"Still Here, Still Queer" and We Ain't Going Nowhere: A Qualitative Study of Community During a Second-wave of Activity

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“STILL HERE, STILL QUEER” AND WE AIN’T GOING NOWHERE: 
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF COMMUNITY DURING A SECOND WAVE OF ACTIVITY 

by 

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Under the Direction of Eric R. Wright, PhD 

ABSTRACT 

Are we witnessing the emergence of queer community? To answer this question, I interviewed self-identified queer people living in Atlanta, Georgia. During one-on-one and relational interviews, 31 participants reflected on how they understand and live queer, as well as socialize with other queers. An intention of this study is to advance theory; as such, this analysis inspected tenets asserted by “first wave” theoreticians and activists of the 1980s and 1990s. To test theory, I attend to queer as fluid, non-normative and diverse. The participants viewed their queerness in sexuality, gender, and political terms congruent with a first-wave framework. On the whole, participants supported the emergence of queer community, yet offered a cautionary tale as to whether collective queer will be able to achieve its political goals. “Still here, still queer” extends theory in the direction of shared identity and code for conduct, essential dynamics of community. 

INDEX WORDS: Queer, Queer theory, Community, Identity, Code for conduct, Political ethos
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DEDICATION

To all the people who love to live a queer life; to all the people who have struggled, fought, and died to live a queer life; and, to all the people who have supported me as I have attempted to give voice to the fabulous group of queers that participated in this study. To my partner, my mom, my friends and family, thank you. And, to the person who encouraged me in life, and death, Grandma Mary; “May you be resting in peace. Love you 2-2!”
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1 INTRODUCTION

Imagine a world where we are freed from bounded identities. In this world, how we perceive our self, how we manifest this self, and the relationships that result, transcend etiologies set in motion by chromosomes, genetics, checklists of social circumstances, and normative expectations spelled out in social scripts – “metaphors for conceptualizing the production of behavior within social life,” (Simon and Gagnon 1999: 29). Regarding sexuality and gender as sources of identity, having a strong or absent parent, a medical designation at birth, a double x or an x-y chromosomal structure, or a variation on chromosome Xq28, may influence, but does not produce a specified identity. The variation inherent in gender and sexuality, as socially constructed phenomena, complicate the categorical boundaries delineating male from female, masculine from feminine, and homosexual from heterosexual. Even bisexuality and transgenderism, as predicated and often contested alternatives, fail to define a person, let alone a class of people. In this “imagined” world, even if our biology, desires and behaviors remain within the boundaries of a particular sexual or gender identity type, we are not trapped by these boundaries. From this vantage point, sexuality and gender exist as fluid and diverse states whereby the endless possibilities are available to the willing.

Scholars and activists active in the 1980s and 1990s assert this non-bounded world is the world we live; some live it more explicitly than others. They argued, in practice, gender and sexuality are fluid and diverse, more so than can be explained by the dominant paradigms of male, female, transgender, homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual (Alexander and Yescavage 2009; Morland 2009; Sedgwick 2013; supported by, Cohen 2013). Indeed, some scholars and activists assert we live in a postmodern era in which embodied practices refute the epistemology and ontology that maintain modern identity systems (Nicholson and Seidman 1995). The primary
forum in which these perspectives were defined, and have since been refined, is queer theory. As a theoretical framework, queer theory evolved from social constructionism (identities are created through social interaction; Berger and Luckmann 1966), post-structuralism (our present identity system is binary, hierarchical and imparts notions of normal and abnormal; Foucault 1979), and postmodernism (the world is messy, constricted by language, and there are no universal truths; Rosenau 1991) (Kirsch 2000; Ritzer and Stepnisky 2013). By titling their assertions queer, these theorists and activists embraced a liberationist stance toward understanding meaning and our collective experiences. They purposefully reclaimed a term used as a derogatory slur referencing gender, sexuality and their intersections, and repurposed it to an academic and political rallying cry. These reclamationists positioned queer to reflect our ever evolving, non-normative, fluid and messy human existence.

Contemporary queer theory proponents’ work from an ethos grounded in diversity, fluidity, and a counter narrative of “non-normativity” by championing life’s endless possibilities (Kirsch 2000; Namaste 1996). This ethos takes to task social distinctions and forces that privilege those deemed normal. Furthermore, the self, as informed by experiences and desires are ours to define, or not. Any definition is subject to change based on new experiences, knowledge and perceptions; identities, thus the self, is porous. No sense of sexuality or gender is better or less than the other, given a consensual world, and we certainly aren’t always dichotomous and fixed.

If queer theory explains social reality, at least segments of it, it must hold up in empirical applications, which to date remain anemic. Indeed, as an embraced and embodied practice, the theories’ ethos begs the question, who are queer people? What do they do, and how do their practices complement or refute what is philosophically understood to be queer? Do queers
embrace and live a sexual and/or gender fluid life that resists normalization, as asserted by queer theoreticians (Jagose 1996; Kirsch 2000; Luibhéid and Cantú 2005; Warner 1999). If so, how does the diversity and fluidity take form collectively?

As a social scientist, I wonder: have queers collected into a community? If so, how is participation meaningful? How is the queer community distinct? In short, are we witnessing the emergence of a queer community?

1.1 Purpose of the Study

In this study, I took a descriptive approach to understanding queer people’s inner- and inter-personal experiences. This study fills a gap in knowledge by empirically focusing on queer as practiced, particularly at the micro and meso levels of social life. Furthermore, illuminating the gap between theory and practice is significant given the growing importance of queer theory in sociological thought, and as a burgeoning second wave of activity among queers is unfolding. Living queer provides unique insights into essential social experiences; that you can be fluid in your sexuality, gender, race – all areas we socially construct as well as privilege/marginalize – as well as provide space for a host of experiences under one moniker.

Few studies have considered queer as embraced distinctly. More often, queer gets conflated and muddled with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT). In fact, queer is often used as shorthand for LGBT. To overcome this limitation, and in light of recent anecdotal evidence, I conducted a descriptive research study focused on the social outcome of collective identity and means of interacting. Studying a primarily unexplored and emerging collective with the intention of advancing theory, I found it important to pose a broad question with a theoretically-sound, yet exploratory nature. This study inspected certain tenets of queer theory, while not being restricted to these tenets. A narrative approach provides a unique contribution to
the sociological understanding of sexuality and/or gender-based communities in that few have asked queer people about their personal and social worlds. Investigating queer people, queer practices and queer relationships extends theory, specifically queer theory, in applied directions. The importance regards sexuality, gender and politics as essential experiences that provide meaning to our lives, and shapes our social interactions (Butler 1999; Warner 1999).

1.2 Argument

In this study, the participants provided a foundation to understand queer as community. As I shall show, the participants endorsed queer in identity terms with shared features. These features reinforce the first-wave tenets of fluidity, non-normativity and diversity. Participants applied queer’s features to their sexuality, gender, political ideology and with experiences of race, socio-economics and other intersectional experiences. The participants also supported queer as a framework for how one conducts themselves, i.e. a code for conduct, at least within shared space. Where such a code became evident regarded the shared identity features noted in their political ethos. Those intolerant of marginalized people, those who wish to maintain the privileged status of the few, and those who adopt queer, but only for the “street cred,” are not tolerated. When combined, queer as a shared identity and code for conduct informs queer as community. In Atlanta, for example, the queer community has built distinct institutions, such as Southern Fried, Queer Pride, Queer House and Mary’s, which serve those who embrace queer as, in part, distinct. Politically speaking, queers started and defined one of the most significant domestic political movements, Black Lives Matter. As such, being queer collectively matters to our understanding of community, and how community impacts society.
2 BACKGROUND

2.1 A Brief History of Queer and its Relationship to Sexuality and Gender

We trace the Germanic origin of “queer” (kweer) to the sixteenth century A.D. as describing the unusual, the non-normative (www.dictionary.com). At the time, the Catholic Church influenced social perceptions on what was normal and usual, as well as queer, especially regarding sexuality and gender roles in European societies (Brown 1986; Tannahill 1980). Prior to the thirteenth century, same-sex sexual behavior was grouped with any number of “immoral” sexual acts, such as bestiality and adultery (Goodrich 1976; Johansson and Percy 2000). We credit the cleric, St. Thomas Aquinas, with distinctly delineating same-sex sexual encounters as against canonical law (Brown 1986; Tannahill 1980). At that time (and since), religious authorities argued “normal” sexual encounters were between a husband and wife, and primarily for reproductive purposes. Of course, people went against the canons; if caught, they faced harsh punishment. For example, the punishment for sodomy, as sex between two men or between two women, was death by burning, hanging, drowning, or beheading (Brown 1986; Crompton 1981). Sodomy, as anal penetration between men, was noted as an especially heinous sexual act (Bray 1982; Brown 1986; Rocke 1996).

Also during the Middle Ages (and since), women were considered and treated as inferior to men. This position was asserted in religious doctrine (Brown 1986). While a transition in attitudes toward women occurred as European societies moved from the Middles Ages to Renaissance periods, this transition did not result in equalizing women’s social position. Tannahill (1980) stated,

At the beginning [around 1100 A.D.] they had been despised, not only by men, but often by themselves; at the end [around 1500 A.D.], they were respected, even admired. It does not, perhaps, sound like very much of revolution, but it was this reversal of attitude that made all subsequent changes possible, even if the psychological and genetic adjustments
necessary after more than 5,000 years of inferiority were to mean that it took several hundred more before the most radical of them came about. Some, of course, have not come about even yet. (Pp. 256-7)

As such, men remained the privileged class, as did all things associated with men and masculinity. Of interest, the shift in attitude toward women occurred when the hegemonic dominance of the church started to wane. During the Renaissance era, political and social shifts took place giving way to more tolerant attitudes toward various sexual behaviors as well as toward women (Saslow 1990). Indeed, over the millennium plus covering the church’s authoritative control, social and political evolutions took place as to how sexual desire and behavior was understood and tolerated, as did general attitudes toward the “inferior” sex, and characteristics associated with women.

More contemporary western notions of gender and sexuality have shifted toward scientific thinking over religious doctrine (Foucault 1979; cf. Casini n.d.). As the Industrial Revolution unfolded, western societies looked to science to explain and resolve phenomenon, specifically sexuality and its relationship with gender (Rueling 1997; Lauritsen and Thorstad 1974). Scientific inquiry resulted in the social reconstruction of sexuality, whereby medicine reformulated religion’s possession argument into biological naturalness and unnaturalness (Marcus 2008; Krafft-Ebing 1906; Ulrichs 1997). What drives our desires and behaviors are not supernatural influences or poor moral character, rather products of biological processes. Similar biological assertions plague how we understand sex and gender (Geary 1998). The new argument to explain same-sex desires and the inferiority of women and femininity centered on the unnaturalness of same-sex desires and behaviors, as well as gender nonconformity. Natural law, in contrast to God’s law, is out of kilter in cases of unusual, non-normative behavior or gender expression (Spade 2003; Sedgwick 2015). Nature, according to scientific thinking, has a natural
(read: normal) state toward which all should aspire. Medicine’s intent is to re-establish biology’s natural, thus “normal” state, as scientifically discovered by men.

In western societies, we conceptualize sexuality, gender and sex in accordance with the categories of homosexual and heterosexual, masculine and feminine, as well as male and female (McHugh 2004; Padgug 1979). An early marker in the shift toward scientific (read: biological) explanations of sexuality occurred in 1868-69 when Hungarian writer, Karl Maria Kertbeny, coined the term “homosexual” when responding to proposed legislation that would criminalize ‘unnatural fornication’ (Katz 1997: 177). The exact boundaries of homosexuality came into focus when “heterosexuality” was demarcated as its natural, thus normal, opposite. Once medical professionals took hold of Kertbeny’s terminology and his contemporaries’ ideas regarding classes of people distinguished by their desires and behaviors, sexuality took on more fixed notions, similar to what was perceived regarding sex and gender. These notions provided society, and specifically medicine, a means to assess normalcy and pathology. The new binary of homosexual and heterosexual helped shift sexuality away from immoral, demonically-driven behaviors to natural and unnatural people. During this period of transition, a number of labels moved in and out of fashion to describe the boundaries marked by the appearances, desires, and behaviors attached to sexuality and the sex and gender of the participants. Foucault (1979) and queer theorists asserted language, such as the dominant identity labels (e.g. male and female, heterosexual and homosexual), allow us to understand our social world, thus each other (Kirsch 2000; Plummer and Stein 1994). This allowance imputes the importance of identities, and their social power.
2.2 The evolution of the queer moniker

Chauncey (1994) argued by the early part of the twentieth century heterosexual society labelled a homosexual as “she-man,” “nance,” “sissy,” “fairy,” and “fag.” These labels also gendered sexuality, noting the subjugated position of anything associated with women, including effeminacy. Women’s on-going occupancy of a second class social position regulated their sexuality to Victorian notions of chastity and motherhood (Marcus 2008; Vicinus 1984). As a result, women who engaged in sexual relations with other women remained taboo. These patriarchal views of female sexuality, resulted in terms such as “sissy” and “fairy” being applied mainly to those perceived as the “female” during man-on-man action. As a result of women’s diminished social position, any posturing by a man viewed as feminine, or “woman-like,” led to his diminished social position. From this understanding, the terms used by heterossexuals to describe homosexual men, in particular, typically applied to those that took the feminized position during sex. The active partner (i.e. the penetrator) maintained his male privilege given his “dominant,” male-associated role. As a result, his sexuality and gender were not as questioned. This was not the case for the passive male partner (i.e. the penetrated). Society viewed taking the penetrated role during sex as sexual deviancy – an unnatural state. In keeping with this thinking, the penetrated partner bore the brunt of stigma and persecution attached to labels such as she-man, sissy, fairy, and fag.

In addition to fag, fairy and the like, queer was also used to label men who had sex with other men (Chauncey 1982; 1994). To distinguish within their newly defined class, early twentieth century homosexual men described, and thus defined, themselves based on gender expression, whereby the effeminate were called *fairies* and *faggots* and the masculine were called *queer* (Chauncey 1994). In fact, Chauncey states, “By the 1910s and 1920s, the men who
identified themselves as part of a distinct category of men primarily on the basis of their homosexual interest rather than their womanlike gender status usually called themselves queer,” (p. 15-16).

Around the same time, government and medical institutions used queer to label “pathologically deviant behavior,” such as same-sex sexual relations (Pigg 2000). Institutionally speaking, in the early twentieth century the U.S. Navy conducted an investigation into allegations regarding activities at the Newport Island Training Station in Rhode Island, and in the local community (Chauncey 1985; Murphy 1984; Simopoulos and Murphy 2014). The investigation resulted in a trial of 36 enlisted and civilian men for engaging in same-sex sexual relations and/or acting in non-gender conforming ways. From the trial’s transcripts, we learn queer described men in sexually gendered terms, meaning only the men who took the sexually passive/penetrated role were deemed queer. This understanding is not in keeping with how the term was used among homosexual men, thus the term involved variation in its application.

Queer as a sexuality and gender-based label remained in vogue to describe homosexual and gender non-conforming men, both within and outside the homosexual community, until post-World War II. It was the homophile movement that initiated the transition to gay as a favored means to distinguish homosexual men, and lesbian to reference homosexual women (Pigg 2000). While the transition away from queer was the case within the homosexual community and many societal institutions, queer remained a derogatory term slang by bullies and haters (see, Burn 2000).

Currently, those who engage in or desire same-sex sexual encounters as well as those who embrace a transitioning gender identity, have evolved into what is believed to be a scientifically identifiable class of people. Like what Tannahill noted previously as occurring for
women nearly a millennium ago, rapid social acceptance is said to be taking place for those who embrace a gay or lesbian identity, yet this is not universally the case between, nor within societies (Baunach 2012; Loftus 2001; Pew Research Center 2015; Smith, Son, and Kim 2014; Tilcsik 2011; Whitehead and Baker 2012). For example, recent events tell of religious extremists using Sharia law to justify throwing homosexual men to their death (Senzee 2015), and it was not so long ago Matthew Shepard died from a fatal beating motivated by hatred toward homosexuals (Ott and Aoki 2002). These examples signal sexuality as a social construction, thus ever evolving and shifting in how they are conceived as well as received (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Browning 2016; Foucault 1979). This is also the case for sex and gender (Browning 2016; Hughto, Reisner and Pachankis 2015). In fact, the hostility aimed at gender non-conformity is problematic for sexual minorities as well as transgender people (Gordon and Meyer 2008; Grant et al. 2011).

While paradigms regarding gender and sexuality have shifted, these shifts do not abandon the preceding paradigm outright. This assertion, as applied to sexuality, is supported in any number of examples. For instance, in 2006, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops proclaimed, “The Church seeks to enable every person to live out the universal call to holiness. Persons with a homosexual inclination ought to receive every aid and encouragement to embrace this call personally and fully. This will unavoidably involve much struggle and self-mastery…” This position indicates a shift in religious doctrine away from automatic condemnation, or at least severe punishment when found guilty; yet, it does not exclude such a possibility. This assertion is mirrored in context to gender when looking at the current debate raging over which public facility a transgender person should have access. Indeed, social conservatives use medical
authorities designation of sex at birth to support their claim that biology determines one’s sex and gender, not the person’s sense of self (Steinmetz 2015).

2.3 The first-wave’s reclamation of queer

The work of academics, such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Gayle Rubin, and the actions of activists, such as those engaged in Queer Nation, led to the reclamation of *queer* in the 1980s and 1990s. Their efforts reflect liberationist assertions and narratives that emerged during the culture wars of the 1960s and 70s (Jagose 1996; Puar 2005; Plummer and Stein 1994). When activists and academics reclaimed and reconstructed queer, the label was grounded in a political air contesting homonegativity and social subjugation, as well as reflected an attempt to escape the confines of bounded identities. The reclamation of queer countered proselytizing gay men and lesbians (Jagose 1996), as much as larger societies disdain for all things non-normative. According to Jagose (1996), queer re-emerged in the context of the sexuality debates within the feminist movement as well as AIDS activism effectively framing the terms reclamation in overtly political tones.

Those who put forth the *first-wave* queer ethos, asserted difference over normalization in keeping with the word’s linguistic origins (Warner 1999). Anecdotally speaking, those embracing this ethos in contemporary times, the *second wave* of queer activity, include a range of people that intend to problematize the inherency of categorically fixed and “normalized” identities beyond those originally conceived. The second wave queers appear to be collectivizing around their political, gendered, and sexual differences from normalized sexualities, e.g. the dyadic couple who embrace and are embraced by a traditional family structure and a capitalistic society, and binary gender system of male and female.
The first-wave reclamation of queer took aim at assertions put forth by the homophile movement, which blossomed in post-WWII gay and lesbian communities. The homophile movement in the United States began in earnest when the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis organized around the idea that homosexuals should benefit from the same rights that their heterosexual counterparts benefit. This new narrative asserted gay men and lesbians mirror their heterosexual counterparts in nearly all manners other than romantic/sexual partner choice (Esterberg 2000; Silverstein 1997). Their argument being akin to, “We maintain jobs, pay taxes, own property, and as such we deserve equal protection under the law,” (The Mattachine Society 1997). The homophile movement’s “normalizing” perspective contrasted the deviancy narrative that remained in vogue, and as grounded in scientific and religious ideology. In the pulpits, legislative halls, and medical offices, lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people remained immoral and pathologically out of kilter with God and nature.

As the homophile movement paralleled the civil rights movement demanding equality for African Americans, and later the second-wave feminist movement. Collectively, these identity-based movements exposed various social narratives, norms, policies and laws as discriminatory, even hateful. The cultural and political shifts fought for by these movements, and the hostility they encountered, sparked a radical liberationist perspective grounded in difference over normalization (Bredbeck 2000). The emerging liberationist perspectives argued variation from the socially dominant position does not equate to abnormal or wrong, let alone warrant second class citizenship. Liberationist perspectives, as applied to sexuality, and gender and sex, moved that those who are outside the privileged, thus normalized groups, i.e. heterosexuals and cis-gender, do not need, nor should we concede to a hostile society; we must stand against it (Kissack 2000).
This period of social change set the stage for a series of events within social movements paving the way for *queer*. Armed with the culture war’s radical liberation ideologies, lesbians and bisexual women confronted sexuality-based discrimination in the feminist movement, and lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people (LGBT) took aim at the anti-homosexual hostility underpinning the AIDS crisis. The battles within both movements occurred along normalizing/liberationist ideological lines (Jagose 1996). The reclamation and reconstruction of *queer* occurred in context to these ideological fights.

An example of an early battle came during the 1970 Second Congress of the National Organization of Women when several dozen women donned the title “Lavender Menace” to protest lesbians’ position within the organization, as well as the feminist movement in general (Bensinger 1992; Jagose 1996; Whitlock 1977). This event helped ignite a sexuality debate within the feminist movement, and emboldened a new position for gay liberation as well as extended the liberationist vantage point to lesbians (Reger 2000). Lesbians were a collective in their own right. The sexuality debates that transpired were of critical importance to the re-emergence of queer, as the term would now apply to women as much as men. Some scoffed at such an application given the terms patriarchal roots, but that became a point of interest during the queer reclamation process and a point of inclusion.

On the heels of the feminist battle over sexuality, lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender people confronted one of the most devastating events to hit their conjoined community. In 1981, the Centers for Disease Control reported five cases of pneumocystis pneumonia (PCP), diagnosed among sexually active gay men living in Los Angeles County (Shilts 1987; Epstein 1996a). Soon after, PCP and a rare viral infection, Kaposi sarcoma, began occurring among gay men living in San Francisco, New York and other urban enclaves. While
other marginalized communities, such as injection drug users, also manifest the new illness, the media focused its reporting on incidents among gay men. This focus produced a narrative exclusive to a “gay cancer,” or the “gay plague” (Dowsett 2009; Halkitis 2013; Herek and Glunt 1988). By association, larger society also implicated lesbians for AIDS, even though relatively few cases were (or have been) diagnosed among women who have sex with women (Carter 2014; Herek 1997; CDC 2014). The government, and society in general, blamed affected communities for engaging in immoral and unnatural acts (Halkitis 2013). This tragic and shameful situation resulted in the formation of activist-driven organizations, such as ACT UP (Bronski 2000; Gould 2009). These organizations took aim at the intolerance, discrimination and stigma directed at the infected, as well as gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people in general. As scientific knowledge blossomed, it informed how the disease was spread and that any numbers of communities were at risk, not just gay men. Yet, the gay and lesbian community continued to be treated with overt AIDS-phobia, homonegativity and homophobia (Gould 2009; Herek 1997). This intolerance and ignorance prodded activists and academics to target various institutions as well as homosexuals who took a proselytizing position to garner a response (Gould 2009; Katz 2000). These activists were fed up with societal and government disdain, and communal posturing.

Encounters within the feminist and AIDS movements exposed concerns activists and academics had with larger society as well as with others who took a normative approach to achieving improvements in social position (Jagose 1996). These dissenting activists and academics asserted gay men, lesbians, and any numbers of “sexual deviants” and gender nonconformists are not like their heteronormative and cisgender counterparts, and should not aspire to be so (Sycamore 2008; Warner 1999). Ultimately, sexuality and gender are naturally
expansive, and society is what restricts us to binaries framed around what is normal and abnormal, moral and immoral. Furthermore, to these activists and academics, society was not going to view, nor treat, non-heterosexuals the same as their heterosexual counterparts, or cisgender women, transgender, and non-binary people the same as cisgender men. This is especially the case in light of vested interests in maintaining power differentials (Foucault 1979). As such, seeking a proverbial place at a table, a table that discriminates and stigmatizes, is counterproductive and reproduces the very discrimination and stigma many fought to counter. This historical backdrop serves to frame an understanding of queer’s first-wave reclamation.

Reclaiming and reconstructing queer emerged from an adversarial position toward normalization (cf. Ward 2008), thus privileging certain types of sexuality, sex and gender. The moral judgements and naturalization assertions of religion and science are problematized in a queer world that affirms the non-normative, the odd and the deviant. Queer in its new formation took aim at sexuality and gender as categorically fixed in classes of people (Halperin 2003).

Those demarcating the queer ethos concerned themselves with positivistic grand narratives whereby sexuality is viewed as a coin marked heterosexual on one side and homosexual on the other (with bisexual serving as the bridge between the two sides) and gender is distinguished by masculine and feminine, sex as men and women. Their concern was grounded in how we have positioned these fixed notions of sexuality, sex and gender. The grand narrative asserts sexuality, sex and gender are, in essence, dichotomous and uniform. This narrative leaves the impression each community constitutes a monolithic group. In essence, the grand narrative argues heterosexuals and homosexuals are really no different from one another other than our object choice, and male and female are defined by one’s genitalia, or rather, hormones. This positivistic ideology insinuates a normalizing narrative based in traditional notions of family,
romantic partnering, and what is and is not acceptable performance, behavior or desires. Politically speaking, this ideology asserts a position whereby “we’ll accept LGBT people so long as they embrace what we view as respectable, normal and usual” (cf. Warner 1999). The sexuality debates within the feminist movement and fighting for a response to HIV and AIDS, as well as gay and lesbian rights, exposed grand narratives as a source of further subjugation and discrimination. Queer, as reclaimed, confronted the assertion, “If you act and look like us, we’ll tolerate you.”

The *queer ethos* divested sex and sexuality, race and class, physical and mental ability from assertions of normal and abnormal, natural and unnatural, moral and immoral by exposing our inherently diverse manifestations (Kirsch 2000). The queer ethos as an embraced ideology argued that the abnormal, as a counter narrative, is to be promoted, celebrated, and even heralded (cf. Guter and Killacky 2004; Sycamore 2008).

2.4 *Queer theory*

The natural sciences ascribe the homo-heterosexual, male-female binaries as fixed, even the predicated “middle points,” i.e. bisexuality and transgenderism, as fixed. Scientific inquiry is said to expose natural law as “biopsychosocial” givens. Such inquiry is said to have observed homosexuals as a category of people who desire and engage sexually with members of the same-sex, while heterosexuals desire and engage sexually with members of the opposite-sex. In keeping, women act in feminine ways while men act in masculine ways. From this thinking, all people fit into one, or the other, group. As a sexual category, bisexuality reinforces the paradigm in which sexuality is fixed, for bisexuals are said to manifest an equal appeal for both sexes (as if there were only two sexes in which to desire). A similar argument can be made for
transgenderism; they fall somewhere between being a cisgender man or a cisgender woman, or are simply transitioning from one to the other.

Categories that define sexuality and gender often fail to explain variations in social position, as well as account for diversity and fluidity (see, Rust 2000 regarding sexual diversity along a bisexual continuum, and Browning 2016 regarding variations in gender). For example, how do the homo-bi-heterosexual categories explain a homosexually identified person with a sexual her/istory that includes a person or persons of the opposite sex, the less than “gold star”? Or, a person born with male genitalia, yet embodies both masculine and feminine traits while dressing in socially androgynous ways? When such realities exist, are these persons truly homosexual or male? In the prior case, if they only had sex with one or two people of the opposite sex, but hundreds or thousands of same-sex partners, are they really bisexual? What about desire; are our desires more important than our behaviors, and where does identification and aesthetic performance fall in importance? Queer theory problematizes sexuality, sex and gender as pendulums that land on homosexual, bisexual, or heterosexual, masculine, feminine, male and female in accordance to some esoteric notion of hierarchal significance.

Based on the work of Jagose (1996), I assert queer theory emerged to contest the belief and faith placed in what we perceive as naturally occurring explanations in light of social realities (cf. Epstein 1996b). Sexuality, sex and gender involve different perspectives as well as manifestations; sex, sexuality and gender escape categorization based on specified definitions (Butler 1999; Kirsch 2000). Furthermore, queer theory also provides a means to inspect science’s historical and ideological relationship with religion. Scientific claims continue to assert there are natural and unnatural phenomena, while religion argues there are moral and immoral phenomena. Both ideologies are grounded in the notion that there is a dichotomous existence,
either according to nature or God. This can also be applied to the social sciences and our on-
going distinction between the micro-level conceptualization of agency and macro-level notions of structure. Such thinking is incorrect, according to the tenets of queer theory. As asserted previously, there is no normal and abnormal, no moral and immoral, no agent and structure as distinct categories, only difference, diversity and fluidity.

Queer theory emerged from theoretical notions regarding the supposition that western societies, in particular, have transitioned from the modern era to a postmodern one (Seidman 1994; Simon 1996). According to postmodernists, we live in a period of fractured narratives, and a plethora of divergent experiences. Sexuality and sex cannot be boxed into distinct categories that define a subject, let alone entire classes of people. At heart, postmodernism critiques scientific assertions as ontologically true, as if there were such a thing as “truth” (Rosenau 1991). It should be noted that postmodernism includes a host of various, sometimes contradictory ideas that in essence takes to task positivistic notions of fact and truth (Ritzer 2008). Postmodernism questions assertions regarding social phenomenon as knowable, and as manifest from natural law. Indeed, those ascribing to postmodernism hold radically different ideas about questions of epistemology as well as ontology.

Regardless of whether we live in a continuation of modernity, with its biologically-bound identities, or have transitioned into a postmodern world of fractured narratives, our current conceptualization of sexuality, sex and gender have been constructed and reinforced from ecclesiastic and scientific “authorities.” Postmodernists refute authoritarian claims by arguing the validity of all narratives and attempting to make transparent the power dynamics inherent in claim-making, as well as privileging and oppressing particular identities. Ultimately a number of institutional and personal forces claim the right to define what sexes, genders and sexualities are
normal, as well as deviant. Counter narratives, such as queer theory, emerged taking aim at such distinctions, as well as any authority-grabbing taking place. Queer theory and postmodernism are being embraced by a growing number of people, including sociologists, as a means to better understand, or at least illuminate non-normative sexualities, sexes and genders, as well as how we live our lives (see: Giffney and O’Rourke 2009; Kirsch 2000; Seidman 1997).

Like its theoretical cousin, postmodernism, queer theory leaps from a social construction framework. Phenomena ever change in accordance with the interplay between structure, relationships and agency (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Queer theory centralizes its core assertion around the significance and shifting understanding of sexuality, and more recently extending to gender and sex. To queer theorists, sexuality is as a complex set of converging and diverging components that can explain much social reality. Kirsch (2000: 35) stated: “Whether ‘queer,’ ‘gay and lesbian,’ or neither, what these writers and activists (queer theoreticians) have in common is their call for the acceptance of diversity.” Sexuality cannot be boxed into normalized categories defined by desires, behaviors, gender expressions, sexes, legal statuses, or any combination thereof. Sexuality, as well as sex and gender, exists in a messy state of fluidity. We are, as sexual individuals, a breadth of elements, and as sexual communities, a breadth of convergent and divergent factors (see Rubin 1984; and, Sedgwick 2015 as seminal works speaking to this divergence and convergence). Sexuality, gender and sex are nothing short of a reflection of the human experience in its expanse. Queer delineates that which is non-normative in keeping with the word’s Germanic origin (Plummer and Stein 1994). When a person identifies as queer, they signify a political and social position in opposition to what has been normalized (Plummer and Stein 1994). As queer, the person(s) defies being defined by the limits of scientific, religious and social thought – that which makes you easily categorized. You are
declaring an allegiance to diversity and possibilities rather than fixed categories and social acceptability.

At the same time, others, seminally by Patrick Johnson (2001), have critiqued queer theory’s narrowed focus on sexuality and gender decontextualized from intersectional experiences with other socially constructed aspects of our lives, such as race and economic standing. Explicitly, we must understand sexuality and gender as situated within personal life histories informed by race, economics, health and ability status, to name a few (Alexander 2003). Regarding “queer” in the black community, Battle and colleagues (2002) found less than one percent of their sample from Black Pride festivals selected queer to reference their sexual identity; the answer was least likely to be selected. At the same time, what are the experiences of queer black people and how they understand the intersection of identities? Critiques of queer theory also extend to contributing scholars overtly intellectualized and increasingly inaccessible reflections on queer (Dilley 1999; Watson 2005). These critiques call for an empirical as well as expansive lens when attempting to understand queer, and to what degree is queer experienced in context to other defining positions. In addition, how does queer in practice understand and live the diversity its champions claim as foundational. This study takes critiques around the intersection of queer and race into account by selecting narratives that speak, in part, on Johnson (2001) and Alexander’s (2003) concerns.

2.5 Queer: people, relationships and communities

As mentioned, queer is being embraced by an apparent host of people with a range of diverse desires and experiences, including individuals who otherwise appear heteronormative – they are in dyadic, opposite cisgender relationships with no obvious fetishes, sexual proclivities or gender expressions. Embracing queer among heterosexually-living people appears to be
fostering some tension among certain queer people. While some homo/bisexual-oriented and genderqueer/transgender queers accept their queer heterosexual counterparts, others do not (Taormino 2003). In personal communication, some queers who have experienced the stigma attached to non-normative sexualities and genders question cisgender heterosexuals who embrace the queer ethos, and yet have not faced sexuality and gender-based stigma, discrimination or ostracism. In these instances, queers appear to assert the ethos is an intellectual and political accessory with little experiential meaning. I raise this anecdotal point to signify the difference between the philosophical tenets of queer theory and the lived experiences of queer people, a tension noted by Kirsch (2000). While the prior appears to allow for an application to otherwise heterosexually oriented people, given its focus on diversity and rallying against normalizing tendencies, the latter takes aim at intention and relevance. What is ultimately in question regards queer as a personal and social identity, based on lived experiences. Providing, at least preliminary answers is an important reflection on sexually and gender-based communities in terms of how they function as collectives, and what they mean to the members. Exposing understandings and meanings within this community is a cornerstone consideration for the present study. Given what little is empirically known about queer people, an appropriate approach to answering the research question is an exploratory study grounded in qualitative methods.

2.6 Theoretical Approach: Queer Theory and Grounded Theory

Arguing queer theory explains lived experiences is premature. There is little empirical data to support the argument queer theory explains queer lives (Plummer 2005). Furthermore, as stated by Plummer and Stein (1994: 184): “There is a dangerous tendency for the new queer theorists to ignore ‘real’ queer life as it is materially experienced…” Wilchins (2004) argued that
for many queer people, queer scholars’ reflections on queer life is “too abstract and academic to be of value,” (p. 1). This oversight calls for an empirical application to test certain tenets asserted by theoreticians, as well as extend theory to explain a burgeoning community unfolding during queer’s second-wave of activity.

In more practical terms, queer theories’ central argument regarding diversity and living a non-normal counter, sexual and/or gender, narrative can be translated into testable ideas. As such, queer theory provides a point of entry in establishing a set of questions that test the theories foundational arguments. For example, do queer people have diverse sexual and/or gender experiences in keeping with the fluid nature of queer? At the same time, queer scholars put forth the notion that queer refutes identities altogether, thus any embrace of queer must be anti-identity.

To develop an empirically sound, theoretically-based understanding of queer as community, I selected an eclectic framework in which theory was tested, as well as advanced. Given critiques of queer theory as purely theoretical, I recognized queer and queer community might be found beyond the tenets; at the same time, these tenets provide an understanding of queer that may be empirically relevant. On the prior note, I employed aspects of grounded theory, rather than utilize it exclusively. Charmaz and Belgrave (2002) assert the approach selected follows a post-positivist approach. This approach is defined by an intention to contribute unique empirical knowledge that advances theory. In this case, I applied methods noted by grounded theory when writing and implementing the interview schedule. In keeping with Charmaz and Belgrave’s (2002) suggestion, I wrote the interview schedule purposefully intending exploratory and open language, and while I developed a series of probes, most probing resulted from the participants’ responses. As will be explored in more detail, grounded theory
also speaks to the importance of a theoretical sampling frame when attempting to advance theory. In conclusion, the theoretical framework allowed for an exploration of queer community from the perspective of existing theory, while providing space for new narratives to emerge and inform the research question and its theoretical implications.
3 METHODS

3.1 Methodology: A Qualitative Analysis

In this study, I asked: are we witnessing the emergence of a queer community. I turned to Bhattacharyya’s (1995) definition of community to frame the analysis. Community, in this case is defined “as solidarity, and solidarity [where] deeply shared identity and code for conduct serves to bound the concept in a distinctive and intrinsic manner (emphasis added),” (p. 61). Queer theory assists in assessing whether queer provides for both shared identity and code for conduct. The theory, at a rudimentary level, puts forth tenets, such as fluidity, diversity and non-normativity as central to understanding queer; yet, these tenets are empirically vague given the lack of attention to inspecting their embodied practice. In short, queer scholars rarely ask queer people how they understand queer, how they live queer, and if these understandings are shared among queers. While queer theory provides variables for consideration, given how little we know about queer as practice, this study also borrows elements from grounded theory, thus the exploratory portion of the study. As such, I created opportunities for the participants to explain the theoretical dynamics considered, as well as unique aspects not reflected previously in the literature to assess shared identity and code for conduct. In the end, this study used an eclectic theoretical frame to answer the research question.

Given the exploratory nature of the research question, the study was designed qualitatively. I collected data through in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one and relational interviews. This approach allowed for micro and meso-level perspectives to inform the findings. The relational interviews were critical in speaking to the shared aspects of community. It is one thing to look across one-on-one interviews to assess convergence and divergence, and quite another for convergence and divergence to emerge organically during a relational interview. This
blended approach to data collection is rare in the social sciences, even though the social sciences intend is to reflect on relationships and social dynamics at the micro, meso and macro levels.

The design and approach taken was informed by a group of colleagues and friends that embraced queer. The preliminary conversations I had with these queer friends and colleagues were critical to developing the sampling frame, recruitment strategy, provision of individual as well as relational interviews, as well as expanding the potential markers of shared identity and code for conduct. Indeed, this group felt strongly about assessing a range of queer experiences to get at queer community. Given diversity as a central ethos asserted by first-wave theoreticians, the sample must reflect a host of experiences to assess queer as community. The perspectives shared during these initial conversations are reflected in the sections of the Findings, as many accepted invitations to participate.

Regarding the inclusion of relational interviews, Eisikovits and Koren (2010) summarized the importance of this approach in the following, “The perspective resulting from contrasting partners’ views sheds light on new issues, such as the nature, type, and dynamics of their relationship…” (Eisikovits and Koren 2010: 1652). As a social scientist I am called to expand the vantage points that shape theory development. Illuminating queer as an identity and code for conduct presents an opportunity to include multiple perspectives on what being queer means as well as how queer is lived. Conducting individual and relational interviews put me in a better position to achieve the study’s aim from two different data vantage points, micro and meso.

3.2 Sampling

To honor the advice offered by the informal group of queer friends and colleagues, I developed a sampling frame intended to acquire a diverse group of participants. Glaser and
Strauss (1967) argued theoretical sampling selects individuals and associations as a means to compare and advance the data. Theoretical sampling allowed for shared identity and code for conduct to be refined as well as be defined from differing points of view. Unfortunately, given what little is empirically known about queer people, crafting a sampling frame theoretically appeared infinitely expansive, almost to the point as to make an achievable sample near impossible. Yet, some standard parameters were apparent from the literature. For example, given the diversity of individuals anecdotally embracing queer, a cross pollination of gender, sex, race/ethnicity, age, education level, social class, sexual experience as well as desire were essential characteristics to consider. As such, much attention and effort was granted to recruiting a diverse sample that reflected on queer theories’ narratives of difference, fluidity and being “othered,” thus non-normativity. The theoretical sampling frame included the following demographic and characteristic distinctions:

- **Gender**, e.g. femme, feminine, butch, genderqueer, gender-fuck, and masculine
- **Sex**, e.g. cisgender male, cisgender female, transman, and transwoman
- **Sexuality**, e.g. same-gender loving, different-gender loving, demisexual, sapiosexual, and pansexual
- **Race/ethnicity**, e.g. black/African American, Latinx (Hispanic), Caucasian, Asian American, and Native American
- **Education/degree**, e.g. less than high school, high school diploma, 2-year degree/trade school, bachelor’s degree, and advanced degree
- **Socio-economic status**, e.g. poverty-level, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, and wealthy
- **Relationship status**, e.g. single, dyadic couple, polyamorous, open relationship, and alternative partnership (e.g. sexually platonic but romantically involved, such as “fuck-buddies”)
During the recruitment phase, the theoretical sampling frame was cycled through in an attempt to achieve diversity, while also attending to saturation (“new data no longer sparks new insights,” Charmaz and Smith 2003: 107), as a standard practice in qualitative research.

This was a nonprobability sample selected through targeted recruitment and snowball methods. Eligibility criteria included being 18 years of age or older, and embracing queer in terms of their sexuality and/or gender. In the latter case, participants in one-on-one interviews and at least one of the relational interview participants must have used the term “queer” when screened to describe their sexuality and/or gender. Other monikers may have been used when asked, “How do you identify your gender and your sexuality,” but one of the monikers needed to be “queer.” It is important to note, in keeping with queer theory, the distinction of queer as sexuality and queer as gender are not categorically lived in ways distinct from other identity labels, such as transgender, gay or lesbian. Some overlap was anticipated. This study, however, was not about gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, heterosexuals nor transgender, cisgender men or women; if a potential participant did not specifically mention queer, they were excluded (see Appendix A: Screening Script). All participants were gifted a $15 incentive upon completion of each interview.

3.3 Recruitment, Scheduling and Setting

The recruitment plan involved active and passive methods. Active methods included approaching people who had previously disclosed embracing queer, e.g. the group of friends and colleagues who assisted in framing the study, as well as those believed to embrace queer, e.g. if they were present in a location known to be frequented by queer people. This approach assisted in achieving the theoretical sampling frame as I was able to target particular intersections, e.g.
African Americans, when directly approaching potential participants. Eleven participants were recruited through active means.

In terms of passive methods, I distributed posters and advertisements via social media, and posted announcements through list serves. In keeping with the theoretical sampling frame, passive recruitment means targeted various networks of queer people, e.g. Wussy Magazine, the Queer Ph.D. Network on Facebook, and a polycule network of pansexuals. In addition, I incorporated a “snowball” sampling mechanism, which was implemented during screenings and interviews. An additional $5 incentive was built into the snowball recruitment plan whereby each successful recruit, as defined by a completed interview, resulted in the additional incentive for the participant that referred the person. Seven participants were referred through this snowball approach. Specific attention was granted to the sampling frame to target characteristics/demographics/experiences where participation had not been achieved. For example, it became increasingly difficult to sample people aged 40 and older, snowball efforts were made to select participants from this age cohort.

Interview scheduling included the participant’s choice in terms of interview location, date, time, and means of identification (if referred via a means other than researcher-to-person). I followed a chronological scheduling pattern when setting up interviews. At the time of screening I also assessed the participant’s choice in terms of how they wish to communicate, e.g. telephone or email. All personal, or identifiable information collected at the time of screening was kept in a secure location and will be destroyed once I have successfully defended the dissertation. Maintaining personally identifiable information in a secure location helps ensure confidentiality (see Human Subjects – Protecting Confidentiality below).
Interviews were conducted in various locations. These locations included participant’s homes as well as public locations, such as coffeehouses and restaurants. Two participants selected to be interviewed via video-based Skype due to transportation concerns, yet these participants did live in the greater Atlanta metropolitan area, in keeping with the larger sample. Each participant/relationship selected where they felt comfortable answering questions, understanding the nature of the study and the personal nature of what was to be asked. A number of participants selected public locations in which others were present, and no participant(s) changed their selected location upon arrival, even after I offered to move the interview to another, more private location.

3.4 Sample Size

Thirty-one people participated in this study. Of these 31, 17 participated in a relational interview and 14 in a one-on-one interview. Fourteen of the relational interview participants were in a romantic/sexual coupling, of which four couples, thus eight participants, self-reported being legally married, and six participants were part of distinct polyamorous networks. The final three relational participants were housemates. In total, 42 interviews were completed averaging approximately one hour per interview. All but two individual interview participants completed two interview sittings. Of the two who completed one sitting, one exhausted the interview schedule in a single sitting, and the other reflected calendar conflicts. In addition, nine people were screened, yet did not participate. One of the nine identified as lesbian, and when asked about queer specifically, they said they personally do not identify as such, even though “many gay men and lesbians embrace the term.” The other eight people dropped off at the point of scheduling, and while multiple attempts were made to schedule these people, responses were
never received. As such, I was unable to assess non-responders characteristics, or reasons for dropping off.

Reflecting on the primary criteria – being queer, 30 participants’ embraced queer at their time of interview, and one had recently transitioned from queer, referring to himself (his pronoun) as “same-gender loving.” This participant was part of a relational interview in which his partner embraced queer. In total, 26 participants noted queer as a means to understand their sexuality. Specifically, 17 participants responded they were “simply queer,” two participants said they were lesbian/queer, two said pansexual/queer, and two claimed gay/queer. Other sexuality-based monikers included: bisexual/pansexual, lesbian, polyamorous, polyamorous/demisexual/”ultimately queer,” queer/bi, queer/sapiosexual, same gender loving, and “simply sexual.” Regarding gender, six participants mentioned they embrace queer. Other queer-related gender monikers mentioned, included: agender, gender fluid, genderqueer, femme genderqueer, non-binary trans, non-binary male presenting, trans* (the participant noted the “*” denotes queer), and transgender woman/queer. Two participants embraced a “non-binary/queer” gender expression, four identified as transmen and four as male, or cis-male. The largest gender-related group were the thirteen participants that identified as female/cis-female/femme female and/or woman.

3.5 Data Collection and Coding

At the beginning of each interview, participants were oriented to the voluntary nature of their participation. At this point, informed consent was obtained (see Appendix B: Informed Consent). Semi-structured interview schedules were implemented soliciting participant narratives regarding their understanding and experiences as queer people, as well as to assess their backgrounds. Two distinct interview schedules were developed: one for the one-on-one
interviews (see Appendix C: Semi-structured Individual Questionnaire), and the other for the relational interviews (see Appendix D: Semi-structured Relational Questionnaire). Interviewing individuals as well as members of relationships offered distinct perspectives on queer. The prior provided micro perspectives, while the latter provided meso perspectives. Both vantage points provided unique and compelling opportunities that illuminated on queer as a shared identity and their code for conduct.

In keeping with Seidman (1998) and Kvale (2007), the interview schedules involved a series of sequential questions intending to build trust and rapport as well as establish foundational parent codes for analysis. The parent codes informed the analytic categories along with the underlying properties that informed queer as community. For example, I asked, “What does queer mean to you/(each of) you, and how do you see yourself as queer?” (Appendices C & D). I intended these questions to assess if there is shared identity, and what is being shared. It also informed the parent code, “Understanding queer – What does queer mean to the participant/how did they define and/or see queer,” in the coding scheme (Appendix E: Coding Scheme). Regarding the theoretical application of queer theory and grounded theory, no formal question asked about a theoretical tenet, rather the questions explored particular applications of queer, wondering if the tenets would emerge organically. To provide a more solid foundation for the theoretical categories, the core questions related to queer were asked of all participants. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for probing based on participant responses; as such, this structure resulted in a series of participant-informed narratives, e.g. policing. This approach extended an understanding of the nuances involved in being queer, in a community.

Interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder. Each recording was transcribed verbatim. A transcription service was solicited to expedite the transcription process. Of the 42
interviews conducted, 26 were transcribed by the service and 16 by myself. Data cleaning was completed on every interview transcribed by the service, meaning I listened to the original recording while reviewing the transcription for missing words, misappropriated text as well as errors in transcribing. The integrity of the original transcription was maintained and the data cleaned version was saved as a separate file; the data cleaned files were the version coded and analyzed.

Once data cleaning was complete, the cleaned/final transcripts and interview schedules were reviewed to develop the coding scheme (see Appendix E). Base interview questions – those asked of all participants – provided parent codes, while participants’ individual and relational responses informed the child and grandchild codes. For example, I asked, “Do you think there is such a thing as queer sex, and if so what and/or who is involved?” (Appendices C & D). This question resulted in the parent code, “Sexuality as queer – The participant reflected on queer as sexual desire, behavior, and/or identity,” (Appendix E). Whereas, response narratives informed the child codes, e.g. “Queer as sexual desire” and “Queer as sexual behavior,” and “Queer problematizes sexual identities,” as well as grandchild codes, e.g. “Queer sex: Yes” and “Queer Sex: No.” (Appendix E). This approach bridges the questionnaire (what was asked) to the codes, which then informed the themes, e.g. queer sex. Developing the coding scheme was an iterative process, whereby, as each transcript was read, codes were added, refined and defined. The coding scheme was finalized only after all transcripts were reviewed.

3.6 Data Analysis

After finalizing the coding scheme, the transcripts, along with the scheme were uploaded in NVivo®. Each transcript was then re-read and coded according to the final coding scheme. All coding was completed by myself, and random inspections of applied codes were reviewed.
against the code’s definition to ensure valid application of codes. Once all transcripts were coded, I returned to my definition of community – shared identity and shared code for conduct – and grouped relevant codes according to their ability to reflect on whether they informed “shared identity” and/or “code for conduct.” I then considered whether saturation was achieved, and if so, to what degree. At the same time, divergent opinions and experiences were flagged to ensure a range of perspectives reflect on queer community, specifically communities’ shared identity and code for conduct components. Divergence does not negate shared, rather, divergence provides alternate understandings of foundational aspects of what is being shared. This perspective is in keeping with queer’s tenet of diversity and fluidity; I allowed and accounted for diverse perspectives on the component parts of queer community. Unfortunately, time did not allow for participant verification or feedback on the coding scheme, or analytic framework.

3.7 Human Subjects – Protecting Confidentiality

This study was approved by Georgia State University’s IRB (H16115). To protect participant’s confidentiality, I asked each participant to select a pseudonym as a means to identify their stories and experiences. Most participants selected their own pseudonym; yet, in one case, I suggested a nickname, and the participant agreed to it. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate, as noted by their signature on the Informed Consent (see Appendix B). Finally, all materials linking the participant to their pseudonym, or means of identification, e.g. contact information, will be destroyed once the study is complete.

Unique ethical concerns confronted the relational interviews, given the parties were intimately involved with one another. Forbat and Henderson (2003) drew attention to a number of these potential ethical concerns: 1. Conflict of interest whereby the interviewer can be caught in-between the interviewees, 2. Imbalances within the interviewee’s relationship, 3. Taking sides
in interviewee’s disagreements, 4. Intrusion through disclosure of what one interviewee says they do not want the other to hear, 5. Inclusion by ensuring each interviewee fully understands and has the capacity to leave the study at their discretion, 6. Influence of one interviewee on the other over what is said and how it is expressed, and 7. The potential to disclose one interviewee’s statements at the point of result dissemination. The authors also provided guidelines to ensure ethical concerns are addressed in advance, if not as they arise. It is important to note, several of these concerns relate to separate interviews with related people, which I did not conduct.

Relational interviews were conceived, and occurred among members with all parties present.

While not all ethical issues can be prevented, I draw attention to several concerns I felt were more likely as a result of a relational interview. At no point during any of the relational interviews did I feel ethical concerns arose. Participants in relational interviews did disagree with one another, but no disagreement posed a threat to the other participant’s ability to express their views. Furthermore, concerns regarding conflict were explicitly addressed at the beginning of each relational interview (see Appendix D). At no time did I feel relational interviewees attempted to bully or hinder the other from expressing their opinion or telling their experiences, nor did I feel “caught in the middle,” or asked to side with one participant over the other.

In total, all participants voluntarily participated and were provided opportunities to express themselves or not. In total, over 42 hours of recorded interview data reflected on the participants’ experiences, perceptions of shared identity and code for conduct informing the research question on queer community. The perspectives shared mirrored as well as advanced how I understood and had come to embrace queer over two decades ago.
3.8 Reflexivity – A “First-waver’s” Lens in a “Second-wave” World

Like many who grow up in America, my introduction to queer was “smear the queer” – an inane game involving a ball or some object the players sought to take possession. While the object was desirable, being the “queer” wasn’t, as it meant you became the target of the other players’ goal to pry the object from the queer, by whatever means necessary. Broadly speaking, I grew up understanding being queer was not something one wanted to be. The common use of queer was pejorative; thus, I understood to be queer is to be despised, ridiculed, and bullied. This understanding changed in the fall of 1993.

During my junior year at college, I chaired Act OUT, the activist committee of OUT: Indiana University’s Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Student Union. Early in the academic year, the committee brainstormed activities for the up-coming semester. During this meeting a committee member suggested we consider some of the recent activities undertaken by Queer Nation.

“Queer Nation?” I am sure I asked myself. “What in the world are they all about, and why would they chose such a name?” The committee member who suggested we look at their activities, shared a copy of the Queer Nation Manifesto, along with a telephone number for, what I currently believe was the Chicago chapter. Shortly after reading the Manifesto, I had a now vague phone conversation with one of the chapter members. As a result of that conversation, I come to understand queer was being reclaimed as a means to reassert a liberationist stance that fights a world hostile to anyone that isn’t “straight,” meaning heterosexual. Queer Nation was also taking a stand against posturing that intended to “normalize” the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community, as well as any moves to extract a subgroup from the community – meaning, we must embrace the L, the G, the B, and the T. In the wake of this
conversation, and as I immersed myself in taking on institutional and societal homophobia and homonegativity, I did so, in part, by declaring, “I am queer.”

For the next two years, I continued my involvement in the LGBT/Queer student movement at Indiana University, and in Bloomington, Indiana. Regarding queer specifically, after being elected President of OUT, I put forth a motion to retitle the group, OUT: Indiana University’s Queer Student Union – the motion failed, but the spirit of building a movement that addressed all sexual and gender non-conformist’s demands and needs remained. Toward this end, the local movement’s overall efforts resulted in Indiana University and the City of Bloomington including “sexual orientation” in their non-discrimination clauses, the establishment of a university-based LGBT Student Center, and a series of campus-based kiss-ins that dominated local media and classroom conversations for months. From these experiences, I grew a profound respect for what I call “first-wave queer” activism. We acted for change, for our lives, and the right to live our lives as we see fit.

After graduating, I moved on to larger urban landscapes that presented more dynamic challenges for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans, and queers. HIV/AIDS continued to decimate the community, and other prominent concerns, e.g. homelessness, poverty, breast and cervical cancer, and intimate violence, came into view. Within a year of moving, I took a position at a historically gay and lesbian health clinic that had evolved into the second largest AIDS service organization in the United States. At that time, HIV rates among gay and bisexual men in DC were Sub-Saharan Africa levels, which is to say that the situation was devastating. While I remained committed to the first-wave queer agenda and ethos, day-to-day life circumstances took center stage. People are more important than ideology and politics, even though both influence the people. As a result, I became less interested in fighting for a queer nation, and more
interested in working with all sexual and gender non-conformists to improve our health and well-being.

As the years passed, my use of queer diminished. Over the decades I moved from one large urban center to another, and found myself more and more integrated into a world dominated by gay men. As a result, I struggled to bridge the gay male world with that of lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people. Along the path, queer seemed to fall out of favor, other than its use in academic classrooms, which I cycled in and out over the years. Queer theory, from this cycling, remained a relevant framework to understand how people that have been othered are socially positioned. Over successive stints in graduate school, most prominently my time at San Francisco State University in the Human Sexuality Studies Program, this theoretical framework brought queer back into view. Yet, it wasn’t until 2013, when I moved to Atlanta, Georgia to complete doctoral studies in Sociology, did I find queer once again used as a living, breathing means to understand how people situate themselves, and understand themselves. This reintroduction sparked the interest in conducting this study.

All of this is to say that I view queer as having ebbed and flowed over generational waves of activity. The first wave took shape in the 1980s and early 90s, when I came to embrace queer. Now a second wave of activity is unfolding. My lens is shaped by my involvement in the first-wave of queer activity, and all that has come since. I hope my subjectivity results in understanding and empathy, rather than judgement or a narrowed view of what it means to be queer now, during this second-wave. All the same, I applaud what is happening, yet understand that wanting queer to be community, does not make it so.
4 DATA

4.1 Participant Profiles and Queer Awakenings

Given the centrality of being “othered,” as noted in the prior reflexive narrative, I wish to provide each participant their own space to frame their story, and how they came to embrace queer. In addition, the following participant profiles and selection of narratives speak to the degree to which I achieved the theoretical sampling. Particular challenges arose regarding characterization, or rather “fitting” participants into bounded identities. Indeed, several participants did not fit standard categorizations, or did not ascribe to standard approaches of classification. For example, when asked race and ethnicity, one participant noted these characteristics are not understood the same in their country of birth, as in the United States. After some discussion, this participant said they check the “Latina/o” (herein after referred to as Latinx) box based on their place of birth. Another participant identified as African American, yet her (accepted pronoun) parental heritage consisted of African American, American Indian and Caucasian. Another participant was born of Caucasian heritage, yet was adopted and raised by a family that immigrated from South America. In sum, when asked their primary racial and/or ethnic identity, 21 participants identified as Caucasian/white, six as Latinx, and four as African American/black.

Based on the 30 participants that provided their age – one participant would only say that they are “in their 30s” – the average age was 31, with a range from 19 to 45. In terms of socio-economics, 18 participants noted they consider themselves either poor, lower class or lower middle class. Eleven participants claimed a middle class to upper middle class life, and the rest (n = 2) did not provide a response to this question. This was a highly educated sample with 14

1 All names were changed, or redacted in accordance with standard confidentiality practice.
participants currently holding an advanced degree, nine had a bachelor’s degree, seven had some college or vocational/trade school training, and one had graduated high school. As will be discussed in detail, not fitting or unwilling to fit into standard demographic categorizations is congruent with how the participants understood identity, in light of their embrace of *queer*. Theoretically speaking, queer problematizes traditional identity categories, and this sample lived this assertion, and in ways beyond sexuality and gender.

To present intersections of individual participant’s background, while giving voice to their lived experiences, the following offers a participant-based characteristic profile along with a narrative excerpt. The vignettes provide a snapshot related to their embrace of queer, e.g. being othered or experiences with marginalized social positions, suggesting the foundations for, or beginnings of the participants’ adoption of queer. For example, several participant vignettes tell of non-normative, or rather same-sex/poly sexual experiences. Other participants discussed coming to terms with their non-conforming gender, and their subsequent transition. Finally, some participants reflected on embracing a non-normative queer sense of self via conflict with their family of origin’s religion. The centralizing theme is non-normativity, of countering societal expectations or experiencing life in a counter narrative. The excerpts give a glimpse into the milieus reflecting on adoptions of queer.

**Adelina** was 24 years old at the time of the interview, and married to Isaac. Adelina embraced a queer, non-binary/female gendered self. Adelina was white, bisexual/pansexual and claimed to be “a lesbian married to a man, because it turns out that I most often attracted to women.” The following supports this description and introduces us to the fluid nature of sexuality as asserted by queer theoreticians. In essence, we are more than a moment-in-time and cannot be boxed according to bounded identity labels.
When I was 13, me and my best friend – she was a female, 15 – we had like this stupid made-up… basically we played make believe. What did we call it? Live action role-playing, “LARPing,” based on an anime show. We would do it every weekend: Friday, Saturday, and Sunday night for like 8 hours throughout the night… It was a blast. Then the characters started to feel something for each other. At the time I didn't know how to think about it clearly. Once I realized it and looked back on it, we liked each other. [We] didn't know how to deal with it so we had to make up characters so we could act on it. Which is such an interesting coping mechanism. This went on for two years. We got to the point where her character and my character would have pretend sex. We would be down to our underwear but not actually be doing anything, but it is like mentally and emotionally we were there for like years... in the end I was like, “I am not acting anymore… I would really like to actually do the thing…”… I have always known, since I was a kid that I was not going to just get married to a guy and that is it. Wait till marriage, then like vanilla, that's my life. I always knew that there is something different about me but I didn't have a word for it.

**Isaac** and Adelina shared custody of Isaac’s two daughters from a previous marriage. Isaac was 37, held a master’s degree in a technology-related field, and, while Isaac accepted being white, he modified this by noting a bloodline that includes American Indian. Isaac identified as “pansexual/queer.” In the following, Isaac, a self-identified non-binary person, discussed a her/istory of attraction to other male presenting persons. Isaac, like Adelina, spoke to the fluid nature of sexuality and gender, thus their experiences support the complex interplay of gender and sexuality in how queer is embodied.

There are times that we've [referring to Adelina] had sexual experiences where we're both thinking of me as being a woman, which was relatively recent. And when we had that experience, it seemed – I think for both of us – that was a really enlightening experience. And I also have – you know, sometimes I have really what I would call aggressive sexual desires, a very sort of "top" role for both men and women. And then every once in a while I go through [a] phase where I feel a very passive, receptive sexual desire, primarily for men.

**Allister** was a “fair-skinned Latina” who embraced being genderqueer and queer. When asked their age, Allister would only say they (preferred pronoun) are “in their 30s.” Allister moved to Atlanta to complete an advanced degree. In the following, Allister described an introduction to queer and how the concept “fit” their sense of person.
As soon as I heard the word [queer], it was like one of those things…where you know something, but you don't have the word to explain it, and then you find that word? And you're like, 'ha, that's it.' Like that's what it was for me... I never identified before that. I just didn't identify because nothing fit.

**Ambrose** and Lucien were in a polyamorous relationship. Ambrose identified as gender fluid, was 33 years old, white, and lives with their (they/them, were preferred pronouns) parents until they can establish economic stability. Ambrose had a Master’s degree in a social service field. They described their sexuality as polyamorous, which they viewed as queer. Ambrose was born in the Midwest having moved to the Atlanta area in early childhood. This narrative tells of growing up in a “normative” environment that accepted sexual exploration, even encouraged it. This experience served as foundational for their latter embrace of queer.

I was masturbating at, like, 6…and at 14, I think, I started finding objects to put in places, right, as kids do. And one of the objects I found was one of my dad's screwdrivers, and it was perfect. And it happened to be one of his favorite screwdrivers, and so we kept trading back and forth. He'd find it by my bed, and I'd go find it in the garage, and he'd find it by my bed, and I'd go find it in the garage. And he got tired of it. He went to my mom and was like, ‘Will you please take her to the store and buy her, her own?’ Neither one of them thought, ‘Let’s go to a sex store and buy her a dildo,’ because I wasn't old enough. I was, like, 14... So my mom takes me down the street to Ace Hardware and is, like, walking up and down the screwdriver aisle, like feeling the handles! Right! And I'm like, ‘What about this one?’ She's like, ‘Yeah, but that rubber's going to dry you out.’ And I was like, ‘This is happening. This is happening in my life.’ But yeah, that's a big contrast. Because my parents really did, 100% open-minded.

**Lucien** lived with a cisgender male partner that accepted and embraced Lucien’s polyamory. They self-described as lower middle class and had completed some vocational training post high school. Lucien was 28 years old, a transman and polyamorous, demisexual, and “ultimately queer.” Lucien was European by birth, yet was adopted by a family of Latin heritage; thus, while white by birth, Lucien was raised culturally Latinx. Lucien described an early sexual history grounded in diversity and polyamory, which served as foundational to their adoption of queer.
Starting in my junior year, I met these two freshmen... They were one of those couples that have been together since the dawn of time... I guess at some point Dawn had had a conversation with Michael in which she was talking about how she really liked me, and Michael was like, ‘Well, I really like her, too.’ And we [all] started dating. And this was really my first poly experience because it wasn't – well, both of them were still virgins, and they'd never had sex, and they hadn't planned on having sex yet, so it was more of, like, an actual, traditional, kind of dating sort of thing. It was so funny to me because I still didn't know what poly was at the time. But we had rules, we had written down different rules... It was really funny. Like ideals that you see in the adult poly community and stuff.

Andi offered a tapestry when describing her (preferred pronoun) race, noting a primary identity as African-American while describing her parents as multi-racial, including African American, American Indian and Caucasian. She held two masters degrees, and was pursuing a PhD at the time of the interview. Andi was 32, identified as a cis-gender woman, married to a cis-gender man, with whom she has two children. Andi stated this picture, on the surface, appears heteronormative; however, the following argues the contrary, and helped paint a picture of Andi’s queer sense of her sexuality as non-normative.

And then I started hearing, like, people using it [queer] themselves. But the men that I saw using it presented, like, to me – I thought they were just gay men, and so for me, I just thought it was like, you know, the “N” word or the “B” word and they were just sort of like reclaiming the word and saying, ‘Fine, call me queer. You don't have to call me gay, but I'm fine with queer.’ And then, like I said, my friend brought it to me in a different way, right? A way of sort of giving you more leverage and fluidity over your own identity. I was 19 when she first brought it to me, and it just sounded really good, and at that point, I still was kind of identifying as bisexual. I was on a break from my then fiancé. We took lots of breaks, me and him... And I was dating a lesbian – well, dating's a loose term. We were sleeping together and having dinner sometimes. And she had just broken up with someone, and we were both having this issue with the women that we had been dating, trying to sort of like construct an identity for us. And the girl at the time, she had very specific ways. I mean, everyone has specific ways in which they have sex, but she had very specific ways in which she thought lesbian sex should be performed. And as someone who had been penetrated before and thought penetration was, you know, enjoyable, it was concerning to me. Because I did – you know, I enjoyed being penetrated.

Andre was 25. He (an accepted pronoun) identified as African American. Andre recently transplanted to Atlanta having moved to find an audience for his artistic talents. Andre described
himself as a cis-gender, queer/gay man with some college and a socio-economic status that
“could be better.” At a young age, Andre understood being sexually “othered” reflective of his
gender appearance. In this excerpt we begin to understand what queer responds to – the pressures
of normativity and conforming.

In the first grade there was a girl I would play with. Back then I had really long hair and
it was spikey and my mom would pull it back and put it in braids. I remember I got teased
about it and [people] would say things about looking like a girl. I didn't really care about
what they thought about my gender. I didn't like feeling like someone else could
humiliate me if they just wanted to. I guess kids hear things about ‘gay’ or ‘queer’ and
she kind of like, broke up with me. I will never forget that, it was in the winter time and I
had just got off the monkey bars and she was like, ‘Andre, I would like to play with you,
but I can't because everybody thinks you are gay.’ I didn't even know what that meant. I
was in the first grade. Back then that was a slur that people would say to mean you aren't
cool. You aren't tough. I immediately started running from that. ‘I can't identify with that
because people aren't going to want to be friends with me.’ That was my experience all
the way up to high school. I can't be this because people are going to push me away from
them.

Nazim was romantically partnered with Andre. Nazim was 21 and identified as
Hispanic/Latínx. Nazim graduated high school and had aspirations to go into medicine, an
aspiration fostered from family history. As he (an accepted pronoun) described in the following,
this family history included several sexual minorities, which translated into a supportive
atmosphere for his self-acceptance as being a gay/queer man – an acceptance of queer as an
umbrella term for LGBT.

In my family, I'm, like, the third gay person, so it's pretty okay in my family... My uncle
lives in L.A. He's a little bit older now, so he's – I think he's married [to a person of the
same sex] and all that. He's found his partner. I also have an older aunt. She comes from a
side of the family that a majority of the time [we only get together at] family parties, so
we don't really interact that much, but we do see each other from time to time. And my
uncle who lives in Mexico and is a doctor... he's gay... I know that he did it [lived as an
openly gay man and practices medicine]; I can do it here. So I like that.

Angelica was 36 years old, white, a first generation American (her parents immigrated
from Europe), queer woman, living “near the poverty line” reflective of her graduate student
status. Angelica grew up in a middle-class home in another state having moved to Atlanta nearly a decade ago. Angelica was a devout atheist dating a person of Jewish heritage. This excerpt summarizes how she (an accepted pronoun) came to adopt queer, and reinforces queer as related, but distinct from gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender.

I came out in 7th grade. I was 14 or 13. I came out as bisexual. I specifically had a very major crush on one girl, not only on one girl but... I very quickly went back into the closet because my best friend told everybody that I was having orgies with everyone else. I was like, ‘This is ridiculous.’ Having orgies in the 7th grade is not cool. In my group now, it would totally be cool, but at the time, for a 7th grader, it was not cool. So I went back into the closet. I did not hear the word queer; I didn't know that word. This was in the mid-90s when I was a 7th grader. I knew the word lesbian, but I liked boys too. I felt kind of in-between so I didn't completely identify as a lesbian. Then when I heard the word *queer*, like in my early 20s... I was like, ‘Oh, that is definitely me.’

**Blanche** moved to Atlanta to complete her (an accepted pronoun) advanced degree, and also lives near the poverty line. Blanche embraced life as a white, cis-gender woman who viewed her sexuality as a queer, lesbian. Blanche came into her queer, lesbianism experientially. Her sexual herstory included cis-gender women, a transman, and cis-gender men, but she always felt disconnected from the latter. This disconnect also introduces us to significant fractures within the LGBTQ community, thus supportive of queer as semi-independent. This fracturing will be explored in more detail.

Yep, once...with one man. Well, how do you define sex? ...I had sex with one guy and I was kind of traumatized by it. Yea, penile-vaginal. I did give head a lot. I thought that was what I was supposed to do. I never enjoyed it, but that is kind of beyond the point. It doesn't matter if I enjoyed it or not. It didn't fit who I was. Things you have always known about yourself but haven't really been given the opportunity to articulate. When I got to college I was fortunate enough to be in a women's studies environment that taught queer theory and I was like, I don't have to feel bad about this shit [like] I did before. It is what it is. There is some conflict, even among the lesbian community... There is that expectation of being a gold star, [meaning] you haven't had penetrative sex with a man. To say my friend isn't a lesbian or queer is to say that I am not a lesbian or queer either. ‘Who gets to make up those definitions and who gets to decide who exists within these parameters? Who the fuck?’ I have had my fair share. Yes, I have had lots of different types of sex with women and a transman, and I only say that because they do not identify as a woman.
**Buttercup** and Bunny were legally married; both were raised in the Midwest and moved to Atlanta in young adulthood to adulthood, respectively. Buttercup was 45, preferred not to identify with a racial background, but stated they were raised white. Buttercup embraced life as a femme woman who is queer, lives an upper middle class life with Bunny, and has some vocational training post high school. In the proceeding, Buttercup described how she came to view non-binary gender and polyamory as desirable, as well as reflective of her “untraditional, yet traditional” Midwestern family herstory.

He [her dad] did leave an awful lot of porn around the house. He also showed me an awful lot of porn. The very first porn I ever saw was *Hustler*… and here are these beautiful women with these gorgeous tits, and I'm like, ‘Oh, how beautiful is that?’ Even as a young person, I appreciated women… So he shows me this centerfold, and I'm like, ‘Oh, beautiful!’ You know, beautiful bodies, beautiful colors, you know, and then he turns the page, and then they have these, really nice looking, rock hard penises, and I'm like, ‘Oh, my God, I can have both things… Really?’ And I'm very, very young. I'm a preteen at this point. And that was a very impressionable thing for me. Because I'm like, ‘Okay, so, am I saying that I like both things?’ You have to think, as a child, what questions would have been going through your head. The other side to that is the polyamory side – I grew up watching my father cheat on my mother. I knew it was happening, couldn't stop it. The only time that I ever remember my parents fighting was the time that they kicked me out of the house and told me to go play in the creek because they wanted me to not hear them yelling and what they were yelling about. But I knew for a fact that my father was cheating on my mother… I [also] know my mother wasn't stupid. So which woman was she? The woman with her head up in the clouds who kept turning a blind eye? Or the woman who just accepted it as her fate? And I decided I would never, ever be either of those women. And so I kind of turned out to be a little bit of a player, like my dad, in the fact that I would never settle for monogamy. I think monogamy itself, in my world, is a lie. I don't think you can have a monogamous heart, a monogamous brain, or a monogamous body. We have the ability for too much growth and too much openness to chop our opportunities off like that.

**Bunny** had two bachelor’s degree. She practiced Santeria, identified as a queer female who was also sapiosexual, white and 40 years old. In the following, we see how Bunny and Buttercup came to be partnered in a non-normative, aka queer, fashion.

Neal [to Bunny]: Do you get misread a lot?
Bunny: No. I think I misread.

Buttercup: There is a story to that. This is the story of how we got together. Bunny and I have known each other for 14, 15 years now? We've known each other for a very long time, known each other through each other's relationships, kept in touch here and there, but there was one very specific thing that she did not know about me, and I happened to be outside on a porch at a birthday party talking with an ex-girlfriend about how difficult it is sometimes, with women, especially lipstick women, because we're touchy. We're gushy. We're complimentary. You know? We're not afraid of invading personal space. And you're unsure where that line crosses into flirtation. And somehow we wished that there was a sign, you know, shake your tail feathers, or something that flipped off a bell to go, ‘Hey! That one over there.’ Well, she overheard this conversation and never knew about me.

Bunny: Now at the time I was dating her husband.

Buttercup: True.

Bunny: It was his birthday party. And I stole his wife right out from under him, so…

Cyan and Rose were also married and lived a “not extremely poor, but not middle class” life. Both held master’s degrees; Cyan in an art-related field and Rose in the social sciences. Rose was pursuing a PhD, while Cyan was professionally engaged in the local arts scene. Cyan was a 29 year old, white, queer male, and avowed atheist. In the following, Cyan spoke of the fractures within the LGBTQ community, yet on a more politically-charged level - the othering that takes place within an already marginalized community. Cyan’s story introduces an analytic thread that will be explored in more detail, the political dynamics of queer.

Awhile back when I was working for… a LGBT retail/novelty store [Rose: sex store], sex store... I had been working there for like a year, I think. They had a position opening up and one of my transgender friends wanted to apply. Every queer person... wanted that job, so I was like, ‘Yea, you should apply.’ Later on I was asking the manager, what [they thought]. ‘How did the interview go?’ They were like, ‘We're probably not going to hire them because we don't think transgender people work well here.’ I was like, ‘What? Seriously?’ This was always in my head that this is a place I can go and be gay, be queer and to hear him say that was like, ‘what the hell; what are you doing to this community.’ His reasoning was that they had had a transgender person working there previously and they had...I don't know the exact story but they had done sexual things on the job, in the store, and somebody found out and they got fired. Now he doesn't want anything to do with transgender people. That’s really crazy to me. After about a month I was like, ‘I got
to leave this place,’ and I left. Immediately [after] I left, I called [a national organization] and [a state-based civil rights group], emailed them first, and told them the story. The very next day I got a voicemail from the manager of the parent company, he actually is the owner of the [a] gay newspaper…, and he was essentially threatening me - if I went any further they are going to get a lawyer. I was very taken back and that was a political stance I took earlier in my life.

**Rose** was also 29. He (an acceptable pronoun) embraced being an African American, same gender loving, cis-male, and avowed atheist. Rose noted he previously embraced queer, but had recently been exposed to “same gender loving,” and found it spoke to him. In this excerpt, Rose described his sexual awakening.

First, there was a good bit of homoerotic wrestling. I was probably eight-ish, eight or nine. First one I can remember, ever remember was in fifth grade. He was my friend and we would talk about women, talk about girls, but I would...I showed him essentially how to masturbate, like showed with props. Then I tried to give him a blow job, but he didn't really want that. We kept doing other stuff though. He was really interested, but in kind of a non-sexual way. Kind of like curiosity. Can't really say it was like sexual. ‘What does yours look like? Do you do the same thing with yours as you do mine?’ That was fifth grade. I remember it vividly. All the while we were looking at straight porn, like magazines that we would keep hidden in his vents, his floor vents.

**D**, Milo and Mischa were housemates. D was 25, embraced being a white, culturally Jewish, cis-female who is pansexual/queer. D held a bachelor’s degree, yet worked in retail and lived a working class socio-economic life from a middle class background. Here, D described her (preferred pronoun) personality and the resulting harassment she dealt with as a result. This story provides context to her later embrace of a non-heteronormative sexuality.

I was bullied, especially in elementary school. I was just a really shy, quiet kid. I liked books. I remember being picked on, on the bus a lot. To the point I would get so quiet and I didn’t want them to notice me. I really wanted to disappear sometimes to the point I would sit on the bus...one time I rode the whole bus route. The bus driver finally realized at the end, ‘Oh my God, sweetie, why didn't you tell me at your stop.’ I was like, I don't speak on the bus because I didn't want to get made fun of. I got more confidence as I got older. In high school I was somewhere in between. I still feel that way now. I definitely wasn't a total outcast. I definitely wasn't popular. I had my group of friends. I got along with a bunch of different people. I think the point I realized, in high school, that I was bi – ‘I think I am bisexual.’
Milo was a white, transman, 23 years old and lived a sexuality understood as queer. Milo was raised in an upper middle class family, yet now lived a “working class” life. They held a bachelor’s degree in a social service field. Like D, in this excerpt, Milo described coming to terms with a non-normative sense of self as a process initiated in childhood.

I kind of repressed my gender identity through middle school, and all through high school. I was really unhappy...I remember telling my parents once that I felt really inadequate. I thought it was because of my clothes. I just didn't fit. I wasn't a girl. It was really hard for me to fit in. My brothers have always been super supportive. They were awesome. That really helped. I think I had a good childhood. There was definitely a lot of anxiety and a lot of repressed issues around gender, even sexuality. I never felt comfortable exploring. The town I grew up in was super, super white, very conservative, very straight. It is a lot better now. It is a lot more diverse. My high school didn't even have a GSA [gay-straight alliance] or anything until after I graduated. There was like one out gay person in my high school. I was never really given an opportunity to come in my identity at all while I was living at home.

Mischa was 23. They (preferred pronoun) identified as a white, non-binary trans, queer person. Mischa and Milo knew each other during their undergraduate years and had recently added D to their household. In this segment, Mischa talked about a foundational dynamic of queer, and what helps root queer as a movement.

I think that notion of healing also goes back to queerness in the 90s. ‘You think we are sick because we're different, but actually you are making us sicker because you have put us in this place and now we are just fucking dying. Can you please?’ This is the trauma of being told you are different and made to be sick, and actually there is nothing wrong with you.

Destiny identified as a white, female who was 31 years old and raised in a working class environment, in the Midwest. She (an accepted pronoun) embraced queer in terms of her sexuality and was pursuing a PhD at the time of her interview. Here, Destiny talked about her adoption of queer as the anti-identity, when all existing labels didn’t quite seem to fit – this theme was previously expressed in Allister’s excerpt.

When I really started embracing the word queer was in early college-ish. That was like, ‘I really like this.’ And I really liked the people who...it is like all those going to college
stories, where you kind of find yourself and your identity… I tried not to have an identity, and I thought that was queer in itself. A lot of my friends in high school didn't identify as anything, so actually, [looking] back, we were like a group of queer kids because we didn't have an identity. We didn't let identity and labels sort of define us. There were skater kids, then there were jocks, and then there was us [the queers].

Evie Jo referenced their gender and sexuality as queer. Evie Jo was a 30 years old, white, transgender woman, middle class and held a master’s degree in a health-related field. They are one of the few Atlanta-area natives, which included: D, Mischa, Milo, Adelina, Royce, Ambrose, Lucien and Hope. In this selection Evie Jo described a recent experience situated in a queer context, the burner community, which emerged a common source of community and sense of belonging mentioned by several participants.

Last spring I went to a burn. I was wandering around with a few of my camp mates, and I ran into someone who I had encountered a few months before on OK Cupid... They had apparently fallen ill for a while and fell off the Internet. We ran into each other and met for the first time, and spoke to each other for a while before we were able to piece together where we had met. There was just this strong connection. They were a non-binary, trans person who had previously spent some time as a transman and then de-transitioned into non-binary. They kind of rocked my world. It was one of those sort of ‘meet them early in the weekend, they become the entire weekend, and it's just them’ and I think there's an extent to which, this being a space where the two of us, even if not everyone we meet or not even most people we meet there are queer, we are ourselves, and we travel around amongst these non-queers, who generally speaking are either safe or well regulated. And so it enables these sorts of experiences where you run into someone who you sort of know, and then you have this fantastic queer weekend with them, where – it was a fun time, but I got carried away.

Gene came to the study via a snowball referral from Evie Jo. Gene was agender, 25, white, queer, and didn’t really want to talk about their current economic standing. Gene had a high school diploma with some college and practiced as a neo-pagan. In the following, Gene talked about growing up in an extended family blended with biological and chosen kin, including a same-sex couple. This story situates a participant’s evolution to queer in a supportive context in which LGBTQ people care for one another.
For a time, I had my two older brothers—who were a gay couple that my mom ended up meeting through the *Rocky Horror* cast that she and my sisters and I went to once we moved to Georgia. I started working with [the theater troupe] when I was, like 14 or 15, I think, maybe younger than that... They were the first people that I moved in with once I moved out of my mom's house, and me and my sisters called them our older brothers just because they, they went out of their way to take care of us, as much as they could. Like some of the times when our mom would just kind of fuck off and go to her boyfriend's house... she would just kind of leave us with $100 or $200 for groceries and then go kind off for ‘shrug’ amount of time. Usually it was about a month. And none of us could drive. $100 isn't much for groceries for three kids going through puberty for a month. And so between [the oldest sister] and [the youngest sister] and I, and I had my best friend and her mom helping me a little bit as well, and [older sister] had her boyfriend kind of taking care of her, like his parents would feed her pretty often, and my little sister had her own friends that she would go and have dinner with every other night or so, but [the older brothers], because they were—they weren't school friends. They were older. They could actually get around places. They kind of picked up a lot of my mom's slack when I was going through, like, 14 to 19...

**Green** was the youngest participant at 19 and had only recently come to embrace queer. Green identified as a white, female, queer/lesbian. Green and her family immigrated when she was elementary school age, and, at the time of the interview, was pursuing an undergraduate degree. Here, in the first of three narratives speaking on sexuality and religion, Green talked about attending services with her dad, and the social *othering* she feels in this context.

My dad likes, wants me to go to church with him, but it always makes me uncomfortable because I know everyone is looking at me and I know that I am the elephant in the room. They all want to ask me something so much but they just won't. So they just ignore me. He is over there with his friends talking and I am just waiting for us to go home. [He is] Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox. Also it is a really long service and you have to stand for most of it and it is at like 9 am, not like Noon, so... I have been kind of having this spiritual crisis of sorts for a while. I am still trying to find where I fit in.

**Hope** identified as a 30 year old, female, queer, white, poor or “lower class” reflective of her student status. Hope holds a bachelor’s degree in the social sciences, but returned to school for a health-related degree. Like Green, in this excerpt, Hope discussed the complex relationship between religious heritage and sexuality, and how sometimes the philosophy and/or political conflict between the two fosters interpersonal challenges related to a queer sense of self.
Okay, so I grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family. So what that means is, in certain ways, my parents are kind of open but really, it was a very conservative religious upbringing. For elementary, middle, and high school, I went to private Jewish schools and didn't even really know non-Jewish people until high school... To give you an idea of the level of religion, from Friday nights until Saturday nights every week, there was no electricity, no writing, separate meat and milk, no cars, no money. We had two separate sinks and two separate dishwashers for meat and milk dishes... So I was pretty religious until maybe age 12 or 13... I, starting at middle school age, was really socially awkward, so that's an important part of my upbringing because I was with a certain group of kids and then I skipped a grade and was in a totally different group of kids, at the age that kids start having cliques and being mean and stuff, so that wasn't great for me. Around 12 or 13, I started questioning religious stuff because there's a lot of stuff that just wasn't adding up for me, one of which was – it's like, well, ‘Gay people are wrong’ – Leviticus or whatever it says. ‘A man shall not lie with a man,’ even though it doesn't say anything about how a woman should lie. But, you know, whatever. We all are like, take your interpretations. But I also knew from a young age that, you know, I was attracted to women as well, and so I was like – and not even just for myself but even just for, like, other people. I was like, ‘Well, if gay people are wrong, I don't know how committed I can be to this religion.’ That was one of the things. There were lots of other things. I started to ‘lose my religion,’ as the REM song would say.

Iris was born in South America and, like Green, immigrated to the United States in elementary school. Iris identified with being a femme, genderqueer, Latinx who graduated high school and is pursuing a degree at 27 years old. Economically, Iris is “broke as shit.” In keeping with the theme of religion, in the following, Iris painted a picture of how her Catholic heritage helped fuel alcoholism – a problem zhe (preferred pronoun) discussed overcoming in the past two years. In preview, this excerpt, while not directly linked to embracing queer, alcohol and drugs certainly influence the context in which queer is lived.

I started drinking when I was about 11 years old. Actually, exactly 11. So we would go back pretty regularly, like every 2 years, to [her birth country], and when we went, we would go and spend, like, all summer vacation there. So the summer that I turned 11, we had gone back and we were staying with my mom’s side of the family. They all drank like crazy. For my birthday party – it was basically, like, a ‘let's get the grown-ups together and all get wasted’ party. And one of my cousins poured me this gigantic cup of Cachaça and dared me to drink it, and I did. I thought it was fucking awesome, you know? I like threw up and blacked out the very first time I drank, but I thought it was incredible. I proceeded to drink for the rest of the summer, and when I came back to the States, my mom, who is also, like, super hyper religious – like, she's very into the Catholic Church. She makes rosaries, you know? And she wanted me to be a Eucharistic
Minister and, like, get more involved in the church, and I quickly realized that every Catholic Church has a massive, massive drawer of wine somewhere, and if you get to be the Eucharistic Minister, they give you a key, and so I totally did it, and I loved it, you know? So yeah, so then I did that for a couple of years, which is probably, you know, not the reason most people get excited about church things, but I was already, like, an atheist.

**Jordan** and Carlos were planning their wedding when we first sat down to talk about queer. Jordan called herself (an accepted pronoun) a Southerner by birth, white, 25 year old, cis-female woman, queer and pursuing a master’s degree. Jordan had come to embrace queer over lesbian in light of Carlos’ gender transition. Here, Jordan talked about growing up an only-child with mentally ill parents, and the impact this upbringing has had on her evolving a queer sense of self.

I was raised by both of my biological parents and my grandmother[s]… until I was six. My parents are very conservative. My father is extremely racist. My mother has a college education… My father does not; he has some technical school training. My father is very emotionally and verbally abusive, so he has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder with a narcissist personality disorder. Something along those lines. My mother is also very mentally ill. She has a severe addiction to prescription narcotics and things like Xanax. Growing up for me was very tumultuous and very – our senior minister described, he had a very similar childhood. He said that it was like he knew his parents loved him, but you never knew from day to day if they were going to love or hate you. You never knew when you go home what you were walking into. That was very true for me. My grandmother was a haven of comfort and love. And still very much is. She is almost 90. Growing up in that way was difficult because I was an only child. I didn't have an [opportunity] to share that experience with someone else. To let me know that I wasn't crazy; that what was happening was not supposed to be happening. But has absolutely shaped who I am today.

**Carlos** is a 41 year old, Hispanic/Latinx, transman that embraces queer to reflect on his (preferred pronoun) sexuality. Carlos and Jordan live an upper middle class life. Carlos holds a master’s degrees. In the following, he talked about his sexual experiences, attractions and desires – all of which inform his queer sexuality.

I probably have more sexual experiences with men, threefold, than I do with women. And I would say that, you know – I can't say that there won't be one in the future. I mean, even identifying as male now. I have not had any sexual experiences with men since transitioning. I have as a fairly butch top [lesbian]. But yeah, for – I don't have even a
count. I've had significant experiences with men. And I am still incredibly attracted to
men. You know, at the end of the day, 90% of the porn I watch is gay porn. Mostly
because it's better. Y'all [speaking of gay men] got that shit down. And I'm a gay guy.
And I'm a bottom. And like, that's what turns me on. So I mean, yeah. I mean I can't say –
we started as poly. We both identified as poly before we got together. We're
monogamous now, but the conversations that we've had are there might be a possibility
for that in the future, and the likelihood for me would be with another man.

**Leslie** also identified as Latinx. They (preferred pronoun) identify as queer/non-binary in
terms of gender and queer/bi in terms of sexuality. Leslie is 28, “poor,” and has some college. In
this excerpt Leslie talked about her initiation as a sexual person, and a tragedy that marked these
early experiences.

There were these zines that were out at the [punk] shows I was going to in early high
school and reading about queer and the ideology that comes behind that, and the history.
And identifying it within myself. I had a group of friends that were kind of like that. I
saw outside that groups of friends this extremely, like heteronormativity all around me.
More of the popular kids in school and seeing all that growing up and luckily not feeling
so out of place because I had these groups that were more like me that didn't try to be
very feminine, that were like nasty to each other as women, just to get more men. Luckily
I have never had to do any of that, but seeing that, and reading all these things and feeling
really connected on a broader scale. That is how I came about queer.

**Miss** was 35 years old, and a transplant from the West Coast. She (an acceptable
pronoun) identified as African American, female/femme/feminine, queer, middle class – she
(like Jordan and Carlos) owned her own home – and holds a master’s degree. Miss described her
sexual and dating experiences as foundational for her understanding of being queer.

…my first ‘real’ boyfriend was when I was 16, and we were together for like 5, 6 months,
something like that. You know, it was, like, the first time I had sex, and in the same year,
so this is all in the same year. My mom was losing it. I had a girlfriend. So I had, like, a
boyfriend in the fall and, like, a girlfriend in the spring, and it was during this time that
Ellen [DeGeneres] was coming out, right? So it was just, like, all the shit's hitting the
family. So, I had my first boyfriend, first girlfriend, and then I got into college, so we, of
course, we broke up [she and the girlfriend]. Got in college. I had another girlfriend, I
think my freshman or sophomore year. I was dating – so I was dating. I dated a baseball
player and then I dated a couple of other women at the same time, and then I ended up
getting into a serious relationship with another woman for about a year, couple of years…
At a point, I think it came at 21, I was just kind of like, ‘I think I'm just going to date
women.’ So, yeah. So I ended up dating another woman who followed me out here to
Georgia, and we were together for about 3-1/2 years. We broke up. Then I was with another woman for about 3-1/2 years, and then we broke up, and then I was with a transman for 2 years, which was a crazy sort of transition because the people who had known me, you know, were just like, ‘Wait! What's happening? You're dating a man?’ And it was just like, ‘What is going on?’ and, ‘We don't get it,’ and I was just kind of like, you know, I've dated – I actually dated transmen before [on the West Coast], so it wasn't like something that was new to me. I think it was just new to these people because they had seen me with women for so long.

Heron and Oak are romantically partnered and live a lower middle class life. Heron was a cis-gender woman and Oak a transman. Heron was 32 years old, white, and a graduate student nearing completion of her (accepted pronoun) doctorate. Heron and Oak met in their Midwestern home state. In the following, Heron described her embrace of queer in the wake of Oak’s gender transition. This excerpt offers support to queer theories assertion that gender and sexuality are fluid.

So I saw myself as a lesbian, in a lesbian relationship, and it wasn't until he [Oak] came out as trans that I really had to start thinking about my sexual identity because I was like, ‘Well, I guess this isn't going to work because I'm a lesbian, and you want to be a guy. This is going to happen,’ and we did split for a little bit. I just realized, you know, I love this person. I don't even care about all these things. I realized that I've been critical of heterosexuality limiting me and who I could be, and I realized that I was doing the same thing with the lesbian box in terms of saying, ‘Oh, I have to be with a particular person, and I have to do these certain things” so I stopped identifying with that. I know some people in relationships with trans guys will maintain their identities, but I just said, was like, ‘Eh,’ so queer seems to fit more. And I would say I'm primarily attracted to people born female, trans guys, androgynous, and certainly cis women as well, but I think – we were talking, we're monogamous, but, like, I potentially could see myself, like if I were single, who would I potentially date? But I could see myself potentially with a transwoman, too. It would just have to be the right person, so I guess him going through his transition, us doing it together, made me transition in my sexuality to where I'm more – now I'm like, ‘Okay, I'm attracted to a person, their intellect, their personality, and it's not necessarily the packaging they're coming in.’

Oak was a 33 year old transman who embraced a queer sexuality. Oak holds a bachelor’s degree in an art-related field. In the following, Oak talked about recent volunteer work that helped spark a political awareness framed, in part, by a queer ethos grounded in being the other.
I like to give back to the community. That's why I do the trans teen group and the programming board for [a LGBT group], just to, you know, get out there and get my voice heard, especially with trans stuff – it's great and awesome right now in the media. It hasn't always been, and that's because people weren't speaking out and being seen and being heard. I always want to make sure I do that, as well as just to give back to these kids who are going through this so young. They have supportive parents, mostly, which is amazing. But that still doesn't mean that it's easy. You know, being there to help them through. Even being with the parents, being able to talk to them, and tell them, ‘No. This is normal. It's not just a phase. It's okay. Yeah things may change and may develop differently as they grow, but right now this is it. You should acknowledge how they feel.’

Royce also holds a bachelor’s degree. Royce identified as trans* ("the asterisk says you are queer") and as a lesbian. Royce was 45, lived a middle class life, holds dear to their Jewish cultural heritage, and being a native Atlantan. This excerpt speaks to Royce’s early struggles with gender identity and sexual development, thus the foundations of their acceptance of queer.

I was 32 when I finally got my first tattoo. Now I am addicted. I love them. But someone who knew me in my 20's may have thought I was some kind of vanilla, if you will. Yea, I might have been a late bloomer on what I really wanted or even just now, being genderqueer at 42 and my friends I have known for 20 years were surprised. ‘You never talked about it.’ I said, ‘Because I suppressed it for a really long time. I didn't have a voice, and I thought I was just comfortable just being gay.’

Majestic (like Royce, Cyan, Andre, and Gene) is an artist. Majestic was a 42 year old, white, female/woman/genderqueer person who claims a queer/”dapper” sexuality. Majestic holds a bachelor’s degree, yet does not work in their field of study. Majestic practices Taoism and Buddhism, and transplanted from the Northeast. Here, Majestic talked about adopting queer once they moved to Atlanta.

I would say that I probably did that in Atlanta [adopting queer], because I think I was probably gay in [the Northeast], and that's simply because there weren't a lot of options. And so it was, you know, you were a flannel-wearing butch or you were not quite as flannel, still kind of in the middle lesbian. You know, everybody was kind of in the middle. There wasn't much diversity of expression. I say I found my inner gentleman here, when the Femme Mafia was taking time to really celebrate the queer femme because they felt invisible, and I was like, ‘I want to be the gentleman,’ and they wanted gentlemen, and it was a nice expression… It wasn't an academic study at all. It was very natural.
4.2 Summary

These selections, coupled with the respective demographic profile, suggest a modicum of diversity was achieved, as intended by the theoretical sampling frame. Gaps emerged around particular age cohorts, especially those who were 46 years old and older (5 participants were 40-45), particular racial/ethnic minority populations, e.g. Asian Americans and American Indian (2.0% and 0.2% of Atlanta’s 2010 population, respectively: US Census Bureau, n.d.) – yet two participants claimed a lineage that intersects with American Indian – and among particular demographic intersections, e.g. no African American transgendered or non-binary queer people participated. Several attempts, however unsuccessful, were made during the recruitment phase to interview people who live these intersections.

The selected narratives paint a picture of varied backgrounds while premiering the dynamics of queer that will be considered in answering the research question. From the participants’ stories I begin developing an argument that queer meets the definition of community. The participants’ experiences speak to shared identities and code for conduct grounded in being “othered,” non-conforming, non-normative, and fluid in their sexuality and/or gender, as well as serving as foundational for a political ethos framed nearly a generation ago during the first-wave of queer activism.
5 FINDINGS

The following inspects participants’ understandings and experiences that inform a shared sense of identity and code for conduct. I unpack these two components of community reflecting of first-wave tenets of queer as fluid and non-normative in terms of sexuality, gender and as a political ethos. Of interest to inspecting theory in motion, the participants’ narratives affirmed the assertions made by queer theoreticians regarding these core foundational principles. At same time, in support of queer theory’s paradigmatic cousin, postmodernism, across narratives we come to understand, life is messy. As such, the understandings and experiences participants shared were at times contradictory, or at least did not align. Thus, participants’ support of queer theories’ tenets is dynamic. Here is where postmodernism makes sense in that humans are at times contradictory, at least complex and we consist of a range of experiences and thoughts, some that support a theory and others that refute the theory. In sum, as will be explored in some detail, participants expressed their embrace of queer reflected their sense of being fluid in gender or sexuality, of occupying a non-normative social position based on their sense of self, and that this adoption of queer comes with particular political postures that support the marginalized, those who live outside the privileged classes.

To assess queer as an emerging community, I begin with how participants understand queer. For some, their sexual desires and practices, thus identity, emerged as salient in understanding queer. For others, queer was understood in terms of their gender. For many, queer also spoke to their politics. An interesting dynamic at work in developing and maintaining the shared aspect to understanding queer regarded “policing.” Policing refers to how we navigate the boundaries of identity – who gets included, thus who does not. Narratives addressing the question of inclusion and exclusion took on unique qualities in how participants understand the
personal and political possibilities of queer – arguing the boundaries around the socially
dominant sexuality and gender identities do not reflect the fluid nature of these characteristics.
At the same time, while several participants discussed being the target of and/or targeting others
for boundary policing, the general position of participants was summed as “don’t yuck my yum,”
meaning to refrain from judging others’ choices. A sort of updated, “live and let live” mantra.
Across sexuality, gender, politics as well as aesthetics as embodied identity, the threads of
fluidity and anti-normativity emerged as central to understanding what it means to be queer. In
short, as will be argued, queer meets the shared identity aspect of community.

Following an assessment of shared identity, I turn to shared code for conduct to conceive
queer as an emerging community. In this section, I show on how participants enact their
understanding of queer, and reflect on the shared aspects of these code for conduct. Like, shared
identity, I assert that the narratives presented support queer as an emerging community; however,
participants also offered a pause. The promise of queer, especially politically, poses certain
concerns that can consume queer, or worse, render it near meaningless. These selections unearth
cracks in the theory-to-practice translation. Indeed, much of the policing that will be explored, is
occurring by and among queers. These experiences demonstrate that fluidity and non-normativity
are not understood universally. In keeping with a broader read of queer as community, I explore
these dissenting and conflicting narratives. In the end, these counter narratives do not negate
what is shared, and much is, rather suggests the infancy of second-wave queer community.

Finally, after making a case for queer as an emerging community, I reflect on Atlanta’s
queer community as an example of this evolution. In this section, I present narratives that speak
to queer in Atlanta, distinctly as well as in comparison to other geographical areas. I undertake
this inspection to provide a real-world example of how community is experienced and understood.

5.1 Shared Identity

Shared identity is a central component of community. “Shared identity” implies a collective understanding of queer binds the members together and provides a foundation for association. Interestingly, queer theory asserts a counter narrative, suggesting traditional conceptualizations of identities cannot account for the fluid nature of many people’s lived experiences as identities are fixed within limited frameworks. Contrary to this philosophical conjecture, most participants did understanding queer in common terms and from a perspective of queer as identity. What they shared was more dynamic than the dominant identities in that queer did not speak to just one aspect of their lives. Queer was understood to apply to various aspects of what participants’ noted as meaningful in their lives. In preview, they spoke of queer in sexuality, gender and political terms.

For some participants queer was understood as part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ) community; for others queer has escaped its LGBT associated roots drawing its own network of sexually non-normative and gender fluid peoples. Interestingly, and in support of a flexible read of “shared identity,” was the allowance for queer as a political ethos, which many participants connected to feminism and feminist theory. Another way I assessed queer as a shared identity was to ask, who gets to claim queer. As noted, a number of participants engaged in, as well as experienced, boundary testing when they talked about being policed and policing. As a practice, policing indicates that queer in motion does not neatly align with theory; what is deemed fluid and/or non-normative is subjective in real life, thus not as objective as it appears on paper. Ultimately, queer must be understood as porous, and those participants
copping to policing agreed that it is not their place to determine who does and does not get to embrace queer. Indeed, this position of “not my place” became one aspect to queer that was shared among participants. Finally, I consider participants’ narratives regarding their body image and queer aesthetics as expressions of shared identity. This exploration, while also not in total, also offers additional support to queer as a shared identity system.

5.1.1 Queer as Identity

In practice, queer is emerging in new directions that are accommodating new understandings, which means that the shared aspect of queer is also evolving. These evolutions underscore a core aspect of queer identity. Unlike traditional identities, queer is far more accepting of new interpretations and inclusions as societal perspectives regarding what is normal, thus non-normal gets constructed. This “breathing” process that refines who emerge as non-normal, was indirectly embraced by many of the sampled queer people. At the same time, queer isn’t for everybody, even those who it applies, nor was it ever intended to be. Ensuring that queer is something more than a trend, policing makes sense and helps affirm queer as an identity. In sum, I argue queer isn’t an anti-identity, rather a new way to conceive identity. Queer has the potential to serve as a paradigm shift in how we understand and approach identities. Queer as a new conception allows for breathing room in line with the socially constructed nature of identities and an allowance of possibilities. Why wouldn’t we want to explore as many of the available options as possible? As our desires, behaviors and ideologies shift, queer is appropriately positioned to provide people a means to understand themselves in light of these shifts, while also providing stability during periods of transition.

The following perspectives support the assertion queer is understood as an identity. In addition, several narratives also tell of a queer identity’s significance. In an era of identity
politics and an identity-defined paradigm – how we are personally and socially positioned is based on a series of distinct and intersecting identities – queer has emerged uniquely in that it provides visibility and space to shift and transition without having to abandon one’s understanding of self.

Andi succinctly introduces us to the assertion queer is an identity, thus initiates the analysis of queer as community.

I think it's important to include that queer, as an identity, is an example of how other identities have been rigid and closed. It sprung out of necessity to be able to define a multitude of experiences with one word.

Andi, 32, cis-gender woman, queer, black (Native American and white heritage)

By framing queer as an identity, Andi suggests it emerged and functions in relation to other identities, or, by extension, as comparable. Andi also supports queer as the identity for a diverse set of “others” and provides a single moniker for a “multitude of experiences.” To provide additional empirical support, Angelica talks about queer as a significant identity on par with how other dominant identities are understood.

Queer, for me, is an identity. It is a sexual orientation, but it is also currently a philosophical, political, social community kind of based identity. It represents who I sleep with, but who I spend my time with. How I walk through the world, [and] the lens I view the world through; how I align myself in all sorts of ways.

Angelica, 36, woman, queer, white

This excerpt speaks to the identity paradigm referenced when talking about gay, lesbian, cisgender male and female, and how queer fits within the existing paradigm. In the following, Allister substantiates the argument queer is understood as an identity, and one with porous boundaries. “For me, if you identify as queer, for whatever that means for you; that is cool. I will not take that power from you, for you to self-identify however you want.” Here, Allister suggests the political undertones of how queer is understood as an identity by talking about power, and how power is a central force underscoring identities. Queer is more often conceived for the
marginalized, the “other,” and as such Allister is raising the intimate operations of power as foundational to their understanding of queer when she states, “I will not take that power from you.” Not only does this statement suggest the personal dynamics of politics, but also helps affirm Angelica’s position that it is not up to them to determine who gets included. Queer, like all identities, should be self-selected, not externally applied.

Mischa also talks about queer as an identity, suggesting queer serves an important means to understand one’s self and their social world.

I identified as queer before I identified as Trans, which I also think is important to note. But I definitely understand my queerness in terms of, this is an act...it’s not even about the act, it's about a way of being, a way of understanding yourself and moving through the world.

-Mischa, 23, non-binary trans, queer, white

Blanche also discussed queer in identity and political terms while referencing queer’s significance when calling it, “home.”

The idea of queer, for me, is that it is my lifestyle. Its home for me. It’s where I feel most comfortable...it gives me this political visibility. Identifying as queer means that I don't find myself with a lot of visibility in like a typical LGBT - gay community. I found that other people who identify as queer is like finding one another. I really like that.

-Blanche, 26, cis-gender woman, lesbian/queer, white

Across these narratives, the participants’ framed queer as an identity. The significance of queer for these participants regarded its ability to mark day-to-day interactions and their place in social life. In fact, queer was expressed as a central part of how they see themselves, and how they understand their position in the world.

In the following, I consider two core tenets of queer: it’s fluid and non-normative dynamics. It is these dynamics that inform queer’s shared boundary. Queer’s fluid and non-normative nature serve to define the shared components of queer as an identity, thus providing empirical support for the argument, queer is community.
5.1.1.1 Queer as fluid

Excerpts from Andre, Carlos, Milo and Iris offer personal narratives on queer as fluid, and suggest queer’s appeal as a means to understand their identity. While Andre understood queer in context to LGBT, thus queer as a moniker in which a number of identities falls under its umbrella, he also noted queer provides an openness other identity labels do not. Carlos talked about his gender and sexual fluidity, thus the appeal of queer regards the allowance for life’s ebb and flow. Milo talked about fluidity as a “journey,” understood in context to their own gender transition, and the implications this transition had on their sexuality. Finally, while Iris did not specifically use the term “fluid” or “fluidity,” they painted a picture of their lived experiences in fluid terms, and as a base reason for their embrace of queer.

I am queer, even though I might be in a relationship with another cis-gender, gay male… I like to think of it as more fluid and dynamic than just gay, lesbian, trans, this, that... It feels comfortable for me to wear. I like to say, queer because I think it is more love extending to everyone.

-Andre, 25, cis-male, gay/queer, black

I have been queer for 15 years. Pre-transition, even as a super butch dyke I never stopped sleeping with men. In all my 20 years of being a dyke, and queer for me sort of was - the kids today are calling it pansexual - to me, queer is politics, person, attraction, regardless of body parts. That is why I picked up queer, because I always formed meaningful, romantic relationships with female bodied individuals, [while] I still really enjoyed sex with men. Lesbian didn't fit. Bisexual was too binary.

-Carlos, 41, transman, queer, Hispanic/Latinx (Cuban American)

Queer means I can be attracted to any type of person at any time. For me it also includes being attracted to people outside a relationship... To boil it down, it is fluid, fluidity in every aspect of my personhood. I think it has been a journey to get there.

-Milo, 23, transman, queer, white

I've dated people who are of many different identities and presentations. I've dated other femme, queer, female-presenting, female-identified people. I’ve dated cis dudes also. And a lot of other folks, you know?

-Iris, 27, femme genderqueer, queer, Latinx (Brazilian)
Queer offers people, like Iris, Milo, Carlos, and Andre a means to understand the range of desires, behaviors and social relationships they experienced and engaged. These experiences speak to an openness in sexuality and/or gender over time, even day-to-day, and as such they find a sense of self in the queer ethos of fluidity. Empirically, queer’s allowance for a host of experiences and desires is a base tenet of queer as lived practice. As an identity, queer also is grounded in its application to the non-normative.

5.1.1.2 Queer as non-normative

In addition to fluidity, queer, from its linguistic roots, was understood as non-normative. Theoretically, whoever finds themselves outside socially acceptability can embrace queer. In other words, the non-normative finds refuge in queer. Yet, what is normal, thus what is non-normal, remains ill-defined, if not problematically subjective. Interestingly, several participants provided similar perspectives on the normal queer stands in contrast. These participants painted a picture involving picket fences with traditional male/female gender roles, and families occupied by “2.5 kids.” The following selections support queer as an identity that embraces the non-normative “other.” Destiny sets the tone for this component of queer’s identity framework.

The most succinct way I say it, is that it [queer] is not the norm, not normal. It’s being on the margins. I think it is being on the margins of the margins too… Being queer means to me, because I have always been an outsider, not just with my sexuality or with my presentation of either gender or self, I have always been an outsider for the way I think [and] for the way I do certain things. I really like to embrace that identity.

Destiny, 31, female, queer, white

Destiny’s comment provides a foundation to understand queer as an identity for the non-normal, those who reside in an “othered” social position. Miss extends the support for the non-normative aspect of queer identity when she explains queer as an embodied practice.

For me, it's like non-normative, right? So things that people would not expect me to be, but then I also like to – queer for me means that I'm able to navigate in all sorts of
different worlds… It means that I could partner with whoever I want, with whatever gender I want, and you know, have multiple partners or date multiple people.

-Miss, 35, femme/female/feminine, queer, black

In the next two excerpts we are introduced to what is perceived as “normal,” thus what queer contrasts. These images harken back to the post-World War II era of traditional gender roles, manufactured homes with picket fences and a mean number of children. From a loose interpretation of participant narratives, this idealistic landscape serves as the “American dream,” thus what is socially privileged and normalized. Queers live an alternate life, where differences are innate and are celebrated.

I think queer also means different, at least historically. So it's not necessarily an assimilation, not like, ‘Hey, we're just like you. I can have my partner and my white picket fence and my 2.5 kids and whatever,’ you know? But like, ‘We're all fucking different! Get over it!’

-Iris, 27, femme genderqueer, queer, Latinx (Brazilian)

I think queer is more a different side of the spectrum than 2.5, picket fence, male roles, female roles, everything's interchangeable, not the traditional, socialized, heterosexual family unit that our parents and grandparents were raised on… Queerness are people who are not mainstream.

-Majestic, 42, female/woman/genderqueer, queer, white

From Majestic and Iris’ perspective, queer’s non-normativity regards those who neither reflect nor desire a stereotypical social script in which heterosexuality, monogamy, traditional family and gender roles are defining. Queer is the “other.”

In the following, Andi substantiates queer’s foundational tenet of difference and non-normativity. I selected Andi purposefully given she recognized and explicitly talked about her families outward presentation as looking “heteronormative,” but as will be explored further, the surface does not always reflect reality. In short, Andi was a cis-gender woman legally married to a cis-gender man. They have two kids, live a middle class, professional life; yet Andi’s story demonstrated a dynamic life full of experiences and desires that breaks from the normative
script. Andi helps us understand queer’s provision of difference can be exponential in its application, and we should be careful when reading the surface as tell-all.

It's [queer] almost like a box for those people who don't fit in the other boxes, whose experiences aren't maybe specifically lesbian or specifically trans or whatever it might be, but have transcended that or even for people whose experiences are just non-normative.

-Andi, 32, cis-gender woman, queer, black (Native American and white heritage)

In sum, fluidity and non-normality were reinforced by a number of participants as essential to understanding queer as an identity. As such, the participants supported theoretical assertions regarding queer’s fluid and non-normal nature. These provide core understandings of what it means to embrace a queer identity. Indeed, queers understand themselves as fluid in their sexuality or gender, and/or are non-normative in their desires or behaviors, including their performances. In addition to these tenets, other understandings of queer were discussed by participants. In particular, queer was understood by some as an umbrella term, some as a means to understand their sexuality or gender as distinct from existing identities, and too many participants, queer identity also overlapped with a political ethos. While these understandings were not as universally held among participants, they were all the same dominant narratives across a number of participants’ stories.

5.1.1.3 Queer as an umbrella

A first-wave perspective conceived queer as an umbrella. For these early adopters, queer was short-hand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Second-wave understandings extend the queer umbrella by offering space for a range of non-normative sexualities, such as asexuality, and gender non-conformists, such as non-binary people. While most participants supported this second wave conceptualization, at least one participant understood queer from its first-wave perspective. Interestingly it was Green, the youngest participant at 19, which stated they understood queer to reflect on lesbian, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people specifically.
I was part of my GSA in high school, which is the Gay-Straight Alliance and we talk, we didn't really talk about what queer meant, but we did talk about how it is overall. It encompasses the LGBT spectrum. I kind of just assumed that if you were part of that you were queer.

-Green, 19, female, queer/lesbian, white (Eastern European)

In contrast, a number of other participants understood queer identity as related, yet distinct from the LGBT community. In the following, Adelina talks about the queer umbrella as a more broadly conceived refutation to what is considered “normal.” In addition to supporting queer as an umbrella, Adelina also supports prior narratives regarding what normal looks like.

Queer is like a really nice umbrella that says I am not like this status quo gender and sexuality. By status quo, I essentially mean monogamous, vanilla, hetero. I like queer because anytime I have met someone else that is queer, they feel like my people… ‘We speak the same language.’

-Adelina, 24, queer/non-binary/female, bisexual/pansexual, white

Buttercup and Bunny also support queer as a broad umbrella that includes, but is not limited to the LGBT community. To Buttercup and Bunny queer’s umbrella welcomes many.

[Note: when presenting exchanges that occurred during relational interviews, I will attribute what each participant said by prefacing their comment with their pseudonym. I will keep the exchange intact. This structure will be used throughout to distinguish individual participant narratives from relational participant exchanges.]

Buttercup [45, female/woman, queer, white (but prefer not to check that box)]: It's hard to give just one descriptor. That's why queer as a descriptor is so easy because then you're coming out and explaining, you know, sapio, pan, kink, poly. I mean, it's sometimes easier just to go, ‘Queer. Umbrella. Hi.’

Bunny (40, female, queer/sapiosexual, white): I agree with Buttercup that it is kind of an umbrella term. I think – yeah because there are many flavors of queer that just get more and more specific, and I like queer because it's as least specific as possible.

The queer umbrella understanding also lends support to the argument there are shared understandings of queer as an identity. The umbrella offers non-normative and fluid sexualities and genders a means to understand and project their porousness. The following quotes from
Ambrose and Cyan support a broad read of queer’s umbrella, as well as the shared aspects of a queer identity.

I adopt queer as an umbrella term for people that I don't want to have [an] extended conversation. ‘I am gender fluid, and this is how my gender fluidity works. I'm scoliosexual and a little bit androsexual,’ … If I'm in a situation where we don't need to have that whole conversation, and you want to put me in a box, well, put me in the queer box because it's so nebulous… I found that word brings together people who fit very differently outside of, like, the heteronormative culture.

-Ambrose, 33, gender fluid/queer, polyamorous, white

From the time I moved to Atlanta, I decided to identify as queer because it is more of an all-encompassing term… I guess it [queer] brings everyone together in a sense.

-Cyan, 29, male, queer, white

As a point of contrast, Andi spoke of queer as distinct from the LGBT community suggesting the umbrella symbolism is a misnomer. While Andi does not directly refute the umbrella analogy, she raises a question regarding the umbrella being a shared aspect of a queer identity.

There's obvious overlap [with the gay and lesbian community]. There really is. Out of sheer lack of numbers, maybe. No way [could queers] only date queers. We end up mixing with other, you know, non-heteronormative communities. We date lesbians. We date gay men. We date trans people. Maybe some of them identify as queer too, and maybe some of them don't. And we go their rallies, and we go to their clubs, and we, you know, partake in their parties. I don't think there's enough of us to, like, section off and have an island all to ourselves.

-Andi, 32, cis-gender woman, queer, black (Native American and white heritage)

Leslie aligns with Andi’s view, noting distinctions between LGBT and queer.

You don't necessarily have to be gay to be queer. That is an understanding, you are queer because you don't adhere to the heteronormative standard… It is more, for me and my friends and people around me, and in my experience, it is more like a statement as well as not being so oriented toward being male and female.

-Leslie, 28, queer/non-binary, queer/bi, Latinx

From Leslie’s vantage point, queer speaks to their understanding of gender and not so much to their sexuality, as is suggested when referencing queer as an umbrella for LGBT. This position of queer as gender will be explored in more detail shortly. Across all but one excerpt presented, a
picture of queer’s features have evolved beyond its first-wave, LGBT roots. Queer in its second-wave of activity encompasses a host of people who are non-normative and/or experience life fluidly. In sum, queer may still serve as an umbrella, but it is no longer restricted to sexualities.

5.1.1.4 Queer as sexuality, gender and politics

The following reflects on queer identity as a means to understand sexuality, gender as well as a political ethos. Queer as sexuality was a central assertion of first-wave queer activists and theoreticians. As noted previously, first wave queers reclaimed the term to counter normalizing narratives pertaining to the LGBT community, including the gendered aspects of sexuality. These initial activists and theoreticians opposed the abdication of sexual liberation that had defined the LGBT community from the social movements of the 1960’s up until the AIDS crisis. First-wave queers did not feel nor want to aspire to normalizing tendencies, even if that meant social acceptability and a more robust response to HIV/AIDS. They celebrated the body politic in context to personal and communal safety that did not require us all to get married and live normative lives. The present understanding of queer, expanded queer sexuality in line with the enlarging queer umbrella. At play during this second wave of activity are sapiosexuals, demisexuals, pansexuals, asexuals, and any number of other, non-normative sexualities that have emerged since the mid 1980’s/early 90’s (see Appendix F: Glossary).

In the following, Hope introduces us to the second-wave understanding of queer sexuality as personal, political and social; indeed, where a queer understanding of sexuality goes beyond desire and behavior.
I identify as queer because, for me, queer is kind of like – it's kind of like pansexual. Pansexual always sounded weird to me, and queer, I like because I feel like it also has this kind of like political element and social element that, like, in my mind, pansexual doesn't have. So queer, like, in the sense that – well – and for me, queer goes hand in hand with demisexual… I've been attracted to multiple genders, so queer in that sense and also I see myself as a part of this social network…

-Hope, 30, female, queer, white (Israeli heritage)

Mischa also talks about queer sexual identity in political terms. From Mischa’s perspective queer as sexual identity is a totalizing lens; queer sexuality is how they experience the world. In this brief excerpt, Mischa also suggests the significance when painting queer as an encompassing moniker.

If we were to broaden the picture and think about it in terms of like how are you moving through the world, how is the world considering you and what you do and your productivity, your labor, then it becomes a different question. Your sex doesn't make babies, but it does make pleasure that is threatening, so you are queer.

-Mischa, 23, non-binary trans, queer, white

Heron also supports queer as an expression of sexuality identity, and one with political implications.

I identify as queer in terms of my sexuality. I don't feel like I can claim queerness in my gender… I've experienced the world as a cis woman, so I'm – so I feel like – I don't know. I can't step outside of that, but it's the politics in terms of how I reject the normative, dichotomous boxes and all of those things.

-Heron, 32, cis-gender woman, queer, white

During our conversation, Heron noted that her adoption of queer resulted from their partner’s gender transition stating, “I guess, him going through his transition, made me transition in my sexuality to where I'm more – now I'm like, ‘Okay, I'm attracted to a person, their intellect, their personality, and it's not necessarily the packaging they're coming in.’” From this perspective we come to understand the space and fluidity queer sexuality provides.

Heron and Hope were not alone in their understanding of queer as sexuality. Allister also presents a queer sexuality, and explores how queer sexuality is lived in practice.
For me being queer not only speaks to my politics, but also my gender and my sexuality… In regards to my sexuality, I define as queer. I personally am, have been in relationships with people who are on the spectrum of gender and because of that I don't believe that somebody's anatomy or somebody's assigned sex or perceived gender can define who they are. I go for the person. If they are a great person I can form any form of relationship with them. Whether it be a sexual relationship, whether it be an emotional relationship, or an intellectual relationship… I can have with people. So for me, queerness is acknowledging that you can be turned on by intelligence.

-Allister, 30s, genderqueer, queer, fair-skinned Latinx

Lucien talked about their queerness as sexuality, but in more general terms. In fact, as mentioned in prior excerpts, Lucien notes when no other term captured how they felt, even when they weren’t quite sure how they perceived their sexuality, queer applied.

I'd started embracing queer because I just had no idea really what my sexual identity was, other than I liked people. Then, as I got older, even after meeting Ambrose, I kind of came to the conclusion that I was a little bit more of like a demisexual, so basically I just fell in love with people when I felt a strong connection.

-Lucien, 28, trans, polyamorous/demisexual/ultimately queer, white (Latix rearing)

In the next excerpt Andi connects the fluid nature of a queer sexual identity. Andi, like several other participants, supports queer theories assertion that sexuality changes; we are not one thing from birth to death. From this position, our understanding of sexuality and identity must adapt according to our lived experiences.

I like the fluidity of it [queer]. I like that, for me, my sexuality at 32 is very different than it was at 19 or 15, and I just sense that, at 42, it'll probably be different than it is now. I like a term that can grow with me. That I don't have to keep changing who I am. If this term is as open and fluid as it's been [and is] being used, then I can keep that term, right? It'll still describe my sexual behaviors as they change over my lifetime.

-Andi, 32, cis-gender woman, queer, black (Native American and white heritage)

To sum the assessment of sexuality as a means to understand queer identity, D talks about sexuality in terms of embodied practice, specifically romantic entanglements and socially defined sentiments regarding monogamy. In her case, queer refutes these normalizing notions and provides her the space to be who she feels herself to be.
My queerness comes out less through my gender and more through my sexual orientation. I am definitely outside the norm, especially in the way I do relationships. I felt kind of radical about that for a long time. I didn't really have words for it. Even on the romantic spectrum too, I don't fit in with what a straight woman is supposed to act like in a relationship. The woman is supposed to be the one pursing the relationship and is supposed to be romantic and make romantic gestures. I hate mushy, romantic shit. It is not my thing. I have never been into that. I have never wanted to have a monogamous relationship. I have always wanted freedom in my relationships both in terms of who I am attracted to and the way I date. If I am going to call myself queer then that is the way I am going to perform it.

-D, 25, cis-female, queer, white

As stated previously, 26 participants referenced queer as how they understand their sexuality. This understanding serves as the first of three applications to the essential tenets of a queer identity: fluidity and non-normativity. Queer sexuality refutes the normative picture whereby desires and behaviors are cisgender, and opposite-sex defined, sex is for procreation, and romantic relationships should be monogamous, follow traditional gender roles, and oriented toward consumer culture. The excerpts selected take the normative script to task in thinking and understanding. A similar conceptualization emerged when participants discussed queer as a means to understanding their gender identity.

The following excerpts speak to queer as a means to understand selected participants’ gender. Across these narratives we see the second wave influence on gender come into view as a myriad of understandings, beyond the cisgender male-female binary and the dominant understandings of masculine and feminine have emerged. Allister, who previously expressed their sexuality as queer, now shines a light on their gender as queer as well.

For me, being genderqueer is somebody that does not live in the binary [meaning male/female]. I consider myself as non-binary genderqueer, or gender fluid. I embrace sort of the spectrum of gender behaviors and sometimes my appearance will change based on the mood I am in. Often time’s people see me as very petite, but they automatically assume a femininity about me. I am petite and bubbly, sort of all signs of traditional femininity, but I incorporate masculine strength qualities, and strength isn't just masculine. I think being feminine can be very strong, even more so. But for me being
genderqueer is living... in between the spaces the world provides and taking those opportunities to express all sides. It is how I feel.

-Allister, 30s, genderqueer, queer, fair-skinned Latinx

Allister succinctly frames an understanding of a queer gender identity reflective of a core tenet – fluidity. From Allister’s perspective, traditional notions of what it means to be a man or woman, masculine or feminine become ands, not ors. A queer gender is masculine and feminine. Queer is the possibility of both, neither, or being able to select “based on the mood” one is in. Isaac confirmed Allister’s understanding of queer as gender identity, in the following, yet differs slightly in that they still see it in or terms. Regardless of whether it is and or or, a queer gender is expressed and understood as fluid.

I suppose [I am] male, if I had to say. But I tend to think of myself more and more as non-binary. I present male. I think I absorbed a lot of the masculine characteristics I saw that I liked around me as I was growing up, until I began to realize that those weren't necessarily my natural personality traits, or physical expressions… I allow those things to remain, but they're not necessarily definitive of who I am. I would say internally, I feel like someone who is neither male nor female, but in any one circumstance, I could be one or the other.

-Isaac, 37, non-binary/male presenting, pansexual/queer, white/Native American heritage

Milo also embraced queer as a fluid expression of their gender identity, while understanding this identity as non-normative, and social constructed.

I think a lot of my queerness comes through my gender [and] how I express my gender through interpersonal relationships. Visually, I fit into the binary very well. I feel like I get read as straight, cis, all the time. That is not who I am. I do identify as a man, but I identify as a man outside the gender binary because I think the ways society has constructed manhood and masculinity don’t feel good. Mostly, they are very gross.

-Milo, 23, transman, queer, white

Evie Jo offered a distinctly personal story when they discussed their embrace of a queer gender. In this excerpt, the significance of queer as gender identity is evident as an outlet for those who reject the male/female, masculine/feminine binaries.
I think queerness maybe saved a transition that was in peril, in some ways, because I got to about a year or so into my transition, and I was really – I was struggling with the sense that many of things that I developed and had become interested in over time, I had to abandon. That somehow there was an incompatibility. Because if I were to really embrace [my] transition as a woman, I needed to act as though I was taking it seriously somehow by ridding myself of all vestiges of masculinity…things like carpentry, which I had sort of shown a previous interest in, and then transitioned and let atrophy for a while. Then [I] came back to [it] as a woman, and suddenly was able to embrace it fully. So yeah, I think that’s probably the best example of queerness saving my transition. I’m not sure I would have been satisfied to be a binary female. And I get very frustrated by – I think there’s a mainstream transgender identity out there that is assumed to be, like, ‘Oh, a transgender woman is attracted to men, is hyper feminine…,’ and for the period that I thought I had to be that, I doubted if I was really trans.

-Evie Jo, 30, transgender woman/queer, queer, white

Evie Jo reflected on limitations of queer as an umbrella when they reference particular understandings of being trans, and some transwomen’s reliance on traditional gender roles to authenticate their sense of being a woman. The umbrella analogy shared understandings of who falls under the parasol and how they conceptualize their identity. To Evie Jo there is no central understanding of trans, therefore there can be on sublimation of transgender under queer.

Before transitioning from queer as a means to understand gender and sexuality, it is important to note how sexuality and gender are inter-related, even under a queer identity structure. In the following Adelina succinctly bridges the two phenomena.

I feel like when I hear queer I understand it means someone who is more like on the androgynous and non-binary gender plane. Like if you are female who is attracted to females that is a lesbian, but if you are like non-binary and you are attracted to any other gender what do you call that, you call that queer.

-Adelina, 24, queer/non-binary/female, bisexual/pansexual, white

This explanation of queer bridges sexuality and gender also complicates any read of queer as an umbrella for clearly Adelina distinguishes queer from lesbian; in fact, Adelina leaves the impression that queer distinctly speaks to one’s sense of gender, not sexuality. When this excerpt also suggests is that participants understanding of queer, and who and how people get to claim
queer is not universal. This suggestion brings us to a process that complicates how a queer identity is not solidly shared.

5.1.2 “Don’t yuck my yum”: Policing queer

In practice and theory, all identities, including queer, have boundaries that establish who gets to claim the identity, and who does not. As asserted thus far, the boundaries around queer are set by the core tenets of fluidity and non-normativity. Those who live a normative life, or do not embrace some form of fluidity are excluded, yet what is normal, thus non-normative, fluid versus staid. Ensuring the boundaries of fluidity and non-normativity are maintained appears an important means to affirm the legitimacy of a queer identity. The process of affirming those who are embracing and proclaiming a queer identity takes shape in the form of policing – inspecting (as well as rejecting) who is donning a queer identity, how they are understanding queer, as well as how they are living it. The policing process goes to the shared aspect of a queer identity. As with many marginalized identities the process of sharing begins with an internal conversation about one’s eligibility to claim a queer identity. The following analysis of policing and its implications for a shared queer identity begins with a consideration of the internal process participants discussed when, and as, they claim to be. This internalization was noted by Destiny and Gene, who talked about their queer identity in light of personal dynamics seemingly in conflict with queer’s core tenets. I conclude this inspection with Hope, who discussed an article that asserted that the process of coming into a queer identity generally reflects on a queer reality, and that people shouldn’t spend so much time worrying about their queer credibility.

Right now I am in a heavy relationship with a male identified person, a cis male so always have that voice in the back of my head that says I am not queer. ‘You cannot be queer right now, right, because you are in a straight relationship. Or what people will see it as a straight relationship.’ But I think, queer to me...to identify as queer, I don't think I can ever change from not being queer. Once I took on that identity, I don't think I ever
waivered. I just have this sort of that external struggle that I feel other people will say that I am not queer.

-Destiny, 31, female, queer, white

I had gone for so long with just, like, having to run myself through this checklist of, like, ‘Do I fulfill enough qualifications to be queer today?’ I would kind of just start trying to run other people through that checklist. But eventually – through the magic of meeting burners and finally just kind of getting dumped into this group of people that accepted my gender [genderqueer] without question and immediately started trying to pick up my pronouns without, like, drilling me through all of these qualifications of, ‘Are you queer enough?’ And, I still occasionally will, like, catch myself starting to try and like, have that knee-jerk reaction when I'm just meeting someone, but it's a lot easier these days to see it at face value, cut it off right there, just end it and move the fuck on.

-Gene, 25, agender, queer, Hispanic/white

The point of this article [posted on FetLife] was basically, people that are struggling with, ‘Do I use the identity queer? What does it mean? Am I not queer enough? I don't have the side cut and the septum piercing’ or blah-bitty blah and then the kind of – ‘I feel like I'm not going to do it justice.’ The conclusion was… ‘If you're thinking about these things, if you're asking yourself these questions, yes you are queer enough.’

-Hope, 30, female, queer, white (Israeli heritage)

In each case, they recognize the subjective nature of what it means to be queer while accepting the core tenets as applied to sexuality (Destiny) and gender (Gene). In Destiny’s case, her apparent cis-gender, heterosexual appearing relationship challenged her queer identity, but Destiny argues appearances are surface (similar to the argument made by Andi, previously).

Destiny discussed a range of experiences and desires that support her queer identity, given they are not normative, e.g. how many cisgender women have put on a strap-on dildo and anally penetrated their cisgender male partners. In the end, her queer credentials remain intact from her vantage point. Gene presents a slightly different image, while they consider determining their queerness in context to boundaries, Gene resolved any doubt through social process whereby other queers were the validating force. Finally, Hope recounts a story about claiming queer in which the notion that if you are struggling with the idea of whether you are or are not queer, you are probably queer. In other words, “normal” people do not review what makes them normal,
they just know, thus a queer person knows what they do, how they feel and their place in the world is non-normative.

Once the internal process gets resolved, the question then becomes: Who gets to claim queer? And how does this process inform shared identity? These questions appear, no pun intended, straight forward; yet in practice, the answers participants’ provided were varied. This variability led to stories of policing and being policed. In the next set of excerpts we get a feel for a near universal response to the question of queer inclusion – everyone who wants to claim queer, gets included.

I'm not going to police people in how they identify, and I'm not going to kick someone out of the space unless they were being offensive in some way, and by that, I mean, they're being, like, super racist or homophobic in a space where it is supposed to be safe space but they could becoming allies, and that is important. But honestly, if I had a friend who's straight and says things like, ‘Oh, I identify as queer,’ [I’m] like, ‘Okay, whatever.’

-Heron, 32, cis-gender woman, queer, white

I think there is a whole bunch of ‘pearl clutching’ [going on], even [in] queer communities... I remember I had a friend who was very upset because there was somebody who she perceived as straight, who was, like, really wanting to be a queer activist. And this person was identifying as queer. This other friend of mine was just not for it at all, but who the fuck cares if this person has nothing but heteronormative relationships? Who cares? Why are we getting our panties in a twist about that? If ultimately the greatest thing is, like, that it's not really a factor anymore. [Neal asks: Who gets included?] Fucking everyone.

-Iris, 27, female/genderqueer, queer, Latinx (Brazilian)

I usually say anyone can identify as queer. I think anyone could be included.

-Oak, 33, transman, queer, white

If you want to embrace the term queer, then definitely that's something that you can do. And I never would look at somebody and go, ‘Oh, this person is just whatever,’ and so therefore they’re not queer. Because you don't ever know anybody's whole story, right?

-Lucien, 28, trans, polyamorous/demisexual/ultimately queer, white (Latix rearing)

Lucien brings us full circle to Destiny’s experience of internalizing her hetero-appearing relationship. As Lucien stated, ultimately, we don’t know another’s life story, thus do we have a
foundation to monitor other’s queerness. Miss extended this assessment and effectively supported Iris’ sentiment; indeed, how a number of participants felt.

My friend was like, ‘But essentially he's not queer because he only dates female-bodied people. He's just straight pretending to be queer.’ What does that really mean? And so she's doing a little bit of policing, right? Like, ‘Who are you to call yourself queer? How are you going to be in my category of queer? You're not queer,’ you know? ‘You're still straight. You just want to be queer because it's cool. Or because your wife is queer.’ ‘And is your wife really queer, or is she just bisexual?’ So it's kind of like all these, you know, what exactly is queer to them? And maybe queer is just a nice umbrella. And maybe it's a great tool. And so maybe it's – maybe it's a political tool that people can use to navigate boxes and labels and to avoid them in some way, shape, or form. I don't care. I don't care.

-Miss, 35, femme/female/feminine, queer, black

Angelica also supported this position in that they do not function as queer’s boundary monitor.

I think it is not my place to questions someone's identity. People assume things about me, about what my identity is, all the time. If you want to identify as whatever you want to identify as...I'm just going to take it. I'll take what you say. I will respect that.

-Angelica, 36, woman, queer, white

Not everyone felt as accommodating. Even when recognizing their discomfort at policing other’s embrace of queer, some felt it important to ensure the fluid and anti-normative tenets of queer are upheld. Protecting the “authenticity” of queer is important to these participants, suggesting a degree of boundary setting and monitoring is called for. In the following, Milo, Allister and Heron grapple with the boundaries of queerness, even when they refute their authority to resolve the question of inclusion and exclusion.

If you want to identify as queer you really need to take a hard look at why you want to identify as queer. What do you bring to the queer community? Would you be better serving as an ally, and being able to check all your privilege and stuff like that?

-Milo, 23, transman, queer, white

I know like when I have conversations with people who identify as queer, and I feel like they have had [it] a hell of a lot easier than me, I have to check myself and not ostracize them. Because I have had [feelings of], like, 'You're just claiming this identity now because it's easy.' It's easier now to identify as queer than it was ten years ago. Like, it's in a sense, it's a fad. So, I understand the desire to want to have authenticity, but I think at the same time you have to sit there and listen to see what the story is before you make a judgement of whether or not their queer identity is authentic or if it's a show, or if it's a
way to fit in. Or do they actually live it… [All the same] I will not tell somebody they are not queer.

-Allister, 30s, genderqueer, queer, fair-skinned Latinx

This idea that there’s this authentic narrative and you have to fit one particular mold that kind of goes against what queerness is. I say that with some reserve, too, because I also don't want queerness to potentiality get completely co-opted and have its power taken away by, like, it just becoming, like, anybody can use it, you know? I don't know. I just – I feel very ambivalent. Like, this fear that it will lose that ability or that power, but at the same time, me not wanting to be like, ‘Well, I can't dictate how you identify and how you see yourself,’ but I mean if someone was clearly, like a, I don't know if they were homophobic – if someone was really, really rigid on all these things, and they were just trying to police everyone, I'd be like – internally, I would probably be like, ‘You're not my kind of queer.’

-Heron, 32, cis-gender woman, queer, white

These concerns were shared within queer relationships. In the following exchanges, the importance of inclusion and exclusion get at the root of how people understand and live queer. In the first excerpt, Jordan argues that total inclusion has the potential to evaporate queer’s meaningfulness; whereas Carlos’ response suggest that by allowing greater access to queer, may better situate queer to achieve its political goals.

Jordan [25, cis-female/woman, queer, white (Southerner)]: If everything is queer, then nothing is queer.

Carlos [41, transman, queer, Hispanic/Latino (Cuban American)]: I don't think that's mutually exclusive. I mean, I think there are straight people that can be queer politically and still heterosexual. But to me that's where the queer politics – doesn't make them question their own identity, but question their policing of others’ identity.

This narrative is flipped in Buttercup and Bunny’s exchange. In their case, Buttercup invites, while Bunny pulls back the reins, and asserts boundaries in line with queer’s foundation in the LGBT rights movement.

Buttercup [45, female/woman, queer, white (but prefers not to check the box)]: I will take anybody who's willing to stand by me as an ally under that umbrella and hold it for them.

Bunny (40, female, queer/sapiosexual, white): Well? True. However, I really think that people who identify as queer, if they want to use the term queer and if they want to stand with people, other people who identify as queer no matter what flavor under the umbrella,
then you need to make sure, as a personal responsibility, that queer rights are being expected.

In contrast, a number of participants sided with the notion that not everyone that calls themselves queer or claim they follow a queer ethos, are queer. For several participants the boundary around queer identity is set in relation to queers association with sexual and gender non-conformists, and the socioecological forces that distinctly shape these experiences.

I think you can be a hetero-queer ally, but I think there is something about our queer lifestyle that is different.

-Andre, 25, cis-male, gay/queer, black

When it comes down to the nitty-gritty, to the oppression, to the coming out to your parents, to the job discrimination, housing, whatever, are you in that fight too. To me, it seems like not so much. You are getting the benefits and you are not paying for any of the shit you actually have to pay for, as GLBT/queer people.

-Rose, 29, cis-male, same gender loving, black

If you can shed it at will, do you really, do you get to take up space in that community.

-D, 25, cis-female, queer, white

In general, participants were not comfortable with policing a queer identity, unless the person claiming to be queer acts or says things contrary to the political ethos, or restricts the inclusion of people who are fluid and/or non-normative. When faux pas happen, then the participants feel some boundary setting and action is warranted. These instances of boundary protection are essential to maintaining shared meanings of what queer is, and what queer is not. At its essence, policing is ensuring the shared aspects of an identity are protected.

The next series of narratives reflect on the discomfort of policing while also noting encounters in which boundary protection maintain their understanding of queer.

Let folks do as they will, and if they're being, you know, obnoxious or unpleasant, then that's one thing. But if they're being truly foul...there are these moments where people say, ‘You've just said something that is straight up racist, sexist, something bigoted, transphobic, homophobic, any of that. We've all heard it. That was bad...’ It's almost the queer equivalent of that cliché moment of walking into a bar, and you know, the record screeches to a halt and the jukebox stops playing. Everyone looks at you, and people are
spitting in spittoons and all of that. So if there's any significant measure of forced 
conformity, I'd say it's there. There's very little tolerance for open expression of sexism, 
racism, transphobia, homophobia. There's a phrase – "Don't yuck my yum."

-Evie Jo, 30, transgender woman/queer, queer, white

Evie Jo’s hypothetical situation indicates the boundary watching that takes place is communally 
an internal process. This “within” assessment was shared by a number of participants who 
reflected on specific concerns and how policing is taking place between queers.

In the following, Bunny and Buttercup discuss this process in context to bisexuels and 
transgender people.

Bunny (40, female, queer/sapiosexual, white): A lot of catty, back-stabbing bitches.

Buttercup [45, female/woman, queer, white (but prefer not to check that box)]: Amen.

Bunny: That's a very rough way of saying that we undermine each other.

Buttercup: There are a lot of gays who will politic a 
gainst bisexuels, saying, ‘get off the 
fucking fence.’

Bunny: True.

Buttercup: Um, there is a lot of politics between trans and everything else under the 
LGBQ umbrella. The T somehow gets [shoved] off to the side even though they may still 
be able to claim any other letter under the umbrella. And so there are some very hard core 
politics there. And they're horrible because we all need to be supporting each other. We 
cannot do anything alone. It takes a village. It takes a village to raise a kid. It takes a 
village to raise a community.

Bunny and Buttercup’s assessment is extended to heterosexually-oriented people that 
embrace a fluid gender identity, or live a non-normative sexuality in context to their opposite, 
cisgender attractions. Andi argued that when same-sex oriented queers take aim at their 
counterparts it serves to reinforce the very concerns LGB people have fought to counter.

I mean, they've [gay and lesbian queer-identified people] probably experienced a lot of, 
you know, discrimination, and people trying to take their identities from them or squash 
them or whatever or minimize their power. So I could definitely see how people would be 
suspicious of sort of like heterosexual people just sort of co-opting terms because maybe 
it's fashionable or whatever the hell. I could see people being suspicious. But at the same
time, they're then doing what straight people have done to them, right? Like telling
someone else that their identity is a fucking problem. Which is not just unfair, it's just
fucking wrong.

-Andi, 32, cis-gender woman, queer, black (Native American and white heritage)

Blanche and Lucien also note concerns with policing and who has the right or authority to
determine what is authentically queer.

To say my friend isn't a lesbian or queer is to say that I am not a lesbian or queer either.
Who gets to make up those definitions and who gets to decide who exists within these
parameters? Who the fuck?

-Blanche, 26, cis-gender woman, lesbian/queer, white

I was actually reading something on Tumblr, of course – because where else are you
going to get your weird shit – about a woman who was a radical feminist. She was
embracing her radical feminism, and she was like, ‘I don't think transwomen have
women's experiences because they're men,’ and I'm just like, ‘What the fuck?’ And this is
a person who identifies as queer, and they actually identify as gender fluid, but they're
like, ‘I don't think anybody who wasn't born a woman can experience women's
experiences.’ And I'm just like, ‘That literally makes no sense!’

-Lucien, 28, trans, polyamorous/demisexual/ultimately queer, white (Latix rearing)

Where particular identities were noted as primary targets for policing pertained to those
who appear heterosexual or are in opposite-sex relationships. Like Destiny’s story, Hope and Iris
expose their concerns with policing.

I just feel like a lot of people are going to assume that I'm cis het. But that's fine because I
don't really care what people assume. The people that it matters to are the people within
my social crowd, my little layers, that all are very aware. Also, who I'm dating makes it
kind of obvious that I'm not a cis het.

-Hope, 30, female, queer, white (Israeli heritage)

This person that I'm seeing now is the second cis man that I've had a relationship. I've
heard things… I remember particularly with the first person that I dated, I had people
who straight up told me, like, ‘Oh, well, you're straight now. You’re straight.’ It doesn't
matter that you're also dating other people who aren't straight – suddenly, this one
relationship has made you straight, which is like, ‘What the fuck?’

-Iris, 27, femme/genderqueer, queer, Latinx (Brazilian)

In keeping with the personal experience narrative thread, several other participants also
expressed their frustration and anger at being policed.
The policing has been the biggest fucking problem for me. And frankly it's the reason I ended up with who I ended up with, just being honest. Like, I had so many fucking relationships end because of the way people tried to police me… Yeah because it's fucking infuriating. You know, you're talking to someone who you know understands what it's like to have someone define them, and they're doing the same fucking thing to you. And you want to just, like, punch them in the face, really.

-Andi, 32, cis-gender woman, queer, black (Native American and white heritage)

Carlos and Jordan extend this argument.


Jordan [25, cis-female woman, queer, white (Southerner]: I feel – I mean, that's absolutely been my experience, and I feel the same way. Especially when I was identifying as a queer lesbian. I was policed because I identified as a lesbian. And, you know, I couldn't identify as a queer lesbian because that's antithetical to what it means to be queer, and I was like, ‘No. It isn't, actually. Queer can be whatever I want it to be, and I'm choosing to use it in this way.’ But I still very much, at that time, I still very much identified as a lesbian. And people would tell me, ‘You should not identify as a lesbian because it's just reinforcing the binary, and you're being transphobic, and you're being…’

In conclusion, across the narratives we understand that by-in-large participants did not care for boundary policing. So long as the person embracing queer accepts the core tenets of fluidity and non-normativity most participants did not see it as their, or others place to tell someone they did not belong, or that do not get to claim queer. The strength in their convictions suggest that refuting such policing serves as a shared component to what it means to be queer. Queer is open to all who are willing to accept its porousness and its attention to social justice, feminist and liberationist perspective regarding sexuality, as well as gender and marginalized social standing. Where a degree of policing was called for is in instances where these values are demeaned, or violated. Yet, these occurrences are less about embracing queer and more about violating a tenet or part of the political ethos.
In terms of queer as a shared identity, participants’ feelings regarding policing and who gets to claim queer demonstrate that overall queers do not care for the notion of exclusivity. In fact, their narratives support broad inclusivity as a distinct aspect of queer, and how it is lived socially. All are welcome given they reflect the fluid and non-normative nature of queer and that they accept the ideology that marginalized people are deserving of visibility and space to voice their truths. Another area in which shared identity is manifest regards a queer aesthetic. The next section completes the assessment regarding shared dynamics of queer identity.

5.1.3 Queer Aesthetics and Body Image

Minus verbal exchange, one way identities get expressed in a shared manner is through aesthetic, non-verbal means of communication. While an aesthetic does not determine membership, it does suggest it and can enter into popular culture as a marker for a particular community. For instance, in the wake of the Treyvon Martin murder, the hoodie came to represent social justice for African Americans, in particular as a symbol for the Black Lives Matter movement. This particular clothing item now resides within a larger aesthetic that helps frame hip-hop culture, and segments of the African American community. In similar vein, a particular image, however cliché, arise when we discuss butch lesbians – Doc Martens or heavy boots, short hair, flannel shirts or plain t-shirts, and dungarees. Importantly, identity-based aesthetics go beyond clothing to incorporate particular attitudes, communication patterns and linguistic nuances, as well as physicality – think of gay men’s “twinks, bears and muscle men.”

An aesthetic helps bind people with a shared identity, as well as provides a means of identification through shared understanding. In this section, I explore a queer aesthetic, its significance and its meaning to the participants. What emerged in the narratives regarding a queer aesthetic included a fashion-based image, hair styles, body image – especially relevant to
queer as a gender identity – and how the aesthetic, while present, is not a necessity to express one’s queerness. When asked if a queer aesthetic exists, and if so what it looks like, Lucien stated:

I'd say someone that says, ‘I'm going to express myself however the hell I want to,’ and when that happens, you'll get what looks like a blend of styles or a blend of sexual characteristics, physically I mean, or a blend of gender styles with clothing.

- Isaac, 37, non-binary/male presenting, pansexual/queer, white/w Native American heritage

The anti-normative foundations of queer also get expressed aesthetically.

When I think of a queer aesthetic, I think more of an alternative gay person, so someone who has tattoos, who is pierced, who is not conforming to societal style. Kind of beats to their own drum.

- Royce, 45, Trans* (the asterisk means queer), lesbian, Jewish

I think queerness can be an aesthetic of bucking the norm. You can be cis, you can be straight and have an aesthetic of queerness. I think it is sort of a physical representation of your values as a person, as somebody who goes against the grain.

- Allister, 30s, genderqueer, queer, fair-skinned Latinx

For several participants, the queer aesthetic challenges traditional gender roles and what is expected of men and woman, given society is framed according to a gender binary. For some, they challenge the binary by flipping the script, while for others challenging the binary is embodied by embracing the gender spectrum and performing it through fashion.

I didn't feel good wearing feminine type clothing. I never felt comfortable in dresses or skirts, things like that. Mostly that had to do with, I didn't know my sexual identity. After I came out, I think a year or so after I came out I started finding my own style more and embracing that. My mom isn't really happy with it. She expects me to act like a girl. Actually it was a really hard, I had to convince her to let me wear a tux to prom instead of a dress.

- Green, 19, female, queer/lesbian, white (Eastern European)

A lot of the time, when I go out, I try and make myself as visibly queer as possible by riding the line of masculinity and femininity. Or, like, trying to make myself look distinctly neither.

- Gene, 25, agender, queer, Hispanic/white
Some participants noted a queer aesthetic as defined by white queers, and involves a number of markers, including tattoos, piercings, clothes, hair styles and hair color. Mischa summarized these narratives in the following:

I think there is a white queer aesthetic and I think I go for the queer white aesthetic. I have short hair. I have had many an undercut or a Mohawk. I like tight pants and facial piercings and tattoos. I like brightly colored hair. So much of the queer aesthetic is there.

-Mischa, 23, non-binary trans, queer, white

One specific aspect of a queer aesthetic discussed by a host of participants regarded hair, in particular.

5.1.3.1 Hair

Noted by Mischa, hair color and style stands out as a unique aspect of a queer aesthetic. In this series of excerpts, participants talk about this visual marker for queer, and how it gets shared as an understanding of queer.

Have you heard this joke? There's a joke that's like, 'You put enough queers in a room and someone’s going to end up with a side cut.' It seems kind of true because it's like a big majority of queer people I know have side cuts.

-Hope, 30, female, queer, white (Israeli heritage)

What's the difference between queer hair and hipster hair? I think they're the same. Maybe queer hair comes first, right? We're always doing things first, in a fabulous sense.

-Majestic, 42, female/woman/genderqueer, queer, white

I can pull it back into a man-bun when I'm feeling more masculine, right? Like, I can swap genders at a drop to go with my gender fluidity, right? And the color, it suits my personality. The bright color suits me.

-Ambrose, 33, gender fluid/queer, polyamorous, white

The following couple of narratives suggest the shared identity aspect of a queer aesthetic, particularly regarding hair. Both Heron and Milo discussed the loss of visibility based on a particular haircut and how another style could restore their queer visibility. These selections note the importance of hair as a means to mark one’s queer identity.
I had trouble with that when I lost my sort of visibility as queerness. It’s like, ‘Maybe I should just chop my hair, just so I can, like, look more queer.’

-Heron, 32, cis-gender woman, queer, white

For the record my head is buzzed. It has only been buzzed for a couple months. I actually feel I got read as queer more often when my hair was longer. Now, since it has been short, I get read as my age and I think it makes me look more hyper masculine. Nobody has changed the way they interact with me, but I just feel that I am being read as queer far less often. Even in queer spaces, which is like, painful. I identify as a man. My masculinity and my femininity is swirling constantly, but I am still a man, and so the way men navigate their hair is very different than people who identity as women or genderqueer or non-binary gender variant navigate their hair. It is another reason I am considering growing it back out. I also just miss it.

-Milo, 23, transman, queer, white

In addition, hair becomes an interesting navigation point when considering gender fluidity and non-normativity. In the following, Allister talks about the importance of body hair for gender non-conformists, especially those designated female at birth.

I would say I have queer hair. We are not just talking about hair on the head, but for certain gender bodies, it is about whether or not they shave. Different gender bodies will or will not shave in ways that might alert their queerness. Some of it stems from old feminist movement, like women identified women who don't shave their armpits, or don't shave their legs. It goes into conversations now about whether or not women get rid of their facial hair. Female identified women have facial hair. We live in a community, in a nation that says female bodied people do not have facial hair so they spend hours plucking or lazerling or whatever it is to try and get rid of that. So queer hair can be like, ‘Fuck it, I am going to be a woman with a beard.’

-Allister, 30s, genderqueer, queer, fair-skinned Latinx

Mischa continues the narrative thread noted above, yet as applied to hair. In this excerpt, they talk about how a hair movement among African Americans has reignited interest in bucking normative trends set by whites. In the following, we understand queering something over being queer – to queer something means to set it outside the norm, to flip the narrative regarding it from normal to non-normal. Mischa is not making reference to Black women who reject white hair norms as queer people, rather engaging in an act that sets it up as non-normative, thus queering it.
I think it is interesting to think about how queerness is operating in Black queer communities in the South. To think about how natural hair movements began as a very feminine movement by black women to reclaim their hair from white supremacy and say, ‘I am not going to press anymore.’ By saying, ‘I am not going to put awful chemicals on my head every month. This is what I am going to do instead.’ How that has been articulated and remapped by our society is a very queer thing.

-Mischa, 23, non-binary trans, queer, white

Mischa was not alone in their assessment of racial differences and supporting personal choice in how one occupies their own body, and how aesthetics are embraced. Blanche not only supported Mischa’s position, but also discussed it in context to body hair extending Allister’s point.

I know this is probably not the case for every person who's within the community, but for me, queer body politics is acknowledging if a white femme, for instance, grows out her pit hair, that's not going to be a same issue that's supposed to be a focal point for femmes of color, for instance. It's treated differently. I obviously have a lot of body hair, and for me, that's empowering. I also have to recognize that I can't just be like, women shouldn't have to shave their arm pits because the way our society structures women's bodies is different for women of color, especially femmes of color. For me, it's being cognizant of these differences as they go across racial and ethnic lines, and also actual physical body lines. Recognizing that body politic movements and fat positive movements need to embrace queers of color, and they don't.

-Blanche, 26, cis-gender woman, lesbian/queer, white

Finally, Adelina suggests the importance of queer hair, in the following. Our presentation is critical to the self as a personal and social phenomenon. Indeed, our presentation reflects our identity.

I've been really enjoying presenting with more of, like, a characteristically edgy, open appearance because that's what I find interesting. I feel [freer] to have a pixie haircut, to express that physically. So that's kind of one of the things that, to me, is more important and more interesting than where I come from or what education I have or what my socioeconomic status is. Those things don't really define me, but what defines me is the person that I choose to create. The person that I see in the mirror and how I sort of play with that identity.

-Adelina, 24, queer/non-binary/female, bisexual/pansexual, white

5.1.3.2 Body image

In addition to how we adorn the external, through hair, clothing, tattoos and piercing, as a way to express and share in a queer identity, there is the vessel itself. Participants spoke about
body image and physicality in several instances, and how the physical presence emerged as salient to their queer identity. Their lens on body image was vital to how some queer participants developed understandings about themselves. These grappling’s were apparent among cisgender women, transgender and non-binary participants, as well as cisgender men. All felt the societal pressures to conform to standards of body and presentation. In the next two excerpts we begin to understand cisgender queer women’s struggle, and how essential the queer tenet of non-normativity provides room to be yourself.

A part of queer culture… [Its] values are very feminist. There's a lot of body positivity and sex positivity is a part of that culture... What is included in body positivity is, you know, more openness about women or women-identifying or female-bodied people with body hair and not shaving and body shapes of all different sizes.

-Hope, 30, female, queer, white (Israeli heritage)

Generally the culture of people who are queer...there is the queer, then the norm...it seems that that space [queer] has more room for people to be fat. I'm not curvy; I'm fat and that is fine. I am beautiful and I don't have to dress it up and use the words that would be used on the cover of Cosmopolitan. That has been so freeing. I'm fat, my husband is fat. We are not these morbidly obese people by any means. We are also not skinny athletes. We don't have to be. We can work out and do yoga and lift weights without the goal being, ‘I gotta get skinny. I got to be down to this dress size or this shirt size or whatever.’ For some reason that does feel like a part of the queer world. It is kind of like this beautiful, radical...I'll be on Instagram or Tumblr one body positive blog, then the deeper I go I am like, ‘Oh my God, everybody is fat and have beautiful tattoos... This is amazing.’

-Adelina, 24, queer/non-binary/female, bisexual/pansexual, white

For some of the transgender and non-binary participants, the struggle with their bodies often stretched into their childhood. Their experiences were more often marked by negative experiences and feelings about their bodies, at least certain body parts. They too found a queer identity offered them a place of respite and comfort.

I always had a problem with my body image. I think part of that was, it started pretty young, 8 or 9. Because I was a little tom-boy and then...when you hit puberty, by 12, you start growing breasts and you are like, ‘Ugh, I don't like these things.’ It was really hard for me. It was the root of where depression began for me. So I had a lot of body image problems based on puberty because I, not only was I a tomboy and when you are a
tomboy and you are a kid it doesn't matter what your gender is. Because you are just flat chested kids, boys and girls just having fun and being active, but when you start hitting puberty, I wasn't like, ‘Let’s play with dolls.’ I was, ‘Let's go play football and ride bikes.’ So when the boys started hitting puberty they were wanting to look at girls and I was like, they had no interest in hanging out with the tom-boy. Also, I stopped doing other things actively that I enjoyed because I was embarrassed by my chest. I had that chest with me up until July 23 of this year. I wish I had taken it away longer, but I am much happier not having a heavy chest.

-Royce, 45, Trans* (the asterisk means queer), lesbian, Jewish

In Lucien’s case, the body and its relationship to their transition was embedded in a narrative of ownership that encompassed the entirety of their aesthetic. They made the external presentation match how they felt internally, not just in terms of what we gender, but the total package.

She [their mom] asked me one day – we were watching something on TV about the rise and the fad of transgender or gender diversity and was it really a fad or is it just people being more accepting… Almost all the trans or genderqueer or whatever-identified people they were interviewing had piercings, tattoos, weird haircuts, bright colors, whatever, and my mom was like, ‘Why do they do that? You do it, too. You've got all those piercings. What's that about? Why do you have so many piercings? Why do you have so many tattoos?’ And so I thought about it for a while, and then a couple of days later, I got back to her, and this is [it]. For me personally, in my journey, half the time I feel like my body doesn't belong to me, so doing things like this reminds me that this is mine, and I can make it mine. I worked so hard to make my body look the way it is. I've taken hormones. I wear uncomfortable clothing. I've done all these other things to make the representative of the true me out there, so why would I do all that work and not just take it all the fucking way. You know what I mean? It's like buying a house and decorating the whole house but living with ugly paint on the walls, like, ‘Why? Just paint it. It's yours!’

-Lucien, 28, trans, polyamorous/demisexual/ultimately queer, white (Latix rearing)

Finally, the importance of body image should not be treated casually, or minimized. How we present and how others’ view this presentation is highly influential to our social position.

Social position reflective of body images gets shaped by our weight, race and ethnicity as well as sexuality and gender. Our presentation is central to our understanding of self.

I have struggled with this [body image] and I think, ironically, since coming out it has been a bigger struggle than it was being in the closet. I have struggled with my body image, being desirable to other people. I wouldn't say I am overweight by any means, or fat or obese, definitely not obese, but when I see what gay men’s community finds desirable, it makes me look at myself in a different way, especially when I compound the
race factor. When I watch TV I'll say things like, ‘Damn white guys have it so easy.’ We were watching something and there was this white guy and I was like, ‘He is pretty cute,’ but I am thinking, ‘If he was black, just change his skin color, would I think he is so cute.’

-Rose, 29, cis-male, same gender loving, black

At the same time, a number of other participants felt that the queer aesthetic can be counterproductive to a central goal of the queer ethos – social good over capital gain.

5.1.3.3 Political critiques of a queer aesthetic – reinforcing capitalism

While many participants spoke of a queer aesthetic fondly given it can non-verbally express their identity, several participants took the consumption aspect to task. These participants took aim at how queer intends to defy neoliberal tendencies, especially capitalism’s ability to marginalize and suppress, as well as distract us from privileging some over others. Here, Evie Jo connected aesthetic to politics, while Cyan and Rose, as well as Andre took aim at how some queers overlook this part of the ethos.

…if there's a singular attribute, it comes down to a subversion of expectation – one can enter the queer aesthetic without really participating in capitalism, which I think – to go back to one of your previous questions, I think that there might well be an anti-capitalist political vein to queer politics. A sense – or a recognition that social inequality is leaving people behind and that queer people are being caught in a particular way that can be avoided through a certain type of community. Intentional – intentional community is not quite it, but striving towards the same ideals, some of the same spirit of an intentional community propped up within urban, so on and so forth.

-Evie Jo, 30, transgender woman/queer, queer, white

Cyan (29, male, queer, white): I feel it [a queer aesthetic] is very hipsterish. I was in New York City not long ago and there is like this cool thrift store in the East Village, the cool part of New York. I went in and was looking for some cool clothes. There were all these leather hipsters in there. Half of the clothes in there were over $50. Way over my budget. What the hell; this is definitely not Goodwill. The queer community sometimes latches on to hipster communities because they are more open to queerness. There is a certain price you have to pay to be queer. [Of course] there are other types of queerness. Other types of queer communities such as Radical Fairies. I have read a lot about them, but from what I understand they are more about being in touch with nature, not so materialistic. I feel there is a queer aesthetic. I feel it is overpowering, but there is other communities, queer communities that are less focused on visual appearance.
Rose (29, cis-male, same-gender loving, black): I wouldn't necessarily say it is hipster but there is certainly an aspect of being anti-mainstream. I think when it comes down to purchasing, it is as expensive as mainstream or more so even at times. And this part of the reason I reject the self-identity [queer] in the first place. It is so wrapped up in that consumerism, as someone from a lower class community, I cannot buy into. I am not going to buy into it.

Finally, Andre, who holds the view queer is an umbrella encompassing LGBT people, took to task gay men’s consumerist culture, while also seeing their buy-in as protective.

I have been around a lot of queer people and gay men who put such an emphasis on what they have on or ‘I drive this car, so that means this.’ Or, ‘I am with this person and his body looks like this so you should feel like this when you are around us.’ I am like, ‘Nope.’ I think pressure-wise, we need to lighten up and that goes back to representation and inclusion. Letting everybody tell their truth to each other not try to make somebody else to be something they are not. If you are willing and understand it, and you are confident. But there are a lot of people who all their emphasis, all of their energy into that shell and I think it is a self-defense mechanism.

-Andre, 25, cis-male, gay/queer, black

Not all participants felt there was one queer aesthetic or that adopting the aesthetic is essential to expressing a queer identity. In Milo’s case, simply by being queer, whatever aesthetic one dons, their aesthetic becomes queer. For others, a queer identity is less about what you wear, what hair cut or color you have, whether you have one or dozens of tattoos, let alone any number of piercings, being queer is about the lens you see the world and how you live that lens.

I think maybe there's dialectics of aesthetic, like because there's so much to queerness – I think there's so much to queerness now that – you might be fabulously queer or you might be dirty and queer. It was interesting when I was doing [a work of art], it was hard to kind of think of what queer meant because queer in the drag community and queer in the MondoHomo community, the East Atlanta Village – like, Mary's or Blake's, you know – like these different expressions within that. So I don't think there's one queer aesthetic.

-Majestic, 42, female/woman/genderqueer, queer, white

I think people can don that queer aesthetic and not be intended to read that way. It's all in the mindset of the person reading you. Because if they don't know what [the] queer aesthetic is or if they have a different definition of queer aesthetic, you may not fit it. For me personally, I am always queer. My aesthetic is queer because I am queer. If I ever
choose to challenge gender norms or be queer variant in my expression, like if I choose to wear make-up or like "feminine" clothing that would also be part of it, but I don't need to be doing that to exist as an aesthetically queer person.

-Milo, 23, transman, queer, white

I don't think it is necessary in order to be queer you have to have this queer aesthetic or queer look, but I think it happens a lot.

-Angelica, 36, woman, queer, white

I definitely think some people think that there's a queer aesthetic and that if you don't present that aesthetic then you're not queer. I don't tend to feel that way. I'm a very feminine, cis-gendered woman, so I've never had, like, gender boundaries that I've ever really crossed. I don't know, femininity speaks to me. And so I definitely don't know that I present, other than maybe my body size, as anything non-normative. But I definitely have heard this before, right? That there's, like, a queer way to behave and look, right? Breaking gender boundaries, particularly in dress. I had the longest argument with my friend about tattoos and how, like, tattoos were necessary for a queer identity, and I basically at the end was like, 'Fuck you. You don't get to tell me.' Is a tattoo an accessory? Piercings. Queer hair? Hm. I don't know [about that].

-Andi, 32, cis-gender woman, queer, black (Native American and white heritage)

In conclusion, a means to express and share a queer identity is through an aesthetic.

According to several participants, the contemporary queer aesthetic intended to buck normative trends, thus clashing colors, bold tattoos and piercings, colorful hair and particular haircuts; yet, as hipster culture has advanced, it has borrowed many elements of the queer aesthetic nearly rendering it pervasive. Its intention, if there is such a thing as a queer aesthetic, it follows the tenets of queer identity, it is fluid and non-normative.

Styles traditionally associated with men and those associated with women get blended in a single look or are rejected altogether in an expression of androgyny. These outward expressions get tangled with body image and our societal pressures to conform to socially constructed notions of what we should look like according to the gender binary. Being overweight is socially problematic, women should not have any body hair beyond the hair on their heads and around their eyes, and hair should reflect natural colors, even if it isn’t your natural color. To let speak truth to one’s queer identity, the queer aesthetic announces the
refutation of what is expected. At the same time, queers must rectify their desire to express the tenets of their identity in a capitalistic world that expects consumption. What is essential, looking the part or remaining aligned with your political ethos? A number of participants sided with the latter and I am sure nearly all would have stood in solidarity with their opinion had this been the explicit question asked. The take away message is that, by-in-large, a shared aspect of a queer identity is its manifest look, the queer aesthetic. However, as noted in this and prior sections, participants’ asserted the presence of a queer political ethos. In the following section, I take an explicit look at this ethos, and what it entails as reflective of a queer identity.

5.1.4 The Personal is Political and the Political is Personal

In a number of the narratives presented thus far, participants have referenced queer in political terms. As such, I explicitly inquired about politics as a source of shared identification. Given, first-wave queer activists and academics framed the reclamation of queer in definitively political terms, politics were hypothesized to be relevant to the second wave of activity, including how queer understand their identity and how they conduct themselves. The Queer Manifesto positioned queer as politically opposed to normative expectations and the privileges membership to these normative social positions affords. If the present formation of the queer political ethos supports queer’s core tenets of fluidity and non-normativity, then politics, along with gender and sexuality help affirm the argument, queer as an identity is shared.

Participants asserted the ethos they claim is grounded in seeking recognition and justice for those who are socially marginalized. Ideologically, the marginalized are such given they embrace fluid sexuality and genders or live a non-normative, socially “othered” life. The bridge between queer and social marginalization is demonstrated in queer responses to recent legislative and executive actions pertaining to transgender rights as well as the establishment of the Black
Lives Matter movement by queer, African American women, noted by Blanche. The veil of a queer political ethos was asserted by several participants as “radical.” For example, Royce states, “When you say queer in a political way, people automatically think ‘radical.’” The following provides a series of mainly convergent perspectives on what is involved in the queer political ethos, and how it serves as another shared aspect to a queer identity.

In this introductory narrative, Rose borrows from second wave feminism to assert the intimate nature of queer politics.

The personal is always political. The things that we do personally that is anti-normative have a political element to them, although they feel really emotional at times.

-Rose, 29, cis-male, same gender loving, black

Oak underscored Rose’s point when they stated, “Isn't the act of calling yourself queer part of that [a political act].”

In keeping with queers’ core values, a key feature of its politics is to expose the privileging of the “normal,” and the impact this privileging has on marginalized people, regardless of whether we are talking about sexuality, gender, race, socio-economics or other identity structures that have been “othered.” In the case of the queer political ethos as an identity, we return to the broader applications of queer and who gets to claim it. Carlos asserted that one can be politically queer even when they do not live queer in terms of their sexuality or gender. Here, he provides an example of this point.

Queer politics is about, to me, opening the doors and the eyes of those that see heteronormativity and the [gender] binary as the only way… To me, queer identity politics [allow] people [to] identify as queer without romantically acting on it. They are the people that think every relationship should be on a level playing field. They are the people that think that just because you have sex with, or fall in love with, the same sex you should not be fired from your job. To me you can be queer politically without being queer sexually. It is all about everyone is equal. It is also about fighting heteronormativity. It is about the people who don't think there is only one way to be a man, and only one way to be a woman. One of my best friends is a 47 year old bi-racial, Black man who shaves everything, paints his toe-nails, and is the queerest person in the
world, and only sleeps with women. I think that is queer because he is fighting the heteronormative, hegemonic representation of what a masculine, muscular, athletic man should do, should look like.

-Carlos, 41, transman, queer, Hispanic/Latino (Cuban American)

Allister supported Carlos’ read of queer politics as broadly inclusive, and based in part, on a commitment to countering neoliberalism and an “us versus them” posturing.

You can have queer politics and your gender and sexuality can be within the dominant framework, but your politics can be queer... For me, being queer, and having a queer politics is trying to dismantle all that sort of western, neoliberal framework that is controlling our lives and getting us to ignore the humanity of people.

-Allister, 30s, genderqueer, queer, fair-skinned Latinx

Leslie builds on the specific components of the queer political ethos. In her case, she asserts the ethos opposes heteronormativity, in personal and structural ways, while countering the capitalistic norm – both dynamics of neoliberalism

I see queer as political in the way that it goes against heteronormativity, whether it is physical or in relationship settings, and you are being more polyamorous. It is non-hierarchal and more community oriented. More of the ‘do it yourself, because it is not going to be done for you.’ Understanding the systematic aspects of how being gay, or not subjecting yourself to being female, male biases and consumerist society.

-Leslie, 28, queer/non-binary, queer/bi, Latinx

Heron also supported queer politics as about more than sexuality and gender. The queer political ideology stands against larger societal structures that privilege some, and marginalize others.

Heron’s position suggested an intersectional dynamic to queer politics, and framed the ethos in identity terms.

It's a way of living, and it's a way of viewing the world and challenging the problematic power structures that be. Some of them may be directly about sexuality and gender, but even, like, our capitalistic system... its super sexist. It's super heterosexist. It's connected, so it's kind of difficult to say, but it is super racist, all of these things are embedded.

-Heron, 32, cis-gender woman, queer, white
In fact, Heron’s mention of the political ethos as a “way of living” is reminiscent of Mischa’s assertion under the section discussing why we should consider queer an identity. Heron drags the identity argument into the political arena.

For a number of participants, the queer political ethos was integrally related to feminism and feminist principles. In fact, Blanche, D, Milo, Mischa, Hope, Destiny, Leslie, Miss, Iris, Angelica, and Andi all noted the link between their feminism and their embrace of the queer political ethos. Other participants, such as Rose and Ambrose, suggested the relationship in their narratives. To these participants, queer politics and feminism are inherently linked to their identities. In support,

I would say that queer politics are inseparable from feminist politics. Queerness that is not feminist is missing something. It is inarticulate, stilled. Wanting to be careful about my language here, but in the same way feminism that is not queer is like...what are you doing?

-Mischa, 23, non-binary trans, queer, white

[My politics are] intersectionally feminist. A politics that is committed to amplifying the voices of those groups of people who have been marginalized and oppressed. Politics that don't seek to serve the white, male, upper middle class... Politics that seek to serve those people who are largely ignored, historically speaking.

-Milo, 23, transman, queer, white

As noted by Milo and Heron, the queer ethos is also intersectional. The next excerpts discuss several intersections the queer political ethos fights on behalf. Rose ties these intersectional linkages to first-wave queer activity.
For Blanche, the intersectionality concerns being fought for by queers is an internal position among LGBTQ people.

I think that the queer community, when it comes to politics, I definitely think they are more so at the forefront at making things intersectional, especially regarding invisibility of people of color, people that feel alienated from the mainstream gay rights movement. They are kind of at the helm of that, which I think is really powerful.

-Blanche, 26, cis-gender woman, lesbian/queer, white

Destiny also approached queer politics as a within community process, yet related to how society imposes on cisgender women and how they can escape the confines of normativity.

I feel like I have been political most of my life. I challenge people's views, especially women… I just think we are so brainwashed to think about some of this shit as the status quo... Women shouldn't be where they are right now. And that's queer politics. We live in a society that tries to control everyone, and everything. And police everything and everyone.

-Destiny, 31, female, queer, white

Finally, in the last two narratives reflecting on the political aspects of queer, Miss and Andre paint the personal, day-to-day realities of what queers are fighting for.

Queer politics, I think, is around language, like being able to use inclusive language. Being able to navigate the world where you view and respect people equally. That you navigate power in a way that feels right for everybody that's involved. I think because I work within sexuality, I think a lot of it is, you know, thinking about people's relationship styles and sexualities and being able to respect them and really trying your best to be inclusive in any way possible, because nobody likes to feel marginalized. Everybody – you know, most people feel like they want to belong, you know, to some group, and I think queer as a politic lets everybody belong. It's inclusive, and so I think that's the advantage of being politically queer.

-Miss, 35, femme/female/feminine, queer, black

I think it is important to constantly be aware there is always going to be oppressive forces that don't want to see people be happy. They don't want to see that fluidity, that dynamic energy. They are going to try and keep us from it. We need to be aware of that. Queer rights for everyone. Be with who you want to be with, and love them. You know that your relationship does not mirror a hetero relationship. Mine doesn’t.

-Andre, 25, cis-male, gay/queer, black
The personal is political and the political is personal. This expression is lived daily by those who embrace a fluid and non-normative gender and/or sexuality. As the narratives in this section note, the political understandings of queer appear to be shared near universally across participants. For a number of participants, those who embrace the ethos asserted the queer rubric allow for a number of people to don the queer marker who would not otherwise be considered. As such, it is in the political arena where queer is not restricted to those adopt a fluid and non-normative sexuality and/or gender. Politically speaking, so long as you stand and fight on behalf of the marginalized, the social outcasts, the “others,” you can call yourself queer.

In conclusion, in this first section of the text a case has been made to assess queer as a shared identity. This identity is delineated by its embrace of the fluid and non-normative aspects, mainly in terms of sexuality and gender. For some, queer serves as an umbrella in which a host of sexualities and gender non-conforming identities can reside. As the second wave of activity unfolds, queer has come to provide space for a host of identities not explicitly mentioned during the first wave of activity. In addition, one understanding of queer during the first wave, conflated LGBT under queer, most of the participants in this study understood queer as distinct from LGBT. While LGBT people can embrace queer, indeed they are more often queer, the evolution of homonormativity causes some participants pause. Leslie (28, queer/non-binary, queer/bi, Latinx) stated,

I can see [hostility towards homonormativity], because maybe they buy into consumerism. Maybe they don't take the race part into account. Just because you are a gay doesn't mean you aren't racist or those kinds of things.

In addition to embracing a fluid and/or non-normative sense of self, queers can also justify their authenticity by embracing the queer political ethos. This ethos takes aim at the privileges afforded some, especially those normalized by society, and as a result, marginalize
others. These aspects of queer are shared, even in the presence of divergent opinions. Not everyone sampled felt that queer is totally open, yet everyone did indicate that protecting who gets to claim queer compared to those that do not, is not their purview. Policing queer happens, and it primarily happens between queers, yet what the process suggests poses a number of challenges for participants. If queer is an umbrella for all fluid, non-normative people (rather than for LGBT people), then it needs to be so for all who fall outside the norm. Several participants provided means to assess “normal,” but I suspect herein lies a source of conflict. Some may see on going challenges to recent legal decisions that uphold same-sex marriage as indicative of all LGB people’s marginalization, yet others view marriage as a normalizing institution, thus not all LGB people are non-normative. In the end, the specifics of which sexualities and which genders get to call themselves queer is less important to the shared aspects of queer identity than if the person, or persons embrace a sense of fluidity or non-normativity. In addition to shared identity, to meet the definition of community, queers must also embody their claim of fluidity and non-normativity. In the next section I present participant narratives that speak to shared code for conduct. In this case, code for conduct are noted as manifest behaviors.

5.2 Code for Conduct

In the prior section I explored how participants understand queer as a relevant identity for those who embrace a fluid or non-normative way of seeing their sexuality and/or gender, as well as a political ethos that fights on behalf of the oppressed, marginalized and the socially “othered. In this section I reflect on whether these tenets are embodied in participants’ practices. Do the participating queers live sexually or gender fluid and non-normative lives? Do they engage in political action and awareness campaigns that intend to improve the social position and standing of the marginalized? Minus processes and organizations charged with keeping record of formal
standards, laws, policies, and other means to assess and measure queer code for conduct, I assert the most meaningful and applicable way to determine if queers meet this aspect of community is through their actions. Is there solidarity in how the participants enact their queer identity? Do they act in similar ways, or at least in ways that are congruent with the fluid and non-normative foundations of their shared identity? If they do not manifest the tenets of their shared identity, then they do not meet the definition of community.

The following inspects the tenets set forth as the shared components of a queer identity. I consider if the participants described living a non-normative life in terms of their sexual practices or gender performances. Do they talk offer stories that support their understanding of queer in manifest form? Have they engaged in political action or consciousness raising that gives voice to racial or ethnic minorities, the poor, the differently abled, the transgender, or other oppressed people?

5.2.1 Performing queer

I begin with a look at embodied queer sexuality. Participant narratives at the personal and relational level are offered to support the argument that sexual fluidity has occurred among many participants. I then turn to gender fluidity and non-normativity. Where participant narratives provide a less convincing argument for shared code for conduct regards enacting their political ethos, or what I refer to as “fighting the good fight.” A number of participants talked about engaging in awareness raising as they also note the limitations of these activities, especially given the selective audience they often speak to or work with. In addition, many times their audience is other queers, thus they reflect on the limited impact their awareness and actions have toward achieving the ethos’ goals. In fact, several participants referenced their engagement as “slacktivism” – their word, not mine – meaning their actions require little effort and often to no
effect. Finally, given the relational nature of a significant minority, I turn the empirical lens on their relationships and consider how they have queered these relationships. Are they living fluid or non-normal in context to their intimate relationship? Or do their relationships reflect traditional, or dare I say, normative expectations.

In preview, I make the case that the participants’ have lived fluid and non-normative lives, thus meeting a rudimentary argument pertaining to shared code for conduct. What remains to be seen, now weeks into a new federal administration and as preliminary movements to counter this administration evolve, for example, is whether queers will step into the fray and translate ideology into protest. At the same time, participants offered a tenuous tale as to the future of queer and whether the queer community will hold.

I begin this inspection of queer as a lived practices shared across participants reflecting on queer sex. Did participants discuss their sexual behaviors, for example, as non-normative or fluid in some ways? When asked, “Do you think there is such a thing as queer sex, and if so what and/or who is involved?” participated reflected on what is involved, as well as discussed how their experiences embody this understanding.

You might say that any sex participated in by a queer participant, or multiple queer participants, is queer sex. I would go so far as to say that two non-queer-identified people could, through sufficient exploration, find themselves queering a sex act. There might be a degree to which queerness or queer sex could be a relative term, which is queer to me. That’s sort of a flexible definition, but I imagine that there are some couples to whom strap-on play would be queer. Oh, the queerest thing they could imagine. I feel like it's sort of become somehow the canonical step beyond missionary style activity or…

-Evie Jo, 30, transgender woman/queer, queer, white

In this excerpt Evie Jo supported a wide application of sexual practices as being queer. Not only do queers engage in queer sex, but non-queers can find themselves engaged in queer sex through non-normative practices. Thus, Evie Jo exposed the notion of *queering* a sex act in contrast to an act being queer because a queer person is involved. As such, sexuality as a queer code for
conduct can effectively be: an act a queer-identified person engages (when a queer person “gives head,” that oral sex is queer), and the act itself can be queer (penetration with a strap on, regardless of who is involved).

In the following exchange, housemates Mischa, Milo and D discuss the nature of queer sex as being about pleasure. In their cases, pleasure isn’t always a physical sensation achieved through penetration. In fact, queer sex as pleasure is as much an emotional state that can be achieved in a host of ways. Their assessment establishes a paradigm shift in terms of how non-normativity and fluidity are achieved. In other words, being sexually fluid and non-normative can mean to also steps outside traditional notions of what sex and sexuality involve. A dominant perspective regarding pleasure is as a state reached through penetrative interaction, at least physical interaction involving the genitalia. Queer sexuality broadens this perspective by rendering sexual behavior in fluid terms, which results in a non-normative perspective on the intent and outcome of sex. Queer sex isn’t just about one body part coming into contact with another; the goal isn’t procreation or ejaculation as much as a sense of pleasure. In the following, Mischa, Milo and D reinforce this assertion.

Mischa (23, non-binary trans, queer, white): I would say queer sex is pleasurable sex.

Milo (23, transman, queer, white): Yea, yea.

Mischa: It is a refusal to just like procreate, like capitalism to create more labor or creating more parents to create more boys and girls. I think queer sex is pleasurable sex. Sex that is based on desire, and I would also say that queer sex is consensual.

Milo: Also, without the objective of an orgasm. I think there is so much goal oriented sex. The way we talk about sex, you assume that there is a goal in mind that is orgasm. I think that queer sex totally takes that out of the picture. Queer sex isn't goal oriented, it is pleasure oriented. There is a big difference between those two things.

D (25, cis-female, pansexual/queer, white): And removing pleasure from like genital pleasure.
Mischa: I also think, to build on what you are saying D, um, that it is also about romantic pleasure. Queer sex doesn't have to look like physicality. Queer sex is also whatever you need it to be in order to find that pleasure.

D extends this thought in the following where she discusses how queer sex escapes the genital boundaries that define non-queer sex.

I recently got diagnosed with herpes. That is a thing I need to disclose to everybody, all the time, and that is changing the type of sex that I have. Where I used to have a lot of straight, PIV [penis in vagina] intercourse, I don't do that anymore. At least not as much. It is changing a lot of conversations that I have about sex. I am having a lot more queer sex.

-D, 25, cis-female, queer, white

Here, Allister supported Mischa, Milo and D’s broader read of what queer sex is and how it is achieved.

For me, queer sex is exploring. Being okay with putting aside something that might scare you. You can have queer sex without touching someone. I think some of the most erotic and the most queer sex is when somebody else may not define it as sex. The fact that you are not touching anybody; the mind sex that happens.

-Allister, 30s, genderqueer, queer, fair-skinned Latinx

In motion, queer sex as breaking free from sex as penetrative, is expressed by Miss. In the following, Miss also asserted how partner choice also becomes a means to achieve fluidity and non-normativity.

I had 15 partners last year. And they ranged from – I had – mostly women, and then I had a couple of transmen. And I hooked up with actually a couple of straight guys, and I – there was like no penetration involved. Well, me not being penetrated.

-Miss, 35, femme/female/feminine, queer, black

Blanche also separated penetration from their understanding of queer sex. In their narrative, any goal symmetry focused on ejaculation is rejected, while noting the centrality of pleasure.

It is messy, and it's ok if your body isn't what society tells you it's supposed to be. If you don't fall in these little boxes, it's totally fine. We're here to embrace each other and to make each other feel good. The end result isn't just cumming. It's not just penetrative. It's more open and engaging with the individual, and not so distanced. To me, that's queer sex.

-Blanche, 26, cis-gender woman, lesbian/queer, white
A couple other narrative threads emerged that assess queer sex in non-normative and fluid terms. For example, in the next selection, Destiny brings penetration back into the queer sex picture, but flips the traditional narrative by making the traditionally penetrated partner, the penetrator, effectively queering the act of penetration.

Okay queer sex… a lot of the men that I have sex with like anal, so I'm usually the penetrating one. [That is] queer for the woman to be penetrating their man. Or gender reversal or role reversal...not just penetration but the way you enact your power in bed or your gender in bed.

-Destiny, 31, female, queer, white

Royce described queer sex in personally political terms by removing moral judgement from queer sex.

I think queer sex is really fluid. You can be someone who might be into a little more kink or you might be bisexual or you might be sexually fluid in the sense that you if you're a male and a female bisexual having sex or a transgender with a straight cisgender person, or like queer embodies both gender and sex where, there are two separate things, but I think queer embodies both. I think it just opens up the spectrum wider to exploration and for non-judgement. It's on the fringe of the norm.

-Royce, 45, Trans* (the asterisk means queer), lesbian, Jewish

Lastly, Andi provides a framework found in a number of narratives regarding how many queer people understand queer sex as non-normative by discussing kink and polyamory as queer.

I think there is such a thing as queer sex. Now what it looks like is so vastly different depending on who, how many, which way, whatever. I think it's anything that hasn't been normalized as proper sex. We're talking kinky sex. We're talking multiple partners.

-Andi, 32, cis-gender woman, queer, black (Native American and white heritage)

As discussed here, as well as by a number of other participants, kink serves as a central and established means to understand queer sex. In the following, Destiny offers an understanding of kink, and explicitly linked kink to queer. As a practitioner, Destiny also supports kink as a queer sexual code for conduct. While not universal, a number of participants noted kink as a form of
queer sex; indeed, Royce, Heron, Hope, and Adelina all mentioned kink specifically when asked how queer sex is an embodied practice.

I think kink is queer for sure. And what is kink? Kink is, I don't want to use like the psych terms for it, because that pathologizes it. I think kink is like S/M, but it can be BDSM. That's why I like using BDSM more than kink, but instead of using a fucking acronym like we do for everything, I say kink. That term is used more in society where vanilla people know what I'm talking about. When I say BDSM they are like, “what?”… You can have sex kink or you can have other kink… I didn't play in public with kink until I was about twenty-seven; that's like in a dungeon and stuff like that.

-Destiny, 31, female, queer, white

With non-normativity as a core tenet of queer, including kink as an expression of queer sexuality makes sense, regardless of the popularity of appropriations such as Fifty Shades of Grey. The following considers additional experiences with kink as an embodied expression of queer sexuality. I begin with an exchange between Rose and Cyan where they discussed Cyan’s desire and engagement in kink, and how both participants have come to understand kink as manifest queerness.

Rose (29, cis-male, same-gender loving, black): Cyan's more into the kinky. I think the queerness informs that, even if not for you [to Cyan], but for me being okay with the kinkiness. I can be a part of it even though I don't get sexual stimulation from it.

Cyan (29, male, queer, white): The queerness does play into the kink. I guess being open to other queer people that are also into kink has opened my eyes to other stuff. It’s not something only serial killers do, like the media portrays it.

Rose: Ironically, for me it has been bi or straight women who have really been role models for ‘this is okay;’ not necessarily gay or queer men, even though we do those things in the bedroom. For me the pathway for that is usually a bi or straight woman, which is very interesting. They are the ones that have said, ‘Kink is good.’

Cyan: I don't really feel a lot of straight couples really get into kink. Maybe that is why I see it more as a queer thing. I don't see it as the normative, straight couple that doesn't do it, very vanilla. I guess [kink is] non-vanilla in a way. Experimenting sexually. Not just doing missionary.

In support of kink as a shared code for conduct among participants, Cyan mentioned Destiny as a source of information as he explored his desires for kink. Cyan and Destiny were
not alone in their experiences with and desire for kink play as part of their queer sexual options. Bunny, and an exchange between Lucien and Ambrose, also linked kink to their queer sexuality.

I definitely have a predilection for kink. Sometimes I just like to get the crap beat out of me and feel the adrenaline rush, and everything that comes from that, the loosening of the muscles.

-Bunny, 40, female, queer/sapiosexual, white

Lucien [28, trans, polyamorous/demisexual/ultimately queer, white (Latinx rearing)]: I like pain, and so, like, if we're doing things like flogging or spanking or whatever, I'm always bottom. But when we're doing things that are sexual, then it works better for her if I'm more dominant, so it's a really – so it's a fun switch. And for a long time, we used to switch back and forth, not knowing that that's how our dynamic was evolving, but just, like, we would have fun. There'd be scenes where we'd just go back and forth, like, five or six times.

Ambrose (33, gender fluid/queer, polyamorous, white): That's why I try and do the stingy stuff. [To Lucien] even though you say you don't like it. [To Neal] he said for the longest time that he doesn't like – there's sting pain and thud pain, and he says he doesn't like the stinging. But I notice that his bodily reactions are more pleasurable when I do the sting, and I'm like, ‘I don't care if you say you don't like it! I'm doing it because that's what works.’

It is important to note, as expressed by D, not all people into kink would call themselves queer, and as Rose noted, not all queers engage in kind. While there are overlaps grounded in being, or at least, engaging in behaviors society largely deems “odd,” or “not normal,” this does not mean a person into kink embraces queer, and vice versus. All the same, a non-normative bridge exists between kink and queer, and in the following D asserted a similarity in that both kink and queer also make pleasure a central focus.

Some people in the kink community are not at all queer, [but] there is a nice little overlap. They [people who embrace kink] are so used to negotiating other acts that are not sexual, whether they be agreements with their partners or the way they receive pleasure or their own desires have nothing to do with intercourse at all. It might have to do with putting on shoes or whatever it is that gets them off. Not even gets them off, but gives them pleasure.

-D, 25, cis-female, queer, white
These narratives offer evidence of queer sexuality as a shared code for conduct enacted during kink play. Another arena in which queer sexuality transitions from ideology to practice regards the burgeoning evolution of polyamory.

Polyamory is being romantically and/or sexually open to multiple partners. This openness is applied across casual and on-going partnerships. Unlike its conceptual relative, polygamy, polyamory generally opposes patriarchal power structures, and does not regulate cisgender woman to relationships in which their power to take multiple partners is negated. Polyamory accepts multiple partners as defined across genders and relational dynamics and networks; the parameters are what the partners make of them. In fact, the potentiality for an endless array of relationship types, including various gender expressions, is what makes polyamory an expression of queerness. The openness is non-normative and fluid, thereby linking polyamory to queer’s core tenets. This bridging results in some polyamorous people to embrace a queer sexual identity. Yet, like with kink, not all polyamorous people see themselves as queer. Here, I explore participants’ understanding, willingness and experiences as part of polyamorous relationships and sexual networks, and how these experiences support the shared conduct of queer in sexual terms. This exploration begins with selected excerpts describing polyamory in motion.

In one of my poly relationships, I was connected to a guy. He was connected to, like, six girlfriends, and four of us were very poly minded. The other two were monogamous, didn’t want to know about all the other stuff. They just wanted their own little corner of his world. So the four girlfriends would get together, just the four of us sometimes, and have, like, family night.

-Ambrose, 33, gender fluid/queer, polyamorous, white

We [Carlos and Jordan] started as poly. We both identified as poly before we got together. We're monogamous now, but the conversations that we've had are there might be a possibility for that in the future, and the likelihood, for me, would be with another man.

-Carlos, 41, transman, queer, Hispanic/Latino (Cuban American)
I'm poly. I was dating – I had, like, a, primary partner for about 3 years, and we just broke up 6 months ago. [It] has been a really, really strange transitional time for me, and currently, I'm dating a couple. Which is something I, like, never thought I would do and is really weird in lots of ways. But I'm actually dating – I'm not, like, dating a unit. I'm dating this guy, and I'm dating this girl, and they happen to be married. Sometimes I hang out with one, sometimes the other, sometimes we all hang out together, so that's really nice. I'm actually going on a date after this with somebody new.

-Hope, 30, female, queer, white (Israeli heritage)

A new partner that I am really into is genderqueer. Really awesome. Definitely queer. I have been seeing him for like three months. I have others I have sex with, but we don't go on dates really. I cook dinner with them, but pretty much a hook-up and cuddle partner.

-D, 25, cis-female, queer, white

I'm in – I guess three relationships? There's the partner I've been with the longest is – I live with that partner. We've been together well over 5 years. So that's sort of like my foundational relationship at the moment, but we were primary partners for most of that period. We've recently sort of decided to shift – mutually decided to shift to a more secondary – less of an orientation towards the future, I guess? Another partner is not a cohabitant. [We] have been dating, maybe 4-1/2 months? I've known them for about a year and a half. Met them as part of this queer social group of burners… And then, there's a third partner, who I guess, it feels weird assigning values and terms, but is the most peripheral of the three. And that is – weirdly enough, the most peripheral of these relationships is the one that – its content maybe most resembles a, like, heteronormative set of expectations about what goes into a relationship? Like, I go, I pick her up. We go out, get dinner somewhere, and go back to her place or my place.

-Evie Jo, 30, transgender woman/queer, queer, white

Evie Jo and I are seeing each other, and I am also seeing [someone else], and he is – I've been seeing him for, like, a year. Oh yeah, they know each other. They hang out fairly often. Usually, I'm involved. Usually, it's like group hangouts and stuff like that. But they're very aware of one another… [Speaking of the relationship with Evie Jo] So there was a lot of shared anxiety between the two of us about the fact that, even though both of us believed our relationship to be very queer, at face value, at the time, both of us, like we looked to be just a cis het couple.

-Gene, 25, agender, queer, Hispanic/white

These narratives reference polyamory, and open relationships in general, as beneficial. But not everyone experienced sexual openness in such positive terms, all the time or under all conditions. Ultimately, my point isn’t to paint manifestations of queer sexuality in glowing terms, rather to demonstrate the shared aspect of the behavioral actuality – they have engaged in polyamorous relationships or sexual openness, and these experiences inform their queerness.
In the following, Iris talked about being open with her then partner, and this openness was destructive. I present this narrative to demonstrate the complexity of human experiences exposing how being queer is to be human – good, bad and otherwise.

So me and [her partner] were – this was when I was also, like, starting to do poly, but like, what I was doing was kind of not – I had this idea, at that time, when I was, like, 19, that it meant that I could just do whatever the fuck I wanted. So that, like – ‘I'm not going to define our relationship, and then I'm going to sleep with whoever the fuck I want, and then you're just going to deal with it. If you have feelings about it, then you're bad. You shouldn't have jealousy, and you shouldn't have issues. I have jealousy, and I have issues, and like, they're valid, but yours isn't.’ So super hurtful.

-Iris, 27, femme genderqueer, queer, Latinx (Brazilian)

For at least one participant, D, their polyamory served as point of queer policing, and exposed how the marginalized can marginalize.

When I was first exploring non-monogamy, I was talking to one of my best friends from high school, who is gay...it was just his reaction. He didn't say anything, but the way he reacted, I was like, ‘Okay, no you are really - you are probably going to talk shit about me tomorrow. You probably think this is really gross and weird.’ Sometimes I feel excluded for that reason, but to me that is part of my...if I am to call myself queer that is a big part of it too. My relationship orientation is also very different what most people assume to be normal, natural, accepted. Sometimes I also feel like kind of gets me into a certain community that is queer space.

-D

Interestingly, societal presumption asserts cisgender gay men and same-sex gay male couples have a proclivity toward sexual openness and multiple partnering. From D’s experience, cisgender gay men can challenge polyamory and treat it as sexually deviant. As an interpersonal phenomenon, polyamory posed particular concerns for participant same sex, cisgender male couples. The two participating cisgender male same-sex couples, Andre and Nazim as well as Rose and Cyan, noted the sexually open cliché is not universal. In the following, Rose and Cyan’s conversation regarding openness as an embodied practice does not result in questioning polyamory’s queerness, rather how we are socialized in the direction of monogamy. Their exchanges demonstrated how difficult it can be to counter this socialization.
Cyan (29, male, queer, white): Open, it is an open relationship.

Rose (29, cis-male, same-gender loving, black): An evolving openness.

Neal: Sexually or romantically open?

Rose: I would say, both.

Cyan: I think both too.

Rose: Yes. I would say that I am open. Now I would actually have to caveat that by saying it becomes very difficult. I think it is a difficult thing to do. I applaud people that can do it. I haven't really seen anyone do it easily. I think that just because of time and energy. The time and energy you put into sustaining something that is open as our relationship is a lot. Doing that with two to three or four people would be difficult. Theoretically I would say yes because I wouldn't want him to think that if he found someone he can get along with better I'm stringing him along. If you truly love someone and you want them to be as happy as possible, even if that includes you not being in the picture. I'm saying that as if it is so easy. It is very difficult to do that. I think that at least having that as floor, for me, that makes it easier to imagine it.

Cyan: I agree with that. It might be, I feel weird agreeing with him. Somethings that I have done in the past have...maybe it is better for us to be in an open relationship, just for research purposes. It is definitely, I understood now from prior mistakes that communication is vital. I feel like what we have now is really good. Even though I agree with Rose at times in the sense that it might be extremely difficult for me to be in an open relationship, which we are, I guess it really hasn't...nothing has really happened yet. Things have been discussed before.

Rose: I think that is why the ease is there. We have never really actually encountered the third party… I think people expect gay men to be less monogamous.

Cyan: That we sleep around with everyone.

Rose: As gay men and lesbian women move toward that assimilationist, the same-sex marriage deal, I would say that queer is still in that poly area. Even still, I bet if we looked at statistics of people who are queer, we would still see a good deal of monogamy. It is not just about family systems that is in all of our sort of structures. I think sexuality as identifying as someone who is queerish, let’s put it that way does make it easier, it makes it easier to say it out loud. It is sort of expected. I don't know if it makes it easier in functionality. I guess I can't really say that given we don't have examples.

As noted, Andre and Nazim also reflected on the possibility of being sexually open in their relationship, and with similar results to Rose and Cyan.
Andre (25, cis-male, gay/queer, black): I'm pretty open to a lot of things. But, I think that within our relationship it mostly depends on, like, our security. I don't think that we're against, like, other partners in the future, [and] it wouldn't necessarily have to be strictly with a man. I've had some crazy experiences over the years, and I'm at an age where I'm like, ‘Okay, I'm gay. I like men.’ That's established, but if I ever wanted to feel adventurous or travel outside of that, I wouldn't feel limited to it... My philosophy is, we're only down here one time. So I don't want to look back and think – ‘Man, I should have tried,’ or, ‘we could've done that,’ you know what I mean? So I'm open to it.

Nazim (21, cis-male, gay/queer, Hispanic/Latinx): It would take me a little bit more time, just because I like – I'm a Taurus, so I like to take my time with things... But it's not something I would immediately do.

The inspection of monogamy and the challenging nature of openness in romantic relationships was not contained to cisgender, gay male couples as the following exchange between Heron and Oak demonstrates.

Heron (32, cis-gender woman, queer, white): There's someone that we hang out with and are friends with who studies polyamory, right, and so they were talking about how they perceive monogamy and polyamory as sexual identities. I would agree that I identify with monogamy. I don't think I would be able to handle the openness, I would not be able to handle that. I would get jealous as hell and feel insecure probably, so I don't even mess with that, but at the same time, I know I don't want to be with anyone else.

Oak (33, transman, queer, white): You know, when you know what each other like...

Heron: You know where the sweet spot is, on impact, so let's just stick with that.

Across the narratives regarding kink and polyamory as queer sexual conduct, I am building support for the assertion that queer is emerging as a community. Participants describe their embrace of fluidity and non-normativity as core foundations for their queer identity and that they live in accordance with these tenets. They practice what they preach. On a note of divergence, at least three participants rejected the idea that there is such a thing as queer sex. Their position calls into question queer sexuality as a shared code for conduct given they do not buy into the thinking queer sex is real. I present these narratives to provide alternate opinions to the example, not the point, as other aspects of queer identity were manifest, thus serving as
shared code for conduct. This divergence was a minority opinion, but one worth noting. Here I present how Isaac as well as Bunny and Buttercup’s reflections on queer sex.

I want to say no to this, and surprise everybody. Because I think that, even in traditionally heterosexual couples’ sexual relationships, when they are exploring everything in a way that is healthy and accepting, unusual things are going to occur. I mean, as soon as you deviate from, ‘We’re doing this to make a baby,’ already aren’t you kind of moving in the direction of queer sex, because it’s recreational. So I think the more recreational and creative you get, the more you start kind of moving a direction that would be queer sex, regardless of the body parts or movements involved.

- Isaac, 37, non-binary/male presenting, pansexual/queer, white/w Native American heritage

Bunny (40, female, queer/sapiosexual, white): I would say no, because to me sex is sex, no matter what you're doing and who you're doing it with.

Buttercup [45, female/woman, queer, white (but prefer not to check the box)]: Right.

Bunny: If it's sexual, it's sexual.

Buttercup: That's why I had the weird look on my face. It's like – it goes back to that – there's too many flavors under the umbrella. What about the asexual that considers them self queer? They're asexual queer. So yeah, to say that there's queer sex –

Bunny: I think it's only straight people who think there's queer sex, really.

Buttercup: To define sex as queer, I think that’s way too difficult.

Bunny: I think that there is such a thing as kinky sex, festishy sex and that can fall under the queer umbrella, but I don't think [sex can be queer].

5.2.1.1 Queering relationships

Another aspect of queer in motion regards intimate relationship, whether romantic, sexual, or platonic. It is through our social interactions that we come to manifest our identities, thus achieve shared code for conduct. The question becomes – do we live the tenets of our identity, in the relationships we engage. In the next section I explore participant perspectives on their noted relationships looking specifically at how they manifest their queer identity in these relationships. To introduce queer as a means to understand how participants approach and
engage in social relationships, Miss talked about her queerness as a framework to associate with many people, queer or not. Her queerness was a lens to understand all sexualities, thus the human experience.

I honestly am the type of person that loves everybody. I think, because I'm queer I'm able to connect [with] everyone. I'm able to connect with ‘Joe Schmoe,’ you know, the straight guy, or you know, ‘Lisa Lesbian,’ or you know, ‘Barbara the Bisexual.’ I'm able to connect to all these different people because I understand their sentiments, and like, I get what they're going through. I think it's very, yeah, advantageous for me that I'm able to connect to all sorts of people based on my queerness.

-Miss, 35, femme/female/feminine, queer, black

While Miss discussed how her queerness allowed her to associate with many people, in various social dynamics, most participants referenced queer as a code for conduct in terms of their romantic and/or sexual partnerships. The following narratives explore these relationships as additional means to conceive queer as a code for conduct shared among queers. For Blanche, the newness of queer, as a forming identity with fresh roots, the navigation of relationships as a queer person is tenuous.

Sometimes I think it is interesting, and sometimes it’s a cluster fuck in the queer community. And I mean queer specifically. We don't have any rules. That is why marriage is so interesting because it is like...we’ve all been cruising for decades and none of us have any rules that regulate such things as, ‘Are we supposed to stay with this same person. When is a good time to move in with this person?’ So it is interesting but also possibly damaging as well.

-Blanche, 26, cis-gender woman, lesbian/queer, white

Most participants, however, did not reflect on being queer in a relationship from a grander perspective, rather discussing their manifestation of queer in their personal, intimate relationships, some sexual, some not.

There's another girl, a transwoman that I’ve started kind of casually seeing recently. That's really interesting because, in that relationship, she is not attracted to men, and typically, I'm not attracted to women. So we had, like, this idea of, like, let's do a platonic romantic relationship, and through dating me and feeling comfortable around a male, she's kind of exploring that side of her sexuality.

-Lucien, 28, trans, polyamorous/demisexual/ultimately queer, white (Latix rearing)
I am [in a relationship with Nazim]. It's great. It is the first relationship I have been in for 3 years. I had a crazy break up with another person in 2012. He was kind of one of those superficial guys who cares all about aesthetic. I kind of understood then that is not what I wanted love to feel like. ‘I am not going to sell myself short or I am not going to play up an image so that you can feel your relationship is hot.’… What I was doing when I was dating was trying to blend in. Trying to live up to some superficial idea that my boyfriend told me I had to have. Now I don't believe in that any more. That's when I met my boyfriend. It was different than most ways I have met guys. Usually when I meet them it was sexual. When we met it was like, ‘What's your favorite color?’ It was authentic.

-Andre, 25, cis-male, gay/queer, black

I am currently in a relationship. I have a girlfriend who identifies as a genderqueer transwoman. Our relationship is super cool and it is awesome… We are currently monogamous. We really love each other, but if there was somebody else who she wanted to explore things with, or someone I wanted to explore things with, that would totally be fine. We are supportive of each other… We can have whatever sex we want to have, or don't want to have. It is total affirmation and respect… It is super queer, because we are both queer.

-Milo, 23, transman, queer, white

For these participants, their queerness helped inform their relationships that, as Andre put it, were “authentic.” Their relationships allowed them the space to be fluid and non-normative. Yet, not all participants experienced their queerness in a relationship with such ease and grace.

I partnered with a trans identified man… We would have arguments, or discussions - it was a thin line between the two, because for him identifying as a straight man, and me identifying as a queer woman, what were we doing. I kind of thought, my idea behind it is that… ‘Because I'm dating you does not make me straight. If anything, by dating me, it makes you a little queer, because you are dating a queer person.’

-Angelica, 36, woman, queer, white

Got into this relationship with this person who started transitioning when we started dating. So right when we started dating was when he started using male pronouns. Right afterwards, started – and became really, like, physically abusive, and so we both kind of like were in, like, this shitty addiction kind of situation. We were both drinking a lot. He was actually a, like, absolutely a queer activist, you know? And still, like, had all of these internalized masculinity kind of things. He was, like, short and would get physically abusive sometimes when that would come up.

-Iris, 27, femme genderqueer, queer, Latinx (Brazilian)

For Iris and Angelica, their queerness did not automatically translate into a harmonious relationship. In Angelica’s case the discrepancy in identities instigated the discrepancy in how
they perceived as well as carried themselves in the relationship. For Iris, while their partner also embraced queer, this embrace was mediated by evolving notions of their partner’s gender as well as substance use. In a vein similar to the dance between monogamy and polyamory, it is important to keep in mind that queer as a code for conduct cannot and does not guarantee positive or beneficial outcomes. The point is that an attempt to live fluid and non-normative occurs, regardless of the outcome.

Thus far I have explored queer in sexually lived terms. I have presented participant narratives that support the argument they do indeed attempt if not achieve lives in motion that reflect their embrace of sexual fluidity and non-normativity. Hiccups occur, as should be expected, yet that these participants’ lives reflect their identities is important and moves us closer to understanding how queer achieves not only shared identity features, but also shared code for conduct. My argument is further supported when inspecting how participants reflect on living their queer sense of gender as an embodied practice.

### 5.2.1.2 Queer gender performance

Where queer as gender identity manifest distinctly was among the transgender participants, especially in their discussions of their transition. Transitioning in one’s gender is queer in motion. Moving between masculinity and femininity, and between designated as either male or female at birth, yet recognizing this designation to be off, truly reflects the fluidity and non-normativity inherent to queer. The contemporary debate unfolding in state legislatures and school boards across the United States regarding access to public restrooms eloquently speaks to queer as other, as non-normative and fluid when referencing gender. This debate also asserts a foundational position of second-wave queer activity, especially its political ethos. Social acceptability in neoliberal times is not guaranteed, even if you take personal responsibility and
engage in the tax-paying, consumption-driven labor force. Of course, queer refutes the
suggestion of universal access to the system we are asked to participate, especially for
transgender women in particular. Here, Milo reflected on their transgender sense of self, and the
connection between transgender and queer.

I think for me my queerness and my trans are inexplicably intertwined, and these are the
most defining characteristics of who I am. I also strongly identify as a feminist and that is
very much a part of being queer and trans for me. To speak to the most salient part of my
identity that would be it for me... I don't want to be read as cis or straight. I am white so I
should be read as white, but being read as cis and straight is so strange and weird and so
far removed from who I am.

-Milo, 23, transman, queer, white

When Milo talked about being “read” as cis and straight, they are discussing how others interpret
their embodied transgender identity, as well as their queer identity. It is their manifestation of
their queer, transgender personhood that is meaningful to understandings how they carry
themselves in the world and how others perceive them, as a non-normative person.

The intermingling of sexuality and gender and how these can define one’s transition and
queerness was explicitly explored by Oak and Heron.

Oak (33, transman, queer, white): I identified as a lesbian for a long time. And then, as I
started being like, ‘Well, I don't necessarily identify as a woman. How's that going to
change?’ That was one of the reasons I didn't transition right away, because I really liked
being a lesbian – ‘No, that's how I identify, and I don't want to be seen as just some guy,’
you know? So that's really what I was struggling with. It’s like, ‘No, I need to do this
[transition].’

Heron (32, cis-gender woman, queer, white): Yeah, I think that we did sort of do it in
tandem; he went from F to M [female to male], and we both went from L to Q [lesbian to
queer].

Oak and Milo were not alone in their gender transition, and how it frames an understanding of
queer fluidity and non-normativity. Carlos also shared their experience of gender transition.

I feel like my transition has been a relief for me. It has caused some ruckus and some
adjustment for the people in my life... Being a man is a huge part of my identity... I
identify myself as a transman for visibility purposes. I'm just a dude. I happen to have been born with female body parts, and I think that is where the trans label applies.

-Carlos, 41, transman, queer, Hispanic/Latino (Cuban American)

At its most poignant, physically alter a part of one’s body to match their identity and sense of self emerged an essential means to conceive queer in practice. Royce described such an event, and its critical importance as a trans* person when they described having chest surgery.

I had surgery this year. I had top surgery because I had gender dysphoria. I didn't know what that was until I read an article that gave me the terms of my feelings. I was like, literally, two months later, I was in surgery. I was like, ‘This is who I am. This is what I have always been.’ I have always had problems with my chest. I never associated with it, but I didn't necessarily want to be a 100% male, so that, even for friends who have known me for 20 plus years, when I sat them down to tell them that I was having this surgery and that I wanted to let them know that I see myself this way, and now I have a voice.

-Royce, 45, Trans* (the asterisk means queer), lesbian, Jewish

Royce was not alone, as several participants discussed having surgery to have their fluid sense of gender match their physical person. Lucien and Oak also both discussed having chest surgery to ensure their body reflected their gender.

While not as invasive as surgery, Lucien noted other actions they took to express their gender nonconformity and fluidity, such as chest binding. Other participants embraced a particular aesthetic, to ensure their sense of self was being projected and understood in accordance with their identity. In the following, Majestic talks about how they present to the larger world, and how this presentation is fluid, thus queer.

I have a traditionally masculine haircut and broad shoulders. You look at me from behind, you think a certain thing. I turn around, you see my boobs… some people look at me and see the female lines of my face. Other people will not see it at all. I had a man cut my hair twice and have no idea he cut a female's hair. So androgyny was that palette, and genderqueer – queer has allowed androgyny to be three dimensional – and androgyny not existent in the negative form but in a positive form, meaning that it's actually – maybe I don't mean androgynous that you have an abundance of gender that you can be anything. You can be both. You can be both in a person. You can be both from one day to the next. Even in the same day.

-Majestic, 42, female/woman/genderqueer, queer, white
Furthermore, gender nonconforming participants discussed societal norms and impressions and how these conflict with their sense as well as expression of gender. Such conduct is not always embraced, even among other queers. In the following, Isaac and Adelina discussed an incident in which Isaac donned a feminized aesthetic, and how a few friends reacted.

Isaac [non-binary/male presenting, pansexual/queer, white (Native American heritage)]: We went to a convention.

Adelina (24, queer/non-binary/female, bisexual/pansexual, white): Some people were like, ‘Oh. Ha ha. Is it a costume?’ Like, ‘Are you in costume as a woman? Are you in drag?’

Isaac: Yeah. Some people still misunderstood… I'm like, ‘No. I'm just dressing – I'm wearing women's clothes.’

Adelina: We had a friend who understands his non-binary expression, and she said to him – she laughed and goes, ‘Oh, you'd make an ugly woman.’

Isaac: Yeah, yeah. So I am not surprised in the sense that you hear about this kind of stuff all the time. But I am always surprised when I see this kind of stuff in real life. Because I'm always thinking, ‘How could someone be so insensitive or so completely close minded or narrow viewed?’ So no, I don't think my friends get it. I mean, I don't think that they truly understand. Because I – most of my friends don't – they've never known of my male sexual partners, I don't think. No. And so they've never known. I mean, I appear as straight and masculine. I'm always with women, and I just don't think they get it. I have sexual desires that are completely outside of that presentation.

In keeping with prior excerpts, Isaac also affirmed the interrelationship between sexuality and gender, and how one can and does inform the other when considering queerness.

Other participants expressed their queerness in gender fluid ways not involving transition, rather moving between masculinity and femininity. These participants noted the importance of their conduct as ways to represent their identity. In the following, Iris, Green and Jordan reflected on their embodied gender fluidity, thus their queerness, especially in aesthetic terms.

The femme parts of myself are me being really strong, me being able to go out, me being able to have better body positivity, me feeling comfortable with my body, me kind of just
Iris, 27, femme genderqueer, queer, Latinx (Brazilian)

Whatever typical female actions would be... like, for me it is mostly the way I dress. I always want people to know my identity without having to tell them because it can be very awkward. I am always looking to project that image. This is how I would dress for school. I guess that is why some people think I am a guy because a girl wouldn't totally wear that.

-Green, 19, female, queer/lesbian, white (Eastern European)

I very much embrace the queer identity. I dress like this [business professional]. Some days I dress really femme. My hair is always short. I sometimes shave very close on the sides. So my family has reactions to that in ways that I know they think or suspect that I am ‘one of those.’ My mother has told me that my father asks her that all the time. He asks if I am ‘one of those faggots?’

-Jordan, 25, cis-female/woman, queer, white (Southerner)

In this section, I explored participant narratives that speak on their gender expressions as queer conduct. From intimate conduct such as surgery and binding to more publically accessible choices such as dress and make-up, these participants spoke on expressing their queer identity in fluid and non-normative terms. Whether they chose chest surgery or to flip traditional clothing narratives, these queer individuals lived their identity. They manifest their understanding of queer and did so publically. In accumulation with the sexuality and partnership practices noted previously, I am building support for the assertion there are queer code for conduct shared by the participants. Where the code for conduct argument was challenged regarded enacting the queer political ethos. In the next section, I look at how participants’ acted, or not, on the ideological tenets.

5.2.2 Fighting the Good Queer Fight

As noted previously, the reclamation of queer during the first-wave of activity was contextualized by a social and political world deliberately seeking to silence, if not eradicate the
other, especially LGBT people and “feminazi” women fighting for equality. AIDS was devastating networks of gay and bisexual men, while lesbians and bisexual women were treated suspiciously, guilty by association. At the same time, women continued to fight against their second class citizenship and subjugation to the proverbial kitchen. Queers, in association with HIV and feminist activists mobilized to fight on behalf of the marginalized, especially those marginalized due to their sexuality and/or gender. Queers also opposed neoliberal positions that propagated consumerist culture and narratives of personal responsibility over structural obstacles maintained by entrenched and privileged, heterosexual, white men.

During the first-wave of activity, queers collectivized around an ethos of difference and equality over privileging and societal tiers. Queers assailed policies and practices that upheld heteronormativity and traditional gender roles in private and public spheres. This first-wave set a standard which presents a means to assess the second-wave of queer activity, notably in the political arena. Indeed, this ideological framework presents the most solid means of assessing a code for conduct, in light of formal policies and laws to guides ones actions and interactions.

Questions that arise: How do those who embrace queer during this second-wave of activity understand the queer political ethos, and do they live in accordance? Are they fighting on behalf of the oppressed, the othered, and the marginalized? In the following, I explore participants’ narratives that described their political actions and means to uphold the ethos they have adopted and embraced.

Angelica aptly underscored a foundation in which to assess queer as a political ethos and the degree to which it is practiced in its contemporary usage.

It is not just about just identifying as someone who is liberal [or] agreeing with more liberal ideas, but it also trying to practice those ideas as well... So like working with different organizations or volunteering but also in terms of how you interact with others… We all come from different places and that we all have different experiences and
want different things, but treating each other with respect no matter how what the circumstance might be.

-Angelica, 36, woman, queer, white

In this excerpt, Angelica recognized that the queer political ethos in practice is not only about taking action in terms of influencing policy, law and structural factors, i.e. “working with different organizations or volunteering,” but also the intimate, or rather personal aspect of political action – how we treat each other. These components provide a few measures to understand the political as a code for conduct. Regarding respecting one another, I raise a previously explored concern, the issue of boundary monitoring, i.e. policing.

Policing each other’s identities suggests a lack of cohesion within the community, as well as a lack of respect for one’s ability to self-identify in light of the shared ideas of what constitutes queer. If queers, even a significant minority or key stakeholders, develop the habit of checking one another’s authenticity and rejecting each other based on surface level assessment, they run the risk of violating the political ethos founded on protecting those who are marginalized. Indeed, policing can serve as a marginalizing process, which contradicts the very ethos queers rally behind. While a number of participants readily admitted to instances where they policed others, in total, all participants asserted it is not their place to determine who gets to embrace queer. In light of this recognition, I argue that overall, while moments of disrespect, as a personal and political act, occur, participants by-in-large respect the larger network of queer identified people. Here, Iris talked about engaging in some policing, and how they come to understand this as contrary to being queer.

I've said things that perpetuate that [patriarchal attitudes], and then thought about it and, like, ‘Well that's absolutely ridiculous. That actually brings about a world that is the opposite of the one that I actually want.’ Mainly out of ego and fear and arrogance…If, like being queer is to try and, like, also break these boxes, then, like, breaking these boxes big enough so that there aren't any real walls and that, it's better.

-Iris, 27, femme genderqueer, queer, Latinx (Brazilian)
In this excerpt, Iris suggests that achieving the goals of the queer ethos is a process as much as a destination, and one, at least they, struggle with. Conduct is not 100%, thus we must be open to the process rather than judge it as a destination.

On top of respecting each other as a political act, participants also distinguished the queer political ethos in action as represented by awareness raising, ala educating others, including queers about the struggles of marginalized people. In the following, Jordan argued that education and protest are relevant to honoring the queer ethos, and that each queer person needs to assess which path they feel most comfortable.

If your goal is to just raise social consciousness, then I think there can be a lot of social consciousness one on one, on the neighborhood level, in the classroom. If your goal is to change policy, then you have to do something bigger. You have to do something else. That looks like what the Black Lives Matter Activists are doing. Whether anybody likes it or not, or thinks it’s tactful or not, they are getting attention. They are starting a conversation, and that is how social movements start… I don't think one defines action as more than the other one. I think you need both.

-Jordan, 25, cis-female/woman, queer, white (Southerner)

Jordan wasn’t alone in her assertion of consciousness raising, and the importance of education to the queer cause. Here, Andi situated their place in the cause squarely in terms of educating others.

I feel like my position within the revolution, the nebulous revolution against all oppression, is education. I really do. I feel like I'm good at that. You know, singers, they hold concerts to benefit things. Educators, we educate people. And so I feel like I – that is all I do, is take time out of my day to educate people on what's going on, on who is suffering and for what reason and how we can fix that, and how ideologies overall impact all of us. So I think that I'm very heavily involved, and I plan on getting even more heavily involved as I age and hopefully have more time to spend on it.

-Andi, 32, cis-gender woman, queer, black (Native American and white heritage)

Andi wasn’t alone in their commitment to awareness raising as a means of enacting their queer political ideology. Destiny stated, “Be aware; be conscious of where you are. Politicalness means
to me engaging in conversation.” In Ambrose’s case, she was actively and directly engaged in educating mental health professionals on matters relevant to gender fluidity and queerness.

So with my office, we actually do a Trans 101 training for therapists. It's something that we've done a couple of times now, and I feel so strongly about the queer identity and the community and the movement around it that I integrate it into that conversation because I think it's important for therapists who are shifting their understanding in gender and relationships to understand that this is something that's happening...

-Ambrose, 33, gender fluid/queer, polyamorous, white

At the same time, several participants questioned the role of education and awareness raising when these efforts are restricted to social media, especially as our social media forums tend to be comprised of like-minded people. In the next two excerpts we find queers problematizing what a couple participants’ referenced as slacktivism – efforts that make the slacker activist to feel good about what they are doing, with little to no outcome resulting from these efforts.

I'm not trying to police or define activism, and I think that there's a lot of types of activism. But, you know, I don't think that posting something on Facebook is going to change anything, because you're posting to your friends. And also when have you ever read one thing that someone has posted that has dramatically changed the way you feel.

-Iris, 27, femme genderqueer, queer, Latinx (Brazilian)

We both want to bring about a new future. What can we do to effect social change? We get both can get to the point where we are financially stable, so with our dollars we can do important things. If we think that there should be more clean energy, then I don't want to just say that. I don't want to be like, ‘I posted it on Facebook.’ I want to put my money where my mouth is.

-Adelina, 24, queer/non-binary/female, bisexual/pansexual, white

Being engaged directly in a political discourse that intends to improve the social position of a marginalized group or to refute actions seen as contrary to the queer ethos was part of several participants’ narratives. For instance, several participants noted direct involvement at some point in time, and while some discussed being more involved previously, this does not negate their commitment. In fact, for several, their efforts evolved in different directions, ebbing
and flowing between direct action to education and consciousness raising to providing support and caring as a means to engage their political beliefs. The following presents several participant excerpts that refer to evolving levels of their time commitment.

In college I organized [a] lie-in for the Iraq war... I was part of the Student Democratic Society, so we did a lot of that stuff... the Love-one-out, protesting the cognitive therapy sessions they did in [names a Southern city]. We organized these protests for these abortion people that were coming in to boycott Planned Parenthood that was like 5 or 6 years ago. But nowadays it is confined to research and the classroom... trying to get rid of some the barriers to graduate education... making sure my students leave with an awareness of what’s going on in the world in terms of race and class, and gender and sexual orientation. It’s really important to me that they have an awareness of social justice.

-Rose, 29, cis-male, same gender loving, black

I would say that, like, being an activist is one of the main identifiers of my life, and what that is has shifted a lot since I was younger. I'm 27 now, and I was very heavily involved in, like, very political activism in some ways, and I think that's shifted a lot to more like caring, healing and feeling sorts of things.

-Iris, 27, femme genderqueer, queer, Latinx (Brazilian)

I had this idea recently about curating a show based on the original Pride flag... At one time it had a black stripe in representation of people who had died from AIDS. I have trying to come up with some queer, LGBTQ artists around Atlanta, and [the] surrounding area to put a show together that can actually educate the queer community. There is deep meaning around, like loss of identity, [and] consumerism toppling the gay/queer community.

-Cyan, 29, male, queer, white

Other artists, such as Majestic and Royce, also spoke of their art as a way to educate as well as raise awareness regarding social issues and being queer. In addition, as will be explored in more detail in the final chapter of the Findings section, a number of participants talked about their active involvement in queer institutions situated in Atlanta, e.g. Free School and MondoHomo.

Some participants, like Hope, offered a degree of regret regarding their current state of involvement, but this does not negate their level of commitment to the cause. And, in the case of Angelica, who introduced queer as political conduct, a period of less activity does not negate their queerness. As such, like understanding one’s genuine and authentic ability to adopt and
maintain a queer identity reflective of their life experiences, so too does one’s engagement of their queer political ethos gets measured over time. Most participants, like Hope and Angelica, described their involvement as ebbing and flowing.

I've been more “activisty” in the past, but – and I actually feel a little bad about myself for not being very “activisty,” but, you know, being a full-time student kind of – that's my excuse.

-Hope, 30, female, queer, white (Israeli heritage)

Just kind of like staying up to date on what’s going on in the political field in terms of like gay marriage, or gay rights, partner rights, adoption. Like do I need to be active? Active activist. I am not as active right now, but that doesn't mean I am less queer.

-Angelica, 36, woman, queer, white

The selected narratives suggest a degree of similarity occurred in terms of how participants conducted themselves politically. Within this degree of similarity, overwhelmingly participants noted consciousness raising as their primary means of asserting and living according to the queer ethos, as well as educating others about the state of law, policy and respect toward the socially and politically marginalized. A few participants noted more active involvement in social movements that align with objectives of the ethos, especially in years past. While several participants argued that this level of “activisty” engagement is a pinnacle means to expressing one’s commitment to the cause, several others noted that each person needs to find their own path to making a contribution. Concern was raised regarding policing others adoption of queer. Assessing the authenticity of anyone who embraces queers runs contrary to the ethos of diversity and inclusion, especially as these pertain to those who live fluid and/or non-normative lives. Policing weakens the argument queer meets the definition of community, as it calls into question shared identity, and under certain circumstances can question conduct, including political engagement. In the final chapter of the Findings section I explore how queer community is experienced in Atlanta.
In sum, I argue that the participant narratives presented support queer as a code for conduct shared among those who embrace the identity. Participants noted their sexual and gender fluidity in terms of engaging in kink as well as polyamorous relationships. In addition, a significant minority of participants described their gender transition or activities they have engaged to align their gender presentation with their identity, e.g. cutting their hair or binding their chest. These actions speak to queer manifest across participants. At the same time, several participants discussed a her/istory of active involvement in social movements aligned with the queer ethos, such as Rose protesting conversion therapy, or at the more intimate level, Cyan’s protest of an employer’s refusal to hire a transgender applicant. Concern for queer as a code for conduct involves policing those who embrace queer in order to ensure authenticity. Policing, as a practice, can seriously damage the queer ethos of diversity and inclusion. At the same time, as noted by Carlos, “if everything is queer, nothing is queer.” The conundrum between policing and inclusion presents certain challenges for queer as community. Who does and does not get included may very well determine the future of queer communities as minorities within the collective may feel more and more marginalized in a community founded on carving out physical and social space for their voice and holding them up to a heralded position. All the same, what is clear from the participants’ narratives is that they do enact queer’s tenets of fluidity and non-normativity. In short, their shared identities manifest in shared conduct. Combined, these make for a community.

5.3 “Southern Fried, Queer Pride” – Queer in Atlanta

When asked, “Tell me about the queer community; is there such a thing, and, if so, what does it look like,” most participants stated they believe there is such a thing as a queer community. For example, Blanche was direct and to the point, “I do think there is such a thing as
a queer community.” Gene proclaimed, “I believe there is such a thing as a decent, hefty queer community.” And, Majestic made a telling admission when they said, “I've been really immersed in the queer community and frankly, I got my first hugs, true hugs and true unconditional love, in the gay community.” These were just a few selections of the near universal sentiment there is a community in which queers belong and mark as their own. Of course, most participants spoke of their queer community, or communities – typically referring to various networks made up in total or part by other queer identified people – as geographically based. Many participants had experienced being queer in other parts of the country, but as Atlanta was their place of residence at the time of their interview, they more often reflected on queer community in spatially bound terms.

Atlanta is a unique metropolitan area, and a number of participants felt the qualities underscoring the cities distinctness also fosters a distinct queer community. As a large city situated in the Deep South, the Southern culture as steeped in religiosity and a her/istory of racial tension, is defining. At the same time, Atlanta has been shaped by the re-migration of African Americans in the wake of civil rights advances, aka “the new South.” Like most large urban areas, Atlanta serves as a haven for many LGBTQ people who wish to live in accordance with their identities, to not have to hide or mask their sexual non-normativity or gender fluidity. The influx of marginalized peoples, based on race, ethnicity, sexuality and gender has fostered a context conducive to the evolution of a distinct queer community. Furthermore, Atlanta’s socially and politically marginalized majority has helped produce in a more liberal political system, as compared to its more rural and conservative surroundings. This system tends to favor the protection and promotion of the “other,” including LGBTQ people, e.g. the city maintains legal protections against “sexual orientation and gender identity” discrimination. This read of
Atlanta, and how it influences its queer community, found support in several participants’ stories; yet, not all participants felt the queer community in Atlanta is all that distinct, let alone all that laudable. In the following, I offer narratives that support Atlanta as a distinct milieu as well as other excerpts that argue its burgeoning queer culture shares features common to many queer communities. I begin with the prior assessment – queer in Atlanta as unique. From a native perspective; Evie Jo was one of the select participants born and raised in Atlanta.

In the same way that Atlanta has served as a LGBT Mecca of the South, it seems to also be developing into something of a queer Mecca for the South. There's something sort of queer about being southern. Maybe it's just my impression of the burn community down here, but there's sort of a rowdiness that I've always appreciated… There's a rebel spirit to these southern queers.

-Evie Jo, 30, transgender woman/queer, queer, white

The unique Atlanta culture and what it offers queer people was also noted by several transplants from various parts of the country.

I think Atlanta has a very metropolitan queer community. I think it's from all over the place… When I moved here, it took me over 2 weeks to meet someone from Atlanta. It's not – so Atlanta is not – it's the new South.

-Majestic, 42, female/woman/genderqueer, queer, white

Buttercup [45, female/woman, queer, white (but prefer not to check the box)]: That's one of the things that [prompted] me to move here, there were more opportunities to enjoy diversity, in all forms. I did not have that growing up. And I didn't realize just how naive and sheltered I was until I moved down here. I spent years up there hunting in the underground for likeminded people… We're lucky enough that we can walk into, you know, a club over in East Atlanta and go, ‘I'm here, and I'm queer,’ and everybody's going to come give you a hug.

Bunny (40, female, queer/sapiosexual, white): True.

Buttercup: So I feel lucky… We, of course, have charity organizations here in Atlanta, like Charis Circle. We've got Lost & Found Youth, which is incredibly important. And things like that for people that are in need. So we have ways that we can be inclusive, and ways that we can help. And I think within our social circles, we build community of, like Bunny used earlier, family… You name it. It's available.
Blanche, a transplant from another Southern state, supported Bunny and Buttercup’s narratives in the following,

Its unique here [in Atlanta], because there’s a lot more to do. There’s a lot of people here that come from lots of different backgrounds. Where I’m from, we have Pride, but it wasn’t like a cohesive sense of community. I knew all the other queer women, and the diehard lesbians. I think here it’s just different because it is also that combination of political. For a lot of people here, they do identify as queer because it’s their politics.

-Blanche, 26, cis-gender woman, lesbian/queer, white

These three narratives painted an embracing and accepting picture of Atlanta’s queer community.

Then there were those who felt Atlanta’s queer community is not all that unique. Those participants who asserted this thread tended to be transplants, thus their impressions were formed in context to other places they had lived as queer.

I think, because of the places that I’ve lived, Atlanta doesn’t seem unique to me. I think had I grown up somewhere in the rural south, Atlanta would be a haven. You can look around and you see queer in all shapes, all sizes, all colors, all religions, and so I think in that case it seems unique. But, since I’ve lived in other sort of queer havens, both here and abroad, it’s not necessarily that unique.

-Allister, 30s, genderqueer, queer, fair-skinned Latinx

Andre, who also grew up in another part of the country, also felt that queer in one part of the country tends to look the same regardless of where one lives. He succinctly stated, “In a lot of ways, no” when asked if there is a difference in being queer where he grew up compared to Atlanta. Regardless of whether the individual participant felt being queer in Atlanta was similar or different they still felt Atlanta has a queer community, and nearly every participant talked about how race uniquely frames living in Atlanta, in general and as queer.

One important and critically remarkable contour of Atlanta is the majority of its populous is comprised of African Americans. As such, one might hypothesize that its queer community would mirror the racial and ethnic distribution of the larger populace. According to many
participants, such is not the case. At the same time, they also reflected on the notable racial segregation, which may impact their perceptions and experiences. Here, I succinctly explore these experiences and impressions. In short, their narratives paint a troubling picture regarding race, class and inclusivity – a central concern for queers politically.

I grew up in Atlanta, which is very white, I mean, in [the] sense of gay. The Atlanta lesbian scene is extremely segregated. It's very white. I always think of like when I was up in New York or San Francisco, you just have a mish-mash of so many different kinds of people. And I don't know if that’s just because of where we live and how our - Like it's a very gay friendly city, but you have your different cliques. You know Bulldogs is more for gay, black men. Blake's might be a mish-mash and Burkhart's might be a mish-mash, but it might be more of a little middle class to upper class, boy next door kind of clean cut guy [gathering place]. You may not find a Radical Fairy hanging out at Blake's because there would be judgement.

-Royce, 45, Trans* (the asterisk means queer), lesbian, Jewish

I think more of our queer movement is also sparked by racial undertones, especially in Atlanta. A lot of people, I find, in other states, looking at the gay community in Atlanta, think about white gay men. Like, that's what the gay Atlanta community is, and it's very open, and it's very accepting, but it's all white gay men. As I've become more involved in the gay male community, I definitely see that. We had an incident a few months ago. [A local gay bar] put up this sign that was like, ‘We have a dress code.’ I feel, like, in the South there's this big divide.

-Lucien, 28, trans, polyamorous/demisexual/ultimately queer, white (Latix rearing)

Briefly, the incident Lucien refers involved a gay bar that primarily caters to gay white men. The owner posted a dress code that overtly appeared to restrict access among African Americans. The community responded in volume, including some of the staff of the bar, resulting in the dress code being removed promptly. Several participants spoke of the incident as a means to distinguish local institutions that serve Atlanta’s LGBTQ communities. Royce and Lucien’s impression of the racial concerns problematizing Atlanta’s queer community did not stand alone.

I think there is [queer community in Atlanta], but it is problematic in a way. I see that a lot of people in the queer community, around my age and stuff, a lot of them tend to be white and [from] educated backgrounds. The majority probably grew up middle class or lower middle class. I see more people of color coming into the community, but not enough.

-Leslie, 28, queer/non-binary, queer/bi, Latinx
In addition to issues of segregation and delusions that whiteness defines queer in Atlanta, participants who were people of color also discussed being a queer person of color, yet in context to the African American community. In sum, Rose described the larger social world African Americans must navigate and how this context may inform African American’s relationship to queer. Miss and Carlos also argued that the traditional features of African American communities tend to reject the core tenets of queer – they embrace traditional gender roles and normativity, not fluidity and non-normativity, thus few African Americans embrace or at least participate in Atlanta queer life.

I think the boundaries to queerness are much stronger here [in Atlanta]. I know that some of those boundaries are much stronger in the black community. Like the religious fervor in black communities. The devotion to parental politics. The community of your parents is very...you know, because black people have to deal with racial aggressions too, and sometimes that over shadows the queer question. That results in things like later coming out, more of them being in the closet, more heteronormative relationships. I think it is difficult.

-Rose, 29, cis-male, same gender loving, black

With black folks, and particularly here in Atlanta, it's very gendered, right? There's feminine, and there's very masculine, and the feminine and masculine folks usually just say they're feminine or masculine, like queer is, like, not as prevalent in their dialogue as it is maybe with white folks, you know? Because sometimes I think the gender thing kind of goes hand in hand. And maybe this is just my own personal experience, I feel like here in Atlanta we don't have a lot of black genderqueer people, as opposed to white folks. And so to understand queer, maybe is understanding it through the lens of gender, of masculinity and femininity.

-Miss, 35, femme/female/feminine, queer, black

I find that the colored communities everywhere tend to be more homonormative than – and even heteronormative – than the white gay community. I mean, the butch/femme thing is a thing in all lesbian communities of color, regardless of the color. From New York to Portland to San Francisco, everywhere... I think queer as a community doesn't exist, very frequently, anywhere.

-Carlos, 41, transman, queer, Hispanic/Latino (Cuban American)

While these narratives suggest conflicts exist that explain why African Americans who may be LGBT do not embrace queer, even why queer itself tends not to speak to African
Americans in Atlanta, this was not the case in total. In the following, Ambrose talked about how the racial divide has cracked in particular situations, or at least particular circles. From Lucien’s perspective, African Americans who live fluid and/or non-normative lives are becoming more integrated into Atlanta queer community.

For the longest time, there was *Black and Poly* and there was *Atlanta Poly*. Atlanta Poly was whitewashed and family, all family oriented. There were no adult events. So we had a lot of people who rejected that community, and didn't go because they didn't share their values. We've got new leadership now. Two out of our three leaders are black, and we're starting to get a lot of people of color - more people of color than Caucasian/white people, and it makes me so excited because that bridge is coming together. The community is becoming more of a welcoming to everyone experience with that racial diversity and that gender diversity and the sexual orientation diversity, and it's starting to come together, and I'm so excited about it.

-Ambrose, 33, gender fluid/queer, polyamorous, white

Unfortunately, race was not the only concern participants’ expressed regarding Atlanta’s queer community. Indeed, several talked about other troubling features, including attitudes that tend to alienate rather than welcome of queer Atlantans. Again, concerns with policing tendencies, segregation according to class, as well as issues resulting from Southern cultures traditionally non-acceptance of marginalized and non-normative peoples came into play.

For some queer people I’ve met here in Atlanta, there is a sense of pretentiousness. I think it’s used as a way to create a little bubble. As much as people will try to be like, 'I'm not about safety, and I’m way out here pushing on these boundaries.' In those elements of who they allow in, is very closed off.

-Allister, 30s, genderqueer, queer, fair-skinned Latinx

Let me put it this way, when I first moved here, I definitely didn't feel a part of the community because I still enjoy men, cismen. But, most of the men I actually do like are not really all that cis. They're mostly effeminate men. They're queer gendered. Yeah. So given that, I just didn't feel like part of the community. Just because of comments here and there.

-Destiny, 31, female, queer, white

I felt that in California things were a little more diverse in queer spaces. Here you can definitely see where things are more divided according to things like how much money you make, race, or class. There, everybody loves everybody. I actually had a conversation with another person, she is a lesbian and we were talking about that. She was like, ‘I don't
understand why we need to have separate Prides. Why can't we just have one?’ I was like, ‘You know I always trekked down to San Francisco for Pride with my friends when I was a little bit younger. Everyone was just blended together. It was huge.’ Here, it is gilded as unity, but when you peak under, you can see that [it isn’t]. There is not enough inclusion for people who are older and queer, people who are low income and queer.

-Andre, 25, cis-male, gay/queer, black

In the Deep South, [it is hard] to have a conversation and be like, ‘I'm genderqueer; I'm a lesbian who took off her breasts because I don't feel the need to have them, but I also don't want to be on hormones either. Can't we be who we want to be and live our lives and have the same rights as anyone else? Because we are human.’ That is the bottom line, we all pay taxes. We are all human beings. We all have emotions. And regardless of who I have sex with or how I present myself, it is really not up to anyone else to judge me.

-Royce, 45, Trans* (the asterisk means queer), lesbian, Jewish

In addition, for at least one couple that understood queer in LGBT umbrella terms, the queer community is more normative than non-normative. In the following, Carlos and Jordan discussed the pervasiveness of homonormativity among queers in Atlanta. In this case, the lived practice of being queer conflicts with queer identity and its stated political and personal goals. It is important to note that both Carlos and Jordan are transplants to Atlanta, and both had embraced queer prior to moving to “the new South.”

Carlos [41, transman, queer, Hispanix/Latinx (Cuban American)]: The little bit of the Atlanta gay scene that I know, I find is pretty homonormative.

Jordan (25, cis-female woman, queer, white (Southerner)): Yeah. I would agree.

Carlos: I think that, you know, there's the one lesbian bar in town. But you know, you walk in there, and it was very butch/femme, especially in the colored community. It's very butch/femme. It's very traditional. You go to The Jungle. You go to The Eagle. You go to The Anvil.

Jordan: Blake's.

Carlos: Blake's, whatever. It's a pretty homonormative gay male world. Like there's not – I mean Mary's is as queer as it gets, and it's not that queer when you put things in perspective from other places.

Jordan: Yeah.
Carlos: It's queer in that the boys mix with the girls and the straights come in too and that's about, I think, as queer as it gets. I don't think Atlanta's incredibly queer. I don't find…

What this exchange also highlights is a concern for demarcating queer community – how do we untangle queer from its relational roots to the LGBT community. Some LGBT people do not embrace queer, thus assessing queer community in light of non-accepting, yet historically connected people becomes problematic.

At the same time, a number of participants spoke of Atlanta’s queer community, especially in context to particular institutions and organizations, in glowing terms. In this section I present narratives that inform how Atlanta has developed a robust second-wave of activity related to queer as a social phenomenon, one that provides meaningful outlets for shared identity and code for conduct. In fact, through these experiences and what they entail we better understand how people who embrace queer built and sustain a community. One institution a great number of participants reflected on fondly was a bar called Mary’s. Royce referred to Mary’s as, “I think that it is the safe zone for queerness.” Others also spoke of Mary’s as not just a gathering place for queers of age to drink, but also as a safe place to drink and socialize with other queers.

Mary's is so important to me. It is a bar at the end of the day; it is a fucking bar, but it is so important because... I know I can go there and sit at the bar and have someone to talk to at the end of the day before I head home and the people who work there, and the people who spend time there... Mary’s is queer. It is not just like...Mary's is kind of like a queer person. It has a queer aesthetic that goes along with it… It has the feel of a community… It is like a big communal house.

-Angelica, 36, woman, queer, white

I go to the bar Mary's all the time with my girlfriend. We know it as a queer bar because we don't get harassed there and our friends don't get harassed there. It is like a safe space to the point where if anything is happening there it is okay. There is diversity in the people that go to this bar, and there is diversity in the people that feel safe in that bar.

-Blanche, 26, cis-gender woman, lesbian/queer, white
If I go to Mary's there is a queer community that I can be a part of... They don't necessarily know what is going on in my day to day, but we have an understanding we are in a fight together.

-Allister, 30s, genderqueer, queer, fair-skinned Latinx

Often, participants who spoke of Mary’s contrasted it with other Atlanta bars catering to the LGBT community, or at least particular networks, for example, Atlanta’s fetish and leather bar, The Eagle. Participants noted Mary’s distinct role in providing a place for queers to socialize, and “get a good, strong drink,” as Angelica stated.

Mary’s wasn’t the only forum Atlanta queers gathered to share in their identity and to engage in collective action, whether for fun or political reasons. For example, Angelica and Majestic spoke of a now defunct art and culture festival known as MondoHomo. In complement, Angelica also spoke about an erotic film festival, Cinerotic, which ran for a number of years. Other participants’ mentioned collectives such as the Atlanta Free School, which Hope and Iris both noted as particularly queer. In fact, Iris stated, “I feel like that was a very explicitly queer – you know, we had – it was very political and it was very queer.” Hope also mentioned that a number of queers were actively involved in Food Not Bombs as well as Queer House. In the latter case, Leslie described the group home in the following, “There is a place called Queer House in the neighborhood where I live... it is a community for a lot of artists and queer folks.”

Finally, an annual event, with a number of smaller events throughout the year, hosted and populated by Atlanta’s queer community is Southern Fried, Queer Pride.

Southern Fried, Queer Pride’s website (http://www.southernfriedqueerpride.com/) bills itself as, “an Atlanta-based queer and trans alternative Pride festival and collective celebrating the robust and vibrant community in the Southern United States. Cooked in the oils of our “forequeers” of the Compton Cafeteria Riots, the Stonewall Riots, ACT UP, and the many radical uprisings of years past...” One of the salient aspects that emerged in the narratives
regarding Southern Fried, Queer Pride was its embrace of a variety of people who are marginalized among the marginalized. While at least one of the narratives found this focus personally troubling, given they did not feel comfortable at the event they found themselves, they recognized the need to carve out territory for those who are generally left out, otherwise. The following excerpts explore the organization, its events and the role they play in the Atlanta’s queer community.

Rose (29, cis-male, same-gender loving, black): I think one of the critiques we can have of queer community is its ignorance of its communities. Queerness proclaims its unity in its “anti-ness,” but when we don't say they exist, we ignore them. For example, when we went to the Southern Fried Queer Pride. We went to one of their variety shows. It was very interesting, there were a lot of folks who would not normally be included in what we call queer community, so, for example, there was one presentation from a young individual who I would assume to be of some trans* identity, who I would also assume has some sort of cognitive impairment. But they were very welcomed, they were very welcome in that space, which would not happen in other queer space, such as a queer bar, like Mary's. Clearly they found the need to have this secondary; that sounds bad, this counter space to contemporary queerness. I think a lot of people who identity of queer would not have gone to that; they didn't go to that.

Cyan (29, male, queer, white): Yea, there really weren't a lot of people who attended.

Rose: Yea, there were a lot of people on Facebook, who I know that identify as queer who talked about going, but didn't go. But they were definitely at the Mary's show [after]. It is divided by the same divisions in mainstream community, by race, class, ability status. Ability status is one I really noticed at Southern Fried Queer Pride, and class. A lot of the stuff going down were free, and they had organized it pure grass roots.

Cyan: You could definitely tell it was very low budget, very small space. Everyone was like crowded in, and there weren't that many people.

Rose: It very much depended on volunteerism. And the age was very interesting. There were, I would say the majority of them were under 21, which is very different.

Rose and Cyan brought to light how Southern Fried, Queer Pride embraces the core tenet of inclusion and diversity. This inclusion, or rather, explicit development and offering of space to the marginalized, especially those left out of traditional institutions, such as bars, is queer
ideology in motion. Others felt a similar way, as noted in the exchange between Ambrose and Lucien.

Lucien [28, trans, polyamorous/demisexual/ultimately queer, white (Latinx rearing)]: I understand having to have person of color safe spaces.

Ambrose (33, gender fluid/queer, polyamorous, white): Right.

Lucien: Because the journey of being a queer person of color is completely different, especially in the South, [than] being a white person of color. But some of them were things that weren't necessarily related to race, like one that you were really interested in was trauma and queerness or like autism and queerness.

Ambrose: Something like that, yeah.

Lucien: Some mental health –

Ambrose: Being a therapist, right, it really spoke to me based on the description.

Lucien: It was a person of color safe space.

Ambrose: It was person of color period. Like, a white person could not walk through the door. I was like, "Really?"

Lucien: I just think, again, that goes back to the divisiveness. But at the same time, I've struggled with this idea of, ‘Do I only think that because I am white? Because I am excluded?’ Because part of white privilege is people feeling like [we] should be allowed everywhere.

The last sentence contextualized Lucien and Ambrose’s conversation about Southern Fried, Queer Pride, and queerness overall. A point of queer is to ensure the fluid, non-normative, and the excluded have, as Blanche referred to queer, a place to call home. The institutions and organizations reflected on by participants reflected on Atlanta’s queer community – the places where they feel they can be queer, with other queers. In fact, when talking about queer in Atlanta, Ambrose stated, “I love getting to know all those different kinds of people and pulling those bits and pieces together and connecting with people of like mind. It's a lot of fun.” This
sentiment regarding being queer in Atlanta and socializing in its queer community was shared by Buttercup and Bunny.

Buttercup [45, female/woman, queer, white (but prefer to not check the box)]: Queer karaoke at The Eagle. You name it. It's available. And it's at your fingertips. So if you have the inclination and the interest, all you have to do is let your, you know, tips do the typing.

Bunny (40, female, queer/sapiosexual, white): I think that we are less limited to the bar scene, to the nightlife scene. Our roommate is involved with a group that does video gaming at, where is it? The Heretic? At The Heretic. And, you know, that's a great way to get both the younger generation and the older generation to come together and bond over something, and it has that sense of community over something that's just fun, you know?

Buttercup: There's a group that does game nights at The Jungle, and all proceeds from the game nights go to Lost & Found Youth.

Bunny: There will always be a place for bars and nightclubs. That's not going to go away. And as long as there's bars and nightclubs, there's going to be queer hangouts.

Buttercup: Well, and not only that, but it goes back to, you know, information, again to the person who's still finding themselves. There's a lot of very incredibly introverted people in our society that are scared to death to ask the question to the face of a person but has no problem typing it out in a group chat.

On a final note, when asked what she likes about being queer in Atlanta, Green responded, “The people. I feel like a lot of people are very open and accepting and very nice. I like having friends and I do like making friends. I am happier than I used to be.”

In this section I have explored Atlanta’s queer community as an example of the assertions of this study – that queer is community. Queer people share an identity and they manifest this identity through shared code for conduct engaged in Atlanta’s queer institutions and designated spaces. The participants, all who live in the metropolitan area, reflected on ways Atlanta is unique, e.g. its concentration of African Americans, and in ways it is much like any other city, e.g. suffers from segregation. They painted a picture of Atlanta as a collection of institutions that function for and on behalf of queer people, their allies as well as their identity-based chosen
families. In conclusion, Atlanta offers distinct space for the participants to understand what it means to be queer and the freedom to live these meanings in a specified community.
6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between and individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.

-Audre Lorde (1984)

In this study, I considered the participants experiences and understandings as people who embraced queer. During one-on-one and relational interviews we explored aspects of their childhood, “coming of age,” as well as contemporary lives to mount a response to the question as to whether queer people have socialized and organized to a communal end. Have they formed a distinct queer community?

The question of queer as community is significant sociologically, given the impact and importance of sexuality and gender-based communities to the members, and society in general. Indeed, as an intimately related example, we understand the evolution of a gay and lesbian community nationally, and in particular locales, as changing the social landscape (D’Emilio 1983; D’Emilio 1990; Kennedy and Davis 2014; Rubin 2002). Since Mary McIntosh’s (1968) seminal work on the “homosexual role,” the social sciences, and sociology in particular, have attended to sexuality (and gender) as a social force of particular importance. As lived practice, those who embrace queer have also embraced a number of emerging socially marginalized and oppressed gender nonconforming and sexual “deviant” roles. The inclusion of this broader diversity is in keeping with the themes set forth during the first-wave reclamation process. In short, this is to say that we, as academics and as people living our daily lives, find meaning in collective association, community in particular, as refined by our gender and sexuality. This assertion informs the significance of this study. If queers have formed their own community, it serves as a distinctly meaningful evolution for those who embrace life’s fluidity and designation
as non-normative. Queers no longer need to function as “off shoots” of other communities, as now they have their own to which they can belong.

The participant narratives serve as building blocks to the precis, queers have formed their own community. To address queer as community, I applied a definition grounded in the social sciences. From arguments posed by the likes of Durkheim and Tönnies, Bhattacharyya’s (1995) defined community as solidarity, and solidarity as including shared identity and a code for conduct. As Bhattacharyya stated, this definition overcomes the “excess baggage of ethnicity, territoriality, or certain types of economy,” (p. 61), thus provides for identity-based communities that coalesce around shared meanings and embodied practices that conform to communally-defined norms and expectations.

The structure selected for this study follows Bhattacharyya’s definition in that each respective Findings section addressed queer as a shared identity, followed by a code for conduct, and concluded with Atlanta as an example supporting the argument. In short, this study showed participants held common understandings of queer as fluid and non-normative, and they applied these principles to their sexuality, gender, and political lens. Their narratives demonstrated they hold to the tenets of fluidity and non-normativity in their actions, suggesting an accepted code for conduct. Yet, one’s behavior does not, in and of itself, prove a shared code for conduct; they only suggest it. I argue that where a shared code for conduct was more clearly expressed can be found in the participants’ experiences and understanding pertaining queer’s political ethos, as well as the practice of policing. While traditional, spatially bound communities more often have laws and policies and strongly held social scripts that serve as codes for conduct, queers do not maintain these in the same formal manner. What they do have is a manifesto set forth over a generation ago that loosely frames their community’s conduct during a second-wave of activity.
Policing, while not looked upon fondly among participants, does suggest a strongly held belief system is in play as it regards queer in practice.

The first component of community, queer as an identity, centers on fluid and non-normative expressions of self. These core tenets get operationalized through sexual desires and behaviors as well as the gender performance and aesthetics. The narratives explored participants’ polyamorous relationships – having more than one romantic and/or sexual partner concurrently – experiences with kink – such as sado-masochism and bondage – as well as desires and encounters with people of various genders. Some participants spoke of their queer sexuality in terms of being sapiosexual – being attracted to intelligence – or demisexual – having a strong emotional bond with the partner prior, while others linked the queer identity to be an LGBT person. Many of these expressions of queer sexuality are more recent in evolution, indicating queer as an identity is fluid in and of itself. Thus, queer has not remained bounded by the specifics of first-wave thinking and application. Where second-wave queers experienced some divergence regarded queer as an umbrella for LGBT people, and the inclusion of people who live apparently heterosexual lives.

During its first-wave of activity, in which queer was reclaimed and reconstructed, it evolved from within the LGBT community. Those first-wavers asserting a new meaning for queer had grown defiant in the face of on-going oppression and processes seeking to normalize gay and lesbian lives. Queer emerged during the social vortex swirling around HIV and AIDS and its overtly anti-gay, lesbian and bisexual accusations. In fact, some LGBT people refuted the supposition that their sexuality and/or gender could be reduced to a mirroring effect, whereby the only distinction regarded the gender of their object choice, or that LGBT people desired to fit into traditional gender roles. Queers saw it differently. Indeed, they asserted a counter narrative.
In June 1990, an anonymously produced publication, “Queers Read This,” was distributed at New York City’s Pride. This publication noted queer as,

Well, yes, ‘gay’ is great. It has its place. But when a lot of lesbians and gay men wake up in the morning we feel angry and disgusted, not gay. So we’ve chosen to call ourselves queer. Using ‘queer’ is a way of reminding us how we are perceived by the rest of the world. It’s a way of telling ourselves we don’t have to be witty and charming people who keep our lives discreet and marginalized in the straight world. We use queer as gay men loving lesbians and lesbians loving being queer. Queer, unlike GAY doesn’t mean MALE. And when spoken to other gays and lesbians it’s a way of suggesting we close ranks, and forget (temporarily) our individual differences because we face a more insidious common enemy. Yeah, QUEER can be a round word but it is also a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe’s hands and use against him (emphasis in the original).

As reflected in the narratives of the participants, this base understanding of queer still serves a guiding framework during a second-wave of activity. Yet, the social position for gays and lesbians, in particular, have changed since the first-wave of activity. With the U.S. Supreme Court striking down sodomy laws and upholding the constitutionality of same-sex marriage, coupled with various institutional, local, state and national policies protecting against discrimination and allowing for adoptions, the landscape has shifted. On the surface, these shifts challenge the first-wave’s counter narrative of “f*ck you” intending to fight a “common enemy.” This begs the question, is there a need for queer as applied to gays and lesbians, in particular? The participants sided with the notion that a queer umbrella continues to include gays and lesbians. Recent social advances have not eradicated the common enemy, though they may have altered exactly who that enemy is. Gays and lesbians remain socially marginalized because of our object choices, our “messing” with traditional gender roles, and the potentially fleeting nature of the policies enacted. Andre, a gay/queer identified cisgender man, stated the case succinctly when he said there are those that “don't want to see people [meaning gay and lesbians] be happy.” In sum, many participants continued to perceive and support queer as an umbrella for
those who live fluid and non-normative lives. At the same time, the participants also noted that this inclusion does not apply to gays and lesbians, or anyone for that matter, which shun queer’s principles of fluidity and non-normativity. Queer identity maintains certain boundaries.

In addition to challenges posed by social shifts for gays and lesbians, a number of sexual and gender variants have come into view, and fall outside society’s picture of normativity. Where these variations present challenges to queer inclusion centers on those who would appear to be heterosexual, yet modified by their embrace of non-normative sexual expressions. Several participants noted what queer contrasts is an image represented by the opposite-sex coupling with “2.5 kids,” living a socially privileged life defined by a consumerist culture centered on traditional gender roles and family structures. This debate is summarized by Mortimer (2016), who argued, “A straight person identifying as queer can feel like choosing to appropriate the good bits, the cultural and political cache, the clothes and the sound of gay culture, without the laugh riot of gay-bashing, teen shame, adult shame, shame-shame, and the internalized homophobia of lived gay experiences.” In a purposeful selection, I drew attention to Andi’s story to explore this challenge to inclusion, given her image at interview appeared to reflect this heterosexual appropriation. Yet, Andi’s collective experiences tell a different story. She brought to the table a past that included same-sex encounters and relationships as well as a political ethos aligned with queer assertions. She fights on behalf of the socially oppressed and does so as a woman of color that embraces a queer identity. While some participants argued a place for queer allies instead of queer inclusion, they also stated that it is not their place to serve as the “authenticity authority.” In addition, several participants noted that if a person wants to take on all the trappings that come with identifying as queer, then they are welcome. Furthermore, several participants recognized that few typically know a person’s life course, thus queers must
be careful when policing those who appear heterosexual, even normative. In the end, I assert that second-wave queers are living in accordance with the spirit of queer’s platform of diversity; so long as queers’ adherents keep with the core tenets of fluidity or non-normativity, they belong.

When the anonymous writer (1990) announced, “Queer, unlike GAY doesn’t mean MALE,” they carved room for a host of other potential adopters, in particular, the gender non-conformists. Since, we have seen an explosion of activity and identities centered on gender non-conformity and fluid expressions of gender, some have come to embrace queer as a means to express their gender and/or sexuality. Indeed, queer provides gender non-conforming and transgender people an umbrella to frame their identity that falls outside the traditional gender binary, thus a space to call “home.”

This sentiment was supported by a number of participants who understand their sex as something other than male or female, and/or their gender as masculine, feminine, both or neither. These queers refuted the social scripts in which we are forced to select one or the other. They claim queer to express a “f*ck you” to those who categorize them in normative terms.

Unfortunately, for some transgender individuals, queer has been viewed as exclusionary to their experiences (Ahmed 2016). At the same time, in their conversation, Ahmed and Butler (2016) assert, what has been deemed as the “quare” movement (Johnson 2001), has resulted in advances of greater inclusivity for non-white, and non-gay and lesbian sexualities and genders under the queer umbrella. Fortunately, for some transgender individuals, including those who selected to participate in this study, queer does speak to their sexuality, if not their gender expression (empirically supported in: Herman 2016; Kuper, Nussbaum, and Mustanski 2012). This growing inclusivity has also been found among femme identified individuals, who embrace queer as an important means to understand their sexuality (Blair and Hoskin 2014). Blair and
Hoskins finding is also supported by the present sample of femme queers. In total, queer spoke to the present samples’ understanding of their gender, sexuality or among a select few, the convergent relationship between the two. The applicability of queer also demarcated a number of participants’ political posture.

Queer as a political ideology also took on unique features in evolving queer as identity. For example, in response to discussions on the inclusion of heterosexually-appearing people’s legitimacy in claiming queer, several participants defended their inclusion in context to the principles set forth by queers’ larger social justice goals. The argument was, if a person fights for those socially marginalized and oppressed, they are welcome to embrace queer. As an identity, politically queer comes to represent the title used previously, “f*ck you,” or what Duggan (1994) more politely referenced as “dissent.” Queer as dissent, yet in its more confrontational language, found support in a recent description offered by Wussy Magazine’s (an Atlanta-based online publication targeting the queer community) Features Editor, Zaida J, who stated, “’Queer really just means ‘F*ck you!’” (Zimitravich n.d.). This position maintains the first-wave’s political response to normalization and subjugation, yet extended to the second-wave of activity. This political bridge between first and second-wave was noted by queer blogger, Eric Anthony Grollman (2013); “By continuously fighting, we carry on the legacy of those who fought before us, and improve the opportunities for future generations. It is not a war we started, but it is one we will have to win in order to survive.” As such, not only does queer speak to sexuality and gender, it also speaks to one’s stance on social norms and policies that privilege some at the expense of others. In short, you don’t have to be fluid or non-normative in terms of sexuality and/or gender to embrace queer, yet you do have to subscribe to its opposition to oppression and
marginalization. At stated, taking on this political fight serves as a key dynamic to queer’s code for conduct.

In sum, as an identity embraced by participants, queer was “not so much [a category] to be occupied, owned, protected or rejected, but [a space] to be navigated, revisited, revised and elided on a moment-to-moment basis,” (Giffney 2009: 6-7); thus, queer’s appeal. Queer as an identity provided participants breathing room whereby they can be many things along a continuum and not have to reassess their identity. As such, unlike those who embrace gay and lesbian, as well as masculine and feminine or male and female, a queer person can don femininity in one moment, masculinity in the next and it not result in a re-examination of self; a similar argument pertains to sexual experiences with one gendered object choice during one encounter, and another in another encounter. Queers do not need to ask, am I queer if I have slept with a woman and a trans and a man. In support, Eliz Schwartz (2012) wrote, “For me, queer is not just who I fuck, it’s how I fuck and why I fuck, and how I approach my relationships. It’s how I perform my gender identity…” (p. 2 of 4). From the narratives offered, participants agreed with Schwartz’s assessment in which queer folds in sexuality, gender and politics. Queer is not one thing, it is many things reflected in a single moniker (cf. Villarreal 2016).

As a code for conduct, the participants’ strongest position resides in their adoption of a political ethos. This ethos provides their stance toward social norms and scripts as well as institutional policies and laws. They take issue with the further oppression or marginalization of those who have experienced being othered. At the same time, this ethos also provides a roadmap for queers’ daily interactions. The ethos calls on queers to refute macro- and micro-aggressions that discriminate against racial and ethnic minorities, the economically disadvantaged and those lacking access to educational arenas, as well as the differently abled and those stigmatized based
on their physical and mental health status. Evie Jo provided a hypothetical scenario in which the queer ethos plays out in more intimate settings, Cyan talked about taking a stand when the marginalized serve as the oppressor, and Iris talked about manifesting this ethos in more internally supportive ways. Reflective of these, and other narratives, I argue on behalf of a queer code for conduct that is grounded in what we know as activism, as well as more subtle mechanisms, such as noted by participants as consciousness raising.

Across the participants’ views and experiences we come to understand an informal code for conduct does exist, yet when asked how active they are in seeing it manifest, some claim a weak response. This weakened response and the informal nature of the code presents queer community’s greatest challenge. In light of a code for conduct as foundational for community, queers will be hard pressed to maintain their community in the face of a limp response to ongoing challenges confronted by the marginalized and oppressed. At present, it appears the U.S. is experiencing revitalized attention to affirm the privileging of traditional normative social positions. The recent election cycle saw a wave of narratives that takes aim at religious, ethnic, racial, gender and sexual minorities. This context presents queers an opportunity to strengthen their ethos through practice. Only time will tell if this opportunity is acted on, or squandered.

On a more indirect note, participants also reflected on a queer code for conduct when they discussed the embodied practices that inform their queer identity. Ensuring queer’s authenticity, personally and collectively, emerged an important part of what it means to be queer. To embrace queer one needs to conduct themselves in a manner that speaks to why they get to claim the identity. From the participants’ stories we understand that each one perceived a congruence between their identity and their actions. This congruence suggests a particular code of conduct speaking to legitimacy. The participants were not posing as queer, they are queer.
This code for conduct emerged as an important one given the level of attention granted to policing and being policed. Their experiences with policing and being policed underscore that to claim queer requires one to act queer. Like the political ethos, there are no formal rules governing when and how a person gets to claim queer, yet clearly the participants felt an informal set of conditions apply. Ultimately, participants noted that policing is counterproductive. Yet, the mere fact that they police and/or are policed affirms the presence of an informal code for conduct, which they are seeking to affirm or refute.

Overall, the participating queers provided the foundations for an argument that they have formed a distinct queer community. Through shared identity features centered on fluidity and non-normativity that translate into informal codes of conduct, their narratives met a “burden of proof.” Unlike its counterpart communities, queer stands out given the diversity of people that fall under its umbrella, and this diversity has exploded in recent years. That a second-wave of activity has picked up on tenets argued over a generation ago, have held to these tenets and expanded their application is telling. The understandings and experiences presented offer empirically-based means to advance theory, which is critical in queer theories case.

### 6.1 Implications for theory and theoreticians

Several advocates and academics have highlighted critiques of queer theory as disconnected from queer practice at the intersectional and everyday life perspective (Johnson 2001; Kirsch 2000; Wilchins 2004). Patrick Johnson wrote, “Some of us need to be in the streets, in the trenches, enacting the quare theories that we construct in the ‘safety’ of the academy,” (p. 18). In this seminal work, Johnson spotlighted a “gap” between theory and practice, which this study begins to narrow. From the Data section we understand that for a number of participants conceptualizing race (in addition to gender and sexuality) in definitively bounded terms, as
suggested by black/white/Latinx and Hispanic/non-Hispanic, proved problematic, even truncated. Some participants recognized the significance of their upbringing, which contrasted, if not expanded, their birth race. For others, while they pinpointed a dominant racial category, they felt their lived experiences were refined by their heritage, including place of birth as well as familial background. Ultimately, the participants queered race by seeing within characteristic intersections that then connected to their sense of sexuality, gender, politics and community. I would be remiss in not recognizing that for at least one participant, queer remained inaccessible, or at least less accessible in regards to their race. This study does not resolve this participant, Johnson (2001) nor Alexander’s (2003) concerns, but does contribute to our understanding of queer African American and Latix-identified people, and how some see their identities as essential and complementary.

Another concern from the theoretical conversation involves identity politics, and queer theory’s tendency to assert queer as a refutation of identity. Clearly the participants in this study understand queer as an identity. Participants noted the porous and fluid nature of queer as identity features, and assert this is queer identity’s distinction from other identities. As such, queer theoreticians should take note of queer in practice, and the epistemological processes that informs how people come to embrace queer, as well as what it meaning and meaningfulness. Wilchins (2004) stated it best; “As queer theory retreated further into academic arcana, it become of increasingly less use to the people who needed it,” (p. 3). It is time for queer theory to catch up to queer lives, to speak more clearly on the possibilities and challenges of living queer. Theoreticians should trust queer people when they state that queer identity, queer code for conduct (and conduct itself) and queer community are important.
If social constructionism remains a vital framework to understand social life, and I argue that it does, then society, its norms, and social scripts evolve. What was normative during the first-wave of queer is different than what is normative during this second-wave. Opinions on sexualities and gender expressions, especially those of marginalized standing are evolving. In the wake of social shifts, theoreticians are called to reflect on how these shifts impact our experiences and impressions of sexuality, gender, community. All the more, theoreticians need to reflect on these shifting terrains from an intersectional perspective that informs these identities, and their respective codes for conduct.

At the same time, this study offers empirical support for queer theory’s arguments regarding the fluid nature of gender and sexuality. Gender and sexuality, from the participants’ vantage points are social constructions that change over time, as does their meaningfulness. The participants confirmed queer theories refutation of binaries; many of us do not fall into either/or categories, rather move in between. Queers find the borders of dominant identities, and call these places home.

6.2 Limitations and future research

This study has several important limitations. First, this was a purposive sample, thus does not, and cannot be regarded as representing the experiences of all people who embrace queer. Second, the sample was bounded temporally and spatially. The experiences of queers active during the first-wave, or being active in other parts of the United States or internationally may reflect divergent experiences and understandings. This sample does not speak to these experiences and understandings. Being situated in the South, let alone the Deep South, may uniquely impact the perspectives and embodiment of queer discussed by the participants. While a number of participants reflected on being queer in other parts of the country, their perspectives at
the time of their interview were, more likely, influenced by their present location. Third, one-on-one and relational interviews cannot speak to broader meso-level perspectives, such as social networks, let alone macro conceptualizations of queer community. Such vantage points may unearth concerns with shared identity and shared code for conduct, thus community, not apparent at the micro and dyadic/triadic level of social relationships. Focus groups, for example, would provide unique data reflecting on the social dynamics involved in queer community. Fourth, how the data is presented also serves as a limitation. Whenever participant perspectives get truncated and decontextualized through excerpting, the broader context also gets truncated. While I took care in ensuring the spirit of each narrative was maintained, the speaker may feel otherwise. Finally, narratives were selected to support particular points. Had all narratives been provided, the reader may have drawn different conclusions. This is a limitation of all research.

These limits also present opportunities for future studies. As the second-wave of activity continues to unfold, it has the potential to shift our understanding of identity, sexuality, gender, politics and social movements, as well as how we socialize and form communities. In light of this potential, further empirical study is warranted. I argue that such “real-world,” or rather applied research can confirm or refute these findings, and can contribute new knowledge on a variety of phenomenon. Unfortunately, the overwhelming body of work speaking on queer appears more comfortable exploring other terrain. These are a missed opportunities, especially for social scientists. Theory is only as good as its ability to explain lives; if we do not apply theory in empirical ways, we violate the integrity of the science. We should give more attention to queer subjects and conditions, to queer as the dependent and independent variable, and we should look at these in cross-sectional and longitudinal ways, and from an intersectional lens. Indeed, and to be more specific, we should be investigating why some transgender, racial and
ethnic minorities feel distanced from a political ethos and community that intends to work collaboratively, let alone why some feel alienated by queer altogether. We have preliminary evidence on this alienation, thus support to pursue this line of inquiry. Queer presents a host of possibilities for new research, and theory development.

6.3 Conclusion

Belonging to a community, and having a community to belong to are meaningful (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Keller 2003; Sayer 2005; Vaisey 2007). In a study of LGBTQ youths (ages 13-17), Andre and colleagues (2014) found queer identified people “reported the highest percentage who believed that their community is getting ‘much’ or ‘somewhat’ better (61%), while only 44 percent of bisexual youth and 53 percent of lesbian/gay youth reported the same,” (p.8). Additionally, the queer-identified youth were more likely to engage in the “online LGBT[Q] community” compared to their LGB counterparts. These findings, coupled with participant narratives, note the importance and hopefulness of community among queer people, whether virtual or physical. Furthermore, belonging to a community has been found to improve health and well-being among people marginalized for their sexuality and/or gender (Frost and Meyer 2012; Kertzner et al. 2009; Meyer 2003). While these studies did not sample queer-identified people distinctly, their findings are suggestive given the historical and contemporary overlap between LGBT and queer-identified people, an overlap supported in the present study. In sum, these findings inform the importance of this study. A queer community provides a milieu in which queer people can belong, and socializing within a queer community can improve queers’ well-being.

In total, the understandings and experiences shared by Cyan and Rose, Blanche, Destiny, Angelica, Allister, D, Mischa and Milo, Green, Adelina and Isaac, Royce, Jordan and Carlos,
Buttercup and Bunny, Andre and Nazim, Miss, Ambrose and Lucien, Majestic, Evie Jo, Gene, Andi, Heron and Oak, Hope, Iris, and Leslie support the case that queers have evolved a community. What appeared to be a generational phenomenon relevant to the specific context of the late twentieth century has taken on significance in a second-wave of activity. In fact, the importance of queer has evolved into a distinct community in Atlanta, Georgia. Queer people are organizing events and building institutions around the core tenets of fluidity and non-normativity, as well as asserting a political code for conduct that carves out space for those who feel voiceless and marginalized, even within socially oppressed groups. Queer is appealing to gender non-conformists who do not wish to adopt traditional gender roles, or refute the socially constructed binary around male and female, masculine and feminine. Queer also appeals to those whose sexual desires, behaviors and identities are deemed “immoral,” “deviant” or “unnatural.” Queers assert that sexuality should be consensual first, and driven by pleasure over object choice and reproductive-based goals. In short, queer as an identity and code for conduct are meaningful, which makes queer community essential.
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Appendix A: Screening Script

Hello. Thank you for your interest in “Still Here, Still Queer.” My name is Neal Carnes. I am a doctoral student at Georgia State University. I am conducting this study to complete my Ph.D. in Sociology. The purpose of this study is to describe the lives of queer people and their relationships. If you agree to voluntarily participate I will not ask for your real name to protect your confidentiality, rather I ask that you provide me a nickname that I can identify you from here on out. Do you have a preferred nickname? If not, I can provide one, such as Addison, Ari, Blake, Bobbie, Charlie, Dana, Dorian, Eddie, Francis, Jamie, Jesse, Kelly, Logan, Max, Morgan, Pat, River, Sam, Shawn, Tanner, Taylor, Tracie.

You are free to drop out of the study at any point in time. If you agree to participate, you will be compensated $15 for your time. Please note, I will be audio-recording the interviews so that I may focus on what is said more so than writing notes. Is it okay to record the interview? (If no, thank them for their time, and let them know all interviews will be recorded.) We will go over this again at the time of the interview.

As part of the study I am conducting one-on-one as well as relationship interviews. One-on-one interviews happen between you and myself, or if you prefer I am also conducting interviews with couples, friends, and other types of relationships. The relationship interviews happen with you, the other person or persons who also voluntarily agree to participate, and myself. Relationship interviews happen at the same time, so all will be in the same room during the interview and all participants will receive their own $15 gift card. All persons in the relationship interview must voluntarily agree and must be aged 18 or older to participate, so please have this person or these people call me. If they are with you now, do they have a moment to speak with me? If they need to call me back, please have them reference your nickname (state the chosen nickname). So first let me ask, are you interested in a one-on-one or relational interview? Thank you. In order to determine eligibility I have a few other, brief questions.

1. What is your current age? (If under 18, thank them for their time and let them know that I am restricted to interviewing people 18 years of age or older and I will need to check their ID at the time of the interview.)

2. How do you identify your gender and your sexuality? (If neither are “queer,” thank them for their time and let them know I am interested in the experiences of queer people.)

You are eligible to participate. Would you like to schedule your interview? (If no) Should I call you or would you like to call me back when you are ready to schedule? (If yes) For everyone’s safety I am asking to schedule interviews at public or semi-public places. Do you have a preferred place? To reiterate, I have you scheduled for (state date, time and place). Would you like a reminder call or e-mail one or two days before our scheduled time? I will destroy your contact information after the completion of your participation to protect your confidentiality. Any questions before we end? Again, thank you for your interest and have a great day.
Appendix B: Informed Consent

Georgia State University
Department of Sociology
Informed Consent

Title: “We’re Here, We’re Queer”: A Qualitative Study of an Emerging Sexual Community

Principal Investigator: Eric R. Wright, Ph.D.
Student Principal Investigator: Neal A. Carnes, M.A.

I. Purpose:

You are invited to voluntarily participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to investigate queer people. What is life like for queer people; when and how do you associate with other queer people; and, what does it mean to be a queer person who does or does not participate in the queer community? The intent is to describe the queer community from the experiences of queer people. You are invited to participate because you are at least 18 years of age and embrace a queer sexuality. The target number of participants for this study stands at 50 to 75 individuals/relationships, yet we anticipate a broad range of participants to reflect on the breadth of people who embrace a queer life. The minimum number of participants is set at 30 people. Participation will require one to two hours of your time on the day we schedule your interview.

II. Procedures:

If you decide to participate, you will be asked about your life, including, but not limited to your personal background, who you associate with as a queer person and under what circumstances, details about your sex life as well as questions about your health and the behaviors that impact your health, such as drug and alcohol use. I am asking your permission to audio record this interview so that we may approach the interview more like a conversation. Audio recording will allow me to focus on what you have to say as much as taking notes during your interview. I will transcribe your interview, and the only other person who will have access to the interview and its transcription is the study’s principal investigator, Dr. Eric Wright. The interview will be conducted in a place you feel comfortable as well as safe. I am suggesting a local coffeehouse that is convenient for you, such as Octane or the Dancing Goat. If you do not feel comfortable in such a public space I recommend a study room at Georgia State University’s Main Library (located at: 100 Decatur Street SE, Atlanta). The interview is planned for a single session lasting between one to two hours. If for any reason you wish to stop the interview you are free to do so. If we have not discussed all questions I am more than happy to schedule a second interview time to complete the interview. This option is totally up to you. There is no financial or reward compensation for completing an interview.
III. **Risks:**

In this study, you will not have any more risks than you would in a normal day of life. You may find some questions uncomfortable to answer. If so, you are free to skip any and all questions you do not wish to answer.

IV. **Benefits:**

Participation in this study may not benefit you personally. Overall, we hope to gain information about the queer community and queer people.

V. **Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal:**

Participation in research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

VI. **Confidentiality:**

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. Eric Wright and I will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (GSU Institutional Review Board, the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)). We will use a pseudonym (nickname) rather than your name on study records. The information you provide will be stored on a password and firewall protected computer. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. You will not be identified personally. The intent is to present each participant as a unique story but will utilize the selected pseudonym to identify what you have to say rather than your actual name.

VII. **Contact Persons:**

Contact Eric Wright at 404-413-6527 if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study. You can also call if you think you have been harmed by the study. Call Susan Vogtner at Georgia State University Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or svogtner@gsu.edu if you want to talk to someone who is not part of the study team. You can talk about questions, concerns, offer input, obtain information, or suggestions about the study. You can also call Susan Vogtner if you have questions or concerns about your rights in this study.
VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Subject:

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you are willing to volunteer for this research and to be audio recorded, please sign below.

_________________________________________  __________  
Participant                                      Date

_________________________________________  __________  
Student Principal Investigator                   Date
Appendix C: Semi-structured Individual Questionnaire

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to voluntarily participate in this study. I appreciate your time and willingness to discuss your experiences honestly and openly. Again, the purpose of the study is to explore queer people and queer relationships.

Before we proceed, what is your current age? (If less than 18, thank them for their time and explain the study is limited to those 18 years of age or older.)

Also, how do you identify your gender as well as sexuality? (If gender and/or sexuality is other than queer, thank them for their time and explain this study is specifically considering the experiences of queer people.)

(Read and acquire Inform Consent.)

Interviewer Role: This is an opportunity for you to tell your story. I am interested in your experiences and what they mean to you. My job as the interviewer is to listen to you, hear what you have to say, and ask relevant questions. I am not here, nor do I have a desire to judge you or anything you tell me.

Do you have any questions? (Address any questions or concerns.) Do you give permission to participate in the study? (If no, thank them for taking the time to sit down and consider their participation. End the interview. If yes, get their signature on the form and then begin the interview.)

In order to protect your identity, I am asking you to select a nickname or pseudonym that I can identify you during this interview as well as in my write up. Please note, I do intend to publish my dissertation and will identify you based on this selected nickname or pseudonym, so I encourage you to select one that does not allow others to identify you. Do you have a nickname/pseudonym in mind? (If yes, let them disclose their selected nickname. If they do not have one in mind, offer the following as possibilities: Addison, Ari, Blake, Bobbie, Charlie, Dana, Dorian, Eddie, Francis, Jamie, Jesse, Kelly, Logan, Max, Morgan, Pat, River, Sam, Shawn, Tanner, Taylor, Tracie – these nicknames were selected based on their gender neutrality. Once a nickname has been selected, check the participants level of comfort, emotionally and physically.) Are you ready to begin? [Select “Record” on the recording device.]

Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study. We are now recording. Today is… My name is Neal Carnes. I am a doctoral candidate at Georgia State University. I have the pleasure of speaking with (nickname/pseudonym). I would like to ask your permission to record the interview, which I will transcribe for study purposes. If you are okay with recording please indicate by stating your nickname/pseudonym. If you are not okay with recording please indicate by saying, “No, thank you.” (If “no, thank you,” thank them for taking the time to sit down and consider their participation. End the interview. If yes, proceed with the interview.)
My first question is a general question to introduce you to the types of questions I’ll be asking and provides an opportunity to get used to talking about yourself, your experiences, and what importance they hold for you.

1. Tell me about something good that happened to you and how it made you feel.
2. What is your current age?
3. Describe yourself; who is <nickname>?
   a. In what city and state do you currently live?
   b. How do you identify your sex?
   c. How do you identify your gender?
   d. How do you identify you race and ethnicity?
   e. What is your current socio-economic (or income) status?
   f. What is your current level of education?
   g. How do you define your sexuality?
4. Of these characteristics, which do you feel are the most important to understanding who you are?
5. Describe how you think other people see you.
6. Tell me about your body image. When you look at yourself in the mirror, who is looking back at you, and how does it make you feel?
7. What does queer mean to you, and how do you see yourself as queer?
8. Do you think there is such a thing as queer politics, and if so, what do they involve?
9. Tell me how politically involved are you, and how important is being involved in politics, as well as queer politics specifically.
10. Do you think there is such a thing as a queer aesthetic, and if so, what does it look like? How do you reflect this aesthetic?
11. Do you think there is such a thing as queer sex, and if so what and/or who is involved?
12. Do you think there is such a thing as queer community, or communities; if so, who is involved and how involved are you?
13. Who gets to call themselves queer?
14. Tell me about the first time you remember hearing the word queer, and how you reacted when you heard someone use queer.
15. Tell me about when you first started to think of yourself in queer terms.
a. When did you first use “queer” to describe your values?
b. How did people respond?

16. Are you currently in a relationship, however you define relationship?
a. How does your partner(s) identify their sexuality? How about their gender? If different than queer, is there any conflict due to the difference.
b. How does your family of origin (what we commonly call your biological family) feel about your relationship?

17. Tell me about your friends.
a. How many would you say are queer?
b. How many have you told you are queer?
c. How have they responded?
d. Discuss the importance of sexuality and gender, especially in terms of non-conformity, to your friends.

18. What other communities do you belong, and how do they compare to the queer community(s) you belong? How are they similar as well as different?

19. Tell me about any mentors you have had that have helped guide you, especially those that relate to your queerness.

20. Tell me about your family of origin (again, what we commonly call biological family).
a. Do you have any family who are also queer? How about gays, lesbians, bisexuals in your family? Did they tell you directly or is there something about them that leads you to believe they are queer, gay, lesbian…
b. How many have you told directly that you are queer? How did they respond to the news?
c. How important is sexuality to your family? Do you discuss sexuality, and if so, in what ways? How do you feel about these conversations?
d. How important is gender expression to your family? Do you discuss gender, and if so, in what ways? How do you feel about these conversations?

Now we are going to shift to discuss what you do, your behaviors and how you feel about these behaviors.

21. Tell me about your most recent sexual encounter.
a. Who was involved?
b. What did you do?
c. How did you feel about it?
d. How did it reflect on your being queer?
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e. Was your health, such as a sexually-transmitted diseases a concern, and if so, did you discuss this concern? What did you do differently than prior sexual encounters?

22. Tell me about your sexual past. How does your past inform your embrace of queer values?
   a. Who have been involved?
   b. What are some of the things you did that you feel were queer?
   c. What are some of the concerns you have had, if any, regarding your sexual past?

23. Tell me about recreational drug use, such as smoking pot, doing coke or meth, and drinking alcohol in your life.
   a. Over the course of your life what drugs have you used and how have you used them, e.g. “booty-bumps,” snort, inject, eat…
   b. Typically, how often do you use drugs? How often do you drink?
   c. Who do you usually use drugs or drink with? Other queer people?
   d. Describe how using drugs/drinking makes you feel?
   e. How important is drinking and drug use to you? How important is drug use and drinking to other queer people? How about gays, lesbians, bisexuals and heterosexuals – do queers use more drugs or less, drink more or less and why do you think this is the case.

24. Tell me about your current physical and mental health status.
   a. What is the relationship between your health and being queer?
   b. How and why do queer people take more or less risk with their health than other sexuality based communities?
   c. Tell me about mental health concerns among queer people.
   d. When was the last time you saw a healthcare provider?
   e. How do you pay medical expenses?
   f. How often do you exercise and tell me about what you consider exercise (cardiovascular such as walking or running, weight-lifting, yoga or Pilates)?
   g. Tell me about your diet and nutrition. Do you watch what you eat and if so, how?

25. What part of being queer appeals to you?
   a. How is being queer different than being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, male or female?
   b. What do queer people do that is different than what gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, men and women do?

26. What does the future look like for you?

27. Do you have any questions of me? Are there questions you feel I should have asked but didn’t and how would you answer this/these questions?
Thank you for taking your valuable time to sit and discuss your life with me. Here is the $15 gift card we discussed and remember you can earn $5 for each person you refer – up to 2 people - who successfully complete an interview. Be sure to let those you refer know they will earn $15 for their time as well as have an opportunity to earn up to $10 for referrals, and to let me know who referred them by handing these cards back to me. [Distribute up to two referral cards if they are interested in participating, and get the best contact information to send referral incentive.]
Appendix D: Semi-structured Relational Questionnaire

Introduction: Thank you all/both for agreeing to voluntarily participate in this study. I appreciate your time and willingness to discuss your experiences honestly and openly, and in a setting that includes both/all of you.

Before we proceed, what is your current ages? (If less than 18, thank them for their time and explain the study is limited to those 18 years of age or older.)

Also, how do you all identify your gender as well as sexuality? (If gender and/or sexuality is other than queer for all people present, thank them for their time and explain this study is specifically considering the experiences of queer people and relationships where at least one party is queer.)

(Read and acquire Informed Consent.)

The purpose of the study is to explore the lives of queer people, personally and as part of relationships – however, you wish to define those. At times you may disagree with each other, and that is okay. The point to the interview isn’t agreement as we all have our own experiences and these mean different things to different people. I do ask that we all respect one another and allow each other an opportunity to answer each question honestly and openly. If you disagree with a response, be polite and respectful. If a disagreement arises and the conversation begins to get hostile I will interrupt and may end the interview to prevent it escalating into a fight. Of course, any member has the same right to end the interview at any point. Can all of us agree to an honest, open, and respectful conversation?

Interviewer Role: This is an opportunity for you all to tell your stories. I am interested in your experiences and what they mean to you. My job as the interviewer is to listen to you, hear what you have to say, and ask relevant questions. I am not here, nor do I desire to judge any of you or anything you say.

Do you have any questions? (Address any questions or concerns.) Do each of you give permission to participate in the study? (If anyone says “no,” thank them for taking the time to sit down and consider their participation. Ask if the others wish to proceed. If no, end the interview. If yes, begin the interview.)

In order to protect your identity, I am asking each of you to select a nickname or pseudonym that I can identify you during this interview as well as in my write up. Please note, I do intend to publish my findings and will identify you based on this selected nickname or pseudonym, so I encourage you to select one that does not allow others to identify you. Do you have a nickname/pseudonym in mind? (If yes, let them disclose their selected nickname. If they do not have one in mind, offer the following as possibilities: Addison, Ari, Blake, Bobbie, Charlie, Dana, Dorian, Eddie, Francis, Jamie, Jesse, Kelly, Logan, Max, Morgan, Pat, River, Sam, Shawn, Tanner, Taylor, Tracie – these nicknames were selected based on their gender neutrality. Once a nickname has been selected, check the participants level of comfort, emotionally and physically.) Are you all ready? [Select “Record” on the recording device.]
Thank you again for agreeing to participate in this study. We are now recording. Today is… My name is Neal Carnes. I am a doctoral candidate at Georgia State University. I have the pleasure of speaking with (nicknames/pseudonyms). I would like to ask your permission to record the interview, which I will transcribe for study purposes. If you are okay with recording please indicate by stating your nickname/pseudonym. If you are not okay with recording please indicate by saying, “No, thank you.” (If “no, thank you,” thank them for taking the time to sit down and consider their participation. End the interview. If yes, proceed with the interview.)

My first question is a general question to introduce you all to the types of questions I’ll be asking and provides an opportunity to get used to talking about yourself, your experiences, and what importance they hold for you. Each question is asked of all of you. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to, yet I will be sure to check in with you before moving to the next question to ensure you have an opportunity to speak.

1. Tell me about something good that happened to you and how it made you feel.

2. What are your current ages?

3. Describe yourself; who is <nickname> and…?
   a. In what city and state do you currently live?
   b. How do you identify your sex?
   c. How do you identify your gender?
   d. How do you identify you race and ethnicity?
   e. What is your current socio-economic (or income) status?
   f. What is your current level of education?
   g. How do you define your sexuality?

4. Of these characteristics, which do you feel are the most important to understanding who you are?

5. Describe how you think other people see you.

6. Tell me about your body image. When you look at yourself in the mirror, who is looking back at you, and how does it make you feel?

7. What does queer mean to (each of) you, and how do you see yourself as queer?

8. Do you think there is such a thing as queer politics, and if so, what do they involve?

9. Tell me how politically involved are you, and how important is being involved in politics, as well as queer politics specifically.

10. Do you think there is such a thing as a queer aesthetic, and if so, what does it look like? How do you reflect this aesthetic?
11. Do you think there is such a thing as queer sex, and if so what and/or who is involved?

12. Do you think there is such a thing as queer community, or communities; if so, who is involved and how involved are you?

13. Who gets to call themselves queer?

14. Tell me about the first time you remember hearing the word queer, and how you reacted when you heard someone use queer.

15. Tell me about when you first started to think of yourself in queer terms.
   a. When did you first use “queer” to describe your values?
   b. How did people respond?

16. Are you currently in a relationship, however you define relationship?
   a. How does your partner(s) identify their sexuality? How about their gender? If different than queer, is there any conflict due to the difference.
   b. How does your family of origin (what we commonly call your biological family) feel about your relationship?

17. Tell me about your friends.
   a. How many would you say are queer?
   b. How many have you told you are queer?
   c. How have they responded?
   d. Discuss the importance of sexuality and gender, especially in terms of non-conformity, to your friends.

18. What other communities do you belong, and how do they compare to the queer community(s) you belong? How are they similar as well as different?

19. Tell me about any mentors you have had that have helped guide you, especially those that relate to your queerness.

20. Tell me about your family of origin (again, what we commonly call biological family).
   a. Do you have any family who are also queer? How about gays, lesbians, bisexuals in your family? Did they tell you directly or is there something about them that leads you to believe they are queer, gay, lesbian…
   b. How many have you told directly that you are queer? How did they respond to the news?
   c. How important is sexuality to your family? Do you discuss sexuality, and if so, in what ways? How do you feel about these conversations?
   d. How important is gender expression to your family? Do you discuss gender, and if so, in what ways? How do you feel about these conversations?
Now we are going to shift to discuss what you do, your behaviors and how you feel about these behaviors.

21. Tell me about your most recent sexual encounter.
   a. Who was involved?
   b. What did you do?
   c. How did you feel about it?
   d. How did it reflect on your being queer?
   e. Was your health, such as a sexually-transmitted diseases a concern, and if so, did you discuss this concern? What did you do differently than prior sexual encounters?

22. Tell me about your sexual past. How does your past inform your embrace of queer values?
   a. Who have been involved?
   b. What are some of the things you did that you feel were queer?
   c. What are some of the concerns you have had, if any, regarding your sexual past?

23. Tell me about recreational drug use, such as smoking pot, doing coke or meth, and drinking alcohol in your life.
   a. Over the course of your life what drugs have you used and how have you used them, e.g. “booty-bumps,” snort, inject, eat…
   b. Typically, how often do you use drugs? How often do you drink?
   c. Who do you usually use drugs or drink with? Other queer people?
   d. Describe how using drugs/drinking makes you feel?
   e. How important is drinking and drug use to you? How important is drug use and drinking to other queer people? How about gays, lesbians, bisexuals and heterosexuals – do queers use more drugs or less, drink more or less and why do you think this is the case.

24. Tell me about your current physical and mental health status.
   a. What is the relationship between your health and being queer?
   b. How and why do queer people take more or less risk with their health than other sexuality based communities?
   c. Tell me about mental health concerns among queer people.
   d. When was the last time you saw a healthcare provider?
   e. How do you pay medical expenses?
   f. How often do you exercise and tell me about what you consider exercise (cardiovascular such as walking or running, weight-lifting, yoga or Pilates)?
   g. Tell me about your diet and nutrition. Do you watch what you eat and if so, how?

25. What part of being queer appeals to you?
a. How is being queer different than being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, male or female?
b. What do queer people do that is different than what gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, men and women do?

26. What does the future look like for you?

27. Do you have any questions of me? Are there questions you feel I should have asked but didn’t and how would you answer this/these questions?

Thank you for taking your valuable time to sit and discuss your life with me. Here is the $15 gift card we discussed and remember you can earn $5 for each person you refer – up to 2 people who successfully complete an interview. Be sure to let those you refer know they will earn $15 for their time as well as have an opportunity to earn up to $10 for referrals, and to let me know who referred them by handing these cards back to me. [Distribute up to two referral cards if they are interested in participating, and get the best contact information to send referral incentive.]
Appendix E: Coding Scheme

1. Understanding queer – What does queer mean to the participant/how did they define and/or see queer
   
   1.1. Queer as an LGBTQ umbrella – The participant viewed queer as an umbrella term for LGBT and gender non-binary people
   
   1.2. Queer as distinct – The participant viewed queer as distinct from LGBT and gender non-binary; it serves as its own identity or “way of being”
   
   1.3. Intellectualism/Queer theory – The participant reflected on queer theory and academic understandings of queer
   
   1.4. Queer history – The participant reflected on a historical perspective of queer (if is a historical perspective situated within the academy, coded as academic queer) - this code is for activism and prior understanding of queer within communal perspectives

2. Sexuality as Queer – The participant reflected on queer as sexual desire, behavior, and/or identity
   
   2.1. Queer as sexual desire – The participant talked about sexual desires as queer (non-normative/fluid)
   
   2.2. Queer as sexual behavior – The participant reflected on what they do sexually, who they do it with, when and where as queer (non-normative or fluid)
   
   2.2.1. Queer sex: Yes – The participant thought sex can be queer and explained why/gave an example of queer sex
   
   2.2.2. Queer sex: No – The participant did not think sex can be queer and explained why

   2.3. Queer problematizes sexual identities – The participant reflected on how queer problematizes traditional sexual identities
   
   2.4. Queer reinforces sexual identities – The participant reflected on how queer reinforces/fits with traditional sexual identities, yet with distinct features

2.5. Consent - The participant reflected on consent during sexual encounters as a queer concern, as well as their own experiences of consent/non-consent

3. Gender as Queer – The participant discussed queer as an issue of gender expression, identity, and/or performance
3.1. Comfortable self-image – the participant discussed how they feel comfortable in who they are/were as a gendered person

3.2. Uncomfortable self-image – The participant expressed an uncomfortable sense of self in terms of gender; this could have been a past period or particular experience of discomfort

3.3. Queer performativity – The participant talked about performing gender in a queer manner (if discussed an aesthetic quality, classified under aesthetic) - this code is for demeanor, personality, how they carry themselves

3.3.1. Being read and Other's response – The participant talked about how others respond to their gender performativity and misreads of gender and sexuality

3.4. Gender transition – The participant talked about having transitioned or thoughts about transitioning

4. The political is Queer – The participant discussed queer politics and the ethos underscoring queer politics; and, if so, what does it involve/look like

4.1. Social change – The participant expressed involvement or desire for social change, e.g. "xx must change" or "we are acting to change xx"

4.2. Social awareness – The participant expressed direct action in or personal intellectual/emotional change in awareness on a queer related topic - this includes social media posts

4.3. Political ideology – The participant discussed queer politics according to, or in opposition to current political ideologies, e.g. liberal, progressive, moderate, and conservative

4.4. Same-sex marriage – The participant discussed same-sex marriage as a political event or a personal event, and the socio-political context in which same-sex marriage was decided

4.5. Socio-economic political ideologies – The participant discussed capitalism, socialism, anarchy or other socio-economic ideologies and their relationship to queer

5. Queer community(ies) – The participant referenced queer as a community - including their personal social and/or sense of belonging to other queer people

5.1. Queer community: Yes – The participant noted they think there is such a thing as queer community(ies) and discussed the dynamics, and their involvement
5.1.1. Burns – The participant discussed their involvement/experience with/at burns (outdoor, typically overnight or over a weekend, event centered around music and community)

5.1.2. Local Queer Institutions - The participant talked about local institutions, e.g. the Queer House, Free School, Mary's and other "spaces" where queers come together and socialize

5.2. Queer Community: No – The participant stated they do not think there is such a thing as a queer community, let alone communities

5.3. Queer inclusivity – The participant talked about who gets to claim queer and who does not

5.3.1. Policing – The participant discussed personal and observed experiences of queer policing (questioning one's right to claim queer or queer expressions)

6. Queer as a movement – The participant talked about queer as a social and/or political "movement," and if so, what the movement includes/involves

6.1. The future of queer – The participant discussed the future of queer, personally, as a movement, and as a community

6.2. Collective trauma and healing – The participant talked about individual and communal trauma

7. Queer aesthetic – The participant talked about a queer appearance, e.g. clothing, tattoos, piercings

7.1. Queer hair – The participant talked about the distinct haircuts and hair colors of people who embrace queer

7.2. Queer look – The participant discussed a queer look, in terms of personality, demeanor, how one carries themselves

8. Queer in Atlanta – The participant talked about distinct features of being queer in Atlanta, reflecting on its culture, and their experiences living in Atlanta as a queer person

8.1. Queer in Atlanta is the same – The participant discussed how queer in Atlanta is not different than elsewhere

8.2. Queer in Atlanta is different – The participant talked about the differences between queer in Atlanta compared to other places
8.3. Aspects of queer in Atlanta – The participant discussed aspects of being queer in Atlanta, but as a point of comparison (e.g. they may not have experienced queer in other places)

9. Heard Queer for the first time – The participant noted the first time they remember hearing the term queer and the context of this experience

9.1. Queer as a compliment – The participant talked about hearing queer used as a positive

9.2. Queer used derogatorily – The participant heard queer used as a negative

9.3. Participant’s response - The participant talked about how they responded when they first heard queer used (emotionally, physically, and intellectually)

10. Queer Awakening – Participant talked about when they began to think of themselves in queer terms/as queer.

10.1. What do they like about being queer?

11. Health & Well-being – The participant discussed their mental and physical health history

11.1. Mental health - The participant talked about their current and past mental health

11.2. Physical health - The participant talked about their current and past physical health, including STD history

11.3. Substance use - The participant talked about current and past use of illicit substances

11.4. Body image – The participant talked about their perception of self as a physical being, how they view their body, both in present and historical terms

12. Queer Relationships – The participant discussed their relationship with other queer people, whether romantic/sexual partners, friends, and/or associates

13. Definitions – The participant provides their understanding of related terms, e.g. sapiosexual and demisexual (see Appendix F: Glossary, for formal definitions)
Appendix F: Glossary
(Source: https://www.amherst.edu/campuslife/our-community/queer-resource-center/terms-definitions)

Ally: An individual whose attitudes and behavior are supportive and affirming of all genders and sexual orientations and who is active in combating homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism, and cissexism both personally and institutionally.

Asexual: A person who doesn't experience sexual attraction or who has low or no interest in sexual activity. Unlike celibacy, an action that people choose, asexuality is a sexual identity. There is considerable diversity among the asexual community; each asexual person experiences things like relationships, attraction, and arousal somewhat differently.

Assigned Sex: The sex that was recorded on a person’s birth certificate. A person’s assigned sex is generally determined by a cursory visual inspection of an infant’s external genitalia and may or may not be congruent with the person’s gender identity or with other biological markers of sex such as chromosomes and internal reproductive structures.

Bisexual/Bi: A person who has sexual and emotional relationships with or feelings towards both women and men, although not necessarily at the same time.

Cisgender: Not transgender, which is, having a gender identity or gender role that society considers appropriate for the sex one was assigned at birth. Often shortened to “cis,” which is pronounced “sis.”

Cissexism/Cisnormativity: A set of attitudes that is consistent with the belief that cisgender people are superior to transgender people psychologically, socially and morally. This serves to create an invisibility or lack of validation and representation for transgender people.

Coming Out (Of the Closet)/Being Out: Refers to the process through which a person acknowledges, accepts, and learns to appreciate her or his lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender identity. Sharing this information with others is not a single event but instead a life-long process.

Gay: Used to describe a man who is romantically, sexually, and/or affectionally attracted to men, although not all men who engage in sexual relations with other men identify themselves as “gay.” The term is sometimes used to refer to the LGB community as a whole, although many women prefer to be identified as “lesbian” instead of “gay.”

Gender: A term used to describe the social status of people as men, women, boys, girls, or variously transgender, including characteristics of masculinity and femininity that are learned or chosen. A person’s assigned sex does not always match their gender (see Transgender), and many people display traits of more than one gender. Gender is different from sexuality.

Gender Binary: Recognizes only two genders and regulates behavior within narrowly male or female expectations. Enforces the idea that all males should be man-identified and masculine, and all females should be woman-identified and feminine.
Gender Expression: The external presentation of a person’s gender (e.g. dress, mannerisms, hair style, speech, etc.). One’s gender expression may differ from one’s gender identity.

Gender Identity: An individual's internal understanding of oneself as a woman, man, transgender, genderqueer, etc. This may or may not match one's gender expression or the way that other people perceive one's gender. See Gender.

Gender-neutral/Gender-free Pronouns: Pronouns which do not associate a gender with the person or creature being discussed. The English language has no truly gender-neutral third person pronoun available, and women especially have criticized this, as many writers use “he” when referring to a generic individual in the third person. In addition, the dichotomy of “he and she” in English does not leave room for other gender identities, a source of frustration to the transgender and gender-queer communities. People who are limited by languages which do not include gender neutral pronouns have attempted to create them, in the interest of greater equality. Some examples are “them” or “hir” for “him/her” and “they” or “ze” for “he/she.”

Genderqueer: Identity adopted by some trans people who blur the lines of the gender binary or embrace gender fluidity. They may identify as a man, woman, both, or neither.

Heterosexism/Heteronormativity: A set of attitudes that is consistent with the belief that heterosexuality is a superior psychological, social and moral stance. This serves to create an invisibility or lack of validation and representation for people/relationships that are not heterosexual.

Internalized Homo/Bi/Transphobia: The fear and self-hate of one’s own homosexuality, bisexuality, or transgender identity in individuals who have learned negative ideas about these groups throughout childhood. One form of internalized oppression is the acceptance of the myths and stereotypes applied to the oppressed group. It can result in depression, alienation, anxiety, and, in extreme cases, suicide.

Intersex: A person born with sex chromosomes, external genitalia, or an internal reproductive system that is not considered medically standard for either male or female. The gender identity and sexual orientation of these people varies as it does with non-intersex people. The older term “hermaphrodite” is considered to be offensive. Although intersex conditions are relatively common, intersex infants often have their sex chosen for them shortly after birth. This is sometimes referred to as “assigned sex.” Assigning a sex to an intersex infant may involve surgical procedures to align the appearance of the genitals to the medical standard for either male or female. This practice has been criticized by many in the intersex community and remains a point of contention and controversy.

Lesbian: Preferred term for a woman who is romantically, sexually, and/or affectionally attracted to women. The name is taken from the island of Lesbos where Sappho, the great women-loving poet of 600 BC lived. Many women who love women adopt this name with pride.
Pansexual/Omnisexual/Polysexual: A person who is attracted to all or many genders or gender expressions.

Passing: Being taken for a member of the dominant group – white, straight, cisgender (non-transgender), for example. LGBTQQIAA people who have the ability to pass can choose to conceal the stigma associated with being a member of a sexual minority.

Queer: Originally a pejorative (sic) word, this term has slowly been reclaimed starting in the 1990s with the emergence of Queer Theory. Usually this term is used as a self-affirming umbrella term for the LGBTQIA community. Additionally, some individuals use "queer" as a separatist, non-assimilationist, politicized identity. Caution: Still offensive when used as an epithet, especially among older people.

Questioning: A process whereby an individual is re-assessing his or her sexual orientation and/or gender identity. A person who is “questioning” may be unsure of their identity or still exploring their feelings.

Same Gender Loving (SGL): A term used often by LGBTQIA African-Americans as a less stigmatized description for one’s sexual orientation. It helps provide an identity not marginalized by racism within the gay community or heterosexism in society.

Sex: The biological (anatomical, hormonal, or genetic) traits used to categorize someone as either male, female or intersex.

Sexual Orientation: A person’s emotional, physical, and sexual attraction and the expression of that attraction with other individuals. The term “sexual orientation” is preferred over “sexual preference.” The latter term implies a choice and sexual attraction is not generally considered a choice.

Transgender/Trans: A term for people who challenge society’s view of gender as fixed, unmoving, dichotomous, and inextricably linked to one’s biological sex. Gender is more accurately viewed as a spectrum, rather than a polarized, dichotomous construct. This is a broad term that encompasses cross-dressers, intersex people, gender benders, transsexuals and those who defy societal gender roles. The sexual orientation of transgender people varies just as it does among cisgender people.

Trans Man/Transmasculine: Identity label preferred by some female-to-male transgender people. Genderqueer and gender non-confirming people who were assigned female at birth and now adopt a more masculine gender expression may also identify as transmasculine.

Trans Woman/Transfeminine: Identity label preferred by some male-to-female transgender people. Genderqueer and gender non-confirming people who were assigned male at birth and now adopt a more feminine gender expression may also identify as transfeminine.

Two-Spirit/Twin Spirit: Native American concept present in some indigenous cultures across North America and parts of Central and South America. It is a term of reverence, traditionally
referring to people who display both masculine and feminine sex or gender characteristics, as well as manly hearted women who have lived a heterosexual life and produced children and after the death of her husband take female-lovers and are accepted by the community in that role. Named “berdache” by European colonists, those who are Two-Spirited are and were traditionally respected and may be healers or leaders thought to possess a high spiritual development.