaknik 1997 and 1998, more dangerous situations for Black women gained attention from the media. In 1997, Atlantan George Hawthorne stated that he pulled a woman from a swarm of 20 to 30 men trying to strip her of her clothes. He stated, "her underwear around her knees and her dress was up over her head. . . if it had not been for me intervening, she would have potentially been raped in broad daylight."¹⁵ In 1998, Jack Warner and Craig Schneider wrote how a woman was ripped of her clothes and passed around a large group of men for them

¹² Shea, Christopher. "Clampdown on 'Freaknik'." *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 41, no. 34 (May 05, 1995): 2.

¹³ Scruggs, Kathy STAFF WRITER. 1995. "FREAKNIK '95; Police Chief Says All Lawbreakers Will Be Arrested; State Troopers to Join in Battle against Gridlock." *The Atlanta Journal and The Atlanta Constitution*, April 9.

¹⁴ Quiros, Ansley L.. "Partying "The Atlanta Way"? Freaknik and Black Governance in 1990s Atlanta." *Atlanta Studies*. September 26, 2017.

¹⁵ Bynum, Russ. 1998. "Atlanta's Freaknik May Fade into History /Sexual Misbehavior at Festival Sparks Backlash." *Houston Chronicle*, May 14.

to fondle while others recorded the event on video cameras. A security guard rescued her from the crowd and retreated to a nearby apartment complex where she could come out of her state of daze and shock. Another incident described how a group of women in a mall parking lot, intending to make a vehicular exit, were attacked by a mob of 50 men who beat dents in the car, tore away trimming, and bent the car's antenna.¹⁶

These incidents show an escalation of unpredictable sexual predatory behavior among men that produced dangers for Black women at Freaknik. It is not known how often such incidents of rape and sexual violence occurred during Freaknik's existence due to victims' fears of revealing their experiences and being vulnerable to the stigmatization and victim-blaming that could occur based on the context of the event. However, what is known is that some women did come forward to tell their experiences briefly. These same stories, documented or otherwise, circulating about Black women's horrific experiences deterred women's attendance as reported in numerous media outlets like *The Macon Telegraph* and *The Augusta Chronicle*, which further aided in Freaknik's end.¹⁷ Considering Atlanta's turbulent relationship with the event, it could be speculated that such concentration of Black women's experiences of sexual violence by Atlanta's politicians was used for dogmatic interest to end Atlanta's Freaknik. Such interest reflects the value society places on Black women and highlights the expediency of Black women who frequently must fight against a distorted image, rooted in stereotypical assumptions from slavery, to be treated like a human but also a woman. Controlled historical constructions of humanness and man-ness (woman-ness) aim to exclude groups like Black men and women away from

¹⁶ Warner, Jack and Schneider, Craig. 1998. "Freaknik Goes from Mild Day to Wild Night; Women Become Commodity on Streets." *The Atlanta Journal and The Atlanta Constitution*, April 19.

¹⁷ Associated Press. "Women; Avoiding; Events; Some Female Students Say Freaknik Has Become Too Lewd for Them to Feel Safe." *Augusta Chronicle, The (GA)*, April 22, 1998; The Associated Press. 1998. "Women Say They Don't Feel Safe at Freaknik." *Macon Telegraph, The (GA)*, April 22.

reason and closer to biological instincts.¹⁸ Sexual violence and other gender concerns should be equally weighted amongst all other issues in politics, culture, and communities; however, such balance does not intrinsically exist for Black women. As this study reveals, Black women's gendered issues weaponized against Freaknik while their racialized concerns defended Freaknic, leaving them in a challenging but very familiar position.¹⁹

Conversations of Freaknik's return have since continued from the late 1990s. No event was officially publicized, especially when Mayor Kasim Reed banned any Freaknik-related activities within the city in 2010.²⁰ In 2019, the official word from the Atlanta-based group, After 9 Partners, announced that Freaknik would return but be stylized as "FreakNik," the family-friendly concert.²¹ In February 2020, After 9 Partners announced FreakNik's second annual return as "Freak World" at the Morris Brown College campus in June 2020.²² Amid the global coronavirus pandemic, state restrictions, and health and safety regulations, the event was postponed to September 2020.²³ It consisted of parking lot concerts with a lineup of hip-hop artists like Jermaine Dupri, Too Short, Plies, Juvenile, 2 Live Crew, and several other artists.²⁴ Organizers of the event insist that their FreakNik is different from the 1990s. Only time will

¹⁸ Wynter, Sylvia. "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Reimprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Desêtre: Black Studies Toward the Human Project." (2007). 122-123.

¹⁹ Freaknik is spelled with a "C" here and throughout this text when making any reference to Freaknik prior to 1995. Spelling of the word fluctuated in 1993 and eventually became only spelled with a "k" by 1995. I use a "c" to reference the beginning of Freaknic and differentiate between Freaknik 1995 and beyond based on the reception, mood, and acceptance of Freaknik after its uninvited by Atlanta in 1995.

²⁰ Ruggieri, Melissa. "Freaknik Returns to Atlanta This Summer in Family-friendly Form." AJC: Atlanta. News. Now. April 02, 2019. Accessed August 17, 2020.

²¹ Watson, Andrea V. "FreakNik 2020 Returns To Atlanta; Tickets On Sale Now." Atlanta, GA Patch. Patch Media, February 25, 2020. <https://patch.com/georgia/atlanta/freaknik-2020-returns-atlanta-tickets-sale-now>.

²² ———. "Freaknik Announces New Location for 2020 Festival." ajc. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, February 24, 2020. <https://www.ajc.com/blog/music/freaknik-announces-new-location-for-2020-festival/T7ei9L5qlb8QxTHv7rV2sN/>.

²³ Ruggieri, Melissa. "Freaknik Festival Announces 2020 Lineup, Including Jermaine Dupri, Too Short and Plies." ajc. The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, March 19, 2020. <https://www.ajc.com/blog/music/freaknik-festival-announces-2020-lineup-including-jermaine-dupri-too-short-and-plies/QvO1G2307gT3AfuSUa1kZK/>.

²⁴ Dennis, Ryan. "The Lineup for Freaknik Festival 2020 Just Dropped." 11Alive.com. WXIA-TV, March 20, 2020. <https://www.11alive.com/article/entertainment/television/programs/the-a-scene/who-is-performing-at-freaknik/85-6c5563e6-4865-4410-94dc-dae34b02f468>.

reveal the magnitude, longevity, and impact of this new Freaknik. Understandably, waiting for another occurrence of sexual violence against Black women at this event or others like it before action is taken is counterproductive and rather harmful to a consistently vulnerable demographic in American society. This study investigates Black women's positionality, using Atlanta's Freaknik as an example, to understand how gender, race, and culture in Atlanta converge on Black female bodies.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this historical study is to explore, document, and analyze the experiences of Black women at Atlanta's Freaknik festival from 1983-2000, resulting in a critical historical analysis of such experiences in the late 20th century. Often, Black women's lived experiences are overlooked, undervalued, or misunderstood. A lineage of academics, like Black Feminist theorist Kimberle Crenshaw, argues that Black women's experiences and other marginalized groups offer unique experiences that challenge the general discourses of identity politics and should be used as a lens to approach social issues.²⁵ This study investigates the social problem of Black women's expediency and marginalization concerning their objectification and subjugation at Atlanta's Freaknik. Engaging in Black women's intersectional experiences from a subjective standpoint at a Black cultural phenomenon like Atlanta's Freaknik offers further understanding into the convergence of race, gender, and culture, which could instigate the proper implementation of protective policies, redirect socially constructed images of Black women, and affirm the humanity of Black womanhood.

²⁵ Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1242-1245.

Furthermore, this case study intercedes amongst Black Feminist and Black Women historical scholarship by exploring the stories of Black women who attended the infamous Atlanta festival in the late 20th century. It promotes awareness to the public and appropriate authorities with the hope of informing the implementation of effective preventative measures for Black women at the reboot or rather continuance of Freaknik and other events alike. It also adds to the body of literature that describes the convergence and struggles Black women experience when advocating for women's issues or Black issues. This research is a collective, intrinsic case study where a cross-case analysis will connect common themes and outliers amongst the experiences. Black women have had at the festival. Implications of this study not only include recording Black women's experiences and understanding their positionality and its implications but also providing future researchers an opportunity to connect more ideas to the subject area of Freaknik, Atlanta, and 21st-century American history, thereby expanding the literature.

1.2 Methodological Approach

In this historical qualitative study, a case study approach best articulated the subject area, Freaknik, a highly popularized but scrutinized cultural phenomenon. This research approached the subject in an exploratory manner. In other words, collecting and documenting Black women's stories at Freaknik remained central to this case study. In the literature, Black women's perspective at this cultural event has not largely been investigated. This case study gives Black women a platform to present their stories while also providing historical context to make thematical connections amongst all the experiences shared.

Although the evidence collected in this research heavily relies on interviews, other artifacts like newspapers articles, college student newspapers, and yearbooks are essential. These sources aid in building a representation of what the participants describe. Much of the primary

source content in the public's access is limited and may include biases. For example, newspaper articles from CAU versus the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* may describe Freaknik very differently for political and social reasons. In addition, artifacts like videos and photos taken by attendees that show intimate and interpersonal experiences at the festival may not be available for public consumption. The reasons for this may include technology, improper online platforms, embarrassment, or professional image.

Since the surge of social media, an ethos of projecting a professional or socially acceptable image even in one's personal life is vital to the security of one's employment, otherwise known as online professionalism. Users of social media must distinguish between "private" and "public" aspects of their material as they are no longer just representing themselves but the organization that employs them.²⁶ Attendees who attended Freaknik could face consequences if they or someone else posted about their memories from Freaknik because of its sexually promiscuous atmosphere. For example, *The Daily Mail* reported in 2012 that an Atlanta officer was reprimanded for a sexually suggestive photo with another woman in front of the police squad car.²⁷ It has been speculated on Twitter that the photo was taken during Freaknik in 1997.²⁸ The authentication of that is unknown; however, the officer's suspension shows that sexually graphic material, like what could exist in Freaknik memorabilia, on public forums is unacceptable for employers.

Therefore, artifacts shared by any participant will be stored on the researcher's password-protected computer. No participant will be singled out, thus protecting their identity. All

²⁶ Bennet, Annmarie. 2014. *Social Media: Global Perspectives, Applications and Benefits and Dangers*. Media and Communications-Technologies, Policies and Challenges. Hauppauge, New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc. 58.

²⁷ Reporter, Daily Mail. "Atlanta Officer Thaddeus Lloyd Could Be out of the Job over Photo of Him with Hands on Woman's Bare Butt." Daily Mail Online. February 15, 2012. Accessed September 28, 2020.

²⁸ Bartholomew J. Simpson, Twitter post, April 21, 2017, 11:25 PM, <https://twitter.com/JayLeTr3/status/855623553647079424>

participants will be given pseudonyms that will be used in the primary researcher's notes, recordings, and transcripts when referring to each interviewee.

Seven Black women who attended were interviewed and five men who participated in Freaknik were interviewed. Recruitment occurred through convenience and snowball sampling. In other words, the researcher released a flier on their social media platforms and contacted all friends and family to see who would want to participate. Interviews occurred via a video conferencing platform (Zoom or WebEx), on the phone, or in person. Consent forms were given to participants via Google forms before starting the interviews. Resources like therapist contacts and group therapy were given to participants following the interviews, given the delicate topics that may arise during the conversation. All interviews were recorded and stored on a password-protected external drive. The external drive was only accessible by the primary researcher. Interviews were transcribed within one month of recording. Interviewees approved their interview's transcript before any analysis took place. Retention of these transcripts may extend beyond 10 years after the completion of the study. Notes from each interview, the interview guide, and interview transcript were kept on the researcher's password-protected computer and notebook.

Interview transcripts and other primary sources were analyzed collectively and intrinsically to focus and capture a holistic but compounding picture of Black women's experiences at Freaknik. The case study must be collective because Freaknik lasted from 1983 to 2000. In this bounded system's existence, changes occurred due to political, social, and cultural aspects that made each year slightly different but relatable. In other words, several influencing elements impacted the space in which Freaknik took place. Each woman's experience will be considered a separate case to allow for a cross-case analysis to find common themes and outliers

amongst the years Freaknik existed. This study has a Black Feminist lens and therefore, within the practice of Black Feminist Thought, intersectionality remains central to the analysis.

Intersectionality refers to examining how intersecting oppressions affect a marginalized group. Implementing this analysis eliminates the possibility of reducing one oppression such a race to encompass the entirety of one's oppression when in fact multiple intersecting oppressions are working together to produce injustice.²⁹ In other words, using Black Feminist theories such as intersectionality describes Black women's experiences the best. Furthermore, this case study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What were Black women's experiences at Atlanta's Freaknik?
2. What do their experiences reveal about gender, respectability, and images of Black womanhood in Black American culture during the late 20th century?

In summary, audiovisual materials, public records, primary documents, secondary sources, and experiences recorded results in the bounded system's description. Data, chronologically and thematically organized, makes a Black Feminist analysis and discussion possible. Reliability and validity were verified using interviewee-approved interview transcripts, corroboration of all participants' accounts, and cross-analysis of supplemental materials from the secondary and primary sources about Freaknik and Atlanta during that time.

1.3 Synopsis of Chapters

Considering that Freaknik existed for almost two decades, for efficiency, data is categorized chronologically, considering dynamic socio-political and cultural elements impacted experiences shared in this research study. This organization supports demonstrating the continuity and significant shifting variables in the social problem. Chapter 2 reviews previous

²⁹ Hill Collins, P. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought*, 18.

literature to understand what scholars have said about Freaknik and the themes it stands on such as the city of Atlanta, the college phenomenon of spring break, and Black popular culture.

Chapter 3: The Birth, Bliss and Bust of Freaknik provides a detailed year by year description of Freaknik using primary sources and recollections of past attendees recorded in private one on one interview. Chapter 4: Women's Stories at Freaknik details seven different women's experiences from Freaknik. Chapter 5: Gender & Respectability Historical Analysis focuses on the stories of the women from Chapter 4 and incorporates quotes from private interviews with men who attended Freaknik as well. Black Feminist Thought and Intersectionality are frameworks used to examine how gender and respectability framed the testimonies of the interviewees. Chapter 6: Concluding Themes provides a summary that revisits the main questions and restates the critical gendered arguments from the previous chapter to recapture all the themes revealed in a condensed form.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

I asked a young woman perched on a shiny car what was going on, and she said, "Freaknik!" When I looked confused, she kindly translated, "black college spring break." - Patti Puckett Ghezzi³⁰

Freaknik, a movement that began with college students, morphed into an infamous cultural memory for an entire generation of Black Americans. What began as a small picnic in Atlanta for a small group of Black students became a celebration for all Black college students spilling out of Atlanta's parks and into Atlanta's streets, leisure businesses, and nightlife. The city, known for its racial progression and thriving Black elite, was overwhelmed and controversially responded with police enforcement and harsh restrictions. Politicians and business owners shamed attendees for their public sexual suggestive behaviors, obnoxious blockage of traffic, and disrespect of public and private property. Such criticism was met with backlash from prominent civil rights activists, the Black community in Atlanta, and the students; that conflict has become a part of the legacy and living memory of Freaknik. However, what seems always to escape this memory is Black women's horrifying experiences of rape, sexual assault, and harassment. Black women, symbols of Freaknik, seem remembered as sexually deviant and promiscuous while others may remember Black women challenging respectability norms. To explore these clashing perspectives, the historical context of Atlanta, Black women, and the event itself, Freaknik, must be studied.

This chapter divides into four sections. The first section includes literature surrounding topics of Atlanta and similar cities' interest in tourism as Freaknik was considered a Black spring break destination. Reviewing scholarship that looks at other cities' relationship to college spring

³⁰ Whack, Errin Haines, and Rebecca Burns. "Freaknik: Rise and Fall of Atlanta's Most Infamous Street Party." Atlanta Magazine. April 05, 2019. Accessed September 20, 2020.

break is significant to understand Atlanta's response to Freaknik, including its political and economic motivations. The second section encompasses scholarship around Black Popular Culture as Freaknik was an exclusive Black cultural event that involved music, dance, and art. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of Black popular culture brings an understanding of the cultural space in which Freaknik was birthed from and celebrated. The third section focuses on the historical gendered experiences of Black women regarding their sexuality and representation in media and culture. Historical context around how Black female bodies have been treated and represented in American society explains and supports their interconnected experiences at Freaknik. Lastly, the fourth section discusses the literature that has examined Freaknik and the women who attended it; however, works with this analysis are uncommon. Scholarship with a racialized gendered perspective on a similar cultural event like the Caribbean Carnival provides added material for relevance and significance of those experiences. Comparative spaces allow for distinctions and resemblances to emerge across regional or cultural identities in an analysis.

Freaknik has yet to consume a considerable amount of academic work; therefore, work written on the subject is rare and quite valuable. In the work available, some scholars have attempted to use Freaknik's space as a reference for more massive points. For example, Sarah Abdelaziz used Freaknik as a comparative historical Atlanta space of expressing "ratchetness" from the Black community to Atlanta's response to Black Lives Matter protestors in the context of respectability politics.³¹ Other scholarship written on Atlanta's Freaknik rarely places its location, time, and context of its participants into the analysis. However, it is crucial to explore these works and its surrounding topics to provide context and place that describes the gap this literature review reveals.

³¹ Abdelaziz, "Ratcheting a Way Out," 24-30.

2.1 Freaknik: Tourist Attraction in Atlanta

Historian John C. Teaford writes that, in the post-World War II era, the decentralization of metropolitan cities due to increased attraction to suburban areas prompted Atlanta officials to protect downtown interests.³² In an effort to do so, Harvey Newman writes that Atlanta's white business elite built infrastructures like the curved Downtown Connector expressway, the Civic Center, the Rockefeller Center complex, the Atlanta airport, the Atlanta–Fulton County Stadium, the Peachtree Center, the Georgia World Congress Center, and the Underground Atlanta shopping center to redevelop and revitalize the downtown space for tourist attractiveness and economic growth with other major corporations.³³ Between the 1940s and 1970s, Atlanta and its surrounding suburban counties like Fulton, DeKalb, Cobb, Gwinnett, and Clayton grew in population resulting in the city of Atlanta's population reaching a threshold of one million in 1960.³⁴ Newman states, "The decisions made by the partnership of white business and political leaders during the 1960s guided the redevelopment of Atlanta's downtown tourist bubble."³⁵

The 1970s marks the crumbling of white elites' control of Atlanta following the Black majority in Atlanta's population in 1970, which led to the first elected Black mayor of a major southern city, Maynard Jackson, in 1973.³⁶ Nonetheless, throughout the 1970s and 1990s, Atlanta was increasingly becoming a fast-growing international city with its estimated \$400 million airport expansion, migration from the Rust Belt to the Sun Belt, promotion of improved

³² Jon C. Teaford. 2006. *The Metropolitan Revolution: The Rise of Post-Urban America*. The Columbia History of Urban Life. New York: Columbia University Press. 45.

³³ Newman, Harvey K. "Race and the Tourist Bubble in Downtown Atlanta." *Urban Affairs Review* 37, no. 3 (January 2002): 307-310.

³⁴ Hartshorn, Truman A. and Ihlanfeldt, Keith R. "Growth and Change In Metropolitan Atlanta." In *The Atlanta Paradox: The Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality*, edited by David L. Sjoquist, 15-41. *The*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. 2000. 17.

³⁵ Newman, "Race and the Tourist Bubble," 307.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 314-316.

race relations, and Atlanta's winning bid to host the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in 1990.³⁷ Because of this desire for international status by politicians and businesspeople, Atlanta congruently grew a robust reputation as a "Black Mecca" due to the city's memorialization of civil rights, vital contracts with Black firms, political appointments of Black politicians, and a sizeable Black student population due to the several universities in the metropolitan area, including the HBCUs in the Atlanta University Center Consortium Inc (AUC). Black Americans viewed Atlanta as a Black space where conventions, concerts, festivals, but most importantly, expressions of Black culture could take place and be celebrated.

Although Freaknik is called a festival, centralized organization from the DC Metro Club deteriorated as Freaknik attracted more people. Hence, Freaknik had an impromptu atmosphere that demanded city officials' attention because of the exponential amount of people visiting the city, causing massive traffic jams that impacted the flow of the city. Shopping malls, hotels, parks, bars, nightclubs, and restaurants were overflowing with Freaknik participants visiting from all over the country, looking to meet people, and have a good time. 1993 is considered the peak year for Freaknik as nearly 200,000 students converged on the city, but complaints from mostly white Atlanta residents compelled Atlanta officials to start paying attention.³⁸ The following year, more than 200,000 people visited the city. White residents of Midtown and other neighborhoods near Piedmont Park and tourism businesses along Peachtree Street pressured the newly elected mayor, Bill Campbell, to act.³⁹ Freaknik mostly became negatively represented because news stations presented the perspectives of Atlanta residents and businesses who considered the event to be a liability.

³⁷ Hobson, Maurice J. 2017. *The Legend of the Black Mecca: Politics and Class in the Making of Modern Atlanta*. 91; Teaford, *The Metropolitan Revolution*, 126-127.; Hobson, *Legend of the Black Mecca*, 92.

³⁸ Newman, *Southern Hospitality*, 238.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 239.

Although efforts by Mayor Bill Campbell and a group of AUC students offered solutions such as an alternative festival named "FreedomFest" or a change in location to New Orleans, Freaknik, in 1995, still garnered 100,000 partygoers despite college and universities' presidents discouraging such participation.⁴⁰ About 600 residents and businesses, known as the Freaknik Fallout Group, threatened to sue the city. Allied hotels refused reservations, and restaurant closures were frequent.⁴¹ Events to attend further minimized when the Lakewood Amphitheatre canceled a rap music concert scheduled for Saturday.⁴² Due to vehicular restrictions in hotspot areas, partygoers were forced to walk the streets, which often led to clashes with the police.

In the press, Atlanta officials received criticism for their mismanagement of this event as reports of violence, rape, and looting emerged. Questions attacking their ability to handle the 1996 Olympic crowd circulated. Freaknik's presence jeopardized Atlanta's reputation as a global city, and business leaders wanted it to go, complaining that it would destroy Atlanta's image. For example, Paul Karatassos, the head of the Buckhead Life Restaurant Group, is quoted stating, "If Freaknik is allowed to continue, I think the adverse effects it will have on the City of Atlanta over a period of time will become devastating and irreversible, particularly when we look at our conventions, our local businesses and the efforts to improve the image of downtown Atlanta."⁴³ From 1996 and on, city officials welcomed but controlled Freaknik by using police enforcement, roadblock restrictions, area capacities, and curfews, which successfully deterred students from returning each year. By the late 1990s, the Freaknik festival was no more than a memory of good "free" times by past attendees. Conversations of its return have since continued. For now, research must focus on the Freaknik festival that existed from 1983 to 2000 to further

⁴⁰ Ibid, 239-240.

⁴¹ Quiros, 'Partying 'The Atlanta Way?'

⁴² Newman, *Southern Hospitality*, 241.

⁴³ Ibid, 241.

comprehend foundations of Black culture during that time, race and class relations in Atlanta, and gender relations in the Black community.

There is something to be assessed in how cities attract crowds of people and respond to them based on the city's context. Tourism in cities is a function that adds revenue to municipal economies. For example, Historian Anthony Stanonis, in a chapter of his work, *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918-1945*, writes about New Orleans' historical path to adapting architectural and cultural elements into tools of profit via tourism.⁴⁴ Dr. Anthony Stanonis stated that, following World War I, New Orleans' city officials and businesspeople alike recreated Mardi Gras into a tourist space for public pleasure instead of a holiday for the city's elite in the 1920s and 1930s.⁴⁵ Dr. Stanonis later writes that as Mardi Gras became an escape for visitors to let loose, New Orleans did little to tame the crowd because of the desperately needed and dependable economic profits, additive industries, and international notoriety the event brought the city.⁴⁶ Interestingly, by the 1960s, social, cultural, and technological changes pushed New Orleans' Mardi Gras to become a favorite hotspot for spring break.⁴⁷

Spring break is a college phenomenon that Education scholar James Schiltz further explores in his journal article, "Time to Grow Up: The Rise and Fall of Spring Break in Fort Lauderdale," where he begins with Fort Lauderdale in 1935.⁴⁸ Colgate University's Swimming Team's visit to Fort Lauderdale leads to swimming coach Sam Ingram and city official August

⁴⁴ Stanonis, Anthony J. *Creating the Big Easy: New Orleans and the Emergence of Modern Tourism, 1918-1945*. Athens; London: University of Georgia Press, 2006. 172.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 173-174.

⁴⁶ Stanonis, Anthony J. 2008. "Through a Purple (Green and Gold) Haze: New Orleans Mardi Gras in the American Imagination." *Southern Cultures* 14 (2): 124-125.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 122.

⁴⁸ James Schiltz. 2014. "Time to Grow Up: The Rise and Fall of Spring Break in Fort Lauderdale." *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 93 (2): 195.

Burghard organizing the Collegiate Aquatic Forum. City officials realized the financial potential and made the event annual, attracting hundreds of colleges by 1940. Schiltz (2014, 196) writes that "Word spread quickly across college campuses that Fort Lauderdale was a great warm-weather destination to escape cold winter and enjoy academic break."⁴⁹ The spring break phenomena began in American youth culture as the GI Bill democratized higher education.⁵⁰

Hospitality scholar Nuno Ribeiro wrote similarly in his historical, ethnographic piece, *The Cultural History of a Break: Spring Break in the Florida Panhandle from 1938 to 2018*, where Ribeiro details a history of spring break that starts in Fort Lauderdale and extends into Miami, Panama City Beach, and Daytona Beach.⁵¹ Ribeiro writes that by the 1980s, spring break had become a part of Florida's cultural history and significantly contributed to the state's tourism economy.⁵² Similarly, Schiltz writes how Fort Lauderdale became heavily dependent on spring break business in the 1970s as Orlando and Central Florida pulled tourist and business attractiveness from South Florida due to the opening of Walt Disney World in 1971.⁵³ Although Ribeiro includes other cities in the Florida Panhandle, he focuses primarily on Panama City Beach, the spring break capital of the United States in the 1990s. He stated the original idea of a fun-in-the-sun spring break began to change as spring breakers were visiting non-traditional hotspots like Cancun and Acapulco in Mexico; the Bahamas in the Caribbean; and Europe.⁵⁴ The emerging trend increased due to traditional hotspots implementing strict measures to dissuade large spring break crowds, an increase in media coverage of alternative spring break destinations, raised awareness of alcoholism among spring breakers placed strict state and hotel restrictions

⁴⁹ Schiltz, "Time to Grow Up," 196.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 196.

⁵¹ Ribeiro, Nuno F. 2019. "The Cultural History of a Break: Spring Break in the Florida Panhandle, 1938-2018." *Journal of Florida Studies* 1 (8): 1-26.

⁵² Ibid, 4.

⁵³ Schiltz, "Time to Grow Up," 203-205.

⁵⁴ Ribeiro, "The Cultural History of a Break," 4.

which encouraged spring breakers to search for venues with less drinking restrictions, and lastly increased popularity of college-sponsored trips that included community service or school credit.⁵⁵

Although their emphases were different, Schiltz and Ribeiro both concede similar findings. Fort Lauderdale, Daytona Beach, and Panama City Beach all recognized the financial potential for their city to expand due to the spring breakers visiting. However, when the cost became too high, unlike in New Orleans, strict measures lessened the spring break, college crowd in those spaces. The histories of spring break in Florida's cities are similar to Atlanta's response to Freaknik; however, these locations are built on different foundations, geographically and ideologically. Hence, the responses will be different. As Stanonis, Ribeiro, and Schiltz found, the context of the city is crucial to understanding the reasons behind the city's response. In order to understand Atlanta's response to Freaknik, its context must be considered.

2.1.1 Atlanta as a Tourism Space

Historian Harvey Newman's book, *Southern Hospitality: Tourism and the Growth of Atlanta*, begins Atlanta's tourism history in the early 1800s when large railroad centers attracted large hotels featuring more rooms, dining spaces, and meeting rooms.⁵⁶ Atlanta officials soon took up the slogan, "Gate City of the South," to promote the city's railroad connections and hospitality.⁵⁷ In the following years, Newman writes how historical events like the Civil War, Reconstruction, the Atlanta Race Riot of 1906, and the World Wars influenced the composition and, ultimately, the tourism business in Atlanta. In the post-war era, the city described by Truman A Hartshorn and Keith R. Ihlanfeldt in their article, "Growth, and Change in

⁵⁵ Ribeiro, "The Cultural History of a Break," 5.

⁵⁶ Newman, *Southern Hospitality*, 12-13.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 16.

Metropolitan Atlanta" as attractive as, "Atlanta benefited from the demand for housing among returning soldiers and the reinstatements of job production in the private sector."⁵⁸ By 1960, the metro Atlanta region was comprised of Fulton County, DeKalb County, Cobb County, Gwinnett County, and Clayton County, with a population of one million.⁵⁹ Atlanta's traditional characteristic of a Black-white dichotomy persisted in the population even as segregation declined, and Black suburbanization expanded in the 1980s and 1990s.⁶⁰

In 2001, Historian Larry Keating wrote in his book, *Atlanta: Race, Class, and Urban Expansion*, that "After fifty years of increasingly segregated growth, Atlanta has become two largely separate cities: a mostly white north side of town where economic activity is vigorous and expanding, and a mostly Black south side, where the economy lags badly."⁶¹ Keating argues that there were two Black Atlantas where a growing economic inequality between middle-class Blacks and poor Blacks increases.⁶² Atlanta historians Newman and Keating would agree that in all those years, Atlanta continued to grow. The businesses primarily catered to the interests of the white elite through subsidies by white and Black politicians in their shared desires for expansion.

2.1.2 Black Mayoral-ship and the rise of Freaknik

In 1970, Newman states, insecurity grew among the white Protestant business leaders when Sam Massell, a Jewish liberal, won the mayoral election with resounding support from black voters, the majority of Atlanta's population.⁶³ He writes that Atlanta and its business sector struggled to promote Atlanta as an international city because Mayor Massell struggled with

⁵⁸ Hartshorn, Truman A. and Ihlanfeldt, Keith R. "Growth and Change In Metropolitan Atlanta."15.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 17.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 25.

⁶¹ Keating, Larry. 2001. *Atlanta: Race, Class, and Urban Expansion*. Comparative American Cities. Temple University Press. 8.

⁶² Ibid, 8

⁶³ Newman, *Southern Hospitality*, 189.

"maintaining the partnership with white business leaders while representing a constituency of Black residents."⁶⁴ This struggle led to Maynard Jackson, the city's first Black mayor, in 1973. He and the following mayor, Andrew Young, allied with white business leaders to redevelop the downtown area that ultimately displaced low-income Blacks Atlantans.⁶⁵ Amid political and business tides during several mayoral terms an international airport, the Georgia World Congress Center, more metropolitan-area commercial areas like Cumberland Mall and Perimeter Mall, and Underground Atlanta, caused a boom in hotel construction throughout Atlanta's metropolitan area by the 1980s.⁶⁶

Historian Jessica Levy writes in, "Selling Atlanta: Black Mayoral Politics from Protest to Entrepreneurism, 1973 to 1990," that Maynard Jackson became increasingly supportive of the city's tourism and convention industry during his tenure even when he faced criticism within his Black constituency for supporting "downtown white economic powers."⁶⁷ Similarly, Keating writes how Andrew Young supported the Central Atlanta Progress task force to encourage middle and upper-income housing in the downtown area through subsidies. Young also backed the city's bid for the 1996 Summer Olympics Games, ignoring his advisors' reluctance.⁶⁸ Newman writes that "During 1985, Atlanta hosted a record number of conventions with 1,400 meetings in the city attended by 1.5 million people. However, city leaders wanted more and larger national events to host."⁶⁹ Well, throughout the 1980s on into the 21st century, Atlanta was hungry for revenue and expansion to shine as a global, pro-business location with its embrace of the 1994 Super Bowl and the 1996 International Olympics. City officials put in years

⁶⁴ Ibid, 190.

⁶⁵ Keating, *Atlanta: Race, Class*, 70.

⁶⁶ Newman, *Southern Hospitality*, 205-215.

⁶⁷ Levy, Jessica Ann. 2015. "Selling Atlanta: Black Mayoral Politics from Protest to Entrepreneurism, 1973 to 1990." *Journal of Urban History* 41 (3): 425.

⁶⁸ Keating, *Atlanta: Race, Class*, 81-82

⁶⁹ Newman, *Southern Hospitality*, 216.

of preparation, business dealings, and marketing efforts to make Atlanta a global city like New York or Washington D.C. However, challenges rose, most notably, when a group of Black college students in 1983 started a spring break phenomenon, Freaknik.

As Freaknik grew larger by the 1990s, Atlanta became further stratified based on racial and class lines, which caused a considerable dilemma for Bill Campbell, the third Black mayor in Atlanta, who represented Atlanta's Black upper class. Elizabeth Grant, in her article, "Race, Place, and Memory: African American Tourism in the Postindustrial City," wrote that Mayor Campbell skated on an anti-Freaknik stance as media outlets suggested the event had a lawless atmosphere which conflicted with Atlanta's image as a modern global city and threatened the city's tourism objectives.⁷⁰ In the article, Grant compares Mayor Campbell's response to Atlanta's Freaknik to Mayor Ed Rendell's response to Philadelphia's Greek Picnic. She writes, "While Campbell saw Freaknik as a liability to Atlanta's massive convention business and Rendell focuses on the financial gains associated with the Greek Picnic, both leaders place responsibility for the disruption and violence accompanying the celebrations with the urban Black youth of their respective cities."⁷¹ Newman details the struggle Mayor Campbell encountered with his colleagues and constituency as he tried to maneuver through the conflict due to Freaknik.⁷² Newman writes that police arrested five hundred people on charges ranging from looting to rape, and nearly half were older than the college students.⁷³ Mayor Campbell's actions, like Mayor Rendell, made the Freaknik's participants stratified through his embrace of rhetoric that classified the Black underclass as problems, which prioritized economic status and

⁷⁰ Grant, Elizabeth. "Race, Place, and Memory: African American Tourism in the Postindustrial City." Edited by Kenneth L. Kusmer and Joe W. Trotter. *African American Urban History Since World War II*, 2009, 420.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 421.

⁷² Newman, *Southern Hospitality*, 238-242.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 242.

racial identity. Grant argues this is because Atlanta, as well as Philadelphia, depended on a Black tourist class.⁷⁴

The Black underclass or low class in Atlanta, identified by Keating, were repeatedly disadvantaged due to the city policies. Their problems were unresolved even with the mayoral appointments of Black mayors.⁷⁵ The Atlanta Child Murders serves as an example of these class tensions within the Black communities in Atlanta. Historian Maurice Hobson writes in his book, *The Legend of the Black Mecca: Politics and Class in the Making of Modern Atlanta*, these series of murders that preyed on the most vulnerable population in Atlanta "demonstrated how black popular political sentiments toward Maynard Jackson shifted from championing the cause of the working and the poor to protecting Atlanta's national and international commercial branding."⁷⁶ In other words, the Black middle and upper class supported Black politicians prioritizing economic and business interests over protecting poor Black children. Such sentiments continued as Atlanta prepared for the Super Bowl and Olympic games, threatening low income/no income housing neighborhoods. The Atlanta Project (TAP), endorsed by Bill Campbell, that constructed the Georgia Dome, Olympic Stadium, Centennial Park, and Olympic Village, displaced thousands of working-class and poor Black residents.⁷⁷ Historian Maurice Hobson writes that the Black working and low class expressed resentment to the Atlanta Black mayors, thereby creating an expressive youth culture and unique sound that lived in the streets where Freaknik occurred.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Grant, "Race, Place and Memory," 421.

⁷⁵ Keating, *Atlanta: Race, Class*, 8.

⁷⁶ Hobson, *Legend of the Black Mecca*, 96.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 192-195.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 203

2.2 Black Popular Culture in Freaknik

Popular culture started as a rebellious form of culture that gave voices outside of the mainstream but now functions as a means for expression, socialization, and entertainment.⁷⁹

Patricia Hill Collins defines Black popular culture as "ideas and cultural representations created by Black people in everyday life that are widely known and accepted." It exists within mass media that takes micro-level interactions and broadens macro-level consumption, inversely influencing everyday activities.⁸⁰ Cultural theorist Stuart Hall articulates that Black Popular culture is a contradictory space where forms of it consist of "partial synchronization, engagement across cultural boundaries, confluences of more than one cultural tradition, negotiations of dominant and subordinate positions, subterranean strategies of recoding and transcoding, critical signification, and signifying."⁸¹ In other words, Black popular culture encompasses dueling concepts that can celebrate but also devalue Blackness.

Historian Brian Behnken argued that race, racism, and sexism became central parts of popular media during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through numerous forms of media like books, films, advertisements, and television. Depictions of Native Americans, Asians, Mexicans, Latinos, and African Americans were highly mass-produced which made tropes of these populations invisible or natural.⁸² Scholar Shawan Worsley states that "Black culture producers must navigate the concerns and desires of black communities that are driven by fears of appropriation and the further entrenchment of stereotypes."⁸³ Hall argues that "good" Black

⁷⁹ Goldman, Adria Y. 2014. *Black Women and Popular Culture: The Conversation Continues*. Lanham: Lexington Books. 6.

⁸⁰ Hill Collins, Patricia. 2004. *Black Sexual Politics. [Electronic Resource]: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. Routledge. 17.

⁸¹ Stuart Hall. 1993. "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" *Social Justice* 20 (1/2 (51-52)): 110.

⁸² Behnken, Brian D. (1973-). Autor. 2015. *Racism in American Popular Media : From Aunt Jemima to the Frito Bandito / Brian D. Behnken and Gregory D. Smithers*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, an imprint of ABC-CLIO. 21-22.

⁸³ Shawan M. Worsley. 2009. *Audience, Agency and Identity in Black Popular Culture*. Studies in African American History and Culture. New York: Routledge. 7.

popular culture will express the historical experience of Black people, cultural elements out of those experiences, and Black counternarratives against mainstream narratives.⁸⁴ Scholar Jackson argues that although images exist that are portrayed by, for, and about Black people, willing Black participation in the cultural capital of popular culture is complying with illusions of racial stereotypes.⁸⁵ Richard Iton in the *Black Fantastic: Politics and popular culture in the post-civil rights era* contends that Black art forms and artists like Harry Belafonte and Alice Walker were all forms of creativity connected to political spaces to complicate the Black public narratives.⁸⁶ Culture is a reflection of and response to the producers' and consumers' reality. Freaknik was a cultural phenomenon birthed out of a cultural tradition of Black pride and a political tradition of self-determination and resistance coming out of the 1970s. The literature further examining the key cultural elements of Freaknik, like music and performance, is critical to the discourse of this study.

2.2.1 Music Traditions in Black Popular Culture

Music at any festival is vital to the culture and understanding of the people who enjoy it. Traditionally, music in Black American culture expresses social issues, politics, and culture. Scholar Kenneth Estell writes that in the 1960s, R&B, specifically Soul gospel-influenced music, was considered the most dominant form in Black popular music that often responded to social issues with racial pride and independence.⁸⁷ Similarly, Scholar James Stewart states popular Black R&B music in the mid-1960s and early 1970s emphasized Black pride because of

⁸⁴ Hall, "What is This 'Black,'" 110.

⁸⁵ Jackson, Ronald L. 2006. *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media*. SUNY Series, the Negotiation of Identity. Albany: SUNY Press. 62.

⁸⁶ Iton, Richard. 2008. *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. Transgressing Boundaries. Oxford University Press. 3-29.

⁸⁷ Estell, Kenneth. 1994. "Soul: The Mirror of a Decade." *African America: Portrait of a People*, December, 545.

inspiration from the Black Power Movement.⁸⁸ Funk, a mesh of Soul and Pop music, became increasingly popular with Black consumers during the 1970s and incorporated political commentary.⁸⁹ By the 1980s, a Hip Hop movement emerged where music was a form of protest commenting on the social, political, and cultural problems of Black people.⁹⁰ Simultaneously in the South, Bass music, a composite of Disco and Funk became popularized in mass media in between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s.⁹¹ Freaknik catered to an audience that adored Black R&B, Hip-Hop/Rap, and Bass music. It is vital to add such analysis to this literature review since Atlanta was increasingly becoming a music capital at the peak of Freaknik's existence.

Bass music consumed what most may articulate as the soundtrack of Freaknik. Originating in Miami, Florida, Bass music became known as the only nationally recognized style from any city in the South.⁹² It emerged as the definitive musical emblem of 1980s and 1990s Black Miami, a population “whose subaltern status was typical of foreign immigrants: African American residents of Miami lived within an internal Global South at the heart of the US South’s southernmost city.”⁹³ Miami Bass music was considered party music as its attitude, lyrics, and values were aimed to be lighthearted. David Font writes, “the music [Miami Bass] was a continuation of the Roller Disco craze of the late 1970s. But as the genre became more distinct and gathered momentum during the 1980s, its lyrics became more explicit, playfully pushing raunchiness.”⁹⁴ Font writes, “Throughout the 1980s, the sound of Bass spread north, taking root

⁸⁸ Stewart, James B. 2005. “Message in the Music: Political Commentary in Black Popular Music from Rhythm and Blues to Early Hip Hop.” *The Journal of African American History* 90 (3): 209.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁹⁰ Reiland Rabaka. 2013. *The Hip Hop Movement : From R&B and the Civil Rights Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Generation*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books. 33-34, 60.

⁹¹ Font, Navarette, David. 2015. “Bass 101: Miami, Rio, and the Global Music South1.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies (Wiley-Blackwell)* 27 (4): 491.

⁹² Miller, Matt. “Rap’s Dirty South: From Subculture to Pop Culture.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies (Wiley-Blackwell)* 16, no. 2 (August 2004): 202.

⁹³ Font, Navarette, David, “Bass 101,” 494.

⁹⁴ Font, Navarette, David, “Bass 101,” 495.

in Orlando, Jacksonville, Atlanta, elsewhere in the US South, and beyond... In the mid-1990s, a handful of novelty hit tracks became the general public's prototypes for Miami Bass: songs like Tag Team's "Whomp! (There It Is)," 95 South's musical twin "Whoot, There It Is," or 69 Boyz's "Tootsee Roll" represented an explosion of the sound into mainstream national consciousness."⁹⁵ The most nationally known Miami Bass artist is Luther "Luke Skywalker" Campbell of 2 Live Crew that found major success "in the late 1980s for bass-heavy club music with simple, sex-oriented call-and-response lyrics."⁹⁶ David Font wrote, "In 1989, Luther Campbell and 2 Live Crew released *As Nasty As They Wanna Be*, setting a new standard in terms of popularity and raunchiness: the double platinum album—which included "Me So Horny," "Dick Almighty," and "The Fuck Shop"—became the subject of lengthy legal struggle, arguably the most recent and most prominent legal test of obscenity in the United States."⁹⁷

Font argues, "Although other exponents of Miami Bass were not so fixated on sensational themes, the hypersexual aspect of much of the music became inseparable from the genre as a whole."⁹⁸ Kimberle Crenshaw expands on the hypersexuality and objectification of Black women of Bass music in her intersectional analysis of 2 Live Crew's release of *As Nasty As They Wanna Be* and its controversy that resulted in an obscenity criminal case. Crenshaw criticized the prosecution because their argument served to limit Black male sexuality in connection to the hypersexual Black male rapist trope in an attempt to protect white women and not necessarily to protect Black women.⁹⁹ Then, Crenshaw also criticizes the defense when she says, "they require Black women to accept misogyny and its attendant disrespect and exploitation in the service of

⁹⁵ Ibid, 498.

⁹⁶ Miller, Matt. "Rap's Dirty South: From Subculture to Pop Culture." 178.

⁹⁷ Font, Navarette, David, "Bass 101," 495.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 495.

⁹⁹ Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins," 1291.

some broader group objective, whether it be pursuing an antiracist political agenda or maintaining the cultural integrity of the Black community. Neither objective obligates Black women to tolerate such misogyny.”¹⁰⁰

In relation to Atlanta in 1990s, Matt Miller called Atlanta and its surrounding regional market a thriving “bass” or “booty” rap scene when he quotes producer and rapper Lil’ John who said, “Back in high school, we listened to rap and everything, but bass is what got the party hyped.” Miller states, “Stylistically, Atlanta’s bass music did not differ substantially from the Miami bass genre of which it was an outgrowth. The uptempo music prioritized low and powerful bass sounds, which were often complemented by cross rhythms created by hi-hats or handclaps.”¹⁰¹ As Atlanta’s music industry expanded in the 1990s, productions of uptempo bass records, once exclusive to Miami, became the first of novelty songs that would be “a growing body material that linked the underground Atlanta club rap scene with national audiences and companies.”¹⁰²

Hobson credits Atlanta's reputation as a music production site with the development of LaFace Records by Kenneth B. "Babyface" Edmonds and Antonio M. "L.A." Ried in 1989. Lyrics produced by artists like OutKast and Goodie Mob reflected the Black experiences caused by Atlanta's gentrification and urban renewal.¹⁰³ Those lyrics in the rap genre, "Dirty South," serve, as Hobson states, as "a rallying cry for southern rap on southern terms,"¹⁰⁴ and as Miller states, "a contrivance born out of the constructs of artistic and economic dominance that have determined the development of rap music as a commercial art form."¹⁰⁵ Hobson further inscribes

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 1294.

¹⁰¹ Miller, Matt. “The Sound of Money: Atlanta, Crossroads of the Dirty South,” in *Hip Hop in America: A Regional Guide [2 Volumes]*, ed. Mickey Hess (Non-Series. Santa Barbara, Calif: Greenwood, 2010), 484.

¹⁰² Ibid, 484.

¹⁰³ Hobson, *Legend of the Black Mecca*, 216.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 220.

¹⁰⁵ Miller, Matt. “Rap’s Dirty South: From Subculture to Pop Culture.” 176.

that "the lives of the artists spoke to the shifting trends and tensions found in Atlanta from their birth in the mid-1970s to 1996."¹⁰⁶ Likewise, journalist Ben Westoff writes in his piece, *OutKast, Goodie Mob, and Organized Noize*, Goodie Mob, a popular rap group emerging during the early 1990s, offered a southern take on conscious hip-hop where their debut album *Soul Food* set a standard for artistic fearlessness.¹⁰⁷ Also, Darren Grem writes, "the rise of Atlanta's 'Dirty South' rap music industry shows the readiness of some African Americans in the post-civil rights era not only to embrace their southernness but to sell it as well."¹⁰⁸

The emergence and success of groups like OutKast and Goodie Mob assert that the expressive culture created under the unequal circumstances Black working and poor class people endured resonated with larger groups of people outside of Atlanta, which mainly became exposed to these Atlanta groups through Freaknik. Groups used Freaknik to expand their audiences, and ultimately accelerated the city's hip-hop industry. Matt Miller, in his article, "The Sound of Money: Atlanta, Crossroads of the Dirty South," wrote that Freaknik served as "a venue to expose and promote artists and companies producing rap music in Atlanta."¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Hobson states that Atlanta artists found Freaknik to be another creative space to showcase their talents and make it mainstream.¹¹⁰

Atlanta's Freaknik music articulated more than just politics steeped in classist and racist issues. As a celebration, the musical expectation about fun, passion, and pleasure was rampant. Consequently, popular R&B and Hip-Hop music at the time encouraged the loose atmosphere Freaknik is known for. Several researchers' analysis of popular music during Freaknik's

¹⁰⁶ Hobson, *Legend of the Black Mecca*, 221.

¹⁰⁷ Westhoff, Ben. 2011. *Dirty South : OutKast, Lil Wayne, Soulja Boy, and the Southern Rappers Who Reinvented Hip-Hop*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press. 103.

¹⁰⁸ Grem, Darren E. 2006. "'The South Got Something to Say': Atlanta's Dirty South and the Southernization of Hip-Hop America." *Southern Cultures* 12 (4): 56.

¹⁰⁹ Miller, Matt. "The Sound of Money: Atlanta, Crossroads of the Dirty South," 473.

¹¹⁰ Hobson, *Legend of the Black Mecca*, 219.

prominence support this statement. Psychologist Dawn Hobbs found through content analysis of Billboard rankings that R&B and Hip Hop genres tend to express reproductive or sexual behaviors more than other genres like country and rock.¹¹¹ Researchers Andrew Smiler, Jennifer Shewmaker, and Brittany Hearon found an increase in sexual content, references to sex overall, and objectification of women, especially during the 1980s into the 1990s in Billboard's Year-End "Hot 100" charts.¹¹² They also found that R&B songs were more likely to reference dating relationships, address sexual behavior, use metaphors for sexual behavior, and objectify women and men. Rap music, which did not emerge in their data until the 1990s, was more likely to address sexual behavior directly, reference sexual behavior explicitly, and objectify women and men.¹¹³

In another study, researchers Ronald Weitzer and Chris Kubrin found that 22% of 403 songs in 1992-2000 platinum status Rap albums contained misogyny. Although a small percentage, the misogynistic messages included derogatory naming and shaming of women, sexual objectification of women, distrust of women, a legitimization of violence against women, and a celebration of prostitution and pimping.¹¹⁴ Scholars Weitzer and Kubrin stressed that in the 403 songs analyzed, messages about women may not have all been misogynistic, but that does not mean they were all positive.¹¹⁵ Consistent with this data, researcher Kathrin Karsay found that although depictions of sexuality and sexual objectification in music videos had not changed from 1995 to 2016, depictions of sexuality and sexual objectification continued to be pervasive

¹¹¹ Hobbs, D. R., & Gallup, G. G., Jr. (2009). Songs as a medium for embedded reproductive messages. *Evolutionary Psychology*, 399, 397, 401-402.

¹¹² Smiler, Andrew, Jennifer Shewmaker, and Brittany Hearon. 2017. "From 'I Want To Hold Your Hand' to 'Promiscuous': Sexual Stereotypes in Popular Music Lyrics, 1960-2008." *Sexuality & Culture* 21 (4):

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Weitzer, Ronald, and Charis E. Kubrin. 2009. "Misogyny in Rap Music: A Content Analysis of Prevalence and Meanings." *Men & Masculinities* 12 (1): 11.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

in popular culture. As a result, women were found more likely to be sexually objectified than men.¹¹⁶ The unusual behaviors at Atlanta's Freaknik show an evident musical influence where the space allowed for expression and exchanges of Blackness to thrive.

2.3 Black Women's Cultural Contribution

Throughout its existence, songs like "Freak of the Week" by Funkadelic and "Le Freak" by Chic are among many that inspired Freaknik's name and later the increased sexual behavior of its attendees. Freaknik's popularity reflects the social acceptance of sexual behavior in youth culture and women demanding equal rights and treatment amongst the sexes, including sexual empowerment. Due to their intersectional identities, Black men and women received critiques grounded in politics of respectability, gender roles, and stereotypical tropes. The name, Freaknik, tends to center around Black women's behavior as the word "Freak," which means a sexually aggressive wild woman who wants to have sex without any emotional attachment.¹¹⁷ Thus, literature around the subject of Black women and their sexuality must be included.

2.3.1 Black Women's History of Sexuality and Violence

Historically, Black women have suffered much on American soil. Their experiences have mostly been popularized by stereotypical myths, often leading to unjust consequences. Harmful stereotypes like the asexual Mammy, the male-emasculating Sapphire, the undeserving Welfare Queen, and sexually insatiable Jezebel continue to categorize Black women in numerous media forms.¹¹⁸ The invention of these images serves to reinforce political, social, and cultural

¹¹⁶ Karsay, Kathrin, Jörg Matthes, Lisa Buchsteiner, and Veronika Grosser. 2019. "Increasingly Sexy? Sexuality and Sexual Objectification in Popular Music Videos, 1995–2016." *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 8 (4): 354.

¹¹⁷ Dionne P. Stephens, Layli D. Phillips. 2003. "Freaks, Gold Diggers, Divas, And Dykes: The Sociohistorical Development of Adolescent African American Women's Sexual Scripts," 20.

¹¹⁸ Morton, Patricia. 1991. *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women*. Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies: No. 144. Greenwood Press.

understandings in American society.¹¹⁹ Scholar Hortense Spillers states that under enslavement, Black men and women were robbed of their bodies' control, becoming "territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related, gender-specific."¹²⁰ In other words, enslaved Black women were ungendered as Historian Deborah Gray White further explains in *Ar'nt I a Woman? Female Slaves In The Plantation South*, where they performed many of the same duties as enslaved men.¹²¹ Contrary to this classification, Black women endured sexual violence as a consequence of being viewed as "a source of irresistible, destructive sensuality."¹²² Sociologist Rachel Feinstein explores this contradiction in *When Rape was Legal: The Untold History of Sexual Violence during Slavery*, where the rapes of enslaved women were not just a result of sexual desire, punishment, or racial domination, but as a part of white masculinity to reinforce intersectional social hierarchy.¹²³

Moreover, Deborah Gray White writes of enslaved women's resistance to slavery and their determination to protect their womanhood within the limits of their captivity.¹²⁴ Similarly, in *Women, Race, and Class*, scholar Angela Davis speaks on Black women's advocacy and struggle for Black freedom and women's rights while maneuvering through the political space with Black men and white women.¹²⁵ White men in power promoted Black women as opposites of white women, which resulted in Black women routinely fighting for protection from sexual violence.¹²⁶ Denial of that protection derives from assumptions surrounding Black women's

¹¹⁹ Hill Collins, P, *Black Feminist Thought*. 5.

¹²⁰ Hortense J. Spillers. 1987. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17 (2): 67.

¹²¹ White, Deborah G. 1949-. 1987/1985. *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*. New York: Norton. 67.

¹²² Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.

¹²³ Feinstein, Rachel A. 2019. *When Rape Was Legal: The Untold History of Sexual Violence during Slavery*. New Critical Viewpoints on Society Series. Routledge.

¹²⁴ White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?*.22-23

¹²⁵ Davis, Angela Y. 1983. *Women, race & class*. New York: Vintage Books.

¹²⁶ McGuire, Danielle L. *At The Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance: a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.

sexuality and white male's agency in the Jezebel trope.¹²⁷ These dichotomies for centuries have regulated what was accessible and acceptable for Black women thereby impacting their value and treatment within society. Black women were used as the standard to define what a woman, more specifically a white woman, was not. "The good, innocent, virginal girl continues to be an idealized image of womanhood associated with white females, but unattainable for African American females."¹²⁸ Collins states, "As the 'Others' of society who can never really belong, strangers threaten the moral and social order. But they are simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries. African-American women, by not belonging, emphasize the significance of belonging."¹²⁹ This dichotomy (good white girl/ bad Black girl) defines normative and deviant behaviors and sexualities as well as facilitates male access and control over women's bodies.¹³⁰ As a result, white women are typically pictured as soft delicate virgins while Black women are framed as strong hypersexual animals.

The narratives or stereotypes of Black women have largely focused on their bodies because they held reproductive, political, and capitalist interest during American slavery. Objectifying Black female bodies removes their humanity and makes them more susceptible to manipulation.¹³¹ For example, Mammy, an asexual faithful and obedient domestic served to "justify the economic exploitation of house slaves" and "symbolized the dominant's groups perceptions of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power," which further

¹²⁷ Morton, *Disfigured Images*, [Access to the book will result in a page number for references]

¹²⁸ Stephens and Philips, "Freaks, Gold Diggers, Divas, And Dykes," 4.

¹²⁹ Hill Collins, P. *Black Feminist Thought*, 70.

¹³⁰ Fasula, Amy M., Monique Carry, and Kim S. Miller. 2014. "A Multidimensional Framework for the Meanings of the Sexual Double Standard and Its Application for the Sexual Health of Young Black Women in the U.S." *Journal of Sex Research* 51 (2): 171. doi:10.1080/00224499.2012.716874.

¹³¹ Hill Collins, P. *Black Feminist Thought*, 70.

cemented Black women's subordination in the social order.¹³² Mammy is expected to sacrifice her needs and the needs of her offspring for the needs of her white family. Another example is the breeder woman image, an early iteration of the welfare mother, that justified efforts to control Black women's fertility during slavery which insisted that Black women could reproduce as easily as animals.¹³³ Consequently, such emphasis made Black women's pregnancies more tough, repetitive, and inhumane than their white female counterparts.

Following the end of American slavery leading into a devastating period of poverty and racial terrorism, a new image, the Matriarch, emerged, capturing the lives of U.S Black women becoming central figures in Black families and providers due to job availability for Black people during that time. Collins wrote, "While the mammy typifies the Black mother figure in White homes, the matriarch symbolizes the mother figure in Black homes. Just as the mammy represents the "good" Black mother, the matriarch symbolizes the "bad" Black mother."¹³⁴ Because of her care in the Black family, the Black matriarch is seen as unfeminine and overbearing, often making her unattractive for intimate relationships. Once again, the Black matriarch held opposing qualities defined unwomanly against the valued image of the submissive unemployed white housewife. In 1965, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan published an official federal report that pathologized female-headed households as the leading cause for the failing status of Black America.¹³⁵ White male elites used this report to define Black culture as inferior, while middle-class Black men used the report to undercut Black women and their role in the Black community.

¹³² Hill Collins, P. *Black Feminist Thought*, 72.

¹³³ *Ibid*, 78.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 75.

¹³⁵ Moynihan, Daniel Patrick, Amy A. Kass, and Leon R. Kass. 2013. "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." AEI Paper & Studies, January, 149–54.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=edb&AN=97419081&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Conversely, the Black lady or middle-class professional Black woman, crafted by Black clubwomen in the early twentieth century, encouraged ideas of respectability through hard work and education. These expectations were heavily taught to their daughters, manifesting and dependently transforming to the social, cultural, and political issues over time. Unfortunately, interpretations of this woman contain aspects of Mammy and the Matriarch. “Black ladies have jobs that are all-consuming that they have no time for men or have forgotten how to treat them. Because they so routinely compete with men and are successful at it, they become less feminine.”¹³⁶ In other words, Black ladies increasingly become independent as their sexuality and fertility become surveilled, especially as their professional success is viewed as a necessity to the advancement of the Black race. Like the matriarchs, Black ladies faced a challenge with Black men who felt Black ladies stalled their success. As a result, within the Black community, gender issues were routinely dismissed or unprioritized throughout the Black freedom struggle.

The link between all these controlling stereotypes lies in Jezebel because control over Black women’s sexuality is central to Black women’s oppression. Jezebel represents the ultimate deviant Black female sexuality. This image originated during enslavement as a means to rationalize white enslaver’s rape of Black enslaved women and the illegitimate children produced from such violent acts. In connection to the Mammy image, Jezebel holds an aggressive sexual appetite to support her fertile desires, but her motherly instincts evaporate for her own offspring. Jezebel is also masculinized because her hypersexual desires are not what a woman should possess. The social order constitutes that men should be the sexual aggressors while women remain passive. Different iterations of jezebel include plain hoochies or sexually assertive women who can be found across social classes, club hoochies or women who wear

¹³⁶ Hill Collins, P. *Black Feminist Thought*, 81.

sleazy clothes to clubs and dance in a “slutty” fashion, gold-digging hoochies or women who aim to attract men with money, and a hoochie-mama or a woman whose primary purpose is to provide sexual favors in exchange for money motivated by their children’s economic needs.¹³⁷ These images enforce normal female heterosexuality as the cult of true white womanhood, whereas the hot mommas of Black womanhood typify deviant female heterosexuality.¹³⁸ These stereotypes of Black womanhood “represent elite white male interests in defining Black women’s sexuality and fertility. By meshing smoothly with intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, they help justify the social practices that characterize the matrix of domination in the United States.”¹³⁹

Social institutions like schools, government agencies, media, and popular culture circulate these negative messages to bombard its consumers and fortify the power systems dominated by white male producers.¹⁴⁰ As a result, self-concepts and identities of others become widely accepted, resulting in prejudice, objectification, dehumanization, polarization, and discrimination. Black women, however, have not been without agency. Although a subordinated population, Black women have and still participate in their categorization, “sometimes subverting the naming process in empowering ways.”¹⁴¹ Specific mechanisms like the culture of dissemblance and politics of respectability, molded within the Black community, have been used by Black women to demand equal treatment, reinforce their humanity, and subvert all the previous assumptions and beliefs about their beings.

¹³⁷ Hill Collins, P. *Black Feminist Thought*, 82-83.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹³⁹ Hill Collins, P. *Black Feminist Thought*, 84.

¹⁴⁰ Lindsey, Treva B. 2013. “Complicated Crossroads: Black Feminisms, Sex Positivism, and Popular Culture.” *African & Black Diaspora* 6 (1): 55. doi:10.1080/17528631.2012.739914.

¹⁴¹ Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1991. “Mapping the Margins,” 1297.

Darlene Clark Hine defines the culture of dissemblance as a cult of secrecy to protect the sanctity of the inner aspect of their lives by creating appearances of disclosure while remaining an enigma.¹⁴² In other words, Black women created an alternate public self to gain mobility in society while hiding their inner selves, particularly sexual desires, even when those two selves conflicted. Their public persona emulated politics of respectability or a set of rules that stressed class distinction, moral privilege, and patriarchal conventions.¹⁴³ Respectability politics for Black women served as a counter-discourse to the politics of prejudice by demonstrating that they were as virtuous, nurturing, and ultimately feminine as white women.¹⁴⁴ Black women battled to erase the negative stereotypes associated with their bodies using these two ideas to reconstruct their self-image served as a means of survival. Therefore, the culture of dissemblance suppressed the intimate lives of Black women in American history as respectability politics ultimately “functioned to limit notions of acceptable sexual behavior among black communities to the realm of conservative hetero-normativity.”¹⁴⁵ This experience is distinctive to Black women in America and changes according to their political, cultural, social needs, community, and society.

Literature surrounding Black women’s experiences, interactions, and rejections of these tropes are plentiful. For example, In *Southern Horrors: Women and The Politics of Rape and*

¹⁴² Hine, Darlene Clark. "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West." *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 915. Accessed April 18, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174692>.

¹⁴³ Angela Hornsbury-Gutting, “Respectability, Politics of,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture : Volume 13: Gender.*, ed. Nancy Bercaw and Ted Ownby, 238, The University of North Carolina Press; 2009. Accessed April 18, 2021.

¹⁴⁴ Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. 1993. *Righteous Discontent : The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*. Harvard University Press.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=cat06552a&AN=gsu.997166933402952&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

¹⁴⁵ Miller-young, Mireille. 2008. “Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop Pornography.” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8 (1): 284.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=edspmu&AN=edspmu.S1547842408102610&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Lynching, Historian Crystal N. Feimster follows Ida B. Wells' political activity. Wells connected the trope of the Black male rapist to the justified rape of Black women in white men's attempt to maintain a stratified social order.¹⁴⁶ In addition, Paula Giddings offers a comprehensive text, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, focused on the political activism of Black women through the Nadir Period through to the Second Wave of Feminism in the Women's Movement.¹⁴⁷ Historian Danielle McGuire also provides a compelling text in which she details explicitly Black women's resistance to rape and dominant activism in the Civil Rights Movement to the rise of Black power.¹⁴⁸ In her work, she details systematic assumptions made by the state regarding Black women's sexual assault experiences while also debunking several stereotypes about Black women and their actions in social movements. These texts demonstrate an extensive literature that looks at Black women's intersectional experiences in the United States relating to sexual violence, their denial of womanhood, and their resistance. Historical understanding of Black women in the United States further places this study in the legacy of such critical literature.

2.3.2 Black Women, Media Representation, and Hip Hop

Stereotypes of Black women created and perpetuated during American slavery continue to control images in mass media and popular culture that devalue Black female bodies.¹⁴⁹ Since Freaknik existed in the cultural space, its' association with lewd sexual behavior distorted the images of Black women and their experiences at this festival. Literature surrounding how Black

¹⁴⁶ Feimster, Crystal Nicole. 2009. *Southern horrors: women and the politics of rape and lynching*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. 37-61

¹⁴⁷ Giddings, Paula. 1984. *When and where I enter: the impact of Black women on race and sex in America*. New York: W. Morrow.

¹⁴⁸ McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*, xx-xxii.

¹⁴⁹ Hill Collins, Patricia, Author. *Black Feminist Thought : Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment /*. Revised Tenth Anniversary ed. Abingdon, Oxon :: Routledge. 85.

women's images in popular culture formed and critiqued through the lens of racial stereotypes. Scholars Dionne P. Stephens and Layli D. Phillips argue that the "transfer of the predominance of symbolic control from the white mainstream to the African American community has created 'new sexual scripts' embedded within an African American, youth developed culture known as Hip Hop."¹⁵⁰ Such sexual scripts include the Freak, Gold Digger, Diva, and Dyke, which reinforce stereotypical beliefs of viewers and shape how Black adolescent women view themselves.¹⁵¹ These current scripts are connected to the foundational images of Black womanhood and therefore share political, social, and cultural meanings. For example, in a study with young adult Black women and sexual scripts in Hip-Hop and Black reality television, researchers found that the Freak and Gold Digger scripts, found in these media forms, are highly salient women.¹⁵² Also, the participants expressed concern about how these scripts have negatively influenced Black men's expectations and treatment of young adult Black women.¹⁵³

Black women's participation in Hip-Hop culture is paramount as Black female rappers "interpret and articulate the fears, pleasures, and promises of young Black women."¹⁵⁴ Sociologist Tricia Rose writes in her book, *Black Noise*, that Black female rappers' work consists of three central themes; heterosexual courtship, the importance of the female voice, and mastery in women's rap and Black female public displays of physical and sexual freedom.¹⁵⁵ Female rappers, like Salt'N'Pepa and Lil Kim, make public displays of physical and sexual freedom that often challenge male notions of female sexuality and pleasure. They resist patterns of sexual

¹⁵⁰ Stephens and Phillips, "Freaks, Gold Diggers, Divas, And Dykes," 12.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 14.

¹⁵² Coleman, M. Nicole, Ebony O. Butler, Amanda M. Long, and Felicia D. Fisher. 2016. "In and out of Love with Hip-Hop: Saliency of Sexual Scripts for Young Adult African American Women in Hip-Hop and Black-Oriented Television." *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 18 (10): 1175.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 1176.

¹⁵⁴ Rose, Tricia. 1994. *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*. Music/Culture. University Press of New England. Press of New England. 146.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 47.

objectification and cultural invisibility in the dominant American culture.¹⁵⁶ Scholar Joan Morgan coins the term, Hip-Hop Feminism, that emerges from the Hip-Hop tradition of artists like Queen Latifah, Lil Kim, Salt'N'Pepe, Missy Elliot, and Lauryn Hill.¹⁵⁷ These women and their consumers used the genre of Hip Hop popular culture to "challenge misogynistic ideas and behaviors of their Black male counterparts and Black community norms."¹⁵⁸ Hip Hop Feminist women reject controlling images of Black women while arguing for love and free expression (artistically and sexually).¹⁵⁹ In support, Gwendolyn Pough states "a hip-hop feminist is someone who is immersed in hip-hop culture and experiences hip-hop as a way of life."¹⁶⁰ In addition, Pough argues that Black women in the Hip Hop generation confronted by sexual stereotypes deal with them through expressive forms against sexism.¹⁶¹ Besides rapping, Black women's participation in Hip Hop also involves Black strip clubs, a popular afterlife of Freaknik in Atlanta.¹⁶²

Murali Balaji argues in his article, 'The Construction of "Street Credibility' in Atlanta's Hip Hop Music Scene: Analyzing the Role of Cultural Gatekeepers" that strip clubs have become notorious institutions that function as cultural production sites.¹⁶³ Music labels have

¹⁵⁶ Rose, *Black Noise*, 166.

¹⁵⁷ Morgan, Joan. 1999. *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down*. Simon and Schuster Paperbacks.

¹⁵⁸ Patricia Hill Collins. 2006. *From Black Power to Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*. Politics, History, and Social Change. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 150.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 192.

¹⁶⁰ Gwendolyn D. Pough. "What It Do, Shorty?: Women, Hip-Hop, and a Feminist Agenda." *Black Women, Gender Families* 1, no. 2 (2007): 78-99. Accessed April 19, 2021.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/blacwomegendfami.1.2.0078>.

¹⁶¹ Pough, Gwendolyn D. 2015. *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*. [Place of publication not identified]: Northeastern University Press.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=nlebk&AN=1090875&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

¹⁶² Newman, *Southern Hospitality*, 235-238.

¹⁶³ Balaji, Murali. 2012. "The Construction of 'Street Credibility' in Atlanta's Hip-Hop Music Scene: Analyzing the Role of Cultural Gatekeepers." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 29 (4): 313-30. doi:10.1080/15295036.2012.665997. (Strip Clubs, Freaknik, Hip-Hop)

learned to use exclusively Black strip clubs to filter songs considered "hot." Balaji further explains that a song passes the test if the stripper can get tips or make the crowd excited during her performance. If successful, she will request the song again and again. Following the success of the song in Atlanta based strip clubs, the song will move on to other cities and eventually other states until the song is approved for mainstream consumption.¹⁶⁴ In other words, Black women who work at Black strip clubs decide which songs will gain momentum for a chance to gain success in the mainstream music industry. As Balaji states, they are gatekeepers.¹⁶⁵

Unfortunately, the crucial role Black strippers hold in Hip Hop is not valued in that way as Black women experience race and gender oppression, as well as colorism, in the exotic dance industry. In a study orchestrated by sociologist Siobhan Brooks, she found that Black women who work at Black clubs were more likely to be subjected to rowdy customer behavior and low-level security measures.¹⁶⁶ Internal stratification based on the women's skin color within the club influences their money flow and placement on undesirable shifts, thereby devaluing their bodies.¹⁶⁷ Brooks writes that internalized hypersexual stereotypes limit the options Black women have in the industry.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, the consequences of these misrepresentations can exist for consumers. For example, Sarita Davis and Aisha Tucker-Brown found in their study, "Effects of Black Sexual Stereotypes on Sexual Decision Making Among African American Women", that although Black women recognize media represents them through the "Jezebel" trope, they internalize it into their sexual decision making.¹⁶⁹ Participants in the study agreed that media

¹⁶⁴ Balaji, "The Construction of 'Street Credibility' in Atlanta's Hip-Hop Music Scene," 323-324.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 323.

¹⁶⁶ Brooks, Siobhan. 2010. "Hypersexualization and the Dark Body: Race and Inequality among Black and Latina Women in the Exotic Dance Industry." *Sexuality Research & Social Policy: Journal of NSRC* 7 (2): 70.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 78.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 79.

¹⁶⁹ Davis, Sarita, and Aisha Tucker-Brown. 2013. "Effects of Black Sexual Stereotypes on Sexual Decision Making among African American Women." *Journal of Pan African Studies* 5 (9): 122.

messages through strip clubs, music videos, magazines, advertisements, and music lyrics play a significant role in making risky sexual decisions.¹⁷⁰ Likewise, Maya Poran, in her study, “The Politics of Protections: Body Image, Social Pressures, and the Misrepresentation of Young Black Women,” found that women feel pressures to be thin, be desirable to men from diverse ethnicities, compete with other Black women all while strongly feeling misrepresented in the media.¹⁷¹

As established by Brooks’s, Davis’s, and Poran's separate studies, stereotypes of Black women like the asexual Mammy, the emasculating Strong or angry Black Woman otherwise known as Sapphire, the tragic mulatto, and most certainly Jezebel, the hypersexual woman, have real-world consequences for Black women in employment, personhood, and interpersonal relationships. Unfortunately, these tropes persist in American popular culture, including in rap/hip-hop music.¹⁷² Pough writes, “As hip-hop culture expands and dominates mainstream popular culture, the hip-hop video becomes more than just a music video... Hip-hop music videos are spreading representations of U.S. women of color around the globe.”¹⁷³ Scholar Mireille Miller Young states, “Hip-hop music videos, as advertisements for hip-hop artists or entertainers, have been the principal location for a growing pornographic sensibility that functions to market black bodies, aesthetics, and culture to a global consumer audience.”¹⁷⁴ In these videos where Black women’s bodies are paraded, racial essentialism would define them as “black ‘ho’s” (normatively lumped together, they include video models, street prostitutes,

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 120-122.

¹⁷¹ Poran, Maya A. 2006. “The Politics of Protection: Body Image, Social Pressures, and the Misrepresentation of Young Black Women.” *Sex Roles* 55 (11–12): 743.

¹⁷² Wallace, Michele. 1999. *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. Verso Classics. Verso. [Access to the book will result in a page number for reference]

¹⁷³ Gwendolyn D. Pough. "What It Do, Shorty?" 83.

¹⁷⁴ Miller-young, Mireille. "Hip-Hop Honeys and Da Hustlaz: Black Sexualities in the New Hip-Hop Pornography." *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 8, no. 1 (2007): 261-292. muse.jhu.edu/article/235560.

private escorts, exotic dancers, phone-sex workers, skeezers, freaks, chickenheads, goldiggers, and others) as existing outside of black moral respectability.”¹⁷⁵ However in her article, Miller-Young challenges this reading of Black women as she states, “although sexism and misogyny exist in much of pornography, this does not mean that it is present in the entire media form. Nor can we consider the women involved in the productions hapless victims or traitors to the race.”¹⁷⁶ To further drive her point, Miller-Young writes, “Black women’s sexual choices and self-articulations within contemporary hip-hop cultural production are complicated by the multiple stigmas and abuses that devalue, commodify, appropriate, mystify, and violate black women’s sexual integrity.”¹⁷⁷ As Pough emphasizes, these images have the power to hurt as they “are not the sum and total of hip-hop and certainly not what is representative of the culture, which is in *constant* evolution. But they do exist, and we do need to interrogate them. And when we do, we need to add to the mix the voices, stories, and reasons these women give for participating in the objectification.”¹⁷⁸ Freaknik contributed to and reflected Rap/Hip-Hop Culture as seen in the music played during the party and reference to women on T-shirts, party promotions, and dialogue of participants. Therefore, crucial misrepresentations infiltrated the actions of Black women either enjoying the festivities or demanding help when in need; thereby continuing Black women’s sexualized oppression in Freaknik’s space. Scholars have critiqued these representations of Black women at Freaknik and offered more readings to consider.

2.4 Black Women at Freaknik

There is literature that talks about the sexualization of female bodies at Spring Break destinations like Communications scholar Karen C. Pitcher’s essay titled, “The Staging of

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 276.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 277.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 278.

¹⁷⁸ Gwendolyn D. Pough. "What It Do, Shorty?" 85.

Agency in *Girls Gone Wild*,” where she interrogates how college women’s agency in the films are framed as a choice “already mediated by a capitalist, white, middle-class, heteronormative framework.” She writes that, “GGW (*Girls Gone Wild*) functions hegemonically in a number of ways...not only through its limited representations of “real” girls afforded the opportunity to step temporarily outside their self-constituted norms, but also as a mechanism that literally and figuratively banks on its consent process to serve its own ends. Ultimately, what makes *Girls Gone Wild* so seductive is that it functions as a purveyor of empowering female opportunity. It establishes participation as socially inconsequential, as pleasurable; and it appropriates a depoliticized, empty model of choice to produce the effect of agency.”¹⁷⁹ This article is highly relatable as it serves to explore temporary or momentary out of the norm behaviors performed by women at a Spring Break location. However, this article is largely missing a racial perspective as the author states, “As much as GGW emphasizes its ‘real girls’ on its infomercials and website (www.girlsgonewild.com), this articulation of “reality” is predicated on a white, heterosexual, middle-class subject. GGW features very few women of color, and this conspicuous lack of racial or ethnic diversity has been publicly criticized.”¹⁸⁰ Therefore, collecting literature with a racial and sexual analysis is paramount to the subject of this study.

LaMonda Horton-Stallings writes in her book, *Funk the Erotic: Trans-aesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, that Freaknik was an exemplary model of the "queer art of failure." She writes, "Freaknik's failure to adhere to heteronormative common sense and Black respectability results in a liminal space of undomesticated Black communal eroticism that overcomes the class divisions set up by work society as well as the public mediation of Black women's mobility and

¹⁷⁹ Pitcher, Karen C. 2006. “The Staging of Agency in *Girls Gone Wild*.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23 (3): 215.

¹⁸⁰ Pitcher, Karen C. 2006. “The Staging of Agency in *Girls Gone Wild*.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23 (3): 202.

sexual expression."¹⁸¹ Horton-Stallings argues in this text that this failure generated a psychic space for Black women to further develop "sexual magic" in the twenty-first century through becoming consumers and dancers at Black strip clubs as well as transforming public sexual cultures into sites of memory.¹⁸²

Correspondingly, Krista Thompson, in her article, "Performing Visibility: Freaknik and the Spatial Politics of Sexuality, Race, and Class in Atlanta," looks at Atlanta's context of race, class, and gender to analyze Black women's performances during Freaknik and how representation and consumption proceeded. She argues that through the camera medium, elements of identity were performed by men as the "photographic shooters hunting for female performers."¹⁸³ The videos and photos taken at Freaknik reveal "the centrality of the camera." Women's behavior was driven by "the desire to be seen and, more importantly, to be photographed and videotaped."¹⁸⁴ She also states that men "performed their masculinity and upper-class status by cruising in pimped expensive sports, luxury, and classic cars."¹⁸⁵ When Freaknik became threatened by Atlanta authorities, the camera became a means of taking possession and space. She offers that the Black female body was central to Freaknik in that "the sexualized Black female body became both the purported reason for eradicating the event and the primary tool in Freaknik's continuation, popularity, and the defiance of authoritarian controls."¹⁸⁶ Although his work is not written about Freaknik, Douglas Allen (2020) makes an argument similar to Krista Thompson. Florida A&M University's (FAMU) homecoming parade created a

¹⁸¹ LaMonda Horton-Stallings. 2015. *6. From the Freaks of Freaknik to the Freaks of Magic City: Black Women, Androgyny, Dance, and Prof.* Champaign: University of Illinois Press. 177.

¹⁸² Horton-Stallings, *From the Freaks of Freaknik to the Freaks of Magic City*, 177-178

¹⁸³ Thompson, "Performing Visibility: Freaknic," 30.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 30.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 32.

¹⁸⁶ Thompson, "Performing Visibility: Freaknic," 43.

similar disruption in Tallahassee, Florida, as Freaknik did in Atlanta, Georgia.¹⁸⁷ He argued that FAMU's Marching 100 and students made a transgressive claim of place through Black joy and celebration in Tallahassee, Florida.¹⁸⁸

Communications scholar Marian Meyers engaged gender and Freaknik, specifically within the media coverage and representation of Black women in her journal article, "African American Women and Violence: Gender, Race, and Class in the News." She draws on Black feminist theory to investigate how local T.V. news coverage of Freaknik represented violence against Black women.¹⁸⁹ Meyers contends that "the convergence of gender, race, and class oppressions minimized the seriousness of the violence, portrayed most of the victims as stereotypic Jezebels whose lewd behavior provoked assault, and absolved the perpetrators of responsibility."¹⁹⁰ She found that the safety of Black women was less noteworthy than the property damage since news outlets criminalized Black men for it more than for their sexist abuse.¹⁹¹ Interestingly, Meyers also found that age was a factor, too, as news outlets were more likely to picture Freaknik participants as Jezebels to emphasize "the presumed threat young African Americans pose to society."¹⁹² Such results indicate a need to revisit this space and time and explore the gaps most likely overlooked by individuals with implicit or explicit stereotypical biases of Black women.

¹⁸⁷ Allen, Douglas L. "Asserting a Black Vision of Race and Place: Florida A&M University's Homecoming as an Affirmative, Transgressive Claim of Place." *Geoforum* 111 (May 1, 2020): 71.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 71.

¹⁸⁹ Meyers, Marian. 2004. "African American Women and Violence: Gender, Race, and Class in the News." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21 (2): 95.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 95.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid*, 113.

¹⁹² Meyers, "African American Women and Violence," 114.

2.4.1 *Black Women in Other Cultural Events*

Because of the shortage of literature that intersects gender and Freaknik, it is crucial to include scholarship looking at similar events like Freaknik, where a gender and racial analysis is available. Rachel Spooner analyzed the St. Paul Carnival space in her empirical study, *Contested Representation: Black women and the St. Paul's Carnival*. She states that women's participation in Carnival for many women was an extension of their domestic gender role and productive roles in the public sphere.¹⁹³ Through the educational role of the Carnival themes, women can represent themselves as achievements.¹⁹⁴ Spooner concludes that the gender roles present in Carnival also challenge Western norms.¹⁹⁵ Anna Perkins, in her journal article, made a gendered argument in the Caribbean Carnival concerning Christianity.¹⁹⁶ In her findings, she found that Caribbean women have "subverted and continue to subvert negative valuations by engaging in the carnivalesque masquerade that revalues bodies, especially colonized bodies."¹⁹⁷ They do this through public eroticized displays like wining and costumery.¹⁹⁸ On the one hand, Spooner finds that traditional Western gendered norms do not fully capture the role Black women play in Carnival.¹⁹⁹ Simultaneously, Perkins asserts that Carnival rooted in the Catholic Lenten season among others influences from West African, Indigenous American, and South Asian practices, serve as a site of resistance for Caribbean women.²⁰⁰ It is crucial here to recognize the regional differences when comparing the Caribbean Carnival to Atlanta's Freaknik. Critique of women in

¹⁹³ Spooner, Rachel. 1996. "Contested Representations: Black Women and the St Paul's Carnival." *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 3 (2): 197-198.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 200.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 200.

¹⁹⁶ Perkins, Anna. 2011. "Carne Vale (Goodbye to Flesh?): Caribbean Carnival, Notions of the Flesh and Christian Ambivalence about the Body." *Sexuality & Culture* 15 (4): 362.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 373.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 373.

¹⁹⁹ Spooner, "Contested Representations," 196-200.

²⁰⁰ Perkins, "Carne Vale (Goodbye Flesh?)," 369.

Carnival and Freaknik share similar historical images of the antiwoman or hypersexual woman, but Caribbean women's struggles are contingent on class and ethnicity.²⁰¹ Likewise, Jennifer Atkins does similar in her article, "Using the Bow and the Smile: Old-Line Krewe Court Femininity in New Orleans Mardi Gras Balls, 1870-1920," where she writes a historiography focused on women's roles in the religious-based celebration, due to the time referenced, Black women, are primarily excluded in this analysis.²⁰²

Furthermore, there is a gap in the literature that expresses the history of Black women and Freaknik. Indeed, Black women's role has been mentioned and even critiqued through existing theories across disciplines. However, the actual lived experiences of Black female Freaknik participants in the context of Atlanta location and time have not been central to any previous scholarship. Discussions surrounding Black Hip-Hop music, Black popular culture, and Atlanta's racial and classist issues consist of substantial academic works that aide in understanding the context of Freaknik. Other conversations that include events like Freaknik tend to focus on other locations besides Atlanta and either lack gender or racial analysis. Thus, this case study servers to contribute to the ongoing historiography of Black women in the South, twentieth-century American history, Atlanta history, and, most importantly, the historiography of Atlanta's Freaknik.

²⁰¹ Edmondson, Belinda. 2003. "Public Spectacles: Caribbean Women and the Politics of Public Performance." *Small Axe* 7 (1): 2.

²⁰² Atkins, Jennifer. 2013. "'Using the Bow and the Smile': Old-Line Krewe Court Femininity in New Orleans Mardi Gras Balls, 1870-1920." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 54 (1): 5.

3 THE BIRTH, BLISS, AND BUST OF FREAKNIK

Recollections of this event have been spoken and discussed amongst family and friends for decades. Entertainment pieces have managed to capture and share audiovisual snapshots of Freaknik. Literature in academia has discussed this even through multiple political or social analyses. Unlike before, in the following chapters, the story of Freaknik will be told through the words of the people who witnessed it. The idea of a “Freaknik” began with the Washington D.C Metro Club, an Atlanta University Center (AUC) co-ed group when they adopted the theme “Return of the Freak” during the 1982-83 school year.²⁰³

3.1 Freaknic 1983-1994

Freaknic means party where it’s just having a good time with no parents and no police. Like it was just do what you want to do. – Randall Marshall

It was a cultural experience, a time shot, a cultural experience from that era. So just being a part of it, seeing it, and knowing it, you know? It was the perfect storm for the safest place for young college students to get together, have fun, be free, and just kind of, you know, let it all hang out, literally and figuratively. - Tina Rodgers

Freaknic is almost like a historical marker for me. When I think back to Freaknik, there was no other event in the country for Black people that was like it. None. That was the premier Black event of its time. - Brandon Harrison

As a nod to their high school memories from the song “Le Freak” by CHIC and its popular dance “The Freak,” group members of the D.C. Metro Club organized events throughout

²⁰³ Toomer, “The Origins of Freaknik.” G7

the school year centering this theme.²⁰⁴ One of those events was a spring picnic on campus with go-go music, a genre originating in Washington D.C. in the late 1970s,²⁰⁵ and music by Parliament-Funkadelic. The picnic was meant to be a spring break get-together for members who would be staying in Atlanta during the holiday. According to Sharon Correa Toomer, the chairwoman of Freaknic in 1983, the first Freaknic took place on the AUC campus and attracted about 60 students.²⁰⁶ The following year, it was moved to Piedmont Park. In 1985, it occurred in Adams Park, located off Campbellton Road SW in Atlanta.²⁰⁷

Randall Marshall attended Freaknic at John A. White park during his first year at Morehouse College in 1987. The picnic became the party for all AUC students to attend with its host, the D.C. Metro Club. Randall recalled the party as a chance to get off campus where you knew “all the girls, stubborn girls, smart girls, Mo Brown (Morris Brown) girls were going to be there.” Everybody there knew each other or knew of each other. It was mainly Spelman and Morehouse students during that year because of tensions between Morehouse College, Clark Atlanta University, and Morris Brown College.²⁰⁸ By 1989, Freaknik grew beyond its AUC borders and welcomed other HBCU college students as word about its fun in the sun traveled across state lines. In the Spelman Yearbook of 1988-89, Freaknic was commemorated, and students wrote:

FREAKNIC: Noun; a massive congregation of partying, eating, bar-b- quing, dancing, drinking, tanning, laughing, stepping AUC students and hundreds of out-of-town visitors from surrounding college; Verb Tense; To Freaknic; To apply massive amounts of suntan lotion. (2) To GO-GO, till you can't GO NO MORE; To eat, and eat, and eat. (3) To FINALLY make that move on the cute brother you've been watching all semester. In April of 1989, the D.C. Metro Club

²⁰⁴ Ibid, G7

²⁰⁵ Vincent, R. "Go-go." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, January 12, 2001. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Go-go-1688512>.

²⁰⁶ Toomer, “The Origins of Freaknik.” G7.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, G7.

²⁰⁸ Randall Marshall, in discussion with author, February 8, 2021.

proudly presented FREAKNIC '89! Washington Park was invaded by what appeared to be thousands of college students – with one goal in mind....PARTY!!!!!! With the D.C. style GO-GO band in place and the sun peeping in and out of the clouds, the stage was set! The Freaknic has managed to put the AUC on the map. No longer is it a local AUC picnic, but a national congregation of college students from all over the country.²⁰⁹

Students like, Lisa Jackson, a recent newcomer to Atlanta and recent graduate of the University of Wisconsin, met up with friends at the AUC center to go to Freaknic where “everybody who’s anybody is going to be up in there.” She stated that, in that year, she heard that members of the D.C Metro Club, mostly Morehouse students, held a pajama party the night before and continued the next day with a Freaknic or picnic in the park to try and meet women. A college graduate from the University of Wisconsin, where Black students were less than 1000 out of 45,000 students, Lisa Jackson expressed how she felt being at the park that day, “For the first time in my life, I was surrounded by a sea of young Black people all young, all about something, all having fun. No mess, no line, no guns, no, ‘shut it down.’ It was exhilarating, energizing, and empowering to have this environment where you could do anything. I learned then and there that I could do anything I put my mind to.” Lisa and the many other students from that day felt they had a majority someplace in the United States of America. With a community of support, students like Lisa felt being Black no longer required an apology.²¹⁰

Freaknic continued to thrive in the community of Black college students that in 1992, a student from Howard University voiced in the student newspaper concern over how changes to the location of their spring picnic would push students to go to Freaknic in Atlanta.²¹¹ The AUC’s Freaknik attracted more students as events started to spill beyond the parks and rolled

²⁰⁹ *Spelman College Reflections 1988-89*, “Freaknic - 89 Activities” 82-83.

²¹⁰ Lisa Jackson, in discussion with author, February 12, 2021.

²¹¹ Dallas Jackson “’92 Spring picnic set for VanNess campus,” *The Hilltop*, April 17, 1992, A2.

over into the streets with little interruption from Atlanta's police. Soon the city of Atlanta and its residents could not ignore the sudden influx of students coming every April for one long weekend. Hotspots like John A. White Park, Washington Park, Piedmont Park, areas around the AUC center, the Lakewood Amphitheatre, and nightclubs throughout the city were packed with partying students. Lady T, a 27-year-old Atlanta resident, said, "The whole atmosphere in the city was extremely congested. People were just everywhere on the street, all the hotels, Downtown, North Avenue, Piedmont Park. Most people were walking... It was just a wildness like anything goes."²¹² On Monday, April 27, 1992, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported that about 80,000 students converged on the city that past weekend attending "Freaknik concerts and shows that students put on at the Lakewood Amphitheatre on Saturday, and many headed to Piedmont Park afterward. Students partied into Sunday morning, spilling onto nearby streets, dancing atop cars and snarling traffic."²¹³

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution and *The Atlanta Daily World* also reported that an incident occurred at Club X-S early Sunday morning. A driver, trying to avoid a shooter, drove through a crowd of 5,000 people, seriously injuring five people in the process.²¹⁴ Four of those people were out of towners, and news of this incident spread to other states like Ohio.²¹⁵ Lady T said, "Atlanta residents were so pissed off because the traffic and parking were so ridiculous. You didn't even dare, like if you lived in Decatur or College Park, you didn't dare go downtown. People's driveways were blocked. People were walking all over the grass." Some residents responded by turning the sudden flow of visitors into an opportunity to make money. Lady T

²¹² Lady T, in discussion with author, March 17, 2020.

²¹³ Dennis McCafferty "5 Revelers hurt as drivers flees gunman", *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 27, 1992, D2.

²¹⁴ *Atlanta Daily World*. 1992, "'Freaknik' Panic Causes Injuries", Apr 30, 1992, 1.; Dennis McCafferty, "5 Revelers hurt as drivers flees gunman," D2.

²¹⁵ *Lancaster Eagle-Gazette* (Lancaster, OH), 1992, "Five injured when driver hits crowd," Monday April 27, 1992, 3.

said, “Freaknik was a real big moneymaker for the city. All the vendors during that time in Atlanta was just selling stuff like t-shirts and barbecue. People were making money off them [the students] because the kids were just spending money like it was water. Like if you had anything to sell. For example, people were selling their yard space for parking. The only people who were mad was the ones who wasn’t a part of that.” Other residents, mostly white, did not feel this way. Lady T said, “The white contingent of Atlanta really had an attitude with them [the students] being here. They felt they were overrun by young Black folks when during that time, the makeup of the neighborhoods of Atlanta was still very Black. It was Black people in all those areas.”²¹⁶

An Atlanta resident of the Belmonte Hills subdivision, located across from John A. White Park, expressed displeasure at the students’ behavior. In the letter to the editor, they wrote,

“The gathering at John A. White was apparently unauthorized as the city had made no plans to accommodate the thousands of students who showed up. There were no traffic control measures and no toilets. As a result, the throngs overran our property. They parked illegally, making it impossible for our residents to get in and out. Drunken trespassers threw trash on our grounds, damaged plants, urinated in public view, smoked crack cocaine, and were profane and otherwise disorderly and unlawful. Although economically privileged, the ravaging students behaved like characters out of Alley Oop.”²¹⁷

Not all onlookers had displeased remarks as an Atlanta police officer said, “a few liked to challenge authority but other than that, they’re basically nice kids.”²¹⁸ There were mixed feelings about how the city of Atlanta should handle Freaknic. Speculation around the topic drove Mayor Maynard Jackson to refer to Freaknic in a controversial address to AUC students and faculty about how the Atlanta police handled students from the AUC center protesting the Rodney King case verdict. Mayor Jackson stated, “We possess the tools now, but we do not utilize them. We

²¹⁶ Lady T, in discussion with author, March 24, 2021.

²¹⁷ Clarence D. White, “Black students use energy constructively,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, May 6, 1992, A14.

²¹⁸ Dennis McCafferty, “5 Revelers hurt as drivers flees gunman,” D2.

are inactive, apathetic, and worrying more about Freaknic than voter registration.”²¹⁹

Unfortunately, the following year did not settle the issue. It catapulted a heated debate amongst Atlanta residents as demands were made to the city to control the inevitable April college crowd.²²⁰

In 1993, from April 23 through the 25, Atlanta endured over 100,000 Black college students in its streets with plenty of Freaknic themed festivities. K.A White, student reporter of *The Panther*, Clark Atlanta University’s student newsletter, explained that Friday began with the Block Party in the parking lot of the Phoenix Dance Club, “Music in the Yard” at the Clark Atlanta University (CAU) Thayer Quadrangle, and a block party in front of CAU hosted by members of Phi Beta Sigma, Incorporated. White writes that James P. Brawley Drive, a popular campus street for CAU students, became “a parade of African American students and others from across the nation.” Beyond the AUC borders, partygoers may have gone to Club Garage for their “Freaky Friday Jizzam,” or Club X-S to meet up with Georgia Institute of Technology’s (Georgia Tech) members of Omega Si Phi, or Club Flava for rap artist, AMG’s performance. On the following Saturday, students gathered at Morehouse College’s B.T Harvey Stadium to hear music from Run DMC, After 7, Recks-n-Effects, and SWV (Sisters with Voices).

Afterwards students attended the “Walk in the Park Party” at Piedmont Park with an afterparty at Sandcastles Nightclub with special guest R&B artist, Trey Lorenz. In fact, successful rapper, Snoop Doggy Dog of “Death Row Records” also appeared at a Howard Johnson Hotel on Peachtree Street. The “Freaknic Explosion” occurred at Georgia Tech’s pavilion while Club X-S expected over 15,000 people for their “Biggest Freaknic After Party.” K.A. White writes, “The two-hour traffic jam,” a result of all several gatherings across the city,

²¹⁹ *CAU Panther* (Atlanta, GA), “Mayor Addresses Students at Forum” May 7, 1992, 4.

²²⁰ *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, “Freaknik ’93 What Readers Say,” April 29, 1993, A17.

“brought the party to the street while cars pumped to the new sounds of Dr. Dre and Silk.”²²¹ On Sunday, students went back to Piedmont Park, watched rap artist Grand Puba at the Phoenix Dance Club, held a “Daisy Duke” contest at Sandcastles Nightclub, and partied at Club X-S with members of Omega Si Phi from Washington D.C. In White’s article, students expressed how Freaknic was a “well-awaited celebration that ends the school year off right” and how they were “very fortunate to have such a sensational celebration in the mecca of Black institutions.”²²²

CollegeFest: Freaknik ’93, a sponsored fundraiser of events for education, was held during that weekend too. Such an event was meant to counter the harsh critics of Freaknic as well as take benefit from the large influx of visitors spending money in the city and raise valuable resources for the community. On Friday, a college prep workshop for high schoolers and the co-ed panel discussion, “The Deteriorating State of Education in this Country and its Impact on the Black Community,” was held at CAU with a concert party at Morris Brown College afterward.

Saturday events at Atlanta’s Lakewood Fairgrounds consisted of a day-long concert with performances from artists like Trey Lorenz, Silk, Monie Love, 2 Crazy, Gumbo, and many more. Sunday’s events included the Slam Dunk basketball tournament, a swimsuit competition, Greek Step Shows, and the Atlanta Dollars for Scholars (ADS) scholarship winner announcements. Kristina Copeland, one of the organizers and president of ELQ Communications, stated, “CollegeFest: FREAKNIK ’93 is a repackaging of the previous event to include planned entertainment, public safety, and \$20,000 in scholarships.”²²³ Carla Sims, a high school student who started attending in 1993, described that year as, “partying, lots of people and partying...

²²¹ K.A. White, “Freaknic ’93,” *CAU Panther*, May 1, 1993, 6.

²²² *Ibid*, page 6.

²²³ Della Pulliam, “CollegeFest: FREAKNIK ’93 Promises To Have Meaning,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 22, 1993, 7.

partying to the extent where I knew it would be unacceptable in terms of some of the things that I would probably do based on my upbringing. So, I knew that I was going to have wild partying.”²²⁴ C.J Johnson, another high schooler, described Freaknic '93 as, “Everywhere you go in the city, all of the hotspots, you see this massive crowd of Black people. Yes, there were some freaky things happening but that was not the biggest part of the event. It was mostly just people hanging out, socializing, and enjoying people's company.”²²⁵

The Atlanta-Journal Constitution compared Atlanta to Daytona Beach as thousands of students traveled from across the country to participate in Freaknic.²²⁶ The article, written by S.A. Reid, included quotes from students and college graduates from Ohio, California, and Wisconsin. One quote from David Lowe, a 26-year-old Kent State University alumnus, stated, “This is the first time I’ve been able to get down here...The trends, the fashion, the unity, the culture – it’s all here.” By Sunday on April 25, 1993, the tone about Freaknic changed as writers sought to highlight the impact Freaknic had on the city. For example, staff writers of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Bill Robinson and Anne Rochell, titled their article, “Hard-partying Freakniks clog city streets.” In the article, writers mentioned reports of sporadic violence, including a shooting on Ralph McGill Boulevard that left one in stable condition at Grady Memorial Hospital and “widely scattered rudeness spawned by the most horrendous nighttime traffic jam in recent memory.” Following this statement, the staff writers included a story of a MARTA bus driver whose bus was trapped for two hours on Piedmont Avenue and 14th Street where a young man climbed on the roof and mooned the “large and appreciative crowd - some of whom answered in kind.” Traffic was described as “Cars snaked down Peachtree to Five Points

²²⁴ Carla Sims, in discussion with author, January 26, 2021.

²²⁵ CJ Johnson, in discussion with author, February 12, 2021.

²²⁶ S.A. Reid, “Freaknik '93 lures blacks to Atlanta,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 23, 1993, A1.

and beyond, then turned back and made the agonizingly slow trip back up to Piedmont Park.” Staff writers reported that the police response to Freaknic doubled their personnel with a quote from an Atlanta police officer who said, “We never disassembled the Rodney King command post, so we’ve got plenty of officers on duty and on the ready – in reserve.”

A large part of the article focused on how Atlanta residents felt about that past weekend. A resident in Buckhead stated, “I wish somebody had given us a little warning that this nonsense was going on today. There’s great advertisement concerning next week’s bicycle race but absolutely no word in the newspaper about 100,000 crazy people – goodness knows where they’ve come from. Who the hell selected Atlanta and how do we get them not to come back next year? Why Piedmont Park? Why Midtown? For that matter, why Downtown?” Another Atlanta resident of Midtown stated, “I don’t feel safe in my home tonight. I’ve just bought this beautiful expensive home, but I’ve never felt like this before. I’m literally a prisoner in my own home. It’s absolutely the worst thing I’ve ever seen – the police were scared.” Although these comments were quite negative, there was one statement the writers included from the Freaknic participants’ perspective where an upcoming CAU freshman student said, “Georgia has it going on. It’s all this and then some. We’ve been walking in circles trying to find the statue of the Phoenix. But there’s wall-to-wall, bumper-to-bumper men. That’s what’s really great.” A female police officer said, “It’s just a crowd of young people having a good time and scaring a lot of the older residents, but really, they’re not as unruly as people think – and not near as bad as last year.” These comments recorded by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* were only the beginning of the heated arguments to follow in the newspapers in the next few weeks.²²⁷

²²⁷ Bill Robinson and Anne Rochell, “Hard-partying Freakniks clog city streets,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 25, 1993, A1, A15.

The next day, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* published an article by staff writer John Blake, who sought to show a different perspective some residents had about Freaknik. Black wrote, “unlike Saturday when police reported traffic jams and sporadic violence, there were no reports of major incidents, and most residents near Piedmont Park said Sunday’s crowd was well behaved.” Van Hill, president of the Friends of Piedmont Park, said in the article, “What I see now is a fairly large and orderly crowds. There’s a lot of litter and trash, but quite frankly, there’s about as much trash from what you would see from the Peachtree Road Race.” Blake included quotes from individuals complaining about the critics of Freaknik. William Edwards of Atlanta said, “Nobody’s bothering anybody. Everybody is chilling out, just being cool.” Ernie Stone, a resident who lived near Piedmont Park who agreed with Edwards and was bemused by all the activity, said, “I asked somebody what was going on and they told me it was Freaknik. I said I’m not even going to ask.”²²⁸

This correspondence between residents continued that next Thursday, April 29, 1993, the “Viewpoints” section of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, where people submitted statements sharing their thoughts on Freaknik and how Atlanta should handle it. Most comments fell along racial lines. Black writers wrote to assess why critics Freaknik and having young Black people partying in Atlanta were huge issues for the city. For example, Richard Kenyada said, “perhaps had the students been blond, blue-eyed, Ivy League types, Freaknik would have been perceived for what it was – just another college romp.” Joella Newman of Marietta said, “as a 22-year-old Black woman, I resent all the hateful remarks about Freaknik...Honestly, I think white people are afraid when a bunch of Black people get together get over it.” Georgianne Thomas of Atlanta said, “I applaud Atlanta Police Chief Eldrin Bell and his outstanding police force because the

²²⁸ John Blake, “Freaknik ’93 lowers volume, hits the road,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 26, 1993, B2.

threat of a police confrontation did not seem evident, and the threat of unnecessary trouble was nonexistent. I say let's organize the event so we can assure another great weekend next year.”²²⁹

White writers wrote to give reasons for the end of Freaknic. C. McLaurin Sitton of Conyers wrote, “To say Freaknic is no different from Daytona Beach during spring break misses the point. Atlanta does not need to play host to a three-day drunk for any group of college students, period. Any economic benefit pales in the face of the damage done and the danger posed.” Roxie Hudak stated, “As a Midtown resident, I was appalled by the behavior of young adults that I witnessed over the weekend. I live one block from Piedmont Park, so I have come to tolerate blaring car stereos and traffic gridlock. It is difficult, however, to accept urination in broad daylight and being called a “bitch” for telling a young lady she couldn't park in our private lot...The culprits, be they college students or others who were tagging along for the party, need to repeat elementary school to learn good manners. I pray they hold this event elsewhere next spring and leave our neighborhood free to outsiders who respect it and those of us who live here.” One white writer, Miriam Center of Atlanta, expressed concern over how the issue of Freaknic was impacting the racial relations in the city. She stated, “Sunday night, I wept...I wept because the tension and underbelly of hate in both the white and black sectors are bubbling, and sometimes I feel that my friends and I might have failed in our attempt at a more peaceful and integrated world. It is not the name-calling that cuts me but the growing realization that race relations today have gotten worse despite the lives sacrificed and the blood that's been shed for civil rights.”²³⁰

On Monday, May 3, 1993, a letter to the editor, written by Barry G. Wahlig, responded to the April 29 Viewpoints section about Freaknic. Wahlig wrote, “the April 29 Viewpoints page on

²²⁹ *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, “Freaknik '93 What Readers Say,” A17.

²³⁰ *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, “Freaknik '93 What Readers Say,” A17.

Freaknic not only failed specifically to reach a consensus on the gathering, it served as a chilling reminder of the fundamental gulf between Black and white in Atlanta...facts of the event apparently cut 100 percent along racial lines...The white writers saw inconvenience, disorder and plain lawlessness. The Black writers recalled only a harmless festive atmosphere, to which white overreacted out of fear of any large group of empowered Black people...People of good will have always differed on causes, effects, and policies. But if we cannot even agree on what we see and hear, is there any future for racial harmony in America?"²³¹

In the May 2, 1993, Sunday paper, staff writer S.A. Reid of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* covered the community meeting at Grady High School held to discuss the traffic and crowd control problems of Freaknic '93. According to the article, some people complained about the surprise inconvenience while others were angry at those complaining about what was considered an incident-free weekend. Some of those folks suggested that the complaints were racially motivated since most of the crowd was Black college students. The highlight of the event was when Sandra Davenport, an attendee of the meeting, asked, "If Atlanta is going to become an international city, something this small can't cause this much trouble. If so, we will be in big trouble for the Super Bowl and great trouble for the Olympics." The questioning of Atlanta's ability to handle the large crowds certainly embarrassed Mayor Maynard Jackson and Atlanta Police Chief Eldrin Bell, whose department was caught off guard by the size of Freaknic. The article reported that police based their estimates on past attendance. They said, "Who could have guessed that the event, publicized mainly through word of mouth, would jump from 30,000 participants to more than 100,000?" Regardless of Atlanta residents' doubts, Michael Meyer, director of the Transportation Research Center of Georgia Tech, said, "everyone has that

²³¹ Barry G. Wahlig, "Freaknik letters emphasize city's black-white gulf," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 3, 1993, A10.

perception because it is in their backyard, that it's the worst in the world. I think Atlanta, in general, does a pretty good job." Another important detail that came out of this meeting, as reported by S.A. Reid, was that City Councilwoman Mary Davis assembled a group of people from Midtown and the Atlanta University Center to plan for a better experience of Freaknic for everyone.²³²

Freaknic of 1993 raised questions about Atlanta's traffic and crowd control, but Freaknic of 1994 raised uproar about Atlanta's lack of competence to handle the sizeable Freaknic crowd that doubled in one year. The University of Georgia's student newspaper, *The Red and Black*, reported on Friday, April 22, that Freaknic was the place to be that weekend of April 22 through April 24. Josh Krach, the student writer, included many thoughts from students about their plans regarding Freaknic. Stephanie Billeau, a freshman from Chicago, stated, "I'm kind of stressed about school, so going to Freaknic to hang with my friends and have a good time." Telvis Rich, a senior from Thomasville and president of the Student Government Association (SGA), said, "It's much like a family gathering but on a greater magnitude." Plans for Freaknic that year included planned events from Midtown and Piedmont Park to Morris Brown College and Lakewood Fairgrounds. Scheduled performers at the concert that Saturdays included Queen Latifah, Snoop Doggy Dog, Luke and 2 Live Crew, Zhane, and A Tribe Called Quest.²³³ The city showed a face of preparation as Mayor Campbell assured Atlanta residents that the Freaknic gridlock was not going to happen again²³⁴ as residents and businesses continued to express fear over last year's problems and doubt over the city's plans for this year.²³⁵ Richard Bono reported that council

²³² S.A. Reid, "Can city control crowds?" *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, May 2, 1993, A1, D5.

²³³ Josh Krach, "Freaknik: The place to be this weekend," *Red & Black* (Athens, Georgia), April 22, 1994, 1.

²³⁴ Richard Bono, "Campbell says Freaknic gridlock is 'not going to happen again,'" *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, January 27, 1994, JE14.

²³⁵ Denise N. Maloof, "Freaknik Neighbors brace for party," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, "CityLife Buckhead," April 14, 1994, J1; Richard Bono, "Midtowners hoping for best, bracing for worst," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, "CityLife Buckhead", April 14, 1994, JE11; Richard Bono, "Student bash means cash to some but zip to others,"

members controversially voted 15-2 to co-sponsor Freaknic, where Cathy Tyler stated, “The co-sponsorship does not promote Freaknic. There is no extra money involved. We are not a part of this event. All this says to residents is ‘relax, city services will be in place and people will not be locked into their driveways and trash will be picked up.’”²³⁶

Tanya Watson, a college senior from South Carolina, described that year as “being around a whole bunch of African American people, having a big block party, and being carefree where you not really concerned at all. It was somewhat overwhelming because there were so many people. I've just never been around that many people, black people, just out having fun.”²³⁷

James Brown, a student from Howard University, described that year as,

“It was crazy. The traffic was just off the chain, like nothing I had ever seen in my life before... Once Friday happens, that's when it really starts to pick up because you got the people from North Carolina, Alabama, and some of the other certain areas, after they got off of work, would head down. That's when we started to really get crazy on that Friday afternoon... It was really still that Southern vibe. You know, so far as you know, black people and whatnot. It was like, the first time I had seen something with that many amount of Black people. I didn't really see a whole lot of people, fighting or shooting or anything like that. I've never seen anything like that on that level. It was everywhere. Everywhere you went, folks were out all day and all night. One of the things and one of the things I remember vividly you know, were some of the cars, seeing guys who had a Lexus or the Escalade or whatever and then they had the motorcycle on the back that matched. They also had the rims. I've seen somewhat out in Detroit, but I had not seen nothing on that level. You saw women, which was interesting, walking around in bathing suits half naked and guys in packs. Women walked through packs and they [men] would grab their ass or the women would pull out their breasts or start dancing, you know what I'm saying? The guys would huddle around and basically just talk and grab. It was again like nothing I had ever seen before.”²³⁸

Atlanta Journal Constitution, “CityLife Buckhead”, April 14, 1994, JE11.; Yusuf Davis, “Whatever else it maybe it’s still a ‘serious party,’” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, “CityLife Buckhead”, April 14, 1994, JE11.

²³⁶ Richard Bono, “City co-sponsors Freaknic ‘to put people at ease,’” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 21, 1994, JD2.

²³⁷ Tanya Watson, in discussion with author, January 21, 2021.

²³⁸ James Brown, in discussion with author, February 1, 2021.

Brandon Harrison, another Howard University student, and friend of James Brown described Freaknic '94 as

“We just went right into the city to see what it looked like, I want to say that was Friday, or late Thursday. So, we hopped back in the car and we rolled into the city and we got we got to a distance where we could see the city. We could see where we were going, but there was so much traffic headed that way that we were literally stopped on the highway. Now a traffic jam isn't necessarily uncommon but we're sitting in traffic and I'm watching people get out of their cars, run to other cars, and there's people playing music. Its men, women, or whatever dancing in their cars, twerking on the highway. At that moment. I recognized, 'okay this is going to be a little bit different than what I thought it was going to be.' I thought it was the best thing in the world...The only thing that weekend that we felt like we had to do was on Saturday, we needed to get to Piedmont Park because it seemed like everybody was going to Piedmont Park. There were hip hop artists performing there and stuff like that. So, we wanted to do that which we did. We ended up getting there but it was a real battle to get down there through traffic and all of that... The one thing that I do remember about that weekend was that we had a lot of plans to go here and to go there and to see this and to see that... never made it... never made it. We would head out. 'Oh, we're gonna go over here to grab something to eat.' But before you got out of the parking lot, you ran into a group of people in another car, you strike up conversation they going over here to so and so. 'Okay, well now we're going over there now.' So, it is never really the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry right? We never made it to a lot of the destinations that we set out to. But it didn't matter. It didn't bother us because boy, did we have fun wherever we decided to go.”²³⁹

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution published an article on April 24, 1994 giving many details of how Freaknic impacted the city, its residents, and visitors. For example, Tera Arceneaux of Houston shared how a male approached her and asked to take her out of town and then to his hotel room. Mikolaj Gomolka, a white man from Poland, told how he enjoyed being surrounded by Black people and watching what Freaknic was all about. The traffic of Freaknic '94 delayed a wedding reception being held at the 999 Peachtree building at 10th and Peachtree and delayed the senior prom of Alexander High School from Douglas County at the Westin Peachtree Plaza. That Saturday evening, Crystal Perry was in a special session of the Atlanta

²³⁹ Brandon Harrison, in discussion with author, February 9, 2021.

Municipal Court to free her sister, Tammie, who had been charged with attempted battery on an officer and obstruction of justice. The article stated, “The women, who drove here from Detroit, were attending their second straight Freaknic. They were sidetracked from the party Friday night after Tammie threw food at an officer who refused to let them drive across Peachtree Street and, according to Perry, insulted her sister.” These few details show how diverse the interactions people had regarding Freaknic. It was too large of an event to generalize it in a few statements.²⁴⁰ Writer Robert J. Vickers wrote, “One moment can’t describe it. One place can’t define it. And no one can deny that Freaknik weekend has engulfed Atlanta – for better or for worse.”²⁴¹

Seemingly in response, *The Atlanta Daily World* published an article, on April 28, 1994, titled, “Life Goes on After Freaknic” described the event as, “The students had great, fun, spent money and ate so much of our good snacks that many of them vowed to come back to Atlanta and live. Some of them began planning new business ventures to serve the public better and more profitably. The garbage the streets littered with has been regularly picked up along with that from our own doings. Crime did not take a holiday (does it ever?), but statistics show no spurt in reports at metro police headquarters.” The article ends by stating, “we’re glad the students came. We hope that planners for the 1995 Freaknik succeed in productions of more attractions over a greater span of the area...”²⁴² This article must have been written in response to the large amount of scrutiny and bad publicity Freaknic was getting from Atlanta residents. People were angry with Mayor Bill Campbell and felt like the city failed to prepare and control the crowd at Freaknic.²⁴³

²⁴⁰ Robert J. Vickers, “Sights, sounds, spontaneity all part of ‘freaky’ weekend,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, “April 24, 1994, H7.

²⁴¹ Robert J. Vickers, “Sights, sounds, spontaneity all part of ‘freaky’ weekend,” H7.

²⁴² *Atlanta Daily World*, “Life Goes on After Freaknik,” April 28, 1994, 4.

²⁴³ Don Plummer, “Traffic hits a standstill as partyers leave park,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 24, 1994, H7.

Jeff Clark of *Flagpole*, a newspaper out of Athens, GA, voiced displeasure of Freaknik and wrote, "Why has Atlanta become the designated location for this mob scene, and not a beach resort or another tourist-oriented place better suited to handle it? Easy. These kids have recognized a pattern of activity over the years in Atlanta that in effect puts out a huge welcome mat. One, the police do NOTHING. In fact, they seem trained to automatically smile whenever a camera or microphone is put in front of them and remark at how 'well-behaved' these kids are. No wonder we have a goddamn crime problem."²⁴⁴ On the flip side, in the *GSU Signal*, Georgia State University's (GSU) student newspaper, Darrin Helpers, wrote, "As a two-year veteran of Freaknik, I should have known better than try to negotiate the streets of downtown Atlanta, but I still tried. The thing that baffles me is the unstoppable fear some caucasians have about the Freaknik event...People of all races need to realize that the greatest barriers to getting along with one another are ignorance and fear...people need to eliminate their own biases and prejudices and judge people by their actions, not preconceived stereotypes."²⁴⁵

It seemed that after Freaknic '94, many people of Atlanta and surrounding areas were torn over what to do with this seemingly inevitable event even as many felt like Freaknic was just the same as any other college spring break party. In fact, a writer of *The Southern Voice* wrote, "I was out of town last year at this time, so I don't know what I missed. By all accounts I've heard, it sounds like everything that I ever did to the unsuspecting citizens of Fort Lauderdale back in the early '80s."²⁴⁶ Debates about Freaknic's return continued in the college

²⁴⁴ Jeff Clark, "Atlanta Report Welcome South, Bros," *Flagpole*, May 4, 1994, 28.

²⁴⁵ Darrin Helpers, "Fear of Freaknik Worse than Traffic," *GSU Signal* (Atlanta, Georgia), May 3, 1994, p 15.

²⁴⁶ Peter Newton, "Nightmoves," *Southern Voice* (Atlanta, Georgia), April 21, 1994, 35.

Fall semester of 1994 as students, residents, organizations, businesses, and communities speculated what was going to happen next year.²⁴⁷

3.2 Freaknik 1995-2000

It was just a huge standpoint of that era and nothing like that will ever happen again, not here in the United States of America. Never will it be allowed where that many brothers and sisters can take over a city, because that's literally what they did. What we did. We took over the whole city, you know, what I'm saying. I don't think anything of that nature or size, or whatever, will happen again - James Brown

It means everything to me. It means culture, memories, the community, and my childhood. – Meme Davidson

It was just a period of time in history, maybe like back in the years when the hippies would just gather, party, smoke, and enjoy. I think it was a moment in history where Black people came together to do the same thing in a sense. – Carla Sims

Freaknik '95 was the year everything changed. At the end of 1994, Mayor Bill Campbell stated Freaknik was no longer welcomed in Atlanta. This left many students furious that Mayor Campbell's absence from Clark Atlanta University's Black History Month Convocation raised questions. SGA Undergraduate President, Jamal Coleman, stated, "We make a plea to the city to sit down and really listen to what we [students] have to say. Instead of talking to the student, who basically control the information flow of this event, he [Campbell] has instituted an almost military style direction to the police force, warning students that certain things will not be

²⁴⁷Garrick Repress, "Freaknik '95? I'll bet on it," *GSU Signal* (Atlanta, Georgia), October 4, 1994, 15.; Nikki Roberts, "Freaknik 1995 will be Restricted Says Atlanta Police Dept.," *CAU Panther* (Atlanta, Georgia), October 25, 1994, P1, P11.

tolerated.”²⁴⁸ Many students felt Mayor Campbell was making mistakes in how he was handling the inevitable event they did not want to end since in January he sought to persuade presidents of the six historically Black colleges and Universities (HBCUs) of the Atlanta University Center (AUC) to sign a letter to the presidents of other historically Black campuses urging them to discourage their students from attending Freaknik in April.²⁴⁹ A CAU freshman stated, “It seems to me like a riot might occur.” Another CAU student said, “A lot of the organized events, people won’t go to them because they feel they’re being pushed into this part of the city and being relegated.” E. Randel T. Osburn, an SCLC administrator, proposed that the mayor apologize to the students because he declared war. Meanwhile, representatives from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Victory over Violence, and Pro Circuit and about 50 CAU students met to discuss Mayor Bill Campbell’s controversial position on Freaknik and submit resolution proposals.²⁵⁰

Soon enough, the city released its plans for how it would handle the anticipated April weekend. Mayor Campbell changed his tone in that students were welcome but had to follow the law or be jailed or have their cars impounded. In their article, *Atlanta Daily World* reported, “Plans included monitoring of traffic by helicopters. Car impound lots and police enforcement teams will scatter throughout the city to encircle law breakers. Tickets will be handed out for blocking an intersection or riding on the hood or trunk of a car. Police checkpoints and barricades will be set up around the city, and restricted areas established to accommodate residents and/or workers. Certain areas will be off-limits to cruisers. They include Piedmont

²⁴⁸ Lisa Flanagan, “SGA Present Question Atlanta Mayor’s Absence,” *CAU Panther* (Atlanta, Georgia), February 20, 1995, P1, P8.

²⁴⁹ Ronald Smothers, “A Fretful Atlanta Awaits a Deluge: Mixed Signals by City Over Black Students Party Weekend,” *New York Times*, April 1, 1995, 6.

²⁵⁰ Ytasha L. Womack, “Students, City Officials Address the Black College Weekend,” *CAU Panther* (Atlanta, Georgia), March 6, 1995, P1, P8.

Park, Grant Park, downtown Peachtree Street, the AUC, parts of Piedmont Road, the West End, and Stewart Avenue [now Metropolitan Parkway] and surrounding neighborhoods.” In addition, promoters of Freaknik or FreedomFest, a name boosted by a group trying to rebrand the event, accused the city of not being supportive of their efforts because denials of their park permits persisted.²⁵¹

Students in Atlanta were not happy with the city’s plans and showed up at the Virginia Lacy Exhibition Hall of the Robert Woodruff Library on March 21 to confront Mayor Bill Campbell. Student writer Lisa C. Flanagan reported that Mayor Campbell was under fire as hundreds of students from the Atlanta University Center and GSU voiced their opinions and asked intriguing questions during the Town Hall meeting. Issues raised by the student community included the traffic plans, underground jails, and the mayor’s zero-tolerance attitude. Students called the mayor “Uncle Tom” and “sell-out” because they felt Freaknik was being treated differently than other conventions like the Comdex computer convention that would take place the same weekend as Freaknik. SGA President Jamal Coleman said, “Don’t our dollars spend as well as the Comdex conventioners.” “It is the same for everybody that comes no matter who you are, everyone must obey the law,” responded Mayor Campbell. The meeting ended with students getting their microphones silenced and the mayor getting escorted out the back door. Students felt no real answers were given. A junior at Morris Brown College stated, “Bill Campbell did not address the issues and should be more concerned with the civil rights of his own people instead of the white man.”²⁵²

²⁵¹ *Atlanta Daily World*, “City Announces Plan to Curb Students’ Fun,” March 19, 1995, 1.

²⁵² Lisa C. Flanagan, “Students, Mayor Still at Odds over Freaknik,” *CAU Panther* (Atlanta, Georgia), March 27, 1995, P1-P2.

Confusion over the city's attitude over Freaknik '95 only grew as the April 3 Atlanta Council meeting left members unable to answer any questions leaving council woman Carolyn Long-Banks to say, "The number [of people coming] seemed to have doubled from last year, and my question is what in the world are we going to do?" Council member Cleta Winslow offered some plans for police preparation and park regulation but declined to address traffic concerns. Council member Pam Alexander insisted that the city needs to create a relationship with the students, or the city will have enormous bills to pay.²⁵³ Ronald Smothers of the *New York Times* described the debate brewing in Atlanta as covered in racial tones as "this Black-majority city that prides itself on being the cradle of the civil rights movement and is home to a progressive Black middle class." As well as an emerging generational battle where "defiant young adults say they will assert their rights to party regardless of what city elders say."²⁵⁴

On April 18, the *Atlanta Daily World* reported that three Atlanta University Center presidents released a statement warning the city and the mayor that their approach to managing Freaknik has been wrong. Dr. James Costen, president of the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), criticized the city for not trying to help the students have safe fun rather than creating a police state.²⁵⁵ More surveillance was on the way as Howard University's *The Hilltop* reported that Major Jim Driscoll of the Georgia National Guard had coordinated their monthly drill sessions with Freaknik. Also, House Speaker Newt Gingrich planned to film Freaknik '95 with the American Heritage Foundation to send to Congress as evidence that Black college students were wasting government money.²⁵⁶ At the same time, there seemed to be conflict within the student community as a new group from Morehouse College called Black Men for the

²⁵³ Regina M. Roberts, "Ready or Not...Freedom Fest '95 is Coming!," *CAU Panther* (Atlanta, Georgia), P1, P8.

²⁵⁴ Ronald Smothers, "A Fretful Atlanta Awaits a Deluge," 6.

²⁵⁵ *Atlanta Daily World*, "City's Freaknik Policies Concern Leaders," April 18, 1995, 1.

²⁵⁶ David Gaither, "GOP to monitor Freaknik '95," *Hilltop* (Washington, D.C.), April 21, 1995, A1.

Eradication of Sexism was featured in a *New York Times* article openly condemning Atlanta's Freaknik because of the reports of sexual and verbal harassment women shared in class after a presentation on Black women images in media. "Women cried over what happened that weekend," recalled Brett Krenshaw, a founding member of the group.²⁵⁷

Once Freaknik arrived and over 100,000 students tried to enjoy activities as they had for many years before, police barricades, business closures, and lousy weather forced many to say last year was much better. In preparation for the commotion, Governor Zell Miller closed campuses in the metro Atlanta area, notably GSU, so traffic could be directed away from their campus and along Peachtree Street.²⁵⁸ Student journalist Mary Blatch in the *Spelman Spotlight* reported that the first 24 hours of Freaknik were peaceful until the evening when police tried to clear areas surrounding The Underground after it closed early. Blatch stated that the traffic plan was successful in preventing major gridlock and forcing partygoers to leave their cars and walk the streets. Unfortunately, this left overcrowded areas like the Underground tense and eventually dangerous when firecrackers were set off creating stampedes of people dispersing. Blatch stated, "Although it was omitted in many official reports, many students attested to the fact that police were using some sort of chemical, such as nerve gas or mace in an attempt to control the crowd." Reports of women getting assaulted, stores being looted, and debris being thrown at police in riot gear were frequent at least near the Underground as the West End Mall's parking lot had an abundance of people having fun. On Saturday, due to the weather, partygoers took to Lennox Mall and Phillips Plaza. Soon both malls closed, which pushed people to cruise the streets, creating traffic gridlock in Buckhead in the newly cleared up weather. Greenbriar mall was so popular that it became dangerous to visit due to a bomb threat, gunfire in the parking lot, and the

²⁵⁷ *New York Times*, "Men Against Misogyny: Blackboard," April 2, 1995, EDUC9.

²⁵⁸ *GSU Signal* (Atlanta, Georgia), "Governor closes campus," April 25, 1995, 1.

store, Rich's, getting looted. Soon people retreated to parks. Blatch stated, "The most notable thing about the weekend party was that there were hardly any planned events for the weekend. No concerts, no parties (except for house parties), everything was canceled. It made Freaknik more a block party than anything else because there was nothing to do other than hang out."²⁵⁹

On Tuesday, April 25, 1995, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported that "Police arrested 509 people on 1,987 charges, impounded 153 vehicles and confiscated 28 weapons, along with cocaine and marijuana, Harvard said. They also wrote 1,184 traffic tickets, not including those written by the Georgia State Patrol. The figures don't include 223 juveniles pulled from a rowdy crowd near Underground Atlanta on Saturday night. They were held until their parents or guardians picked them up. Fifty-four percent of those arrested were ages 17 to 25, and 45 percent were 26 or older - proving that the street bash is not limited to college students. Four people under age 16 were among the 509 arrested. Only one rape complaint had been confirmed Monday, but police were investigating at least 13 more reports."²⁶⁰ Most chatter after Freaknik '95 either condemned the police for how they handled Freaknik participants or chastised Freaknik participants for the crimes committed over the weekend. In one letter in the *GSU Signal*, a senior wrote,

"Let me remind you that white students don't have to 'cry' discrimination because, on the most part, they are not discriminated against. Let me remind you that white students have gone to Florida since the beginning of time, and not only are they welcomed in Florida, but facilities, stores, restaurants, and souvenir shops are available to them. Where were you several weeks ago when the young white student in Florida killed another student? I do not, for one minute condone unlawful or immoral behavior. I expect for students to come and respect each other and the city of Atlanta. The violence that did occur during Freaknik weekend for the most part was attributed to factions other than participants in Freaknik. I think it was utterly ridiculous how the police blocked off streets that

²⁵⁹ Mary Blatch, "Freaknik vs Freedom Fest: Events and Activities Overshadow Name Controversy," *Spelman Spotlight* (Atlanta, Georgia), May 8, 1995, 4.

²⁶⁰ Kathy Scruggs, "Freaknik Aftermath: Half of arrests were visitors; Counting the crimes: About 2,000 charges were filed with offense," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 25, 1995, A1.

led to the nightclubs that would have kept some of the people in clubs and off the streets. I have never encountered so much racism in my life until I moved to Atlanta.”²⁶¹

Interestingly in the *Spelman Spotlight*, an open letter addressed to the Black community was published.

“The current right-wing backlash against poor people and people of color has made it easy for the city of Atlanta’s “undesirables” to be quietly pushed beyond the margins to make way for the 1996 Olympics. The white response to last year’s traffic tie-ups have forced the mayor to prove to Atlanta’s economic elite that he can keep the “niggers” in line just in time for the Olympics. Because of the negative stance that the mayor’s office has taken on this event, and the resulting expectation of police brutality at this year’s freak-nik, it is very likely that there will be a physical confrontation between students and police. However, there is another highly important factor that cannot be placed on the backburner simply because freak-nik is under attack by Atlanta’s city government. The spirit of freak-nik may involve socializing and relaxation, but it also involves the degradation of our sexuality, with black women suffering the greatest insult. Though as a community we are aware that we should love each other, we don’t know how, and often fall into the trap of acting upon sexual stereotypes. We tend to defend freak-nik as being. However, the very nature of the event glamorizes the image of black women as “freaks.” The freak in freak-nik is a term that is specifically intended to describe women as sexual animals (i. e. songs such as “Super Freak”, “Freak of the Week”, “Freaks Come Out at Night”). Some of us declare that we have as much of a right to a freak-nik as white youth have to a Mardi Gras. This is true. But let’s get real about a few things. First, our survival cannot afford the continued imitation of white peoples’ sexist interactions. Second, even with the sexual objectification that goes on at events such as Daytona, there is no institutionalized reference to white women as “hoes.” In the naming of our event, black women have been defined as purely sexual beings, reduced to a “big butt and a smile” caricature. This is manifested in our mistreatment of one another. During freak-nik, women are often harassed, poked, prodded, pulled into cars, or even raped. “But wait a minute,” some of you are often harassed, poked, prodded, pulled into cars, or even raped, “but wait a minute,” some of you are saying, “Some women want to be treated like that.” Whether a woman is dressed or undressed doesn’t give anyone a license to violate her. A woman’s desire to bring attention to her body and to seek and appreciate sexual advances by an individual or a group of men, often becomes misinterpreted as a desire to have sex. The infamous stereotype of black men as sexual conquerors defines how black men are supposed to act during freak-nik, with many black men feeling the need to follow in step with warped one-dimensional notions of American manhood and proclaim, “It’s a Dick Thing.” The popular

²⁶¹ Angela Collins, “One last letter regarding Freaknik,” *GSU Signal* (Atlanta, Georgia) May 9, 1995, 15.

argument that freak-nik is simply a social gathering, like any other, ignores the brutality that goes along with turning women into sex objects. When black women are seen as “hoes,” and indiscriminately “knockin’ boots” is considered natural black male behavior, the humanity of black women and men is fractured. We no longer, speak, feel, cry, think... we merely fuck. We have accepted an image of ourselves passed down from our oppressors. During freak-nik, the tops of cars are reminiscent of slave auction blocks and a black man’s video camera turns into a whip to control a black woman’s auctions. We have been trained to continue our slavery. Only now, black women are the objects to be bought, sold, and traded by black men. It is a fact that many women participate in this, but it is also an undeniable fact both men and women, girls and boys live in a sexist society that constantly programs and reinforces sexist notions and codes of behavior. Women and girls do not escape this and to different degrees, internalize this dehumanizing code fed to us all since we each popped out of the womb. We can no longer pretend that freak-nik isn’t grounded in principles of self-hatred, especially the hatred of black women. The idea that black men are infantile and incapable of thinking with their first head, and that black women are even less than that is a clear example of our self-hatred. Up until now, the movement for the liberation of black people has ignored the specific oppression faced by women. In order to achieve our desired freedom, we must remove all of our shackles, including those that benefit men in the short run. We cannot afford to continue to participate in our own oppression. If we are to survive, we must dedicate ourselves to confront those things that oppress us, whatever they are, including freak-nik.

In the name of freedom,
Black Women and Men²⁶²

This letter reacted to Black women’s sexual behavior and their treatment by Black men at Freaknik ’95 that caused the newly appointed Atlanta Police Chief Beverly to say she was “mad as hell.” In a special article of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* titled, “Freaknik ’95 Sexual Issues,” journalists wrote, “Freaknik takes part of its name from the word freak, a slang term referring to someone who will do anything for sex. It implies an anything-goes attitude – not unlike the hedonistic spring break bashes that made Fort Lauderdale famous – but the openly lewd behavior by both men and women at this year’s Freaknik party shocked participants and officials alike. One of the most alarming aspects of the weekend was that the flirting often turned threatening to women.” The article then reports that the Grady Rape Crisis Center (GRCC)

²⁶² *Spelman Spotlight* (Atlanta, Georgia), “Open Letter to the Black Community,” May 8, 1995, 6.

reported ten rapes between Saturday night and Sunday afternoon. Four of them were at downtown hotels or clubs. Dr. Peg Ziegler, executive director of the GRCC felt that many incidents were not reported because they were “fearful of criticism that their behavior or mere presence at Freaknik with its blatant sexual element many have invited the attack... If women are not being provocative, they’re clearly in a situation where they’re being viewed as sex objects. So many people, especially young men, can justify their behavior if they’re in a party atmosphere and women are dressed skimpily, sexily. Not just young men but older men, as well, seem to think that justifies sexual attacks – anything from groping to outright forced intercourse...To a mob of young men, these women become nothing more than available loot.” That Sunday afternoon of Freaknik ’95 weekend, Mayor Bill Campbell said, “the shameful, lawless behavior cannot be condoned under any circumstances – public indecency, sexual assault, men disrespecting women.”²⁶³

Following the disaster of Freaknik ’95, the city council decided to show more genuine support. The *Atlanta Daily World* reported on May 18, 1995, that in a 12-3 vote, a Freedom Fest Resolution passed despite Mayor Bill Campbell’s wants to gut the event altogether. Regardless of the council members seemingly voting along racial lines, the vote solidified that the city would play a more active role in the planning and implementation of Freaknik ’96.²⁶⁴ This vote, endorsed by Councilwoman Carolyn Long Banks, the first Black woman on the council, seemed to fuel a political feud with Mayor Campbell as she openly criticized him for his handling of Freaknik.²⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Mayor Campbell appointed the Blue Ribbon Panel, a collection of grassroots citizens, educators, and business leaders, who would advise him on how to handle

²⁶³Kathy Scruggs & R. Robin McDonald, “Freaknik ’95 Sexual Issues,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 24, 1995, B5.

²⁶⁴ *Atlanta Daily World*, “City Council Votes In Favor of Freedom Fest Resolution,” May 18, 1995, 1.

²⁶⁵ Maynard Eaton, “Politics 411 Banks vs. Campbell,” *Atlanta Voice*, July 1-7, 1995, 5.

Freaknik '96 best. Organizations represented included Antioch North Baptist Church, First Congressional Church, Midtown Neighborhood Association, 100 Black Women, 100 Black Men, Freedom Fest Coalition, Morehouse College SGA, Morris Brown College SGA, Southwest Atlanta Business, Coca-Cola, Marriott Marquis, Butler Street YMCA, and NAACP Atlanta. The panel chair was Dr. Johnetta Cole, the president of Spelman College.²⁶⁶

Still, many people, including people outside of Atlanta, voiced their opinions and concerns about the “Freaknik” situation, especially since the Games of the XXVI Olympiad or 1996 Summer Olympics were quickly approaching. For example, in the sports section of the *Daily Press of Newport, Virginia*, David Sorrells of Atlanta commented, “Atlanta is never going to be prepared for Freaknik, and if Atlanta can’t stop or handle a large group of people coming from out of state, how in God’s name can Atlanta handle the much larger group of people coming here for the Olympic Games? We may well be the laughingstock of the world and have the worst Olympic Games in history!”²⁶⁷ The “Freaknik” situation only caused frustration for Mayor Campbell as articles like “Weathering Freaknik” in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* criticized his approach and efforts to appease both sides of the argument. The article states, “There is no way for the mayor to please everyone when it comes to Freaknik, which he calls the most divisive issue he has seen in his 15 years in city government...If the mayor appears to be tolerant of Freaknik, he alienated mostly white intown neighborhood activists and business leaders. If he cracks down, he is seen as a sell out by many in the Black community, where Campbell can ill afford to lose support, especially with an election coming up next year. It’s easy to sympathize with the mayor’s predicament. But his job is to do what is best for the city.”²⁶⁸ In

²⁶⁶ H.D. Stewart, “Mayor Appoints Freaknik Advisory Panel,” *Atlanta Voice*, October 7-13, 1995, 2.

²⁶⁷ David Sorrells, “Olympic Notebook: Everybody’s A Critic,” *Daily Press* (Newport, Virginia) Jan 7, 1996, C9.

²⁶⁸ *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, “Weathering Freaknik,” February 13, 1996, A14.

another article, Brian L. Pumphrey stated, “Many cities host events that strain their services, spring break in Daytona, Mardi Gras in New Orleans, Saint Patrick’s Day in Chicago and New York. The difference between these celebrations and Atlanta’s Freaknik is that the partygoers are not allowed to cross the line from high jinks to illegality...The city and Mayor Bill Campbell need to wake up to the fact that no matter who is coming to town, or for what reason, the laws benefiting the good of the community must be upheld. This is not racism; this is responsible city management...”²⁶⁹

Regardless of the chatter, SGA presidents at the AUC center bounded together to officially assist with the mayor’s office to plan Freaknik 1996, although neither the mayor or the City of Atlanta would be directly funding, planning, or promoting it. The mayor did say however that an organizing committee composed of students, community and religious leaders will work on creating an agenda, something the Blue-Ribbon Committee was not actively doing or appointed to do. The students aimed to make the event more positive as Clark Atlanta University SGA president said, “I don’t want anyone to say that the AUC had any events that degraded women or showed African Americans in a negative light. We must be responsible for what happens in the AUC.”²⁷⁰

On February 15, 1996, *The Maroon Tiger*, student newspaper of Morehouse college, reported the announcements from the Blue-Ribbon Committee as they felt, “Students will come to Atlanta for this spring event regardless of any efforts to stop it. Therefore, the city of Atlanta must be prepared for the event.” Their recommendations included renaming the event to

²⁶⁹ Brian L. Pumphrey, “Encourage Freaknik, but take control of it,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 4, 1996, A8.

²⁷⁰ Sherri Day, “AUC student leaders to help reshape Freaknik,” *CAU Panther* (Atlanta, Georgia), February 12-25, 1996. P2.

Freaknik: Atlanta Black College Weekend and providing activities such as a concert, a national step show, sport events, educational and professional workshops, and voter registration drives.²⁷¹

Despite the mayor's office efforts, people still seemed to be displeased as the *Atlanta Daily World* published an article titled, "Stop Poohpooing Freaknik," and Shana Word, writer for the Spelman Spotlight, wrote, "Last year, Freedom Fest did get slightly out of hand in some parts of the city, but most of the crimes did not involve college students. It is obvious the hoopla is race-related, not economics-related as the city initially claimed. I feel we Atlanta University Center students should come together and demand respect for the city. College students spend an estimated one million dollars in Atlanta over the course of the four days during the Fest and it is frowned up. If Atlanta is too good for our money, then let's take it and the party somewhere else."²⁷² There was even a debate held by Georgia State University's Debate Program where the student newspaper, *GSU Signal*, covered Brian Greathouse, who argued fix Freaknik and move on, against Rebecca Daniel, who argued fix it, and until then, forget it.²⁷³

In the *New York Times*, Freaknik 1996 was called more orderly and less rowdy, although an Ohio man and Atlanta visitor, Donny Cantrell, was shot and killed in a robbery attempt.²⁷⁴ *The Atlanta Daily World* reported that the police mediated a food fight at the International House of Pancakes, near Piedmont Avenue on Thursday night.²⁷⁵ Georgia State University's *Signal* reported to have closed their campus Friday and Saturday in expectation of the influx of Freaknik participants but the city of Atlanta's traffic plan worked to keep a steady flow in a

²⁷¹ Louis Clotman, "Mayor's Office Prepares to Ease Freaknik Frustrations," *Maroon Tiger* (Atlanta, Georgia), February 15, 1996, 6.

²⁷² *Atlanta Daily World*, "Stop Poohpooing Freaknik," February 18, 1996, 4; Shana Word, "FreedomFest 1996," *Spelman Spotlight* (Atlanta, Georgia), March 7, 1996, 10.

²⁷³ *GSU Signal* (Atlanta, Georgia), "Should Freaknik Continue?" April 16, 1996, 12.

²⁷⁴ Ronald Smothers, "This Time, Atlanta Finds College Crowd More Orderly," *New York Times*, April 22, 1996, A10.

²⁷⁵ *Atlanta Daily World*, "IHOP Food Fight," April 21, 1996, 4.

common direction. One student said, “although many streets were closed off, Freaknik had become the biggest freeway party she had ever seen. When the traffic stopped, everybody piled out of their cars and onto the interstate.”²⁷⁶ Ryan Samuels, a resident of Atlanta and previous frequent participator of Freaknik from Alabama, compared the change in Atlanta traffic plans from previous years and said, “It went from you been able to freely move around as you wanted to the day or two before the date of Freaknik where they started blocking off the streets. The frequently used streets and areas had already been blocked out where you couldn’t even go down those streets which made it impossible for you to go up and down the streets like they [Freaknik participants] normally did.”²⁷⁷

The *Maroon Tiger* of Morehouse College captured participants and onlookers of Freaknik’s mixed reviews. In the article, one student, who had experienced two Freakniks, said, ““I was harassed somewhat. There were a lot of guys wanting to take pictures . . . wanting you to lift up your skirt. I was not having that.” She said, “Police were all over this year. I thought Freaknik was originally for the Black college students to hang out and just chill, but this year it seemed like everyone, but college students came. It was just a fashion show where women showed off their butts.” An Underground kiosk employee said, “There were much more guys than girls this year. You see a lot of guys grabbing women and trying to take pictures. A lot of women didn’t come back because of the way they were treated [last year].” Underground Atlanta and Auburn Avenue were central locations throughout the weekend even though many retailers filled with Freaknik participants, like Lennox Mall, were low on sales and ended up closing early. The student journalist wrote, “When Braves and Hawks fans tried to merge with the street party Saturday night, all highway movement ceased. Police helicopters scoured the streets from

²⁷⁶ Matthew Wright, “Freaknik rolls through Downtown,” *GSU Signal* (Atlanta, Georgia), April 23, 1996, 1, 4.

²⁷⁷ Ryan Samuels, in discussion with author, January 6, 2021.

above all weekend to monitor traffic and provide assistance to ground patrols...authorities have reported 846 charges (364 of which were out of state), 307 impounded cars, and 14 seized weapons. Although these statistics are down from last year, most Freaknikers complained that the police had a stranglehold on the city throughout the weekend.”²⁷⁸

In the same issue, Jamie Ayers, a guest columnist, discussed accountability about Freaknik in which they said,

“Perspectives of this event depend largely upon the group you speak with. If you are talking to some black college students, many of them eagerly anticipate the third weekend in April. Some see it as an opportunity to meet new people, but let us be honest, many see Freaknik as a chance to act foolish with no remorse. If you are talking to city officials or the many citizens of Atlanta, you will find disgust, anger, fear, and overall disapproval. This side of the Freaknik coin views the weekend as scandalous; they see a bunch of reveling miscreants who plan to ravage and trash their 'fair' city. Now the question is, who is right and who is accountable for Freaknik?... Many (but definitely not all brothers) see it as a time to allow their hormones to take control of their whole body and let their inhibitions go wild, with or without alcohol. Cameras encourage young ladies to "take it off" and some brothers take it upon themselves to molest and verbally assault their so-called sisters. Let us not forget the sisters who dress like they are auditioning for a Luke video. Moreover, some of them wish that their brothers would respect them, yet they do not respect themselves. No matter how you slice it, this is what happens at Freaknik. Let us not pretend and say that these things do not go on, because we all know such escapades are common knowledge. Granted, most, if not all, criminal activity has been perpetrated by locals. But please let us examine our behavior during Freaknik, especially us men... We also need to examine the agendas of anti-Freaknikers like Mayor Campbell, the police etc. They too are accountable. Unfortunately, these people are motivated by politics and the dominant culture. Freaknik, which brings many blacks together at one place and time, is downright scary to many white folks. Furthermore, a double standard persists in the Freaknik debate. No one complains when the Great Pot Festival comes to town. One thing I always hear is if the city cannot handle Freaknik, then how are they going to manage the Olympics? Even if there was a 'utopia Freaknik,' people would still complain. The bottom line is obvious. As Dr. Cornel West wrote a few years ago, race still matters.”²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ Louis Clotman, “Freaknik Receives Mixed Reviews From Visitors and Residents,” *Maroon Tiger* (Atlanta, Georgia), May 1, 1996, 6.

²⁷⁹ Jamie Ayers, “Determining Accountability During Freaknik,” *Maroon Tiger* (Atlanta, Georgia), May 1, 1996, 11.

The columns in the *Maroon Tiger* show how Freaknik '96 was not as fun to the students as it once had been. The *Atlanta Daily World* reported that due to the negative publicity and “not so gracious treatment by the city has taken a toll on the Freaknik spirit...Maybe many of them now feel that the hassle and confusion just isn't worth the weekend of fun.”²⁸⁰ Supporters of Freaknik felt bitter over how Atlanta was attempting to change the annual party. For example, as the Olympics inched closer a complaint to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* mentioned Freaknik and said things like, “To the person who complained about three days of Freaknik: I hope during the Olympics you miss every funeral, every wedding, every delivery of a baby, every Little League baseball game. I hope you just shrivel up in traffic.”²⁸¹ Still, the city of Atlanta prepared for the annual party by appointing a 16-person planning committee that included leaders like Rev. C.T. Vivian, Jermaine Dupri, Dr. Samuel Jolly, SGA presidents of the AUC colleges, Georgia Hawthorne, and Kasim Reed.²⁸² They also created a visitor's website that had over 13 million visits by April 1, 1997.²⁸³ The committee, however, was tough on promoters and organizers. By April 6, things were a bit shaky as two promoters were protesting the conflict of interests some committee members had to other business ventures. In the article, Darryl Fears wrote, “Sharon Toomer of Freaknik Inc. and Charles Reeves of East Coast Express have complained that three Atlanta University Center students on the committee had business ties with another promoter, Wanda Cunningham of Spring Jam. Cunningham promised to split the profits of her company's Freaknik events with Atlanta University center student government

²⁸⁰ Chris Preyor, “Freaknik: Not The Fun It Used to be for Upperclassmen,” *Atlanta Daily World*, Dec 1, 1996, 3.

²⁸¹ *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, “'96 Vent,” July 12, 1996, 20.

²⁸² Alfred Charles, “Mayor forms Freaknik committee,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, Jan 9, 1997, JN9.

²⁸³ Darryl Fears, “Freaknik-friendly on Net,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, Jan 30, 1997, C3; Darryl Fears, “Freaknik on the Web: 13 million visits and counting,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 1, 1997, B1.

associations. All three student committee members – Darius Thomas, Devin White, and Christopher Cornell – are officers of student associations that stood to gain.”²⁸⁴

Nevertheless, Wanda Cunningham’s events were approved and advertised as the *Spelman Spotlight* reported, “Beginning April 18 with a new name, Black College Spring Break or Spring Jam 1997, will also have a new itinerary which includes a gospel concert and a job fair. There are many other events planned for each day of the annual three-day celebration. Old favorites such as Stomp Down '97, the Greek Step Show (April 18 at the Atlanta Civic Center) has been planned along with new activities: The Sweet Auburn Style Festival (April 18-20, featuring entertainment stages, live music, and vendors); The Hip-Hop Sports Jam (April 18-20 at the old Nike Olympic Pavilion, featuring concerts and a 3-on-3 basketball tournament); a Back to School Jam for Jesus sponsored by Morehouse College; and a Black College Spring Break Job Fair (April 19 at the Georgia World Congress Center, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., with more than 50 corporations invited).”²⁸⁵ Due to bomb threats circulating amongst the community, many worried if there would be a high attendance unlike Freaknik '96 which only attracted 60,000 people. A college sophomore from North Carolina said, “Everybody is talking about Freaknik and the bomb threat, but they don’t care because they’ve been planning to go since last year.”²⁸⁶ Similarly, businesses like restaurants and nightclubs prepared for Freaknik crowds while others prepared to close early to avoid possible traffic gridlock.²⁸⁷ Atlanta residents seemed to grow accustomed to the annual crowd as some chose to either leave town or stay and people watch.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁴ Darryl Fears, “Freaknik organizers running into some roadblocks,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, Feb 23, 1997, D3; Darryl Fears, “Planners cry foul on Freaknik lease,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 6, 1997, C8.

²⁸⁵ Ayana M. Davis, “Freaknik '97: A New Party or Simply a New Name?,” *Spelman Spotlight* (Atlanta, Georgia), April 11, 1997, 6.

²⁸⁶ Darryl Fears & Chris Burritt, “Bomb rumors not scaring students planning to party,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 13, 1997, D4.

²⁸⁷ Tinah Saunders, “Some businesses are welcoming Freaknik crowds,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 17, 1997, J1; Henry Farber, “Clubs See Mixed Success,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 17, 1997, JN3.

²⁸⁸ Tinah Saunders, “Some plan to weather Freaknik crowds,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 17, 1997, JN11.

Freaknik '97 began with disappointment as promoters canceled the highly anticipated Spring Jam Concert with the lineup of Atlanta-based groups like Goodie Mob, Outcast, and City Boyz and Greek step show due to lack of corporate sponsorships. Other events seemed to fail at getting people out of their cars and onto the streets as “hundreds of celebrators cruised up and down Fair Street, but few attended a festival along Martin Luther King Jr. Drive...near Northside Drive was virtually empty despite a booming sound stage, food stands and other vendors.”²⁸⁹ Regardless of these cancellations, participant and high school senior, C.J Johnson felt he still had a great time when he said,

“I remember pulling over in this parking lot and we weren't quite at Greenbriar Mall. This would be a teen club called MBK-My Brother's Keeper. It was like right before you got to Greenbriar Mall. But we are in this parking lot and we got the music blasting. Everybody is just there in the parking lot. There's different music coming from a lot of different vehicles. You got people dancing and drinking and talking and just having fun so that's like one of my fondest memories because again now you got a time where now I'm able to drive because I'm actually driving my friend's car so that Freaknik is probably the one that stands out the most. It's probably 10 o'clock at night and you just in a parking lot with a bunch of people you don't know. Some people you do know, just a bunch of people from the city and everybody is just having a good time. During that one It felt like ‘I finally arrived. I'm finally experiencing the whole Freaknik.’ We got the car. We didn't drink but we smoked. We were just like “I've arrived. I'm here. I finally get to be out in it like everybody else.”²⁹⁰

By the end of Freaknik weekend, only three significant incidents occurred. Someone shot a club bouncer at the Crystal Palace. A three-car accident on a stretch of Interstate 75/85 near downtown Atlanta caused two people to recover at the hospital. Lastly, a police-involved beating of Freaknik participant Tommie Sinclair led the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to get involved with Georgia Representative Bill McKinney and

²⁸⁹ Art Kramer & Gail H. Towns, “Freaknik revelers slam car doors on plants to keep them off streets,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 19, 1997, D2.

²⁹⁰ C.J. Johnson, in discussion with author, February 12, 2021.

African American Studies professor at GSU, Derek Alphan.²⁹¹ *The Atlanta Voice* published an article titled, “My People, My People,” that said, “Freaknik ’97 was a success. The Black College Spring Break was a bust.”²⁹² *The Atlanta Daily World* quoted a Morehouse student saying, “This year Freaknik was real cool, but everywhere I looked, there was a police officer in my face. I know they have to be there for crowd control, but they were all over the place, especially on the highways. It just made me feel as if I were a criminal.”²⁹³

It is not a surprise that in the following years, student attendance decreased dramatically as a rival, Black College Reunion in Daytona Beach, became the hotspot for a springtime stress reliever for Black college students in 1998. In *The George-Anne*, the student newspaper for Georgia Southern University, Stacy Clemons wrote, “Since making the decision of which university to attend, college students will be faced with the next biggest decision before stepping into the real world. April 17-19, Black college students will have a choice between the traditional Atlanta event, Freaknik or the annual celebration on the shores of Daytona Beach, Fla.” Similar to the previous year, the city of Atlanta appointed a committee to oversee the planning and implementation of the spring party including the release of a brochure that gave a list of clubs, welcome centers, and expectations for drinking, speeding, cruising, parking, drugs, and indecent exposure.²⁹⁴ As Atlanta changed Freaknik to a more family-oriented, police patrolled party, it

²⁹¹ Steve Visser, “Atlanta police report fewer incidents and fewer people at Freaknik ’97,” *George-Anne* (Statesboro, Georgia), April 24, 1997, 3; Steve Visser, “Two officers cited in arrest of Atlanta man during Freaknik,” *George-Anne* (Statesboro, Georgia), May 15, 1997, 1; Ayesha Tanzeem, “NAACP meeting hosts Sinclair, McKinney,” *GSU Signal* (Atlanta, Georgia), May 27, 1997, 4.

²⁹² Stan Washington, “My People My People,” *Atlanta Voice*, May 3-9, 1997, 4B.

²⁹³ Jennifer N. Phillips, “Freaknik Still a Conversation around CAU,” *Atlanta Daily World*, May 8, 1997, 6.

²⁹⁴ *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, “Freaknik committee appointed,” Feb 3, 1998, B5; S.A. Reid, “Atlanta Unveils plan, brochure for Freaknik,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 8, 1998, C1.

attracted less students. Although Freaknik '98 featured Sweet Auburn Springfest and a concert at the Herndon Stadium at Morris Brown College, attendance was low.²⁹⁵

Staff writer Christy Oglesby of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* wrote that Freaknik '98 was kinder and gentler but just as lewd. “Freaknik was still freaky – with report of grouping, nudity, and other risqué behavior. The most serious cases involved two 18-year-old women who reported being raped in separate incidents Saturday night. Also, early Sunday, a 21-year-old Lilburn woman – stuck in Freaknik traffic downtown near I-75 – was partially stripped by a group of young men who broker her windows and reached into her car.”²⁹⁶ Maynard Eaton of *The Atlanta Voice* wrote, “There were college students to be sure. But most of the 50 to 60 thousand who jammed Peachtree Street and Auburn Avenue ranged from high school students to young and middle age partygoers from across the country that traveled here just to have fun...The police presence downtown was firm and constant...Peachtree Street resembled a war zone...the appeal of Freaknik appears to be dwindling. And, if this year is any true indication, its character and makeup is definitely changing.”²⁹⁷

The Maroon Tiger captured how students felt about this change as Curtis K. L. Johnson Jr. wrote, “Despite the hype that Freaknik brought to Atlanta, it was just that to many students — hype. The annual gathering attracted just 50,000 people, while its neighboring celebration in Daytona Beach reportedly pulled in more... Officials reported that this year's Freaknik, although somewhat smoother, was just as lewd. There were two reported rapes, and over 400 arrests ranging from loud music to traffic violations. Many young women said they felt unsafe, claiming

²⁹⁵S.A. Reid, “Sweet Auburn Spring Fest among weekend’s highlights,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 16, 1998, J1; *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, “Freaknik Buzz: Only 7 people show up for concert at AU Center,” April 18, 1998, F4.

²⁹⁶ Christy Oglesby, “Freaknik friendlier, but crime crops up,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 20, 1998, A1.

²⁹⁷ Maynard Eaton, “Freaknik Aftermath,” *Atlanta Voice* April 25-May1 1998, 2A.

that the surplus of men and lack of women caused men to go frantic whenever they approached someone of the opposite sex. Students also believe the event is no longer for them but are populated predominantly by local men and women.” The article also included a statement by Walter Massey, president of Morehouse College, that said, “I am among the presidents of black colleges who signed a letter welcoming black college students to Atlanta and admonishing them to behave respectfully toward one another and the citizens of this city. But, after having learned more about the demographics of the participants, I no longer feel any special obligation to lend even tacit support to this event.”²⁹⁸

Meanwhile, in Georgia State University’s *The Signal*, on May 12, 1998, Karin Smoot wrote,

“It was only three weeks ago that Atlanta reluctantly hosted the annual Freaknik/Black College Spring Break festivities. Now, this past weekend, Atlanta openly welcomed the arrival of the fifth annual Music Midtown Festival, which generated a crowd of over 50,000 people, most of whom were white. The media, in its attempt to cover this "momentous" event, failed to publicize the negative and illicit activities that took place during this weekend of, at times, chaos... African American Freaknik participants, both locally based and from out of town, received citations and cars were towed away for the most minor infractions, such as stopping at a red light. I thought red meant stop! How long will the media continue to perpetuate negative images of African Americans on television, while praising the efforts of white people?... Police officers gave citations to female Freaknik participants for indecent exposure. Numerous intoxicated white females took their tops off exposing their bare chest while men poured beer on them... In the words of former Black Panther party member Bobby Seale, who blessed GSU with his appearance two weeks ago, it is time for African Americans and other socially conscious individuals to stand up and speak out about inequality and demand proper recognition. Equal opportunity, equal treatment and quality media coverage should be demanded and practiced in this melting pot we call America.”²⁹⁹

The next day, following the airing Freaknik’ 98 on TV, *The Associated Press* published that the Atlanta committee recommended that Atlanta no longer welcome the annual Black

²⁹⁸ Curtis K.L. Johnson Jr., “Black College Spring Break ’98: All Hype, Much Gripe Freaknik – Freak Not!” *Maroon Tiger* (Atlanta, Georgia), May 4, 1998, 7.

²⁹⁹ Karin Smoot, “Does Atlanta hold a double standard,” *GSU Signal* (Atlanta, Georgia), May 12, 1998, 10.

College Spring Break as the committee chairman George Hawthorne said, “We cannot support events that bring lewd activities, sexual assaults, violence against women and public safety concerns.” Aikena Scott, a senior at Clark Atlanta University, responded and said, “I think this is unfair because the city caters to any other event held here. When college students, particularly Black college students, get together, the city feels like they have to regulate us.”³⁰⁰

By 1999, the buzz about Freaknik had tremendously died down as requests for event permits had not been turned in or approved, and the city did not appoint a panel of city leaders to organize the event in January as expected. Besides, two leading websites for the party listed no events or advertisers.³⁰¹ By March 18, 1999, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported that The Auburn Avenue Business and Improvement Association (SABIA) planned the only outdoor event during the traditional Freaknik weekend: a three-day festival with concerts, a car show, food booths, and street vendors.³⁰² By April, Atlanta appointed two business people and two AUC college students to oversee Black College Spring Break weekend.³⁰³ As more were added, discussions of softening Freaknik’s image became more critical as competing locations like Galveston, Texas and Daytona Beach, Florida, attracted more college students away from Atlanta.³⁰⁴

When Freaknik ’99 began, participants complained about the lack of people and the heavy police presence as they were surveilled by police cars and tow trucks. A student said, “This is the worst one I’ve been to... too many police – they take the fun out of it. They won’t let people party right.” Another student said, “police were harassing me and I wasn’t even doing

³⁰⁰ “Atlanta Committee Opposes Freaknik.” AP NEWS. The Associated Press, May 13, 1998. <https://apnews.com/article/356ad8c1c1ffd00900d5208f5dfff338>.

³⁰¹ Carlos Campos, “For Freaknik, the thrill is gone,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 14, 1999, F2.

³⁰² Carlos Campos, “Auburn Avenue welcoming Freaknik,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, March 18, 1999, D2.

³⁰³ Carlos Campos, “Panel is named to plan Freaknik,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 8, 1999, D1.

³⁰⁴ *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, “Freaknik: Planners are trying to soften event’s image,” April 11, 1999, D12.

anything.”³⁰⁵ On April 25, 1999, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* published an article titled, “Is Freaknik dead?,” further indicating that the spirit of Freaknik did not feel the same even as the city was proud to say that the Black College Spring Break weekend was a success.³⁰⁶ A critic of the city’s actions and people’s opinions about how great Freaknik had become or how the city should squash the idea altogether said,

“If you think the only way a city can make money from thousands of visiting students is by beefing up your police force and doing your best to ticket them for any small thing, you are an insipid being and most likely couldn't run a city constructed from Lego blocks. It is very hard for me to understand the problem of Freaknik, although there may be a problem with some of the actions associated with Freaknik. To stifle Freaknik was the wrong approach and showed, in my opinion, a sign of ignorance and abandonment. When white college students go to Daytona or Miami Beach, they do not set up roadblocks 30 miles away, or attempt to drive them out of the city. When adults have Mardi Gras, they do not have to deal with anything. New Orleans welcomes them with open arms and says, "this is where the party is, this is where the parade is, as long as you stay within your bounds and do not commit felonies, you are okay." What I am trying to say is if you had [just] confined it, the students would have enjoyed themselves more and it would be more organized and eventful. If black students can't have fun in the so-called "Chocolate City," then something is terribly wrong. Your actions show me that our "black leaders" of this city can only take action when it comes to hurting and affecting us (black youth). Your problem, Freaknik, has ended, but the real problem remains.”³⁰⁷

On April 13, 2000, the *Atlanta Daily World* printed, “Ask Black college students and event promoters or check the internet for a forecast for Freaknik 2000. The expectations: dud. dead. all-but disappeared...The city is planning for business as usual, unlike previous years.” Still, the Sweet Auburn Black College Unity Fest 2000 scheduled for April 14-16 included a

³⁰⁵ *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, “Freaknik: Hot spots stay quiet,” April 17, 1999, G5; Carlos Campos, “Event’s sedate start may signal end: Positive change: Fewer arrests, job fair a success,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 18, 1999, H6.

³⁰⁶ *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, “Is Freaknik Dead?,” April 25, 1999, B2.

³⁰⁷ N. Anyjah Heatly III, “Freaknik is over, the problem isn’t,” *GSU Signal* (Atlanta, Georgia), April 27, 1999, 10.

gospel jam, sports carnival, and Census exhibit.³⁰⁸ *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reported that the Sweet Auburn Fest was festive and calm as people visited vendors, ate barbecue, and listened to music. On the contrary, they also quoted a college student who said, “I used to come all the time and it would be packed. I was looking for more excitement and more people. I won’t be back.”³⁰⁹ It seemed as if the new face of respectable behavior and police enforcement of Freaknik killed students’ attraction to Atlanta. Hence, it’s no surprise that on Sunday April 16, 2000, George Hawthorne, a past leader of Atlanta’s Freaknik advisory committee, said, “It’s time to go ahead and just call the eulogy for Freaknik. It is definitely dead.”³¹⁰ In January of 2001, *The Maroon Tiger* started an article with, “Freaknik is dead.” as it went on to describe a collection of events possibly in the brewing to kick off the end of the spring semester, something Freaknik used to be for many AUC students.³¹¹

Freaknic began as a small picnic for Atlanta University Center students to hang out, eat, dance, and listen to music. As more students became attracted to the event, Atlanta had to keep watch as its participants literally interrupted the flow and business of the city. Mayor Bill Campbell had a tough decision handling such a spontaneous event that no one had control over. Racial and generational undertones, including respectability politics, painted the arguments around why Freaknik should stay or be outed by the city. What most cannot deny about Freaknic was that Atlanta became a space where Black college students could have fun and be free for almost a decade. However, as it became “Freaknik” in the last part of its existence, Atlanta became a police state that made Black college students feel criminalized and unwelcomed. The

³⁰⁸ *Atlanta Daily World*, “Atlanta Expecting Freaknik 2000 to be a Non-Event,” April 13, 2000, 2.

³⁰⁹ Ernie Suggs, “Old Freaknik gone, but job fair, Auburn scene thrive,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 16, 2000, A1.

³¹⁰ Jack Warner & Sandra Eckstein, “Freaknik is now Feaknot,” *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, April 16, 2000, D1.

³¹¹ Carnegie H. Mims, III, “Spring Homecoming in the making,” *Maroon Tiger* (Atlanta, Georgia), January 25, 2001, 5.

memories of Freaknic's spirit still reign in the hearts of those who attended, while the harsh memories of Freaknik remind them that such a spirit could never indeed return. Now in the 21st century, Freaknic's legacy lives in the Sweet Auburn Festival that has occurred since then. Past attendees of Freaknic and Atlanta residents still attend the Sweet Auburn Festival, and most can almost remember what it was like to be at Freaknic in the late 80s and early 90s. What a time!

Live on Freaknic!

4 WOMEN'S STORIES AT FREAKNIC (K)

Black women were a necessity to the success of Freaknik. They made Freaknik what it grew to be. Their images were splattered on Freaknik clothing and advertisements for crucial parties in the city. They were the center of attention of every camera lens, whether it was capturing their dance moves, fashion choices, hairstyles, body features, or their beauty. To this day, you will not see any reference to Freaknik without the image of a Black woman. In the space Freaknik created, many women explored their sexuality while others were more modest in the activities they engaged with. For this project, seven women were interviewed with their experiences of Freaknik starting in the late 1980s and ending in the late 1990s. Although each women's experience, presented in this chapter, did not occur in the same year, all the women shared that they felt free and could authentically be themselves in a community with other Black people. Their stories, as varied as they may be, were shared among friends, family, and other loved ones in oral or written traditions of Black female communities; however, those stories have not been written in the historiography of Atlanta's Freaknik. This chapter aims to provide an academic space for their stories to thrive.

4.1 Lisa Jackson

Experienced Freaknic '89 to '91

For the first time in my life, I was surrounded by a sea of young Black people. It was a celebration of Blackness, an opportunity to let it all hang out.

After completing her undergraduate degree at the University of Wisconsin, where Black students made up less than 1000 of the student population, Atlanta seemed like the place to be because everybody was Black. Lisa stated, "I craved Black people, heat and warmth, and some sort of welcome. So, in 1987, I went to Atlanta for the first time for the second King Day

Celebration. It was just like there's no other place I can be. The minute I graduated, I moved to Atlanta, drove one way, and never looked back.” By 1989, Lisa Jackson was still a newcomer to the city of Atlanta but had been welcomed by many friends, including ones from the AUC center, who invited her to the party on campus. Her friends briefed her on the history of Freaknic starting with the D.C. Metro Club. She said, “I knew the history where the D.C. Metro Club for what I understand, held this picnic. They named it Freaknic because the members of the D.C. Metro Club, mostly students at Morehouse, had a pajama party the night before. Then after that they held their Freaknic because they were trying to meet women and meet women they did. That was 1989 and it was at the park.” In 1989, it was Washington Park, located less than 2 miles from Clark Atlanta University and the AUC Center.

At the park that day, Lisa shared how networking made Freaknic possible as it was amazing to see how something like a new dance or a picnic could reach Black students from across the states. Lisa expressed feeling like the picnic was a celebration following the trauma of integration; a healing feeling where Black people are in a positive light. For example, she said, “In being amongst people who, you know that’s on something. So, you know, he's in medical school. That's so and so and she's working on her PhD. That’s so and so and he starting a business and we're going to support it. So, it was a groundbreaking of what we saw... the culmination of what happened during that time of Freaknic... in building Atlanta, in building Georgia, in the elections [2020 Presidential Elections], that's a result from Freaknic. I give it to Freaknic because I'm sure that the people who are in a lot of powerful positions now, especially behind the scenes, they were there that day in 1989.” In other words, Lisa witnessed many professional Black students gather connecting and fostering a community that would have major implications on their career paths after the day was over.

Moreover, Lisa described how in the space Freaknic created there was not a need for embarrassment for your Blackness. Lisa said, “Before, carrying a big boombox with music blaring was kind of like ‘oh okay, Cringe! Cringe!’ and I’m around all these white people. They’re probably wondering if I know him, but that [feeling] was gone... So, the respectability politics and policies that we put in place, like, you know, dress the part where you want to go. Be business-like. You could toss all that away because you didn’t need it. You did not have to apologize for being a Black woman. Not then and not there on that day at least.” From her memories, Lisa shared, “at the park in southwest Atlanta that first year that I went in 89, they started fighting and people started singing, *self-destruction... you’re headed for self-destruction*.³¹² Sure enough, whoever was fighting calmed down and ended up shaking hands. Everyone was cheering. It was just like, wow, we can stop the violence in our own community. It was just an uplifting kind of experience in that we do we have the power to do within us.”

Black culture was shown that day unapologetically as people shared food, danced in front of others’ cameras, expressed themselves with loud colored fashion, high low hairstyles, and overall swagger or confidence. Superficial or materialistic trends such as skin color and hair type, dictated who had the most swagger or were considered the most desirable. Lisa said, “Ooh it was the brothers, you know just people being kind to each other, talking to each other, and singing together. The music at that time, when an event would start, you know, it’s kind of a little bit of smooth jazz. Then it would kind of ride into a little bit of maybe Aretha or maybe old Motown sound. Then it would scale up to the height of the party, which was the GO-GO. Those beats, you know, so the soundtrack was amazing. It was an opportunity to just let it all hang out.

³¹² Boogie Down Productions, “Self-Destruction,” track 23 on *Live Hardcore Worldwide*, Jive/RCA Records, 1991, compact disc

And boy did people, but we were still conservative.” In other words, chivalry and dating was still expected even in the Freaknic space.

“Nobody hooked up and left. There was still the golden rule of come together, leave together. Nobody split off into another space and have their way with somebody,” Lisa stated, “It was still, you know, can I talk to you? Can I speak with you? Or somebody would have a line and not just a comment on how you look, or what they wanted from you. It was still about, you know, let's exchange phone numbers, let's have a discussion, let's have a conversation. Nobody would just walk up to you and touch you or try to love or anything like that. It wasn't like that at that time. It was still very much of a gentle approach that was flattering, and it was not rude. People didn't feel like ‘okay, I feel like I've been offended.’ Nobody was offended. It was we dancing together, courting almost, but it was speed courting, and lots of it.” Lisa continued attending for the next two years and in her observation, this courting between males and females became less and less respectful or conservative. In her opinion as more of the “Element” or people who were not college educated or from the neighborhood engaged with Freaknic, the more frequently lewd remarks and behaviors in dating occurred.

This change in behavior can be credited with the understanding of a freak amongst the community and how ideas around sexual openness were tolerated in the public eye over time. From Lisa's understanding, a freak was someone who was sex positive. Although several songs talked about sex-positive behaviors, being a freak or too freaky publicly became a negative stain on a Black woman's public image. Those women would be called a ho or slut; considered a woman who you should not be seen with or take on a date. As a result, a Black woman could not own her sexuality. When Lisa was in school in the 80s, she said, describing somebody as a freak meant “she has herpes, or she has chlamydia.” In other words, being a freak became associated

with adverse impacts of sexual intercourse, although anyone who engaged in sex had equal opportunity to receive the same results. For Lisa, discussions about sex, sexual freedom, and romantic relationships did not occur. Lisa believed her generation was sexually repressed and oppressed. Lisa does not recall having many conversations about sex or sexuality with her friends until they were almost in their late 30s, and even then, it was only a few she could talk to. If those conversations did happen, they were very caged. Gaining knowledge on sex and sexuality was something to be “jezebel,” Black women were often pushed to get an education and a good-paying job rather than focusing on getting married and having children. Other reasons for this included pressure on Black college students to succeed. Lisa said, for her generation, “We were representing the community. We had all these opportunities, so we better not squander them, you know, do it for the people...If you came from a solid middle-class upbringing, double, triple, or quadruple it.” Lisa believed that this mindset of individuality, adopted from middle-class white America, pushed the Black community to further divide and impose certain respectability politics. “So, an event like Freaknic served as a space where Black women could be human and did not have to be the tough strong Black woman. She could be vulnerable and engage in activities that were outside of the confined expectations placed on her by her community and society at large. Lisa expressed, “That [Freaknic] was an opportunity to take care of yourself and be taken care of and to be acknowledged, you know, shake it fast, shake it slow, because you want to shake it.”

An event and name like Freaknic became accepted in the community, Black women included, because it was like “you can say the word bitch, but I’m not talking about me.” Freaknic became a space where women could express themselves sexually outside of the private sphere and be whomever they wanted to be without judgment. “What happens at Freaknic, stays

at Freaknic,” Lisa said, “It was kind of a relief.” Unfortunately, this mindset also has a downside in that if a woman chose to go to Freaknic and something was to happen to her, Lisa said, people’s response would be, “Well, she should have known better for going. She was asking for it. What does she expect?” According to Lisa, although some women may have been clearer on what consent and sexual violence were, those discussions happened when it was too late and often blamed the woman for giving mixed messages.

Like many others, Lisa shared her Freaknic experience with her out-of-town friends and family who responded saying, “I’m coming. I want to see that. I want to be there.” Lisa attributes Atlanta’s reputation to this “word of mouth” exchange about Freaknik amongst the Black college students and their associates. Lisa stated, “More than anything, that's how Atlanta became, you know, the Black Mecca, not because of the schools only but it was that [Freaknic]... that brought the magic of Atlanta to life. So, people, as a result, wanted to move there, wanted to visit. They wanted to see what's happening.” Just because people came does not mean they were welcomed. Lisa recalled many moments throughout her years at Freaknic when Atlanta residents and the city officials dismissed students. For example, Lisa recalled seeing the sea of Black people at the park, an unusual sight for most people, and on the other side of the park people were running away. There was even a threat of a gun where Lisa and her friends were protected by a man with a bicycle from the incoming stampede. Referring to the experience, Lisa said, “people were making jokes like, ‘Oh, wait, wait, why are we running? Oh! Cuz they running.’” In 1990, event organizers could not get a permit from Fulton County, so they went to DeKalb County. She even remembers another year when at Piedmont Park, Freaknic was registered under something like the Jackson or Johnson family reunion, because Fulton County and surrounding counties were not welcoming to Freaknic.

The city was not encouraging of Freaknic nor did they frame it to showcase the city. Heated debates grew as many people felt Freaknic's critics were racially motivated as constant comparisons to spring break in Florida were always made. Participants of Freaknic like, Lisa, were frustrated and disappointed in how Freaknic was not given the same welcome as Spring break in Florida cities. She expressed,

“We knew that they didn't even want our dollars. Wow. Because there were clubs in Atlanta, who would have you know, have like a Black night one day because of the music and we were there. We lined up, trying to pay however much to get in. They would always change the policies when it becomes too Black because they didn't want to scare away their white customers or become known as the Black club; but Black people probably spend more money than white people at a bar or club, buying bottles and trying to look like you are doing really well for yourself. But they [the club] didn't want our money. They'd rather have it as a white club with a Black night...and I remember, they would be all Black people clubs. People paying \$20 at the door, and they wouldn't play any Black music. And so then, when people were complaining enough, and the people started leaving and getting out of line, you could hear they started playing 'Wild Thang' by Tone Loc. Then people forgot they were supposed to boycott this place, you know, but no, here's my money, I gotta get to that dance floor. Where are our principles? So, if they just start playing, you know, R- Kelly, which again, your generation has said, you know, it works, maybe to a double-edged sword, where do you cancel people altogether? Cause we were very forgiving. Shoot if I had a good time at that club, even if they only played three songs that I danced to, I'm going back next weekend, because I'm gonna wait for them to play those same three songs. Whereas now you all would cancel them. You'd protest them. You'd boycott them. You would not go in and wait for those songs to be played. We did though.”

Lisa further explains how she felt most of her generation would accept this treatment by businesses or structures in the community because they were desperate to be represented, celebrate their culture, and ultimately exercise their American freedoms as humans without worrying about embarrassment or ridicule. Freaknic gave them that space to do just that, and they continued to do it regardless of the city of Atlanta and its' residents turning a cold shoulder to them. Lisa said for many students, it was “the pinnacle of your semester or your quarter in

school. Its springtime now. We've survived the winter. You put on your summer dress. Your toes are out and you're ready to go. You looking good. You feeling good. You have your stride going. It's a celebration; a celebration of Blackness. Even though I don't know that we thought of it as that, but it was more of, you know, it's all Black people and we are here to have a good time." Lisa credits Freaknic with her realization that Black people are powerful and can come together, be together and take something over in a good way. Rough feelings or memories of integration and fighting prejudice and discrimination from the Black freedom struggle, including the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement, created divisions along socioeconomic boundaries amongst the Black community.

Lisa stated, a Negro geography, or a series of questions answered directly or indirectly, was used by the Black community to judge if someone wanted to be affiliated with another. However, at Freaknic, for everyone to be "under one sky in one park or area and do that? Wow! It was affirming... it gave me the courage, it gave me the ability to be absolutely bold, to know that I can build the business that I'm building now. Nobody can tell me otherwise because, you know, we did it in defiance of the city. They didn't sanction anything. In fact, they didn't want it in their city and yet, we did it anyway. For me, that served as a source of inspiration for the ability to do anything...It was not an act of protest in the streets, a march, or a rally. It was a party. So, to have this party, that so many people tried to shut down, or break down and people did it anyway? Yeah. If we can do that with a party, we can do that with a factory. We can do that with an economy. We can do that with anything."

4.2 Lady T

Experienced Freaknic '92

We were together on something and it was our thing. Freaknic was ours.

Lady T, a 27-year-old single mom living in Atlanta, went to Freaknic in 1992. She was not a college student like many of the attendees, but rather a factory worker during the day and a professional singer at night. “I wasn’t a college student at the time, but everybody knew about it, or at least my circle did. It was like a tradition.” Lady T’s circle included Morehouse College students who were members of her jazz band. After hearing about all the fun, free drinking, and partying, Lady T went to Freaknic with her younger female friend. “I don’t know how many years they [college students] had already been coming, but I knew that I wanted to go because it was a blowout the years before. I just heard about free drinks, how everybody be partying, ballin’, and smoking weed. That’s what we were looking for. My friend and I decided to go even though neither one of us were in college. We just wanted to go to the party. We were kind of “broke,” but we wanted to turn up. So, we felt like that Freaknic was the best way to do it.”

Lady T described the atmosphere as extremely congested and insane with so many people everywhere either in standstill traffic or walking through the traffic. She said there were some events around North Avenue, the Fox Theatre, Midtown, and Piedmont Park. “We pulled up into the liquor store. We were putting our little coins together, trying to scrape all the coins up and a guy behind us bought everything that we had on the counter. We were like, ‘Man! we wish we had gotten more,’ but we were getting what we could do based on our pockets but if we had known that he was going to do that, we would have gotten more. That was the atmosphere though like, boom! We got it. Then another guy jumped in the backseat of the car, and he had a blunt and smoked this fire weed with us and then just jumped back out.” Lady T said, “It was just like it was a free for all, whatever you wanted to do. It was just a party. They had plenty of money and everybody just wildin’ out really.”

In addition to free, Lady T described Freaknik as wild as she witnessed women jumping on cars, dancing to loud playing music and men ogling and touching women inappropriately. She said there were a of people “blasted” or “high,” making them unaware of their surroundings. Lady T said, “I was really glad to be with my friend because we were looking out for each other, but you didn’t see that in general, especially with young ladies who needed to look out for themselves because the men were like animals.” They were animalistic in a sense that “when sex is involved and its public, people can lose their inhibitions with very personal and intimate emotions coming out that should be private.” Lady T described people’s mindsets as deciding to be crazy or carefree for that weekend and putting aside their morals or normal behaviors because it was Freaknic where “everything goes.” “It was like one big outside strip club – attitude wise.”

For example, Lady T shared how women, she assumed were college women, were very “sketchily” clothed as they were jumping on top of cars and dancing with loud music in the traffic-jammed streets. Men were wild too. When Lady T and her friend were stuck in mild traffic on North Avenue, they experienced a bunch of men surrounding and rocking their car. The men may have been playing, drunk or wanted Lady T and her friend to get out and socialize but they scared the women. Soon enough, when the women didn’t get out, the men stopped and moved on to do something else. From Lady T’s perspective, she said those men were “out of control” and “possessed with some kind of demon.” This lone incident convinced Lady T and her friend not to go to any inside parties. “Everything that we witnessed was outside because we knew that it was some wild and possibly dangerous stuff going on in the inside. We didn't want to be involved in, you know, some things like possibly getting raped, getting a drink spiked, or smoking something that we didn’t know what all was in it. We didn't want to get into the other

stuff that we had just heard by mouth that happens. When dudes get wild and foolish, it can get dangerous for you.”

Due to a prior experience, Lady T was very aware of how situations can go very wrong for a woman if she does not make conscious decisions. For Lady T, sex and romantic relationships were not discussed amongst her family but with her friends. The sex talk happened with her parents, but it was more of a warning for her to not get pregnant and understand what rape was. She learned about sex from just doing it. Lady T stated, “From 18 to my early 20s I was very promiscuous. That’s really where I got my experience from. I was always with somebody, even if I wasn’t trying to be with somebody because they tried to. They chose me but I didn’t choose them. So, I had a really jacked up mentality about sex, just like somebody with a loaded weapon who don’t know how to use it. I found out later that promiscuity is a response to abuse.”

Lady T expressed she was not publicly promiscuous so she did not feel judged by others because she was “the good smart girl that you wouldn’t even know is out here just, you know, fucking everybody who want to fuck her and don’t know why.” This kind of sexual freedom was a private matter for Lady T so when at Freaknic in 1992, seeing her peers being sexually open, made her draw concerns for the young ladies there with men eyeing them. She worried about their safety as she felt teasing men, as she was taught, could warrant a guy to keep going even if the woman says “no.” She said,

“Somebody did teach me that when you say stop, he’s supposed to stop but at the same time, don’t tease him... You cannot expect another human being to pull back when they’re turned on especially somebody who don’t love you or who don’t know you. If you’re gonna do that, it’s dangerous. Women have a responsibility to that too. What I’m saying is if you want him to stop, he should still stop, but have the expectation that he might not stop. You need to have the responsibility for yourself as a woman to say I’m not gonna take it to this point, because I don’t want to have sex with this dude tonight... You can’t hope that the

next person is going to do the right thing because you changed your mind. It's just not guaranteed, but it's still rape because she said 'no.' I just want women to stop putting themselves in that situation and feeling like they don't have any responsibility for how they got to that moment.”

Lady T heard of stories where women tried to reject men's advances and things that were said in response was “Well, why was she in there? What did she think was gonna happen?” Lady T believed that it was very likely that a lot of women were assaulted in some sort of way but were blamed if they spoke up about it. These conclusions and stories convinced Lady T that the wild, “I can do what I want” attitude atmosphere was a one-time experience for her, especially when she heard of many women getting raped following her attendance of Freaknik. Even when her cousin from Tennessee came to town with her friends to go to Freaknik that following year, Lady T refused to attend because she felt she did not need to go again.

Much of the conversations surrounding Freaknic after its end that year revolved around the economic impact it had on the city of Atlanta. Other things like the kinds of cars people were driving, the different schools that were present, and when Freaknic was returning were also hot topics. These conversations resulted in people beginning to see how to make money off the event as Lady T saw people selling barbeque, t-shirts, water, and other items to Freaknic participants on the side of the road. Lady T said, “It was the older people and younger people trying to make some money...it was mostly just an economic come up for a lot of people.” Atlanta residents, especially ones who lived in Decatur and College Park, knew about Freaknic and understood the preparations that needed to happen before the weekend-long party began. “That was the rule like don't go downtown. Get everything you need to get handled and don't come out because they [Freaknic participants] are going to bombard the city.”

In her opinion, you wouldn't know the difference between Freaknic and Daytona Beach Spring Break other than the race of the participants. She expressed, “I think that spring break is

just a space where everything goes. It was just a time to be wild if you had some money in your pocket, you know, sex, drugs, drinking, you know, being away from home, thinking your grown and your parents can't see what you're doing. The white kids have always done it...Black people I think emulated that." She felt there wasn't too much of a distinction about Freaknic and other Spring Break destinations other than how people were responding to those events. She stated, "I was not aware at that time or cognizant, you know, of the racial thing where the police, and you know, some of the nonblack citizens of Atlanta, had a problem with Freaknic spring break, you know, Black kids coming to Atlanta. It was just a tradition they had been doing for a couple years. I knew they [Black kids] were spending a lot of money and I thought hey, great for the city. You know, I heard they spent a hundred million dollars in a weekend, but I guess it mattered whose money." Later, she expressed seeing the debate over Freaknic explode onto the news where a spokesperson for the students shared how they felt unwelcomed due to the police harassment and refusal of some white people in Atlanta voicing strong opinions to push them out of the city. Lady T said,

"During that time the makeup of Atlanta's neighborhoods were still very Black like everywhere you went; Old Fourth Ward, Downtown, Capitol Homes, Bowen Homes...It was Black people in all those areas but the residents that was talking a lot of garbage was probably Buckhead, Roswell, or somewhere else because those white folks were not living in Atlanta then. I ain't trying to be funny, but they wasn't. They were still out in the suburbs, but they didn't like it and Mayor Bill Campbell was kind of wild. I think the white people were really mad because they felt he was in cahoots with it. They [white people] didn't like to see the Black leadership and all those Black kids with all that money. Like I said all the people in those neighborhoods were Black then. They was getting in on it. They were trying to cook some barbecue, sell some t shirts, sell some bottles of water or whatever they could do to get the money. I mean to them it was a way to get their pocket fat that weekend because the kids was just throwing money around like water. So, the only people who were mad was the ones who wasn't a part of it. That's the only thing that kind of stands out to me as far as Black culture was like the alternative economy. So, next thing, you know, Freaknic wasn't coming anymore. They [The students] stopped coming. They [City of Atlanta] started making them [the students] feel very unwelcome harassing them. They probably

were tearing up hotel rooms and all that kind of stuff, you know, because as wild as they were acting outside, I'm pretty sure they tore up some hotels, but they were still spending money.”

Lady T shared that Freaknic became a space of freedom and pride because it was like a status. “We are in an all-Black city. Atlanta was really strong in those days with our mayor, our whole city council, our fire chief, like everybody Black. We were a strong Black city. We got money. This was us. I was kind of proud of us. It looked like chocolate city. It was ours in a different atmosphere other than just a whole bunch of people just hanging out drinking 40s who may or may not have a job, you know? Those college students, still smoking and drinking, were getting an education to make a better life. That represented the come up. Atlanta quickly became THE place. If you were somebody, you were at Freaknic.”

4.3 Tanya Watson

Experienced Freaknic ‘94

The biggest thing was the outfit. You had to get your outfit together because you wanted to be cute.

Tanya was a biology major college senior traveling from South Carolina to enjoy one last bash before graduation in the coming weeks. She was about 20 years old when her friends talked about this gathering of African Americans in Atlanta. So, Tanya and her friends made a trip to head to Atlanta from Colombia. Tanya was excited to see what all the hype was about, especially since she attended a predominantly white school. Although she was a member of a traditional African American Greek organization, the experience of a historic Black college or university (HBCU) was foreign and, therefore she looked forward to being a part of the festival.

Tanya prepared to go by carefully choosing an outfit and hairstyle, which was the biggest thing of concern at the time amongst her and her friends. “Being cute” was of high concern.

“Being cute” meant wearing the popular trends like Duck head shorts, Docker shorts or Daisy Dukes short shorts. If those were unavailable, jeans were cut really high on the hips and matched with tank tops. Tanya said that young ladies were probably dressing this way for attention. “It’s like ‘I want him to see me’ or you know, ‘I want whomever to see me’. I wanted to be cute and seen.” Freaknik was a very youthful space where modesty may not have been high on anyone’s list to be unless it was their first desire. Tanya felt most excited about “a whole bunch of African American people and just having a big block party, just being carefree. You not really concerned at all because you’re young and not really thinking about safety or the risks of being out there just partying in a park. You just want to have fun.” Coming from a small town in South Carolina, where Atlanta is viewed as a big city, Freaknic and the magnitude in which Black people took over the city was a bit overwhelming to Tanya. She said, “I’ve never been around that many people, Black people, just out having fun.” However, Tanya never regretted her decision to go because, “it’s gonna be different for me, a different experience, and different people. I get to let my hair down a little.”

When Tanya described Freaknic, she said, “There was so many people and a lot going on.” She observed groups of men grinning and cat calling to women. At the same time, there were groups of people having fun dancing. She saw women talking to men and other groups of women with their female friends “doing their own little thing.” Tanya visited popular hotspots like Piedmont Park and the Atlanta Underground. Tanya did not see any police, police patrols, or roadblocks. She just remembers people out in the streets, having fun in the park, roaming, and having fun. The thing that stood out to Tanya the most was her time with her girlfriends, just people watching and laughing at inside jokes. Their conversations consisted of commenting on people’s looks, outfits, and overall attractiveness of people who walked by. Overall, everyone

just seemed to be having fun. Tanya said, “I didn’t see any issues of safety. It was just like one big family picnic with various groups of people doing their own thing. It was like a big tailgate. It was an experience that I never had before as far as seeing so many African Americans just out there having fun.”

There were so many people that Tanya felt that there were more there than just college students. “You have to understand when you attend an event like that, you get some local residents who may not have you know, attended college or may not be in college. So, the locals and not that I’m stereotyping the locals, but sometimes you may attract that type of crowd when you have such a large event that’s open to the public.” In other words, as thousands traveled to the city of Atlanta and gathered at Piedmont Park, the amount of people had to have included people not in college. It is safe to say that by 1994, Freaknic was no longer just a college event but a Black American event for all to participate. Although 1994 was filled with students from the AUC center and HBCUs across the country, locals or non-college educated people were present as well. Unfortunately, Tanya believed that was the reason why Atlanta cracked down on Freaknik in the following years.

Reactions from family and friends regarding her attendance had mostly positive reactions. They asked, “How was it? Did you have fun?” There were some that made assumptions based off Freaknic’s name. “Oh okay. We got a bunch of freaks out there,” they would say but Tanya insisted that it really was not like that at all. “I think that people that did not go, probably had more opinions because of the name associated with it, versus the people that actually attended.” When asked what freak meant Tanya defined it as, “someone that is loose in a sense with no self-respect, body, or soul. It’s a young lady that just out there pretty much advertising her body for sale or even just being highly sexually involved with several people.

‘Like yeah, she nasty.’” In Tanya’s experience, she did not see that freaky Black woman at Freaknik. She said, “although I did make reference to wearing Daisy Dukes and tank tops, I think the women were very respectful in their dress. At that time, I don’t recall seeing those types of females although the guys were still catcalling but I don’t recall seeing just women out there dressed provocatively.”

Tanya stated that sex, sexual freedom, and romantic relationships were not a topic often discussed amongst her friends. This probably contributed to their decision not to roam the streets of Atlanta during Freaknik at night. Tanya expressed that they considered themselves to be a little on the conservative side. Also, conversations about consent and sexual knowledge started at home, but Tanya learned most of it on her own. Also, sexual violence conversations did not happen at all. She did not recall any incidents about sexual violence at home, in the neighborhood, or in college. She never experienced it herself or knew anyone else who had such an encounter. Tanya said, “I think it was more taboo to talk about it back then versus you know, you hear a lot more about it now. Sexual violence, you never really heard much about it or at least I didn’t. You know, I had a pretty close group of girlfriends and I don’t think any of us well, none that I know, experienced that. So, I don’t think it just was a topic that we spoke on.”

4.4 Tina Rodgers

Experienced Freaknik ’94 to ’95

It was the perfect storm; the safest place for young Black college students to get together, have fun, be free, and let it all hang out literally and figuratively.

Tina was a 19-year-old freshman from Cleveland, Ohio, studying business administration at CAU when she first heard about the big college party in Atlanta from her friends back at home, asking when they should come down for Freaknik. She said, “I didn’t know what to

expect to be honest, but I knew I wanted to participate in some way, shape, or form as I was in Atlanta at the time.” Her experience lived up to her expectations. In fact, they went beyond because, as she says, “I didn’t know the magnitude of how pervasive the street clogging, the partying everywhere, and people just out and about was going to be.” Although Tina and her friends had heard of some crazy Freaknik experiences, it did not stop them from wanting to go. She said, “It was like if you didn’t see it with your own eyes, you know, you might have caught something later on, like on some VHS tape or some type of camcorder recording that somebody taped.” In other words, the stories being spread around about Freaknik may have seemed unbelievable and people like Tina wanted to go to see for themselves.

Tina described Freaknic ’94 as just mounds of people everywhere with so much going on. People were in cars, jumping in and out of cars as the traffic was at a standstill on surface streets and highways from the AUC area on the Southwest side of Atlanta to Buckhead on the Northwest side of Atlanta. People were everywhere, especially in Downtown, Midtown, and up in Lenox Mall in Buckhead all day and all night. Traffic was everywhere so music was blasting from so many cars. Some were drop top cars with people sitting on top enjoying the scene of standstill traffic and people having fun. One thing she noticed about the cars was the license plates. “There were a lot of people from the Midwest, like every license plate I saw was from either Ohio or Michigan. Tons of people from the Midwest. People came from the West Coast too. It was just a big thing.” Tina described the diversity of people at Freaknic by describing the change in music at the time. Tina stated,

“There was a change in music. The nature of hip hop and rap and everything changed where gangsta rap started being popular. It became something less conscious. For instance, like the late 80s, you had Public Enemy, KRS ONE, people like that who positive lyrics like “Self-Destruction,” a whole compilation of hip-hop artists, talking about things that, they could see that Black people were doing that was causing self-destruction. I love that song to this day but that was a

whole compilation of different rappers that made the song. By the mid-90s, probably right at about 94/95 is when, NWA, “The Chronic” from Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre became popular. So, you start talking about marijuana and everything like that. So it was that all these different East Coast/ West Coast rappers plus there was the South. The whole Miami bass influence and then Atlanta had its own flavor too. I remember when I came to school, bass music was something new to me. My friends who are actually from the South, were at school with it just jamming and I was like, ‘What is this y’all listening to and why are y’all jamming so hard?’. Miami bass, which was Uncle Luke's world where he had a lot of objectifying music about women and their bodies, was very popular at the time. You had some of everything. People from Florida and Atlanta were there. Some of the East Coast, West Coast, and Southern music all converging at Freaknik. People between the ages of 18 and 25, maybe younger than that, bringing their culture and influence from wherever they're from.”

Freaknik '95 was more organized with concerts and activities out at Piedmont Park to capture the attention of visitors. She even got to capture a photo with R&B group Az Yet. By Freaknik '96, she lost interest because “by then it started waning away. They [Atlanta officials and police] actually started locking things down a lot more in '96 so it was like you didn't even want to participate because it was like they got the streets blocked off. Now you can't do this, and you can't do that. So, I don't even think I even tried to participate in '96.” Tina knew some brief history of Freaknic and how small it began. She said by the time she was able to participate that it had reached its height.

Tina and her friends' approach to navigating Freaknik was to stick together. She said, “we weren't the ones trying to be like oh this is my time to let my freak flag fly where I'm just gonna go get in random cars and go to random hotels and be with anybody. That wasn't our style. We just wanted to be out and about in the midst of everything and have fun. See it firsthand.” Tina did have one juicy story of her own where she saw a man strip down naked while dancing in front of a pizza parlor with a parking lot full of people watching. “It was a free for all. You were young, really not legal because most were probably 18,19, 20. People found

some kind of way to get liquor and all that type of stuff. I wasn't aware of any type of drugs, not even marijuana. I'm no church girl but it just wasn't my thing. My crowd did not smoke but we drank a little bit."

Tina said she did not witness any assault on any woman. She felt that people were voluntarily getting into cars and out of cars, some dancing more seductively than others, and overall having a good time. "People were out there willingly dancing, shaking, and whatever else they wanted to do." She never saw anyone get their clothes ripped off or anything of that nature. If a woman was dancing, she said, "They [men] would just go over there first. It had somewhat of an invitation. I hate to say it like that but if you're in that environment that's what people are looking for and what could happen. If you put yourself out there, then that's somewhat indicative of 'I want this type of attention.' You have to be smart about what you do and how you carry yourself." She said, "I knew what could happen out there, that's why I didn't travel alone or hang out alone. I knew it was happening. That was something that was being done and that was expected." Tina felt no need to participate nor to be scared. She was aware of enforcing consent and not putting herself in situations that could bring that kind of attention. She remembers it being talked about with her family and how her school would warn children about molestation. For example, stranger danger was a huge lesson engrained in children where it was communicated to tell an adult if something bad happens or if someone touches inappropriately.

Tina did not feel pressure to do anything that she did not want to do with this mindset. She said, "I'm kind of strategic about who I actually hang out with. Like if I know she might be a little loose, loose, loose, then I'm not going to invite her. I knew I didn't want to be with anybody where they would bring that type of attention to us." In Tina's experience sexual liberation and anti-slut shaming was not a thing. Although in the Freaknik space, women seemed

to be enjoying sexually suggestive touching and other activities, it was still a silent narrative that did not exist outside of that space. “It was shocking like ‘Ooh girl, okay!’ You kind of clutched your pearls.” Regarding this, Tina said, “That was even a stretch from the generation prior.

Women didn’t even show their ankles let alone actually be out there with little booty shorts on.

Most people prior to us were either virgins until they married or if they happened to have sex and get pregnant, they married that person. People felt that obligation. Moving forward, things had gotten more liberal. It was a different time then.” Tina credits this change in attitudes towards sex and sexuality to music. Tina stated,

“I think music had a big influence on it. Again, social media didn't exist. So, it wasn't like, we were seeing people, you know, just kind of liberating themselves or being a little bit more ‘loose’ then, but the music...NWA, Snoop Dogg, and then of course Luke and 2 Live Crew from Miami; that was breaking at that time. So yeah, it was, you know, ‘bend over! Show me this! Dropping it like that! Shake this!’ That was literally the lyrics of the music and then of course the B word, you know, started being used freely and the H word as far as calling women those things. So, I think that was it. Some women felt that any attention is good attention. Like if he yelling it in the song, drop it, and shake it or whatever, and you dropping it and shaking it and then you gonna attract a certain type of attention. Or better yet the music made you feel free-er to do it. ‘Oh, I like this beat. I like this song’ and that's what it really was. It was a lot of beats that was attractive about a song, but you know, if they saying, shouting, yelling, and demanding you do this like ‘okay, that's what the song say.’ It’s like the Cha Cha Slide, like when they tell you “to the left. to the right now, y'all," you know, you do it. It’s like a line dance, but you know, back then if you got to shake this and show that and all that stuff, and, you know it’s a good beat, you might be liable to do it. So, I think that the music... it kind of influenced more of that liberation.”

Tina also stated that music videos were a huge influence on the visual representation of male and female dynamics.

“In the videos, you see people men crowded around, women, scantily clad and dancing and doing all types of stuff. This became typical with the men looking rich in a mansion with everybody out at the pool. Some women felt like, ‘oh, if I do this, I can attract the rich man, who can take care of me. That security is all I need as a woman.’ Women want security, safety, financial stability, and everything. Men of course want some sex and to be powerful. So, that whole dynamic is right there in front of them with the men feeling powerful and the

women are like, ‘okay, is this what he wants? This is what I got to do to get the safety and security and stability financially, then, hey, I’ll go for it. I’ll trade or I’ll participate.’ In the videos, they didn’t show any type of assault or anything, but you know, you’ll see a man who bringing out dollars, pouring out the fine champagne, in the rich looking clothes, in the nice car, and she’s shaking it up. She’s doing all this type of stuff. So, I think those visuals kind of intertwined somehow. If a man has means, then just do, you know, just give him what he wants. He might slap on the butt, but the videos didn’t show any type of man attacking a woman and nothing like that. It looked like she’s doing it willingly in the video to get the means that he had.”

According to Tina, this transaction or exchange between men and women is not new but generational; it just changed and was shown on a larger scale such as in music and media. “For instance, my grandparents or parents their transaction was the man says ‘I’m about to go out to this factory to work. I want a family so I’m going to pick you because you look good like you can have some kids and you can cook. So, I’m gonna date and marry. You will be at home and take care of it and have my babies. You’ll make sure I have a warm meal when I get home from this factory at night.’ Ladies are like ‘I want kids. I want to be taken care of. Marry me, provide for me, and we will have a family.’ That’s the transaction but it changes over time where in my generation, it started getting a little shaky.” In Tina’s generation, what men and women are looking for remains the same, but marriage is not required for sexual relations, for pregnancy, or cohabitation. Women are no longer tied to home life and technological advances in the food and kitchenware industry make home life less dependent on gender roles. By the 1990s and 2000s, the music and its videos highlight a lifestyle where women are trophies with powerful, wealthy men. This dynamic and its changes reflected how men and women treated each other at Freaknik as they participated in this culture with clothes, cars, money spending, and wooing.

Tina and her friends enjoying the freedom of just being out in the middle of the street, walking around, and seeing so many Black people was the best and most visible part about

Freaknik. Reactions Tina received from family and friends were to be safe, careful, and hold each other [her friends] accountable. She said, “I never go out by myself but who would want to at Freaknik?” It was known to all that Freaknik had a “free for all” atmosphere where mostly underage college students engaged in drinking liquor and taking drugs in the name of “Spring Break” spirit. Safety, especially for women, was a concern loved ones expressed.

Tina felt the image of Black women and men were tarnished because, “you’re looking at college-aged students out and about in the middle of the street having a free for all. If you just sat out and looked at it, from the outside looking in, it just looks like it was just a crazy madhouse.... Black kids hanging out, blocking traffic, loud music and dancing provocatively.” Although Tina did not witness any violence, assault, or vandalism, she was aware of how it looked to outsiders who criticized the nature of Freaknik for its termination in the city. Tina said, “That traffic was a fool. Those locals and people who lived here who did not want to participate, their whole plan of whatever for the weekend was made urgent because they were going to be locked in for the rest of the weekend. I think traffic, littering, and loitering was the biggest issue. The city had to kind of step in because I mean, literally locked down the highway exits on the highway for miles just so people couldn’t get up on and just block up the streets. Once that started happening, people were like they weren’t coming back.” The spirit of freedom at Freaknik was ruined once the city enforced regulation and direction of traffic in 1995. There were more planned events in ’95, but Tina said, “some people just didn’t want to do those things. They wanted to hang out on the street as they have been for the past few years. Although you may plan for people to attend events, I know I did and it was packed, don’t mean people planned to attend. However, everywhere was packed even the planned events.” It is understandable how Freaknik could be interpreted as a nuisance to Atlanta’s residents, Tina expressed, but the images of young Black

people being driven out of Atlanta for what looked like chaos on the TV did not look good or represent the potential of the bright students.

Although Freaknik did not last, Tina believed it served as a space for Blackness to be free and express itself authentically. Tina stated, “people tapped into it because ‘Oh! These people my age! Oh! They down there in Atlanta doing that! This weekend in the spring and its nice down there and the weather’s good! I’m finna go!’” Tina said that Atlanta was the perfect place for Freaknik to exist because of all the AUC schools and the Black history and culture present in Atlanta that existed. For Tina, Freaknik was a cultural experience, a time shot from an era. She said, “just seeing it, just knowing...it was the perfect storm for the safest place for young college students to get together, have fun, be free, and let it all hang out literally and figuratively.”

4.5 Carla Sims

Experienced Freaknic '93 to Freaknik '95

I always looked forward every year to getting on the train and riding to Atlanta for Freaknic. I'm glad my parents never knew where I was going.

Carla was a junior in high school from a small rural town in northern Georgia when she first attended with her older cousins, who lived in Atlanta. Her cousins told her about the festival, and she saw television footage of the years prior that encouraged her to want to go. She said, “I knew it would be a lot of people. I was excited about socializing, meeting new people. I wanted to be a part of the atmosphere that I had seen before I started coming. I wanted that experience.” Carla went to Freaknic without her parents knowing because she knew it would be unacceptable based on her upbringing. Carla stated, “I was raised in what they consider the old school mentality, where men and women have certain roles.” Women being sexually open was not a trait taught as acceptable in her household or community so her “Freaknic” outfit which

might have included seductive clothing like a halter top, mini skirt, crop top, biker shorts, Daisy dukes, or short shorts was hidden until it was time to catch the train to Atlanta.

Carla described Freaknic as a very social outside gathering.

“A lot of showing off, riding in cars, just cruising the town. The overall atmosphere was very social, fun flirty interactions between individuals, whether you knew them or not. I remember just mounds and mounds of people from all over. Everyone was happy and friendly. Men gawking at women and women enjoying it. I remember riding down the streets and seeing it packed with people walking, people in cars, people hanging out of cars, and people sitting on top of cars. Everybody was having a free party with dancing and eating. I never felt unsafe. I don’t remember any fear. In the back of my mind, I felt like some of the things that was going on was inappropriate and could possibly become dangerous, but fear did not play apart in my decision to go. It wasn’t something I pondered over too long. I didn’t think about the possibilities of raped, robbed, or kidnapped. I felt that it just wasn’t a part of the atmosphere even though it was and could have been. I saw several encounters where there was unwanted touching but not anything that made me feel in danger at the moment. I just kind of saw it and kept it moving.”

Carla was aware of sexual violence and assault, but consent was a foggy subject and women had to handle such things delicately. She said, “I don’t ever recall having any conversation where the meaning of consent was conveyed as deeply as it should have been. I certainly experienced situations where it could have went wrong very fast because I did not offer consent but, in those situations,, the mentality of the person is what matters. I actually thought once you start the act, that’s giving consent and you don’t necessarily have the right to change your mind. Things like accidental pregnancy and birth control was discussed in my experience. The meaning of consent was not really pushed strongly back then.”

Carla shared that promiscuity, or enjoying having several sexual partners, thrived at Freaknic.

“There were people having sex in the car and in the bathroom. Now I’m not saying that you would see a couple just openly having sex, but you definitely saw kissing, rubbing, and all of that. I think there were some women out there who

were extra flirtatious to men because they wanted to be promiscuous. I just felt that there was a population of women who were waiting on the advancement of a man knowing that they would say “yes.” External factors like drinking and smoking played a big part in all this.”

Carla insisted that not everyone was down to go all the way. She said, “You could tell in the crowd who were the type of women that would go to the next level and who were categorized as the “flirt” You know, we gonna talk. Do our thing and that’s it. You could tell by the dress and body gestures. People were not hiding their interactions with each other. I would say the music and attire supported the sexual activities amongst teenagers during that time.” In other words, people were profiling each other, or men were profiling women to predict the success of their advances. Fortunately, Carla and her friends were able to navigate Freaknic without too much trouble. “We were considered the flirt. We weren't promiscuous. So, we were only going to flirt to a certain extent and then be about our business. We did not present ourselves as so friendly that the touching and close interaction could lead to something else. We were always able to restrain from things getting that far not unless there was an individual that you seemed attracted to and you had made up in your mind how far you wanted that interaction to go.”

As a woman, a few things to keep in mind were as a man’s reaction to rejection. Carla said, “There were times when, you know, a gentleman may approach you that you weren't interested in and they may become more aggressive in his approach, you know, like continuing to follow you around or after you walk off grab your arm or, you know, touch you inappropriately as you walking by, you know. You may turn around and check them, but I never really traveled with a group of people who were violent or ready to pop off at any time. We would just kind of, you know, quietly address that person and keep it moving.” As a woman, creating a scene had consequences. Sexual advances were welcomed, but it had to be denied in a

particular way for the least amount of social scrutiny. As Carla shared, “they’re [women at Freaknic] still trying to be socially accepted so even if you had the thought of changing your mind, you didn’t want to probably experience the backlash from that. Just socially word getting out...not so much aggression from the man but just the words alone.” For Black women, Carla and many other women felt giving consent included teasing or enjoying sexual advances even if it didn’t mean you wanted to have sex. If a scene did occur, bystanders stated “oh well,” as Carla recalled, and overlooked the woman unless the situation turned into a domestic abuse situation.

Once Carla returned home with her Freaknic t-shirts, her friends expressed jealousy. They wanted to attend just like Carla did and see what she saw. Her parents never connected that she went to Freaknic in Atlanta since she was visiting her cousins but their opinions about it were very clear. Carla said, “The older generation, including my parents, felt it was uncalled for and disrespectful. They had all these negative tones towards it and encouraged its dismissal. They did not understand the idea of so many people wanting to come and gather. They looked at it as a takeover. I looked at it as a moment of freedom where you could express yourself in a wildly fashion. Wildly fashion as in stepping out of your comfort zone, being whoever, you wanted to be with no judgement, and even pretending being whoever you wanted to be for that weekend.” For Carla’s age group at the time, Freaknic served as a space to be free spirited that others on the outside like the elders could not understand. “The boundary lines could possibly be crossed, and it would be okay. A lot of your customs, values, and traditions were set aside so you could just have a free moment.”

Carla felt comfortable to be in this Freaknic space, although she was raised in the church. “I have the values and principles taught in the church and other various social organizations that preached abstinence. However, when I got to Freaknic, a lot of those things were not at the

forefront of my mind. I was going with the flow. I did whatever I wanted to do or felt curious enough to do. It was an outlet. Even more so, it was an outlet amongst people I could identify with. You were not judged. You could have come and been completely out of character and never been judged because the people you saw, you'd probably never see them again." Carla felt this outlet was normal for any group of people. She expressed, "I don't remember any racial justice or political situation that made my generation want to 'wild out' but I do think it was just a period of time where Black people came together to do the same thing that other groups like Hippies, have done in the past. I lived in an area that did not have much going on. I lived a very structured life so Freaknic presented a moment to be completely out of the norm." This is interesting to note, since in the 1980s and 1990s, Black Americans were making a lot of positive strides such as Colin Powell being named Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1989, the launching of Black Entertainment Television Network by Robert L. Johnson in 1980, and the flight of Mae Jemison in 1992, but also enduring police brutality like the 1992 Rodney King case.³¹³ Carla's recollection of these events is mostly likely a reflection of her age at the time as well as her location in a small rural town.

Carla continued to attend Freaknic when she moved to Atlanta and became a student at one of the colleges in the AUC. Carla stopped attending because the atmosphere began to change after 1994. "Everything just started to kind of shift," expressed Carla. The police started enforcing more aggressive restrictions. She said, "In the beginning, I was a little surprised that they were letting certain things take place that was probably unlawful such as crowding

³¹³ Femi, Lewis. "Black History Moments: 1980 to 1989." ThoughtCo. Dotdash, December 16, 2020. <https://www.thoughtco.com/african-american-history-timeline-1980-1989-45446>; Femi Lewis. "39 Events That Occurred in the 1990s." ThoughtCo. Dotdash, December 16, 2020. <https://www.thoughtco.com/african-american-history-timeline-1990-1999-45447>; History.com Editors. "Black History Milestones: Timeline." History.com. A&E Television Networks, October 14, 2009. <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-history-milestones>.

neighborhood and streets but when they started to change their tone, police brutality started. I didn't appreciate that." Carla was not the only one who felt the tactics of the police were unwarranted. The "free spirit" was trying to stay alive in the Freaknik space, but the Atlanta police's harsh restrictions during the Freaknik weekend made things challenging for partying people. Carla stated, "It became a battle for control in terms of blocking the streets off and restricting certain areas. I remember people would have their music playing loud and the police would pull them over to give them a ticket. It almost seemed like the police was trying to provide some kind of restriction, but it was conveyed as them picking on us."

In connection to this, Carla noticed the attitudes of the people attending changed and that there were people in their 30s or early 40s looking to have fun experiences with younger people. She said, "The culture of the people changed and therefore behaviors changed. There was a lot more crime and it just became a nuisance. I can even say that older people, folks who weren't in their 20s and early 30s were attending and seeking promiscuous experiences with younger people. The gawking turned into some physical touching and if that was unwanted that would create a scene. You had to be careful which groups to approach because you didn't know their intentions." Like others who experienced Freaknik before Atlanta's tolerance changed, Carla felt Freaknik 1995 dwindled the fun spirit. "It just didn't have the same flare after 94 and I stopped attending because I had the 'been there, done that' attitude. People also were acting out more aggressively in 95 than previously, so that was kind of the reason I really stopped attending. I was ready at some point for the city to shut it down in a way because it had just changed. Besides, the traffic became a hindrance, and I had a different agenda at the time."

Overall, Carla does not regret the experiences Freaknik gave her. She recalled experiences that were fearless, friendly, and fun. "Let me say I chose to attend Freaknik instead

of going to my high school prom. That is the only drawback about my experience. I do wish I had chosen to go but I will still will never forget the experiences I had at Freaknic. I will never forget riding the train with individuals that were traveling from New York and Washington D.C. I won't forget everyone putting on their Freaknic shirts and looking so excited and then Sunday seeing the same people who I still didn't know but sharing all of what we had seen and done that weekend. My most memorable moment was that I hooked up with the person who ended up being my first true love. He was much older and much, much more mature and experienced so for me to be such a young person entering into that environment, and we actually hook up, commit, and it actually grew into something. I think I'll never forget that experience. Had Freaknic never happened I would have never been in a place that he and I ever would have ever connected. I will always cherish my memories of Freaknic."

4.6 Meme Davidson

Experienced Freaknik '95, '96, & '97

It reminds me of what they say in Jamaica, "one love." That's really what it stands for. When I think of Freaknik I think of the community, the culture, and my childhood.

Meme and her family were residents of Capitol Homes, a public housing apartment complex off Memorial Drive, across the street from the old Turner Field Stadium in downtown Atlanta. Meme remembers Freaknik as a childhood memory. The first Freaknik she can remember was when she was six years old. To Meme and her community, "it was just the norm. I was literally able to see it from the porch of our apartment. It was just like a block party. The way my apartment complex was set up, we all just kind of hung out. We're not going to sleep right now because we can't go to sleep."

Meme described what she saw as a family party. “The streets were packed. The cars are going and its loud music playing. There are women on top of cars half naked and it was just a lot going on. I just recall observing all these things like literally sitting on the curb of the side street and watching. I wasn’t in any danger because the streets were shut down. Not by the police but just by the number of people on the streets, whether they were walking or on a car hanging out the sunroof. I mean, you name it, they were doing it. I can’t really tell you what was going through my mind. It was me enjoying the music. Me playing bingo with my friends from the neighborhood, looking at all the flashy cars.” Everything from the cars, fashion, hairstyles, language, music, and food made Freaknik distinguishable as a Black cultural expression. Meme particularly remembered the cars such as Cadillacs, convertibles, Camaros, and Monte Carlos with 26-inch rims. Freaknik celebrated outside the doors of Capitol Homes and Black residents set up outside to enjoy the view, greet the visitors, and dance until it was over.

From a child’s perspective, especially one that grew up around Atlanta’s attractions such as the Turner Field Stadium, the sexual part of Freaknik was overlooked in a way. “All the nakedness, all the perversion, whatever you want to call it, I didn’t even know what it means. Like it didn’t even cross your mind. It’s the flashy things that are taking all your attention.” Meme insisted that although inappropriate things were occurring, it felt more like a family gathering.

“People from my neighborhood, all of us being there together, all of us dancing to the music. I can’t say like we were having like a cookout or like a barbecue or something, but I think, all of us just being there together just sharing that time, sharing laughs, sharing moments, making memories. Everybody just standing there dancing, taking pictures, obviously. What I think what makes it a family is literally just the people from my neighborhood. Then I think you can even include, you know, southern hospitality. Like I said, we were waving to the men and women or teenagers as they were driving by and its people coming from all over. It wasn’t just people from Atlanta. I think these people were actually coming from like Miami and I guess surrounding states just to come down here and be a

part of that. So, people just being friendly, waving at you, or smiling, you know, yelling stuff like, ‘oh, what's up?’ That was the norm. I think just it being a cultural thing. I can't recall seeing any white people at Freaknik, you know what I mean? So, it being like a cultural thing and just been able to have that community and southern hospitality; that's what makes it a family. I don't think no one needs to share the same blood just to be family so to speak.”

Because Meme was so young witnessing Freaknik, the sexual behaviors prevalent that she did see weren't completely understood. She saw women naked with the bare minimum of clothes on. Some things like short “booty” shorts or bikinis were popular to wear in an outfit. Meme said there was also a trend of baggy clothing too with all types of hats. She saw women suggestively dancing while holding onto the car door when the traffic was at a standstill. Women were dancing on the hood on the car. Women were flashing their boobs. Men were recording all of the action with handheld video recorders. Meme saw men zoom in or focus on women's private areas such as their chest or backside while women danced. As an adult, Meme described the men as drug users, drivers of the cars, camerapeople, or drunk. She said women seemed to be the sexual exploits. Meme expressed that this sexual aspect of Freaknik was not discussed in her family even though all of her family would sit and watch people at Freaknik roll by their neighborhood. In defense of her parents, Meme said,

“I stayed in like the heart of Atlanta. I could see Turner Field from my backyard. I remember seeing the fireworks and torch being lit from the Olympics. It was a norm to walk outside and see a half-naked chick during the summer. It was a norm to see music videos being filmed in Atlanta with naked chicks that I knew. It was the norm to see these things. So, I don't think my parents took it upon themselves to explain what I was seeing. I wasn't seeing actual sex but maybe I was seeing things that a child should not see but again it was the norm. The music they were listening to was not unfamiliar to me. This was the same music that my parents were playing in the car. I don't know the context of the lyrics but I'm just listening and singing along. Seeing adults making out during Freaknik wasn't uncommon to me so I don't think they felt the need to have those conversations with me because I was a child who stayed in that type of environment where these things occurred on a daily basis. There was no reason to go into detail about anything that I was witnessing because it [Freaknik] was family oriented. It was a fun time. It was a party or hangout. This was something we looked forward to as I

could tell when the adults were preparing for it. I just knew I was about to stay outside longer, see nice cars, see all types of different people of all ages, and enjoy the time until it literally died down.”

Meme felt her witnessing Freaknik so young did not profoundly impact her as her family soon moved out of that community. Freaknik also stopped before she became a teenager. However, her childhood friends who were there playing bingo with her in some ways were impacted by that environment. For example, they started having sex earlier. They liked to dress how they saw individuals at Freaknik dress.

Aside from the family vibes, Meme remembered a police presence at Freaknik. Meme said, “I remember officers being everywhere with parked cars and lights on. If I’m being honest, they were allowing it obviously because the people outweighed the amount of officers that even worked for the city of Atlanta or Georgia State Patrol. So, they were basically there to manage traffic flow.” Meme expressed that she felt the police, Black and white officers, enjoyed Freaknik even though you did not see them partaking in any activities. She said, “They would talk about the cars, come hang out with us on the streets and play bingo with us. There were some on bicycles too. They were there as managers not to necessarily to put a halt to it. They dealt with traffic, fights, or extreme drunkenness.” Meme said the police were always on standby, but they weren’t on edge. They were calm and friendly to everyone unless they needed to act. By this time, officers were aware of Freaknik rather than its unexpected nature in the earlier years so policemen were able to manage the event as best as they could while enjoying people watching at Freaknik. According to Meme, the neighborhood’s reaction to the increased police presence at Freaknik was unphased. People acted as if the police were non-existent regardless of whether they were drinking alcohol or smoking some drugs.

Meme remembers Freaknik as a childhood memory, but she also gives Freaknik its credit for the exposure and popularity brought to the city. “Freaknik provided a safe space for Black people to come together and have fun without any consequences. I don’t think Atlanta would be what it is had Freaknik not happened because people got to see the real Atlanta. There would be no *Love and Hip Hop of Atlanta* or *Real Housewives of Atlanta* without Freaknik. People just flocked here after that. They came for entrepreneurship to start rap careers, and ultimately create success.” Meme believed that Freaknik made it popular to visit Atlanta. As the word spread about the crazy party at Freaknik across the country, Atlanta became more attractive and the tourism industry exploded. Things like the CNN Center, the Georgia Dome, Centennial Park, and Underground Atlanta sprouted and attracted more people to the city. As Meme said, “when you experienced the heart of Atlanta, the word got out, and people, Black or otherwise, were just coming here. It set the foundation for what Atlanta is now.”

4.7 Mary Anderson

Experienced Freaknik ‘97

Having more self-respect for yourself would definitely be something that I would say everyone out there needed to realize at that time.

Mary, a 17-years old high school student from a small rural town in northern Georgia, attended Freaknik with her older cousin, who lived in Atlanta. Mary decided to go since her older cousin always bragged about her previous experiences at Freaknik. Mary told her mother that she would visit her cousin for the weekend but did not tell her mom about how she planned to go to Freaknik. In other words, she went in secret. She said, “I knew nothing about Freaknik other than it was time to party which maybe gaining the knowledge of what Freaknik was really about could have helped because sometimes people’s interpretation of something is not always correct. So, I knew by me attending, I was going to get wild and have fun.” On the day of the

event, the group, which included her cousin's boyfriend, separated by gender and took off into the city in two different directions. They split up because it wasn't the thing to do to go out to Freaknik with your partner. You went with your friends. She said, "My cousin and her boyfriend just gave each other permission to just do whatever."

Mary described Freaknik as,

"There was a lot of drinking. That was the first time I've ever gotten drunk before; my first experience with alcohol to that level. It was wild. It was a lot of loud music. We did a lot of drinking and driving. We got dressed and dolled up and everything and we hit the streets, you know. The guys and the girls split up and we hit the streets. We had our loud music playing in the car and, you know, we were looking for a live scene. We pulled up to a voluntary road traffic jam and everyone hopped out their cars and danced outside their cars or on the hoods. Some people danced in their cars. I saw people having sex in cars. I saw women giving themselves pleasure in the cars for the guys to look at. You know, there was no police. There were no police at all. Anything with the guys were wild like aggressively wild."

At the time, popular songs about love and sex encouraged sexual behavior at Freaknik. Mary said, "Music like R-Kelly, the early R-Kelly, Mary J Blige, and stuff like that was coming out and it was a lot of love music. It really wasn't, I would say, commitment music. More like having one night stands type of music or very sexual type songs. I think the music had progressed from the past and became more vulgar. I think between the 80s and 90s, it was more graphic. It would speak more on women being okay with being a side chick or being used for sex." This kind of music, Mary said, impacted the attitudes of women where she saw women wearing nothing or thongs under their short shorts or mini shirts, dancing sexually on top of cars, and allowed lots of touching which she described as degrading actions. She stated, "I think they did a lot of things for males' attention. The streets were packed. It would be times where you couldn't move your car. It was an intentional traffic jam and women were willing to do things. I don't even think they realized how they were being degraded. I think it was just more of 'I'm out

having fun. I'm getting the attention of guys.' The more attention they got from men, the harder they went. It could also be like a peer pressure thing, you know. Monkeys see, monkeys do."

Mary said that men were aggressively wild. She shared a horrifying experience in which she said,

"I remember this one incident where my cousin told me to wear this little, little skirt. This was back when the tennis skirts came out. They made it into a one-piece dress like a T shirt tight dress so that's what I wore out with my tennis shoes. We parked, hopped out the car and, we out there dancing everything. We weren't on the hood and I can't even say we were dancing provocatively. We were just having fun and I was drinking. It was my first-time experiencing alcohol on that level, so I was, you know, getting intoxicated. I became very tipsy and I remember these three guys. They came up and were dancing with us and stuff. Then they started grabbing and going up my dress. You know, I'm trying to pull their hands off and out of my dress but like "no" wasn't an answer. My cousin literally had to get into the back seat of the car and pull me in because like, they were probably gonna rape me. We had to lock the doors and everything because I mean, they were really coming forward and that's the only way to get away from them. Luckily, my cousin was older, and she took care of me. I was totally intoxicated when we got back home to where I didn't even know what was going on."

Mary believed that the men who assaulted her were intoxicated from alcohol or had been smoking marijuana; however, she concluded that the men thought her group may have been down for something since there was a girl two cars ahead masturbating herself in a convertible with men hanging in her car. Mary said, "they probably thought that's what I wanted just by seeing other girls doing things. Some of the other girls were cool with it. They were cool with the guys pulling up their skirts, being bent over on the cars, and having their butts spanked. I quickly found that that wasn't my scene." She did not return to Freaknik after that year because, as she stated, "that whole experience just kind of turned me away from wanting to be in that type of aggressive environment. I quickly learned that I don't like to be in situations that I can't control,

and I realized it could have went bad really fast. I just felt like it was unsafe, so I never had another interest to go again.”

Afterwards, Mary heard several stories of women getting raped because of intoxication and the overall wild atmosphere that radiated from Freaknik. “It wasn’t uncommon at Freaknik because the girls would get so intoxicated that guys just did whatever they wanted to do to them. The girls were wild and if they wanted a guy’s attention, then they were going to do things that may have been degrading. A lot of chicks fell into that category.” Mary said when navigating Freaknik you had to be strategic and cautious. “The thing was you had to be careful of who you went with, you know? There were fights that broke out and there were no police or anything around. It was even hard for them [the police] to even get to you because of the backed-up traffic. So, whatever that was going down would go down and you just hoped that you weren’t in the wrong place at the wrong time.” Before Mary could ponder ever going back, she heard that Freaknik was no more. “The next thing I knew Freaknik just ended. I’m not sure if it ended because of the sexual violence or the shooting violence that went on but the only thing I heard from an Atlanta resident that it was too violent and that it doesn’t happen anymore. People said we didn’t know how to act in that type of situation and it just became too violent.”

Mary felt conflicted about her entire Freaknik experience and found that the event influenced her self-respect, relations with men, and how crucial a man’s attention was to her self-worth. “I realized that a lot of the things I was being taught at home were true; stuff like being safe, hanging with an older crowd when you are young, and growing up too fast. I realized I wasn’t ready for all that. Before Freaknik I didn’t believe them because I wasn’t experiencing them. After what happened to me at Freaknik, it hit home and I’m grateful for that because I could have been out here wild, having no respect for myself. It was an indescribable feeling I had

when those guys did what they did.” She said, “You could see it on TV all day long, but you don’t really know what it feels like until you’ve been violated in some type of way.” Mary shared that discussions about sex, sexual violence, and consent were not talked about until she already experienced it because of her Christian background. Her upbringing revolved around the structured life of the church. Prior to experiencing Freaknik, sex was something she didn’t even really enjoy. She said, “It was really just something to do because that’s what the people around me was doing and that’s what the boys wanted.” Mary learned from her experience at Freaknik that a guy’s attention can be attracted in other ways. She said, “I don’t have to get out there and shake my butt, be the side chick, or do all those vulgar dances to be worthy of someone to like me or to even love me. The reality is knowing yourself and demanding how you want to be treated is important to knowing your worth.”

These women had a wide range of experiences that speak to the complexity and enormity of Freaknik itself. Not one had just one particular experience and each year had been different depending on the popular hotspots, fluctuating events, and involvement of the city. Their stories also show the many ways women were treated and how they prepared themselves to be in such an outrageous space. For example, Carla and Mary went to Freaknik in secret because they were high school students whereas Tina, a college student, was careful to go out in the streets. Tanya and Carla stressed how having an outfit and being cute was very important. Lisa expressed her excitement about being around so many Black people while Lady T felt concerned for the young ladies in the crowd who had young men surrounding them. Their own understandings of sex, self-autonomy, consent, and sexual violence influenced how they navigated Freaknik whether that was choosing not to go into inside parties like Lady T or being particular about whom to hang out with like Tina. Carla expressed how women had to be aware of men’s reaction to

rejection, while Tanya said she didn't see many confrontations between anyone while she was people-watching with her friends. These stories are just the start to describe how Black women during Freaknik showed up in the space and how their prior understandings impacted their experience.

5 GENDER AND RESPECTABILITY HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Oppressive systems have historically dehumanized and ungendered Black women. Black feminist scholars have researched and written about the lives of U.S Black women who were initially brought to the United States to be property and reproduce new property for capitalistic gain. Their work reveals that heteronormative forces exercise their powers to implement and maintain a social hierarchy where Black women remain subordinate. Powerful mechanisms such as controlling images justify white elite male's construction of the social order to be normal, natural, and inevitable. Such categorization, rooted in the history of enslavement, has since impacted the social structures, cultural spaces, and political concerns of U.S Black women, creating dichotomies that vary as the power structure's political interest fluctuates. Patricia Hill Collins states, "From the mammies, jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemima's on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, negative stereotypes applied to African-American women have been fundamental to Black women's oppression."³¹⁴

In the late 1980s and 1990s, Freaknik provided a space where Black women could escape such an experience. Women at Freaknik simply felt safe and free to express their sexuality with

³¹⁴ Hill Collins, P. *Black Feminist Thought*, 5.

members of their community. In addition, Art Historian Krista Thompson concluded that “as the police attempted to tame sexuality by controlling space, women attending the event used the sexualized body in response in large degree to these controls and in their own claim to their right to occupy and have a visible presence in the city. This insistence on being seen was magnified through the use of the camera in the women’s performances... In Freaknik, ‘the reality’ of the sexualized black female body became both the purported reason for eradicating the event and the primary tool in Freaknik’s continuation, popularity, and the defiance of authoritarian controls.”³¹⁵ Exploring why and how this space existed for Black women represents the cultural work of non-conformity, or daily tactics of agency and autonomy in which pleasure and free expression is a political act of reclamation in the context of social annihilation to normalizing and oppressive social structures. Freaknik became a way to disidentify with dominant narratives that police Black bodies.³¹⁶

For most Black women in the United States, the image of the Black community and Black womanhood superseded any personal need they had because the dominant images dehumanized their bodies as hypersexual and simultaneously un-woman. To understand how a space in Atlanta created in the late Twentieth Century attracted hundreds of thousands of young Black people, particularly Black women, to boundlessly express their sexuality, their stories must be analyzed through an intersectional lens that considers their entire identity, particularly gender, race, and class. Continuing in the Black Feminist Thought tradition, intersectionality will be used as a solid framework to direct this chapter’s discussion on the interviews recorded for this project to analyze the entanglement of Black femininity, masculinity, and respectability politics in the Freaknik space.

³¹⁵ Thompson, “Performing Visibility,” 43.

³¹⁶ Miller-young, Mireille, “Hip-Hop Honeys,” 285.

Flirtatious behaviors, suggestive conversations, and sensual body movements all contributed to the “freaky” atmosphere of Freaknik. Discussions amongst witnesses of Freaknik say they saw partygoers kissing, stripping, touching, masturbating, and even having sex. These behaviors in the open were new and shocking to many, even people who attended Freaknik because sex was a complicated subject to discuss publicly, especially in the Black community. Stereotypes deriving from America’s historic exploitation of Black bodies categorize them as deviant sexual beings, therefore, making sexual topics taboo to discuss in an openly sincere manner. Black people have routinely suppressed their sexuality, a natural human feeling, in numerous ways to conform to society's expectations in order to demand respect as citizens. Unfortunately, such suppression only adds to their oppression and reinforces inevitable consequences. For example, healthy conversations about sex don’t occur as often as they should, leaving sexuality a considerable mystery, misinformation framed as truths, and experiences that could impact people’s feelings about themselves as sexual beings because sexual identity lies at the core of any individual’s sense of self.³¹⁷ In the twelve interviews of Black men and women, sex conversations were not as frequent and if they did occur certain information was stressed more than others depending on their gender.

One of the women interviewed, Lady T, said, “Our parents had conversations with us about sex to make sure we know how to not get pregnant, but it was not about us being free because a lot of times I see young women now who are really sexually free and in touch with that and I'm like, wow! We didn't do that. We didn't have that kind of freedom. All that stuff was still taboo. You know nice girls wasn't out here screwing everybody and even guys expected that. So yeah, you didn't get to walk around and express yourself like people do today and tell you

³¹⁷ Stephens and Philips, “Freaks, Gold Diggers, Divas, And Dykes,” 4.

what their pronouns are. Back in the day, people would have been like, ‘what the fuck you mean your pronouns? What are you talking about?’ You know what I'm saying? Ain't nobody gonna be doing all that.” Lady T stressed preventing pregnancy was the motivation behind sex conversations with Black girls because virginity before marriage categorized them as “good girls.” Therefore, any sexual behaviors prior to marriage made them or others they saw engaging in sex as “bad girls.” In addition, Black parents emphasizing the importance of not getting pregnant not only included the fact that they don't want their child to have such a responsibility prematurely that could bring much financial burden and life impeding consequences, but that their Black daughter becoming pregnant would classify her as an abnormal sexual being following into the dominant script society expects her to be.

Inevitably, conflict emerges for Black girls and women as they must learn to suppress their sexual desires while navigating pressure from their male counterparts. To settle such conflict, a culture of dissemblance or secrecy emerged. Black women and girls could express their sexuality in one space and be socially acceptable in the other. Lisa Jackson expressed, “Black women were very conservative, and you wouldn't talk about it [sex] in reference to yourself. So, you know, what did Black girls do? What did white women do? Well Black women don't have oral sex. So, if Black women don't have oral sex, these Black men are going with these white women, because they do. You know, it was that kind of discussion of what people did and what people didn't do. But then it's like, well, I actually like doing that, you know, to my man but I'm not gonna tell anybody though because then I'll be a freak, but I know I'm doing it. We were repressed, sexually repressed, I do believe. You couldn't put your hand up and say I like sex. You best not so you had to sneak around.” Here, Lisa describes a struggle Black woman had about their sex life in that their personal likes and desires may not have been discussed with

anyone, leaving harmful assumptions to be made about what certain groups will or will not do sexually, ultimately stratifying their sexual attraction and abilities.

For example, Lisa states that although a Black woman may enjoy having oral sex with her partner, she will not openly say so because it is not respectable that a Black woman does it, even if Black men are choosing white women because of it. This allows several misnomers in the Black community to emerge such as oral sex is an abnormal behavior for Black women, Black men find white women more attractive than Black women because white women give oral sex, and white women always engage in oral sex. These false generalizations do not consider individuality and impact how people think about themselves and others. In this regard, Black women may shy away from oral sex because they feel it goes against respectable Black womanhood and grow insecurity about Black men dating white women. Simultaneously, a Black woman who does oral sex will feel alienated and too ashamed of her desires to express them. Lisa stated, “I had a high school group of friends, all white women, and they were able to talk about sexuality in ways that Black women couldn't, didn't. So, it's almost sad that so many Black women discovered their sexuality so late, you know? It was like he was doing something to you, but you weren't participating. I remember these men talking about the “Frigid Five” and how Black women were unable to enjoy their sexuality as much. So, I think hypersexual jezebel, and all these notions of Black women and sexuality. It got to us.”

When asked what a “Freak” was, the women interviewed unanimously answered a woman who was sex positive or promiscuous. Lisa, who attended Freaknik in the late 80s, gave an extensive answer in which she said,

“Before Freaknik, there was a dance called the freak and there were a number of songs like, freak like me, you know, where it was just almost somebody who was sex positive. It was like I don't have to whisper sexuality. You know? I can say it.

I can describe it, talk about it, but in a way own it. So, I think that's what it meant. Outside of Freaknik it became the list of freaks, which is where it became offensive. 'You a freak' was about women who were sex positive but too sex positive, or too sexual, and that was often what it meant instead of owning your sexuality and being free. Women who were freaks on a list, you know, that's a hoe, a slut, somebody who you usually see at night after dark, a booty call, not somebody who you go out with or ask to dance. I think the word changed over time where being a freak became a bad thing. Even that song by Adina Howard, "Freak Like Me". It was kind of like, "Ooh, that's kind of offensive, you know, calling herself a freak, you know. It had negative connotations by that time. When I was in school in the 80s, you know, describing somebody who's a freak, meant 'She has herpes' or 'She's got chlamydia. Whoop!' You know, 'That's what she get cause she's a freak, freak!' Yeah. So, it was bad but then It was like, okay, reclaiming it. Nope, that didn't work...Lady in the streets and a freak in the bed, you know, that kind of thing, so if you're a freak outside and a freak in the bed? Oh boy! The name Freaknik was accepted then because it was almost like I could say the word bitch, but I'm not talking about me."

This understanding of a freak and usage of it against Black women shows that Black women and girls were surveilled about their sexuality. Being called a freak led to horrible assumptions about a woman as they were outcasted as dirty, unvirtuous, unwomanly, and unacceptable because being sex-positive did not follow into the virtues of a respectable Black woman. While simultaneously suppressing natural human desires, this name-calling shows how the Black community shamed those who did not follow the respectability politics made to reinforce their humanity.

As a result of this culture of dissemblance, some Black women, like Tanya and Meme, may not have talked about sex or even how to give consent with their families or friends even though they were all close. Meme expressed that her parents never talked to her about sex even though she was witnessing sexual behavior at Freaknik. She said, "It was a norm to walk outside and see a half-naked chick during the summer. It was a norm for me to see the videos that Ludacris was putting out with the naked chicks that I knew were being filmed in Atlanta." She insisted that her parents just didn't think to explain any of those things to her because she didn't

understand the context and it wasn't what she focused on. Carla and Mary didn't have any sex talk with their parents either since their lives were structured and confined to the church. Black girls and women in the church were taught abstinence. "It was preached, understood, and practiced." expressed Carla. Sex and other sexual behaviors were heavily discouraged and unacceptable in any context besides marriage. Therefore, Black women and girls could not express any sexuality in the church or with anyone associated with the church or they would face shame and scrutiny from their community.

Lisa said Black women were left to learn about sex and consent on their own. Some women did have beginning conversations with a family member, friend, or parent, like Tina and Lady T, but those conversations may not have gone into depth about sex, giving consent, and how to handle unwanted situations; leaving most Black girls and women to learn from experience. Carla said, "I don't ever recall ever having any conversation where the meaning of consent was conveyed as deeply as it probably should have been. I have experienced situations where it could of went wrong very fast because I did not offer consent for the sexual encounter to take place, but I felt like the mentality was that if you would start the act then you are actually giving consent, in that you do not necessarily have the right to change your mind because we were taught about accidents and birth control." Like some of the women interviewed, Carla did not have consent fully understood by the time they were sexually active, allowing far too many women to experience sexual violence and harassment possibly.

Sexual violence is a delicate topic in the Black community due to sexual terrorism. Black women have endured further humiliation when speaking out against it. Lisa recalled the 1992 Mike Tyson rape case in which she said, "People said, 'Well, she should have known better for going,' you know, 'well, she was asking for it. what does she expect? If you go someplace with a

man after dark that's what you're going to get.' I do have a couple of friends from that time who were like, 'Look, he can be right there ready to go but if I say no, he should stop and respect my consent.' They are telling their daughters this but also that you don't say no and moan at the same time. Know what you want and be able to say yes but we shouldn't give mixed messages to the men either, you know, don't be a tease." In other words, Black girls and women learned that starting the sexual act or even being a tease meant they were giving consent to the sexual act of intercourse and changing their minds was not an option because they had already said yes by either going somewhere private with the man or being accepting to his flirtatious acts.

Lady T experienced this and expressed,

"He raped me and if I wanted to press charges, I could have press charges but it sho' would have been a hard case to prosecute. 'So, Miss T, you were drunk. You kept drinking the drinks and you were passed out in the bathroom. Did you go home with him willingly? Did he force you to get in the car? Did he force you to go to bed with him?' These are questions the lawyer was gonna ask me... I knew what rape was. Somebody did teach me that. You know, that when you say stop, he's supposed to stop, but at the same time, don't tease him. Now this is what we were taught. I can really understand it. Because if you don't want to have sex then, why are you going that far? You cannot expect another human being to pull back when they're turned on especially somebody who don't love you, who don't know you, and just think about you as he getting ready to get some pussy. If you're gonna do that, it's dangerous. Now, if this is somebody who is your boyfriend, your fiancé, or your husband, I still think it's unfair that you go that far if you're not gonna go all the way, but he still should stop. But women have a responsibility to that too. I'm sorry. You cannot have his penis in your hand and all on his face and 'Oh, he raped me.' We got to stop crying cuz you done went too far you're into the sex act. If you don't want to be into the sex act, whether it's a penetration or not, then let's not be out of our clothes. Let's not be sucking on nothing. Let's not be licking on nothing and then all of a sudden you want to stop. You're putting yourself in a dangerous position. What I'm saying is if you want him to stop, he should still stop, but have the expectation that he might not stop. Have the responsibility for yourself as a woman to say I'm not gonna take it to this point because I don't want to have sex with this dude tonight."

A Black woman or girl changing their mind about having sex, experiencing some sort of violence, and reporting often leads to them getting blamed for being in the situation in the first

place as Lady T described. Therefore, Black girls and women are taught not to be a flirt or tease and to be sure about whether they want to participate in a sexual act or not. In other words, they are not allowed to freely engage in any sexually suggestive activity, advances, or conversation unless they intend to have sex; meanwhile, males' accountability for the actual violence decreases. Such messages are inappropriate to send because it serves to control who can be sexually expressive, sexually assaulted, and commit sexual violence, further reinforcing Black women's historic oppression in the United States.

Interestingly, consent and sexual violence were highly emphasized with Black boys and men. All of the men interviewed stated that sexual assault, rape, and consent was made very clear to them by someone close to them. James Brown, a native from Detroit, stated, "I was always taught ask, then you'll know and don't have to worry about whether or not. So, if a lady tells you no or either you let her be the one to make, you know, at least the first attempt in a common direction then make sure that it's clear and clarified on that. So far as with rape, my understanding is basically un-honored consent. It doesn't mean, 'if you're flirting with a woman,' which is what my mother explained to me that if she's flirting with you, then that does not give you the right to move any farther, at any point at that time. She has the right to be like, 'okay, I want to stop, or this is not something I want to do.' Once you go beyond that point, then that's considered rape. Touching a woman or her body, grabbing her body, anything of that nature; that's harassment. That's not appropriate." As any mother should, Brandon's mother was adamant about making it clear what was okay and not okay even if the other person is being a tease, something women were told not ever to be. C.J also expressed that although he could talk to his mother about any sexual question he had, he felt more comfortable talking to his father or

friends about those things. He said there was never really a sit-down conversation just that if he asked a question, it was answered.

Not everyone's parents wanted to have the sex talk. Brandon Harrison shared,

“For me, family wise. It wasn't discussed. I can vividly remember being like 13 years old and going to my mother and asking her about this whole “birds and the bees” conversation because I heard my friends talking about it, and their parents were having it with them. So, I asked my mother about it and she was like, ‘well, when you ready that conversation will come up. You're not ready for that yet.’ That was the extent of our exchange on it, which now that I'm an adult and have children of my own, one who has hit 13 and had the same sort of question, I went and got a book. Me and his mother sat down and went through the book with him and explained it and he was so happy. He was so relieved after that conversation. I was very proud of breaking that cycle, in my own family experience, because I get the sense that my parents' parents didn't have the conversation really with them. They didn't have the conversation with me, but I wasn't gonna allow that to be the case for my son.”

Luckily, Brandon was able to get his questions answered but from an unlikely source.

“God, I was very fortunate. When I hit that following year or two. I had a cousin come to America, from the islands where I'm from. At the time when he got there, I was 13/14 and he was like 19/20. So, we were first cousins. From the time I met him, we clicked right away and so we started hanging out and that's all she wrote from there. But I say that to say, he came to me was like, ‘yeah man so listen, what's going on with the girls in school? I know, you got girls at school, that you looking at and they looking at you or whatever, you know, so what's up?’ I was like, ‘Well, yeah, you know, but such and such is the case. You know, this one girl and blah, blah, blah.’ We got to talking and he was the one who took it on himself to teach me. He said, ‘Listen, man, you know, your parents may not go over this with you, but you're gonna be dealing with these girls. I mean, it gets to a point you're going out. I mean, you are young, and sex is gonna come along.’ He was the one who really sat me down and broke it down how that works. For a man versus a woman, what a condom was, why it's important to use one, don't experiment, make sure that you taking care of that. He really had that serious conversation with me and because I was that age and he was older than me, I really took that stuff to heart. That's what brought me through those years through high school though college, as a man, without children.”

Brandon, however, stressed that his cousin made sure that certain concepts, like sexual violence and consent, were understood before moving forward in the sex conversation.

“When my cousin sat me down, and it was a couple conversations, but when he spoke to me, that was what we talked about first, before we got into actual sex or actually interacting with a woman or whatnot. That is what we talked about first; about what assault was, about women hollering rape and what are the circumstances where her saying that is legitimate. You know, what is it? What does the guy do? When a woman hollered that she's right in doing so. I have a strong foundation for that sort of thing before I ever got to Freaknik.”

The stress of sexual assault and consent to Black boys and men shows an importance towards their safety and freedom. Sexual assault is a crime and Black men have historically fallen victim to punishments for many crimes including rape, whether they were guilty or not. Brandon believed this was why his cousin began with those topics in the first place.

“What happens is a parent may or may not have a conversation with a child, especially a male about sex. Even if they [the parent] haven't had the conversation, at some point, through other conversations, through interactions, or how they see them [the child] interacting with friends and different things they hear, they [the parent] know that the boy has now gotten XYZ knowledge or experience. The fact that they [the child] didn't get it from them [the parent] should be a concern, I think what also happens is some parents, the good, responsible, and accountable parents, watch the behavior of the child and typically, if they see, you know, the child flying off the handle like they've got anger issues. I mean, as a parent, you know, you might be in denial to everybody else but yo ass know. So, some of them [the parent] will pick up the conversation to say, ‘Hey, listen, you can't be getting around this way with these girls because’, and now they gonna go into ...’because if XYZ happens, then they'll call the police.’ The goal of that is to keep them out of jail. So, all of this information is shared and now the child has the information. Hopefully, it has some impact. So, he thinks that, you know, accepts it, and now he processes that. Interacts with it however he wants, in whatever way he wants to, and he's off into the world. The problem, though, is, and I think, you know, parents, who come from this school of thought or persuasion, don't recognize it. The problem is that he found out about sex from somebody else. He doesn't really know what he knows and don't know, number one. Number two, you've given him information about, you know, assault and rape, and the police will come and stay out of jail, which can be very effective; however, at no point in any of this discussion, have you sat down with him and say, ‘Hey, listen, you know, there's a way that you treat women. There are some rules of engagement, to dealing with a woman, to speaking to a woman, how you interact with and communicate with a woman that you need to know foundationally if you're going to try to get out here and be dating and whatnot, and that x y, z,” right? Because without that understanding, the dude doesn't

know nothing about how to treat a woman. He just knows he need to stay out of jail.”

There is a historical connection here in how sex is discussed across gender. While both genders may have missed out on the sex talk all together, the ones who did, experienced different ones. While conversations with Black girls underscore not being a tease and not getting pregnant, discussions with Black boys highlight what sexual violence and consent are. The variations of these conversations can be understood through an intersectional analysis and the sexual history Black women and men have in the United States. For starters, it has been discussed that Black women have extensively endured dominant narratives that portray them as highly sexual beings and therefore politics of respectability, formed by members of the Black community, have sought to define Black womanhood away from this image. A young Black unmarried pregnant female represents and confirms what society says a Black woman is, hypersexual, unvirtuous, immoral; therefore, parents will do all they can to teach their daughters the importance of abstinence and demonstrating respectable behavior to demand respect in the community. At the same time, they teach their daughters in many ways to remain asexual or obsolete about sexual matters. They do not want their daughters to be labeled as a tease because Black women have an extended history of being accused of teasing a white man or enslaver when she was actually raped or sexually assaulted. Books like *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance* by historian Danielle McGuire and *Ar'nt I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* by historian Deborah Gray White explore those experiences of U.S Black women.³¹⁸ So, in a way, parents, particularly mothers, are trying to protect their daughters from being assaulted by teaching them to remain asexual and abstinent until marriage but even then, daughters are taught never express sexual desires publicly.

³¹⁸ McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street.*; Deborah Gray White, *Ar'nt I a Woman.*

On the other hand, Black men and boys in the past have been accused of rape or sexual assault as a mechanism to imprison or kill them. The legacy of lynching documented by Ida B. Wells shows how Black men were routinely and spontaneously lynched, often for the rape of a white woman.³¹⁹ These accusations tore many families apart and incentivized many Black people to move out of the South during that gruesome period when lynching was at its peak in the United States.³²⁰ As a parent of a Black male, it is crucial to make him aware of all the weapons formed against him that intend to take his life. Allegations of rape has been one of them; therefore, Black parents will ensure their son is aware of what rape is and how to avoid being accused of it. Unfortunately, these variations and distinct emphasis on topics, while sex itself remains undiscussed, leaves room for misinformation to spread and more painful experiences to happen.

Brandon said how a woman should be treated may not always be discussed with a Black male at home. Therefore, he learns from other social actors in his life, such as friends, school, his community, and media he consumes. The same goes for a girl, in that if she is not taught at home how she should be treated, she will learn from other sources outside of her home. Scholars have found this to be true, particularly when the youth are seeking it to understand scripts and sexual behaviors.³²¹ Brandon believed that parents refused to have those conversations with their

³¹⁹ Wells-Barnett, Ida B., and Jacqueline Jones Royster. 2016. *Southern Horrors and Other Writings : The Anti-Lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells, 1892-1900*. Second edition. The Bedford Series in History and Culture. Bedford/St. Martins.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=cat06552a&AN=gsu.9934583853502952&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

³²⁰ Feimster, Crystal Nicole. *Southern Horrors : Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching*. Harvard University Press, 2009.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=cat06552a&AN=gsu.9920517103402952&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

³²¹ Stephens, Dionne, and April Few. "Hip Hop Honey or Video Ho: African American Preadolescents' Understanding of Female Sexual Scripts in Hip Hop Culture." *Sexuality & Culture* 11, no. 4 (October 2007): 59. doi:10.1007/s12119-007-9012-8.

children because they felt it may prompt them to go and do those things. He stated parents may believe that “If you know too much too young, you got too much information and then I might have to worry about you.” In response, Brandon believes the inverse in which, “once a youth has that information, then they’re better able to relate to the opposite sex. They’re better able to relate to the world in general because they have a better understanding of how things work.” In other words, how individuals think about themselves, how they relate to others, and how others think and relate to them are based on symbolic meanings associated with sexuality. These symbols emerge through continuously changing cultural and social context.³²² For some young boys, like C.J, his father showed examples of how he should treat women, especially since he was the only male child in the house. Similarly, many women stated that their folks discussed how they should be treated by a male.

As a result of this divergent understanding, James Brown stated, at Freaknik, he observed something he called the mob mentality where men did not treat women with the utmost respect.

“You could notice in these mobs like let's say you got guys on one side of a sidewalk. Look over to the left view, there's another group of guys. it's a girl on top of the car, shaking her ass pulling her titties out. They [groups of men] take pictures of her, taking pictures with her. So, then you look to your right, and then there's women that's walking through that don't necessarily look like that. They are just normal women that's out, but you still got all these dudes in a group. Now some of them know each other and some of them don't know each other. Women walk through the pathway and dudes just grabbing butts and stuff. Some women get pissed off, smacking, dudes or either cussing them out, like ‘what are you doing?’ But now dudes got this courage because they in a pack and the girl don't know who grabbed her, because it's like 40 dudes standing in the path that she's walking through, you know. So, like I said you got a little bit of mob mentality as well is what I call it where people get the courage and they get a mob and their behavior, you know, feeling that they can kind of get out of control, because they're in that mob mentality where everybody's together. All of them are on the same thing, so they encourage each other and it kind of gets out of control. I saw quite a bit of that. “

³²² Stephens and Philips, “Freaks, Gold Diggers, Divas, And Dykes,” 5.

In other words, having a mob mentality means a man within a group sees or goes along with something; they were not personally involved in starting it, but by association they are involved. They allow the action to take place and may even participate. More importantly, they help in the process to cover up the group's actions even if it means shielding perpetrators of sexual violence. This type of behavior men showed at Freaknik towards women demonstrates how many men either did not have conversations in their youth about how to treat women or were following men who did not have those conversations either. It can also be that because they were all in a group in an environment like Freaknik such a space allowed certain behaviors to show up. For example, Brandon Harrison said,

“I had a strong foundation for that sort of thing [how to treat a woman] before I ever got to Freaknik. So, because I had that, whether it was things that come out of my mouth or me actually physically trying to touch a woman, there were just things that I was not gonna do. Freaknik made me realize that it was a lot of brothers that didn't have that [understanding]. I think, as a man, you always have some level of reference to it because most men are physically bigger and stronger than women. So physically imposing yourself on a woman, you know, it has to have a factor into your mind. Right? The nuances of assault and what is really proper respect for a woman in the first place... A lot of the guys down there, I would say, a good 60/ 65% of the dudes down there, they ain't really had that. That ain't where they come from, that ain't where they live at. Now, I don't know anybody who either accused anyone of rape or any dudes who had been accused of rape but I do know that I personally watched a lot of assault go on. I know the guys and even the females in some of those situations, would not have termed it that way but that's what it was. I think the real nuances and particulars of that [sexual violence] for a lot of both the men and women there at that time, was kind of lost.”

As Ryan said, “Most people came there [Freaknik] with the intention of getting out of the norm.” Freaknik disrupted the gender expectations, respectability politics, and culture of dissemblance the Black community created to subvert the dominant narratives that outcasted Black people to the margins. When asked how such a space like Freaknik became so popular, even as people, either older or nonblack, emphasized previous standards of the Black

community, people interviewed in this study stated they were human. Brandon stated, “when I look back on it, I think that we, as young people, or a people in general, at that point in the 90s had started, we were under a state or in a state of constant pressure even though it was not active in your face every day. I think that emotionally and psychologically feeling because now it's where police brutality and being pulled over to pop by the police and all these things started to take a different tone. I just feel like consciously to a certain extent, and even more, so subconsciously, we, as a people especially young people, we started to be under a certain level of pressure, without even really actively recognizing it.”

Further explaining this pressure Brandon speaks of, Lisa expressed, “We [young Black people] were representing the community. We had all these opportunities that we better not squander them, you know? It was do it to further our people. So, you worked...and you better have taken those opportunities that they [previous generations] had in the solid middle-class upbringing, and double, triple, or quadruple it.” This pressure mentioned by some of the people interviewed shows the consequences of how suppressing their humanity while constantly having to defend it impacted their lives. Lisa Jackson said, “It's almost like the tough, strong black woman. When did she get to cry? When does she get to be vulnerable, when does she get to fall into somebody who's arms? Who takes care of her? So, I think that [Freaknik] was an opportunity to take care of yourself, be taken care of, and to be acknowledged. You know? Shake it fast or shake it slow because you want to shake it.”

In addition, Carla said, “when you went to Freaknik a lot of times those things were not in the forefront of your mind because you were just going with the flow. You did, whatever you wanted to do or whatever you were curious to do. I think they [people at Freaknik] just wanted to have fun. It was an outlet amongst people who identified similarly and were not judged. Some

people may have been completely out of character but was never be judged Because the people you saw, you would probably never see them again...That was something that was completely out of the norm spectrum, that you could do once a year that was fun.” In other words, Freaknik allowed for young Black women and men to leave their practices of respectability and cults of secrecy built to protect their humanity and just be free to do or be who they were, something Black people in America rarely get to do. For just one day or weekend, they were able to step outside of their gender, racial, and class structures and rejoice in a communal gathering. Randall Marshall, who attended Freaknik in the 80s, insisted that Freaknic was mainly about meeting women. James even stated that many interactions between men and women were very physical and sexual in simple terms. CJ described how his intentions of going to Freaknik as a high school student surrounded his desire to try and get with a college girl.

Carla said, “it was accepted that everybody would be flirtatious. That everybody would be friendly and boundary lines could possibly be crossed and it could be okay if you were in that acceptance mode. Everything was just free spirited. A lot of your customs values and traditions were set aside so that you could have a free moment.” Similarly, Lady T said, “Freaknik did represent being able to just get out and get up under from what you were supposed to be doing. That's why it was so turnt up.” For example, Brandon Harrison described how Freaknik was an eye opener in terms of sexuality and sexual freedom. He said, “It was the first time that I saw in my young life, in my teenage years at that point, how sexual freedom applied to women. That it wasn't just a man thing, where stereotypically men are promiscuous, or rolling stones and blah, blah, blah. Not to say that there isn't any validity to that, but it was Freaknik that showed me that its some grown women out here ain't looking for love or relationship. There are women out here who, given their situation and circumstances at that particular time, are looking for a particular

experience that might be just date or might be a hook up on that weekend. And you know what? They are inclined to do so! They can even go on and get that experience, easier than a man could. I didn't completely understand that or see that live actively in place until I went to Freaknik.” It can also be inferred that because of the oppressive narratives about Black men and women being hypersexual deviant animals, he and others were probably least likely to see such things in a massive gathering outside of Freaknik or any other space like it.

6 CONCLUSION

Freaknik holds a special place for the ones who were able to experience it. For some, it was their first time being out without their parents. For others, it was their first-time seeing thousands of Black people together having fun. For many, the sexual freedoms and mobility associated with Freaknik were new, surprising, and empowering. Being Black in America dictated what was acceptable, and Freaknik did not fit into the cult of respectability of race or gender. Historically, images and scripts of Blackness derived from enslavement have demonized Black people as the “others.” As a means of survival, Black Americans created sub-scripts or politics of respectability to counter the dominant-negative narratives imposed upon them to demand their fundamental human liberties and validate their concerns in the Black Freedom Struggle. They assimilated to heteronormative white male’s culture to make their existence matter. Within this assimilation, Black women had to navigate their validation by staying within the standards of womanhood but also participating in the Black Freedom Struggle that often worked against those standards. Images like “Mammy,” “the Matriarch,” and “Jezebel,” manipulated and perpetuated in politics and culture, justified their compounding oppression. Coping mechanisms such as a culture of dissemblance or practice of secrecy allowed Black women to engage in discourses defending their race as well as solidifying their gender.

For centuries, Black women have shielded their private thoughts and desires from public records to either protect their privacy that’s often invaded, protect themselves from community shame and ridicule, or maintain a status so resources for their needs remain accessible. Already classified as deviant sexual beings, Black women struggled to express themselves as their bodies were highly sexualized and dehumanized; often referred to as hypersexual animals, only good for replenishing the labor force. In the dominant narrative, Black women were the standard for what

a woman was never to be while white women represented what a woman will always be. These tropes lie at the root of U.S Black women's oppression as they aim to dictate their sexuality and ultimately their existence. During enslavement, they were not recognized as women to justify the labor and sexual exploitation they endured by enslavers. After enslavement, their femininity continued to be denied by the heteronormative power structure who manipulated previous narratives and laws to justify their consistent treatment of Black women. To resist, Black women looked to affirm themselves but struggled when trying to address racial and gender issues. Kimberle Crenshaw argues that when studying marginalized groups, like Black women, intersectionality, or the process of considering the subject's compounding identity, is the most effective way to understanding that group's unique experience.³²³ Therefore, when answering the questions of this historical study, it is critical to discuss how those social constructs interacted in their experiences at Atlanta's Freaknik.

This convergence of race and gender took a different meaning at Atlanta's Freaknik for Black women. They were free to be as "freaky" as they wanted without judgment from their peers in that space. Respectable norms, morals, and practices that policed their sexual behaviors, such as avoid teasing men, outside of Freaknik were gone. At Freaknik, a Black woman could be flirty, dance with whomever she wanted, and leave feeling content with her experience, whereas before, appearing too promiscuous reflected negatively on her character because of dominant images like "Jezebel" that conformed to pathologies about Black women. The drawback of this freedom came when it needed to be defended. On the one hand, Black women enjoyed Freaknik because it was the most known place where thousands of Black people came together and celebrated each other. It was a relief from the constant pressure to be "the crème of the crop" and

³²³ Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1242-1245.

represent for the Black community as they removed their respectable postures and simply indulged in their natural human desires. Freaknik was a space to be unapologetically Black and human. So, when criticisms of wildness and dangers arose from mostly white critics, everyone in the Black community had to defend it on the basis that Black people had the right to congregate and party just like everyone else or otherwise be seen as a “Uncle Tom” or “sell-out”.

On the other hand, Black women had to protect their autonomy and safety as they increasingly became sexual objects to their male counterparts. As Freaknik grew beyond college student participation, young women increasingly dealt with aggressive behaviors from men whose intentions involved using the young women to fulfill their sexual desires. This is not to say that every man at Freaknik saw women as sexual objects, or that every woman at Freaknik did not have intentions to accept sexual advances. The problem existed when the desires and consent of Black women were shamed when it wasn't what was desired by others. In other words, if a woman wasn't there to strip down, dance, be filmed, and possibly have sex, then what was she at Freaknik for? Such a statement undermines Black women's value and humanity.

Like many other issues Black women face, their race and gender concerns converge into a disjointed experience, leaving them to disassemble themselves in their acceptance or rejection of Freaknik. They had to choose between Black Americans having the freedom to take up space or protecting Black women from sexual violence. In other words, at Freaknik, their racial identity affirmed their humanity, but their gender identity devalued their existence to an object for sexual pleasure. This fragmentation leads to problems because a Black woman who gets sexually assaulted at Freaknik may not speak up because if she condemns Freaknik, she is going against a pro-Black celebration. However, if she accepts it, then the violence she endured goes unchallenged and her humanity is diminished.

Of the women interviewed in this study, most expressed situations like giving consent or rejecting men being a concern or constant thought when navigating through Freaknik because they wanted to enjoy the festivities but didn't want things to go bad if a man refused to accept rejection. One of the women went so far as to strategically pick who they went with by thinking about what kind of attention that person may attract. The precautions the women in this study took show how Black women have their own ways of protecting themselves especially when they feel as if no one else will do the same. As one woman interviewed pointed out, the system and society don't protect Black women but blame them for the violence they endured, reinforcing Black women's oppression.

Although this study begins unraveling how race, gender, and respectability worked within the space of Freaknik, it must continue. There are several limitations to this study. For example, Freaknik had hundreds of thousands of visitors, and only 12 of them, 7 of them women, were interviewed. More women and men need to be interviewed to grasp the vast experiences people had at this spontaneous, momentous, enormous event. Another limitation was the access to primary sources such as police reports, photographs, and videos. In this study, the descriptions of Freaknik were highly reliant on witnesses' accounts from over 20 years ago. Some of their recollections may be inaccurate, especially if they went several times throughout Freaknik's existence. Access to other primary resources to corroborate witnesses' stories was limited to online versions due to the global pandemic restrictions placed on special collections in public libraries. In addition, the global pandemic could have put massive amounts of stress on people, deterring them from volunteering to share their experiences. Considering all these limitations, future researchers should aim to access more primary sources and interview more participants of Freaknik to expand this topic further.

EPILOGUE

After listening to the men and women of this project, I want to say that I would like to experience Freaknic. An annual event where young Black people get together and network, wherever it's held, would be so awesome. I learned from this project that Freaknic was much more than freaky parties and naked booty-shaking women. It was a space where Black people would be joyous, enjoy each other's company, and meet new people. It reminds me of a family reunion but with strangers, a communion of like-minded individuals who understand me. I can be free just like they can be free with me. That is a rarity for Black Americans in the United States. Here, we are often separated, stratified, and oppressed. I'm not surprised Freaknic is no longer a thing because large crowds of Black people coming together have never been welcomed in the United States. During enslavement, laws passed forbidding enslaved people to congregate. After enslavement, Black neighborhoods, leisure locations, and business districts like Sweet Auburn Avenue in Atlanta and Tulsa, Oklahoma, were heavily policed, inconvenienced, and eventually destroyed. It seems like any attempt Black Americans make to express themselves and enjoy the liberties they have, gets squashed, pathologized, and dehumanized. Of course, there are other gatherings of large Black communities coming together like the Sweet Auburn Festival, Carnival Atlanta, One Music Fest, Essence Festival, and Afropunk, but those tend to fall in line with a particular image that the location allows in its space. As many of my interviewees expressed, there will never be another Freaknik. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing.

Now, Freaknic wasn't perfect. Women were sexually assaulted. Stores were looted. The traffic gridlock impacted movement in and out of the city that negatively affected businesses. People were loud and rowdy in the streets, disturbing people who weren't there to party. It was a

nuisance and a tough one to deal with in a known civil rights city built on the idea of a Black Mecca. The mayor, Bill Campbell, was highly scrutinized in any move that he made regarding Freaknik. I don't know if there was any way to fix the issue, but I think he was undoubtedly in an annoying yet familiar position; that duality or double consciousness of Blackness against Americanness that W.E.B DuBois famously wrote about. I think former Mayor Bill Campbell should be given his flowers.

In the same token, I also think that the women of Freaknik deserve their flowers too, especially the ones that endured some sexual assault or harassment. Can you imagine being violated at a pro-Black event that your community is trying to defend? It sucks. You can't speak about how you feel to anyone except other women who experienced the same. The problem is you may never find them, or the women you do talk to will minimize the pain and hurt experienced as a coping mechanism as they feel it is hopeless to say anything anyway. I know because I have experienced it but in my own generation. It's a dilemma Black women continuously face; how do we enforce our rights as Americans, women, and Black people? It's the Black Woman Freedom Struggle.

I hope this text inspires researchers and historians to choose constantly and continuously to incorporate Black women's voices in these matters, especially in more contemporary examples. It's critical because if we, scholars, do not, Black women's cries of discrimination, objectification, hypersexualization, and ungendered-ness will fall on deaf ears. As a result, Black women who speak out may get accusatory statements as responses making Black women question themselves and their experiences. In the same regard, others may say those horrible oppressive experiences Black women uniquely have are from the past and no longer exists in the postmodern or post-racial world we live in today. Those assumptions are certainly untrue, as

shown in this study, in my own testimony, and probably many others that have yet to share. This disconnect and silence of Black women's voices need no more to occur. Let us in the academy continue to shine a light on the voices often lost in the dominant narrative.

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