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# Relationships to Alcohol Among Black Queer Women and Non-Binary People

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# RELATIONSHIPS TO ALCOHOL AMONG BLACK QUEER WOMEN AND NON-BINARY PEOPLE

by

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Under the Direction of Eric R. Wright, PhD

## ABSTRACT

Black queer experiences with alcohol use are largely still underrepresented in the sociological study of substance use. Available research indicates Black/African-American queer women are drinking at higher prevalence rates than white queer women. However, little is known about the relationships Black/African-American queer women (and non-binary AFAB people) form and maintain with alcohol. Even less is known about how relationships are formed and maintained over time. This dissertation attempts to center the relationships that Black/African-American queer women and non-binary people have with alcohol through a conceptual model that bridges anti-racist, queer, and medical sociology theoretical frameworks. Eighteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews were collected in an attempt to contextualize the

lived experiences of Black/African-American queer women and non-binary people. Within these eighteen interviews, three major themes emerged. The themes include: 1) origin stories and first times drinking alcohol, 2) gay bars as white space, and 3) embodied control with alcohol. Overall, these interviews provide a unique perspective to how relationships are formed to alcohol, as well as supporting the possibility of a future rooted in harm reduction strategies.

INDEX WORDS: Sociology, Alcohol, Race, Sexuality, Harm reduction, Qualitative

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# DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to Hazel LaVerne (rest in power) and the eighteen participants who shared their experiences.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Black queer experiences with alcohol use are largely still underrepresented in the sociological study of substance use. It is well documented that members of the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) or queer community drink alcohol at higher rates than heterosexual individuals (Lehavot, Blosnich, Glass, and Williams 2017; Solarz and Institute of Medicine 1999; Bradford, Ryan, and Rothblum 1994). Drinking rates are often higher in the queer community due to experiences of discrimination related to their sexual orientation and other related adverse life experiences (Jasinski and Ford 2007; Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim, Barkan, Muraco, and Hoy-Ellis 2013). However, there is scant research conducted on stratifications among drinking patterns and relationships to alcohol within the queer community on the basis of race and ethnicity. How do queer people of color (QPoC) form relationships to alcohol, and what are the potential connections to experiences of discrimination? What provides the foundation or impetus that forms relationships to alcohol for queer communities of color? I argue that the sociological study of alcohol use within the queer community will benefit from more in-depth analyses on the experiences of QPoC, specifically Black queer women and non-binary people.

In order to advance the available literature on alcohol use within the LGBT community, I seek to understand queer Black women and queer Black non-binary AFAB people's experiences with and relationships to alcohol. I attempt to center queer Black women and non-binary people's experiences with alcohol through a conceptual model that bridges anti-racism, intersectionality, and medical sociology theoretical frameworks. I attempt to amplify the voices of this community through the choice of feminist methodology. By employing semi-structured,

in-depth interviews, this study aims to contextualize Black queer women and non-binary experiences within the complex intersections of race, gender, sexual orientation, and alcohol use.

The choice of in-depth interviews as the research methodology is strategic, as it provides a *voice* regarding the lived experiences of Black/African-American queer women and non-binary AFAB people's experiences with alcohol use. The existing literature on Black lesbians' alcohol use is largely comprised of quantitative studies that conduct between-group analyses, wherein being a white lesbian is the baseline of comparison for all other racial and ethnic groups. While comparative studies on alcohol use are relevant for understanding group differences in the frequency of alcohol use and the correlates of alcohol use, it doesn't fully allow researchers to look into within-group drinking motivations or experiences related to visibility in queer spaces (such as gay and lesbian bars). Doing so could lead to an assumption where white and Black queer women have similar experiences with alcohol use, which ultimately negates Black queer women's lived experiences in a white supremacist, heteropatriarchal society. This study further highlights the interpretation and meaning surrounding alcohol use and the importance of *location* within the queer community. Using an anti-racist framework, this research provides important insight into the lived experiences of Black queer women and non-binary people and their relationships to alcohol.

### 1.1 Research Questions

Within this dissertation, I attempt to examine the relationships Black queer women and non-binary AFAB participants have to alcohol. Little is known as to why Black lesbians are reported as heavier drinkers compared to white lesbians, as well as a lack of research that specifically focuses on Black queer women outside of a comparative, between-group analysis. This research seeks to better understand the lived experiences that are unique to Black queer

women and non-binary people from an intersectional perspective as they relate to alcohol use. I attempt to address the following research questions:

1. What motivates Black queer women to drink alcohol?
2. How do gay and lesbian bars (and other queer spaces with alcohol) affect Black queer women's decisions or motivations to drink alcohol?
3. How does experiencing social marginalization on the basis of gender, race, and sexual orientation drive or impact Black queer women's decisions to drink alcohol?

Within my first chapter, I review the available literature on Black queer women's experiences with alcohol and highlight gaps in current knowledge. Chapter two provides a comprehensive overview of the theoretical framework that supports this dissertation project. Chapter three explains the feminist methodology guiding this research and describes the data analysis plan. Chapters four, five, and six provides study findings, including major themes found throughout participant interviews. These three chapters of findings include: "origin stories: queered relationships to alcohol;" "historical memory: gay bars as white space:" and "embodied control: contextualizing alcohol, mediating factors, and protective behavioral strategies." Chapter seven provides a discussion of key takeaways from my research. Chapter eight highlights and discusses key study limitations, and chapter nine provides a conclusion underscoring the main findings.

## 1.2 Background

Substance use literature has attempted to capture an accurate depiction of the prevalence of alcohol use in various communities. Drinking patterns and associated norms vary among communities, yet the queer community consistently reports higher rates of substance use than heterosexuals (Green and Feinsten 2012; Bux 1996). Gay men are found to have a higher prevalence of drug use, especially when living in gay enclaves (Carpiano, Kelly, Easterbrook,

and Parsons 2011). An abundance of research demonstrates that self-identified lesbians and other sexual minority women (commonly referred to in public health literature as SMW) report increased alcohol use than heterosexual women (Ward, Dahlhamer, Galinsky, and Jonestl 2014; McCabe, West, Hughes, and Boyd 2013; Midanik, Drabble, Trocki, and Sell 2007; Gruskin and Gordon 2006; Scheer, Parks, McFarland, Page-Shafer, Delgado, Ruiz, Molitor, and Klausner 2003; Roberts, Grindel, Patsdaughter, DeMarco, and Tarmina 2004; Solarz and Institute of Medicine 1999; Cochran, Keenan, Schober, and Mays 2000; Brux 1996; Bradford et. al., 1994). For example, lesbian and bisexual transgender women living in San Francisco were found to have higher drinking rates when compared to heterosexual transgender women, consistent with cisgender lesbian and bisexual women (Arayasirikul, Pomart, Raymond, and Wilson 2018). Using data from the 2000 National Alcohol Survey, Midanik et al (2007) found a relationship between alcohol reliance and queer women's sexual identity *and* behavior, specifically among bisexual women.

Queer women report higher rates of risky or hazardous drinking than heterosexual women that often begins during adolescence (Caputi 2018; Talley, Hughes, Aranda, Birkett, and Marshal 2014; Marshal, King, Stepp, Hipwell, Smith, Chung, Friedman, and Markovic 2012; Dermody, Marshal, Cheeong, Burton, Hughes, Aranda and Friedman 2011; Caputi, Smith, Strathdee, and Ayers 2015;Wilsnack, Hughes, Johnson, Bostwick, Szalacha, Benson, Aranda, and Kinnison 2008; Parks, Hughes, and Kinnison 2007; Ziyadeh, Prokop, Fisher, Rosario, Field, Camargo, and Austin 2007). In a small, subsample (n=173) of lesbian and bisexual-identified participants from the Pittsburgh Girls Study, researchers found large discrepancies existed when participants used other substances in addition to alcohol (Dermody, Marshal, Cheong, Chung, Stepp, and Hipwell 2016). Phillips et. al (2019) found that over a ten-year trend of high school

LGB students, self-identified lesbians were still reportedly drinking more than their heterosexual peers regardless of a decrease in prevalence. Additional data from the 2015 National Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) reports a representative sample of lesbian and bisexual high school youth with higher rates of binge drinking in a previous 30-day period (Fish, Schulenberg, and Russell 2019).

Young, college-aged, LGBT students also report dangerous drinking habits and patterns when compared to heterosexual young college students (Coulter, Marzell, Saltz, Stall, and Mair 2016). What differs between college-aged queer women from college-aged heterosexual women may be stressors related to coming out at this particular time period. In a sample of college students attending California universities, Coulter et al (2016) found that queer college women reported increased alcohol usage than their fellow heterosexual female students. Coulter et al also specifically looked at place of drinking within their sample, and found that when controlling for locations designated on campus, lesbian and queer women imbibe less when off-campus, including at gay bars (Coulter et al 2016). The presence of alcohol (or other substances) during one's youth and adolescence can be quite formative for young people. Identifying stressors as well as understanding how relationships form to the substance during this time period can provide crucial insight into how drinking patterns develop over time.

The results of experiencing various stressors have led many queer women from alcohol use towards abuse or addiction. The Epidemiologic Study of Health RISK (ESTHER) found that 57.5% of lesbian respondents (N=1017) indicated current drinking use, with 4.7% identified as heavy drinkers (Aaon, Markovic, Danielson, Honnold, Janosky, and Schmidt 2001). In one of the first studies to analyze possible associations between queer women, committed partnerships, and alcohol, researchers found that riskier drinking occurs more among single queer women

(Veldhuis, Hughes, Drabble, Wilsnack, Riggle, and Rostosky 2019). Veldhuis et al found that, "…cohabitating was protective against alcohol dependence and alcohol-related problems" (2019:258), and, similar to studies on heterosexual relationships, "greater commitment is more protective against hazardous drinking" (2019:258). A small study of six white, sober, lesbians between the ages of 31 and 52 were reported to have, "…perceived past drinking behaviors as a way to cope with internalized homophobia/homonegativity, and heterosexism…Further, participants perceived a strong connection between their drinking and finding social support in lesbian bars" (Dorn-Medeiros and Doyle 2018:152). The idea of seeking community in gay and lesbian bars continues to be both a positive yet potentially damaging aspect to queer women's alcohol use.

In a qualitative study assessing 48 in-depth interviews of queer women, Drabble and Trocki (2014) noted that many of their respondents reported seeking out Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) for addiction or used alcohol as a major self-medicating strategy. Alcoholics Anonymous is a program with twelve benchmarks to help individuals seek assistance from peers (or others who are also in recovery), and is generally perceived as the normative strategy used for obtaining and sustaining sobriety. While AA programs continue to be a successful recovery program for many, there are criticisms of how the program itself is not inclusive to those in the queer community due to its Western religious roots (Gedro 2014). More specifically, one of the major components of AA is relinquishing control of the self to a "higher existence" or dogmatic presence as a means of finding internal acceptance and redemption. This component can be problematic for those in the queer community who relay feelings of isolation from recovery programs that are faith-based (Bliss 2011; Bittle 1982). Patsy Staddon writes about her experiences in AA as an aging lesbian in society as an "ex-alcoholic", stating,

> For me, AA is like an open asylum for people who accept that they can't be cured but do their best to behave in ways society requires alcoholics to behave. In one sense this is the opposite of the lesbian and gay world – out and proud. On the other hand, the AA world is similar to own. Both worlds have obtained a measure of respectability, if not acceptance…But, both are named, owned, and controlled by heteronormative society (Staddon 2005:75).

Substance use treatment facilities can also be a contentious place for queer women. Using secondary data from the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol Related Conditions (NESARC), Allen and Mowbray (2016) found that LGB participants (N=308) reported more barriers to treatment than heterosexuals. Queer experiences with Alcoholics Anonymous and treatment facilities may also not report overt homophobia, but some lesbians seeking sobriety do report issues with assimilation (Hall 1996), as well as consistent heteronormative assumptions and a lack of counselor and peer exposure to those in the LGBT community (Matthews, Lorah, and Fenton 2006). Some argue that adapting LGBT-specific recovery support centers is key for reducing substance use and maintaining sobriety (Talley 2013); especially for the aging queer community (Satre 2006). However, there are not enough LGBT-specific programs for treatment, and often those that do exist are cost prohibitive (Anderson 2009).

Stressors related to sexual identity, coming out, and feelings of invisibility are just a few reasons lesbians are drinking at increased rates than their heterosexual counterparts. Queer women are reporting higher drinking rates than heterosexual women, yet there is a dearth of research that focuses on stressors that impact drinking behaviors, especially focusing on *why* lesbians drink more in the first place. Even less is included about possible stressors that exist within the intersections of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation with lesbians of color (Institute of Medicine 2011).

### *1.2.1 Alcohol Use Among Black Lesbians*

Available research demonstrates that queer women of color have higher drinking rates compared to white lesbians (Jeong, Veldhuis, Aranda, and Hughes 2016; Hughes, Wilsnack, Szalacha, Johnson, Bostwick, Seymour, Aranda, Benson, and Kinnison 2006; Hughes and Eliason 2002). Using three-wave longitudinal data from the Chicago Health and Life Experiences of Women (CHLEW), researchers recently found that across race and ethnicity, there was a "marginal, positive superordinate relation between hazardous drinking and the tendency to report more same-sex attraction relative to their sexual identity" (Talley, Aranda, Hughes, Everett, and Johnson 2015). Using the same dataset from the CHLEW study, researchers also found that some Black lesbians report heavy drinking at a later age, some research indicates present heavier drinking compared to white lesbians (Parks and Hughes 2005). Results from the 1992 Chicago Lesbian Community Cancer Project Results measured differences in Black lesbians' (n=69) psychological distress to Black heterosexual women (n=40). Researchers found that of this sample, 77% of Black lesbians reported being current drinkers (Hughes, Matthews, Razzano, and Aranda 2003). Additionally, 19% were found to be five times more likely than Black heterosexual women to have experienced one of six problematic drinking indicators (such as guilt associated with drinking or drinking alcohol with morning routines) within a 12-month span (Hughes et. al., 2003).

Social stressors for Black lesbians differ from white lesbians, as well as other lesbians of color. In a comparative study between Black and white lesbians (N=867), Black lesbians reportedly sought alcohol as a major coping mechanism due to negative experiences related to their racial status (Lewis, Mason, Winstead, Gaskins, and Irons 2016). A recent national study of self-identified lesbians (N=1,048) indicate that lesbians may drink more due to experiencing

stressors related to their identities (such as coping), yet 78% of participants were white and only 10% of respondents were Black (Lewis, Winstead, and Lau-Barraco 2017). While these studies provide important data on coping mechanisms and drinking among lesbians, more within-group research is needed that centers the experiences of Black queer women.

Interestingly, Mays et. al found in a subsample of racially and ethnic diverse sexual minority women (n=365), Black lesbians reported increased alcohol use when compared to Black heterosexual women (Mays, Yancey, Cochran, Weber, and Fielding 2002). Black queer women also have increased mental stressors than heterosexual Black women (Mays, Cochran, and Roeder 2003). Research therefore indicates that Black lesbians may drink more than white lesbians *and* Black heterosexual women, pointing towards potentially more than a singular relationship between increased alcohol use due to experiencing racism.

Gender identity and gender presentation may be a related factor with young queer women's relationships to alcohol. In a sample of 76 self-identified lesbian and bisexual women, researchers found an increase in amount and frequency of alcohol among queer women who identity as butch (Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter 2008). While the sample was majority participants of color (36% Latina or Black, respectively), the study failed to interrogate how butch women of color interpret these social factors. Systemic and structural factors may also play a role in Black lesbians' relationships to alcohol. Data from the third wave of CHLEW (which oversampled queer women of color) indicates that when public policy – such as civil unions-benefits the LGBT community, Black queer women may have reduced negative consequences related to alcohol (Everett, Hatzenbuehler, and Hughes 2016.) Across the life course, college students of color may be at risk for increased alcohol consumption as a result of experiencing microaggressions and other forms of stress (Blume, Lovato, Thyken, and Denny 2011).

Social constraints continue for Black queer women seeking recovery or support from their alcohol use. A small, qualitative study (n=10) of gays and lesbians in recovery centers found themes surrounding the need for peer mentoring and recovery spaces that were LGBT-specific (Matthews et al. 2006). Of the ten participants in the study (with six being women and 4 being male), only one participant was a Black lesbian. This participant, "…found racial discrimination to be a bigger concern for her than sexual orientation" (Matthews et al 2006:118). This statement highlights the complexities embedded with being a sexual, racial, and gender minority seeking sobriety from alcohol. An additional limitation noted in the 48 interviews conducted by Drabble and Trocki (2014) is how less than one quarter of respondents within the overall sample (22.9%) were Black. Many respondents reported themes of alcohol use to self-medicate, yet researchers did not ask racial and gender specific questions related to types of stress experienced by queer women of color (Drabble and Trocki 2014). The safeties afforded by recovery spaces that are LGBT-identified are a privilege only for those who are white and LGBT; this same privilege is not granted to QPoC.

As indicated in the literature, the prevalence of alcohol use by lesbians and other queer women are consistent over a twenty-year span of research. While the queer community gains more visibility (both legally with policy changes and fluctuations in social norms), questions still linger as to how relationships to alcohol use continue to form, especially among queer communities of color. Black lesbians experience oppression and marginalization in areas related to their gender, race, and sexuality. The reality of existing within these invisible intersections may cause additional burdens and therefore an increased likelihood to partake in negative coping mechanisms, such as alcohol misuse. However, little is still known about the deeper, more intricate complexities that support Black queer women's proclivity towards drinking or their

relationships even to the substance. Few qualitative studies are designed that center Black queer experiences, much less focus on their experiences that do not group their behaviors into noted health disparities. My dissertation research attempts to fill this gap by focusing solely on the lived experience of Black queer women and non-binary people. My next chapter (chapter two) highlights the theoretical framework used to best support this research endeavor.

# 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

## 2.1 Applying a Theoretical Framework

Researching the relationship to alcohol among Black queer women warrants a theoretical framework that is unique to their experiences. This requires a framework that is multifaceted and incorporates more than one theoretical paradigm. The idea of intersectionality as a theoretical framework can be traced to Black feminist organizing in the 1970s, or during what is often considered the second wave of the feminist movement. Arguably, the feminist movement (both the first wave featuring the suffragettes, as well as more radical feminists in the second wave movement) neither centered nor sought to include Black women in the fight for equality. Because of this, Black women's needs were pushed into what hooks (1984) refers to as the "margins", whereas white women's needs were consistently placed at the center of feminist organizing.

Feminist legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw, originally promoted the advancement of intersectional research within the legal arena, as Black women were continually discredited as a marginalized demographic. Crenshaw's theories are often considered the instrumental framework for intersectionality as an application for Black feminist and sociological research methods. According to Crenshaw, Black women are only addressed as marginalized on the basis of their race and their gender; however, their marginalization is systemic on the basis of more than just their race or their gender (Crenshaw 1991). Black women and other women of color experience oppression on the basis of their gender, race, or class, and these areas often overlap and intersect. One can extend this argument further by implying amplified marginalization on the basis of (dis)ability, age, and religious affiliation, but race must be centered.

Crenshaw's argument is a demand for scholars to address issues from a multi-dimensional perspective, as intersectional research demonstrates how Black women experience multiple marginalized statuses. A key component to better understand Black queer women's relationships to alcohol is recognizing their lived experiences occur within what Collins refers to as the matrix of domination (Collins 2000). More specifically, their identities and experiences exist within multiple, intersecting sites of oppression that are often organized institutionally or on micro level interactions (Collins 2000). Black queer women (and Black queer non-binary people) do not experience sexism alone; they experience sexualized racism as they are simultaneously a gender and sexual minority and a Black person. It's important to incorporate an understanding of how different systems (race, gender, and sexuality) intersect in ways that impact Black queer women and non-binary people's experiences with alcohol. An intersectional perspective therefore addresses multiply marginalized statuses as interconnected, and as interactive factors instead of as separate or mutually exclusive of each other (Bowleg 2008). Research that does not unpack these various intersections will likely fail to provide the unique and nuanced lived experiences of Black queer communities.

Building from the "double jeopardy" of the combination of racism and sexism, feminist psychologist Beverly Greene describes the lived experiences of queer women of color as experiencing a threat of a third or 'triple jeopardy' (Greene 1996). Double jeopardy occurs when Black women encounter discrimination related to more than one social status, such as race and gender (Greene 1996). The first transgression is being a woman; not being a white woman develops into a second, or "double jeopardy". Third, existing within spaces as a non-white, non-heterosexual female further reinforces a triple marginalization, or a 'triple jeopardy' as argued by Greene (1996). Experiencing discrimination on multiple levels may have detrimental effects on

one's sense of self, representation within a community, and issues surrounding visibility. These stressors could impact one's mental health, and influencing Greene's analysis of a triple jeopardy is therefore a useful measure for researching relationships to alcohol among Black lesbians.

Aligned with the need for multidimensional analyses in substance use literature, Meyer's minority stress model (2003) developed from the need to incorporate stressors that are inimitable to the LGBT community. Meyer's model is an extension of stress process theory (Pearlin 1989). Stress process theory argues that exposure to social stressors are systematically biased along social statuses and this bias creates and perpetuates social inequalities (Pearlin 1989). Meyer's minority stress model prioritizes social stressors that occur specifically among the LGBT community. These stressors can include discrimination on the basis of one's sexual orientation, obligations to "come out", and internalized homophobia (Meyer 2003). These stressors are more pronounced due to our society's continued perpetuation of heteronormativity, as well as assimilation into homonormativity.

The LGBT community faces institutional stressors resulting from policies that do not prioritize their needs, such as workplace discrimination, state protections from hate crimes, and gender rights that are relevant to the transgender community. Those in the LGBT community face innumerable social barriers and obstacles that can have detrimental impacts on their mental health. Stressors for QPoC are uniquely complex, as stressors related to sexual orientation are compounded by race, gender, and often class. Consistent with minority stress theory, the use of alcohol as a coping mechanism was associated with the experiences of being a Black queer woman (Lewis, Mason, Winstead, Gaskins, and Irons 206). In a recent longitudinal study of 1,057 lesbian and bisexual women (where 40% of participants identified as lesbian and 12.2% identified as African-American) between the ages of 18-25, results indicate a relationship

between minority stress and risky drinking, as well as negative drinking related outcomes (Wilson, Gilmore, Rhew, Hodge, and Kaysen 2016). This particular study is instrumental for highlighting the importance of minority stress among lesbians as the results are not consistent with prior research which suggests an association between minority stress among lesbians and increased alcohol. Rather, the findings indicate that for lesbians, minority stress is related to negative outcomes over time (Wilson et. al 2016). Meyer's minority stress model attempts to emphasize the stressors experienced by the LGBT community as a whole, and offers a substantial addition to the theoretical framework outlined thus far. Black queer women, therefore, occupy a unique space in relation to stress and resulting substance abuse behaviors. Intersectional approaches that are guided by both feminist theory and social psychology is a necessary framework to better understand what drives Black queer women to drink more than white lesbians (as well as heterosexual Black women), and useful for unpacking the related systemic stressors of racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Drawing from the Minority Stress Model, intersectionality, and triple jeopardy, I discuss how the stressors resulting from the systemic intersections of collectively experiencing sexism, racism, and homophobia may yield useful insight into the social factors influencing Black queer women's relationships to alcohol. I also extend this framework to include the potential historical impact of the gay bar, and what this historically white space symbolizes for Black queer women. Additionally, I discuss how this theoretical framework may ultimately provide sociological context to an understudied topic within the LGBT community.

### *2.1.1 Sexism*

Being a woman within the confines of a patriarchal society can have adverse effects on one's ability to maintain healthy behavioral and positive mental health outcomes. This is even

further inhibited for Black queer women and non-binary people due to constant social strains on what is considered feminine (read: straight) and acceptable (read: white women). Black lesbians are not well represented within the known dichotomy of butch/femme relationships, as this binary is crafted out of whiteness. Some Black lesbians have reported discrimination based on their gender expression as self-identified lesbians (Wilson, Okwu, and Mills 2011) and others report experiencing backlash within the lesbian community for not conforming (Reed and Valenti 2012). Some Black lesbians therefore created separate identifiers and cultural signifiers that are unique to their experiences with their race and gender. Identities such as dom, or stud, are ways in which the Black lesbian experience exists outside of pre-existing and accepted performances within the lesbian community (Wilson 2009; Hampton 1991).

Black queer women's experiences are rarely shown in mainstream media representations. For Black women in particular, Collins (2000) refers to media depictions of Black women with three negative, controlling images. These three images include representing Black women as an asexual mammy, hypersexual "jezebel" with a voracious sexual appetite, or hyposexual "welfare queen" (Collins 2000). The controlling imagery representing Black women reifies not just heteronormativity, but the persistence of white supremacist efforts to denigrate Black female sexuality while simultaneously eliminating their sexuality altogether. The lack of positive imagery also extends to Black queer women. Black lesbians (and other lesbians of color) are often removed from popular imagery that promotes popular lesbian tropes (Howard 2014). The popular imagery surrounding the lesbian community is yet another image crafted out of whiteness, and promotes female celebrities that are white, able-bodied, blonde, and intended to be sexually appealing to both men and women. Decreased levels of visibility within both lesbian and straight communities, racialized sexism, and internalized misogyny towards other women

becomes problematic for lesbians of color. Patriarchal society dictates what is considered attractive, and this discriminatory ideology trickles down to Black lesbians' sense of self. Identity formation, or the lack of positive imagery and mirroring outside of whiteness, may contribute to drinking patterns or possible relationships to alcohol among Black queer women.

### *2.1.2 Sexism and Racism*

Due to the lasting impacts of white supremacy, communities of color report experiencing discrimination on the basis of their race or ethnicity. Living in both a colorblind and systemically racist society has deleterious effects on one's health (Taylor and Turner 2002). Among Black women, research confirms that experiencing racism elevates risk for adverse health effects (Cozier, Yu, Coogan, Bethea, Rosenberg, and Palmer 2014). Gay men of color in particular experience disparities related to mental health due to perceptions of racial discrimination (Choi, Paul, Ayala, Boylan, and Gregorich 2013). Queer people of color also report internalized discrimination of both their racial and sexual minority status, leading to higher rates of illegal substance use (Drazdowski, Perrin, Trujillo, Sutter, Benotsch, and Snipes 2015). Experiencing both racism and homophobia have also correlated to negative mental health outcomes (Diaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, and Marin 2001). Queer people of color also report experiencing racism from white LGBT members, even while existing within a marginalized identity (Ghabrial 2017; Dudley 2013; Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, and Walters 2011).

Women facing double oppression (meaning they experience racial and gender oppression due to being a woman of color) add an additional layer of complexity that could impact relationships to alcohol. Even though Black women as a whole experience racial discrimination, Black queer women experience racism within heteronormative spaces as well as LGBT spaces. Being a member of an oppressed group prompts the assumption of automatic acceptance

concerning other types of oppression; however, the LGBT community's perception of being absolved from racial prejudice is a fallacy. Even while contending with discrimination due to their race and gender, Black queer women may also feel social pressure to identify separately with either their race or their sexual orientation. In a between-group analysis comparing the mediating effects of racial and gender discrimination experienced by Black lesbians, Black gay men, and white lesbians (n=198), Black lesbians reported higher rates of discrimination (Calabrese, Meyer, Overstreet, Haile, and Hansen 2015). In a small qualitative study of 10 Black, self-identified lesbian youth living in New York City, seven of the participants reported feeling a duality with identifying as both Black and lesbian (Follins 2011). Even though these results are from a relatively small sample size, considering the majority of participants held negative perceptions of their identities is indicative of a much larger social issue and consequent stressor.

#### *2.1.3 Racialized Homophobia/Heterosexism*

Black queer women experience marginalization on yet a third jeopardizing factor due to their sexual orientation. The notion of "coming out" is social performance of declaring one's non-normative sexual orientation that is inherent to those in the LGB community. One 'comes out' via the proverbial 'closet', defined by Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick as the "defining structure of gay oppression in this century" (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1990:71). Coming out and publicly embracing one's sexual orientation can be a sense of mental or emotional relief for some, as they no longer feel shrouded by their former secret. However, the process of coming out is gendered, racialized, and arguably a privileged performance for those in positions of social power (Collins 2005); meaning the process of "coming out" is typically safest for white cisgender gay men and women. Even though coming out may still be a stigmatized act, there is more protection afforded due to white privilege.

Many Black queer women are hesitant to come out or to bring public attention to their identity, citing the need to stay connected with communities of color (Bowleg, Burkholder, Teti, and Craig 2008). Black lesbians may fear rejection from their family or other support networks as heteronormativity continues to be the norm in our society. Lack of social support has been linked to negative mental health outcomes (Link and Phelan 1995), indicating a crucial role within the life course development for lesbians of color. Black lesbians' experiences of homophobia are further problematized as heterosexual privilege is considered the only form of privilege afforded to Black women within a white supremacist and sexist society (Collins 2005). The additive layer of sexual minority status thereby renders Black queer women completely invisible.

Similar to racism, homophobia is institutionalized and systemic, and racial stereotypes may also be fueling homophobic views (Hill 2013). LGBT individuals are also at risk for developing negative coping mechanisms due to experiencing internalized heterosexism (Syzmanski and Chung 2003; Hicks 2000); internalized heterosexism and shame (Hequembourg and Dearing 2013); and internalized homophobia (Kaysen, Kulesza, Balsam, Rhew, Blayney, Lehavot, and Hughes 2014; Syzmanski, Chung, and Balsam 2011). Internalized heterosexism is considered a unique stressor to queer women, as the stress results from feelings of inadequacy resulting from their failure to adhere to social norms in relation to their deviant sexual behavior (Drabble and Eliason 2012). Results from ten semistructured interviews of Black lesbians living in Florida highlight experiences of internalized heterosexism due to familial and community disappointment with their lesbian identity (Walsh 2016). Due to the combination of homophobia experienced within the confines of a racist society, as well as fear of rejection from one's family, internalized heterosexism may have significant implications for relationships to alcohol.

### *2.1.4 Historical Context of the Gay Bar*

An additional factor to contextualize queer experiences with alcohol is understanding the relevant history of the gay bar and what this symbolizes for Black queer women. Historically, bars have always been perceived as a safe haven for the LGBT community (Faderman 1991; D'Emilio 1983). Prior to the protest at Stonewall (and the resulting gay rights movement) being 'out' wasn't a possibility for most. Gays and lesbians congregated inside LGBT-identified bars in secret as a way to meet friends and locate potential hook-ups that were free from the oppressive, heteronormative gaze (Satre 2006). However, due to its popularity, bars also simultaneously represented an environment that increased risk for substance abuse (Hughes and Eliason 2002; Stall, Paul, Greenwood, Pollack, Bein, Crosby, Michael, Binson, Coates, and Catania 2001). The intended socialization related to the bar for lesbians is linked as a risk for higher prevalence of drinking rates (Hughes and Wilsnack 1997). However, research also indicates a decrease in heavy drinking when there are more lesbians actually attending the bar (Drabble and Trocki 2005), potentially leading to a reversal in socialized norms within the lesbian community. Whether queer women drink more or less due to being around other queer women drinkers is still relatively unknown.

While the bar symbolizes security for the majority of the LGBT community, it may have isolated implications for Black queer women due to the complex intersections of escaping their race as well as escaping their sexual orientation. Not much is documented on Black queer women and the gay bar, but some have reported experiencing racism (Bridges, Selvidge, and Matthews 2003; Loiacano 1993). There are significant social implications for women and public alcohol use, and this is even further strained for women of color (Parks and Hughes 2005). Racism has a long and enduring history within both heterosexual spaces and queer spaces in the

United States. Little is known about Black queer women and non-binary people's comfort level with gay and lesbian bars, or if they feel welcomed in these spaces. Black queer women also continue to be fetishized in queer spaces, indicating that LGBT spaces are not necessarily spaces for queer women of color. Gay and lesbian bars, therefore, are a considerable factor to take into consideration when addressing relationships to and motivations for drinking alcohol among Black queer women and non-binary people.

# 3 METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is useful for understanding the multifaceted and complex lived experiences of individuals. Whereas quantitative methods are useful at capturing the prevalence and social distribution of substance use, qualitative methods, such as ethnography or interviews, can yield insight on why people use substances such as alcohol and the meaning of such behaviors. In-depth interviews are particularly useful for understanding 1) what motivates Black queer women to drink alcohol; 2) how gay and lesbian bars (and other queer spaces with alcohol) affect Black queer women's decisions or motivations to drink alcohol; and 3) does experiencing social marginalization on the basis of gender, race, and sexual orientation drive or impact Black queer women's decisions to drink alcohol.

For this dissertation project, I employ qualitative interviewing methods that are grounded in feminist epistemology. Research is considered feminist when the intent is "uncovering the *subjugated knowledge* of the diversity of women's realities that often lie hidden and unarticulated" (Hesse-Biber 2014:185). Feminist research methods are motivated by the need for reflexivity of both the researcher and the research participants. Typically, the role of *researcher* ultimately means one is in a position of power over their participants. The participants are valued for the data they are providing to the researcher, who is seeking patterns, differences, or commonalities to effectively answer their research hypotheses. The interviews conducted for this dissertation are guided by the principles of feminist research methods as way to maintain positionality on behalf of the researcher and align with the original research questions. As a white, queer, feminist researcher, it is imperative that I remain cognizant of my own positionality so I do not inadvertently further oppress my respondents.

A major strength in qualitative research methods is the ability to use intersectionality as a major contributor to the methodology. Contributions can include being able to directly ask about experiences with racial discrimination, for example, or conducting interviews about constructions of internalized homophobia on one's mental health outlook. Quantitative research methods have arguably struggled to design studies that incorporate multiple sociodemographic factors to highlight the effectiveness of intersectionality, as they tend to consider race and gender, for example, as "additive" parts rather than interlocking, comprehensive sums (Grollman 2014; Bowleg 2008). Recent research has illustrated Black queer women's experiences with adverse mental health issues, yet have significant limitations due to attempting to quantify discrimination (Calabrese, Meyer, Overstreet, Haile, and Hansen 2015).

Choo and Ferree (2010) describe three applications of intersectionality as a sociological method that 1) center invisible groups within the research, 2) move beyond reasoning to create "additive" factors by essentially extending Bowleg's (2008) original argument, and 3) highlighting systems of power away from systemic issues to illustrate "processes that are fully interactive, historically co-determining, and complex" (Choo and Ferree 2010:129). As such, this dissertation attempts to qualitatively highlight various experiences with alcohol among Black queer women and non-binary participants as a way to unpack their relationships to alcohol. This includes moving away from the prevailing public health narrative that focuses on higher prevalence rates as resulting from discrimination, and considers the sociohistorical impact of sexualized and racialized violence against Black women's bodies by contexualizing gay and lesbian bars as white spaces. In this chapter, I review the sampling strategy used to collect data, as well as provide detailed rationalizations with my interview questions.

## 3.1 Sampling Strategy

Potential respondents were recruited through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a recruitment strategy that utilizes recommendations or referrals within particular networks for participants. An initial gatekeeper is located who has extensive networking of a given community and/or has the ability to garner trust among potential participants. Gatekeepers take on the role of insider to help data collection begin, and often maintain this insider role throughout the duration of the study. Once participants partake in the study, they are then asked to refer others who they know are eligible for participation. Participants are also obtained through "word of mouth" or sharing information about the project to others within a community or network. The sample then snowballs into various segments of a community.

A key element of snowball sampling involves participants' ability (and willingness) to connect with others for a sample where the researcher lacks access. Regarding my dissertation, I did not have full access to queer Black spaces due to my positionality as a white woman; therefore, establishing gatekeepers was crucial for identifying and recruiting study participants. At the onset of data collection, I sought out two gatekeepers. One of the selected gatekeepers yielded a referred interview, but the other unfortunately did not. After my third interview I became more proactive with posting flyers with my contact information on social media (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter). Recruitment flyers were distributed primarily over social media, as well as placed in Charis Books and More, a well-established feminist bookstore in Decatur, Georgia. I chose to hang my flyer at Charis because the store is heavily involved in multiple communities and offers many titles highlighting intersections of identities. I was not able to obtain approval to place recruitment flyers in local gay bars. Flyers were circulated between February 1st, 2019 and September 2nd, 2019.

Posts about my research were also made in popular Atlanta-based Facebook groups. These groups include: Dream Warriors, which has over 16,000 participants; Atlanta Queer Organizers, which has over a thousand members; and on multiple separate occasions, colleagues or friends within my network shared my flyer in QPoC-only Facebook groups that were private. My flyer was also shared with contacts with access to students and alum at Spelman College, Georgia State University, and Agnes Scott College. Additionally, contact was attempted with ZAMI NOBLA, a network for aging Black lesbians in Atlanta. My attempted contact with ZAMI NOBLA unfortunately did not generate any interested participants.

The eligibility criteria to participate includes: identify as Black or African-American; identify as lesbian or same-gender loving; live in Metro Atlanta; and be at least twenty-one years of age. Participants had to be at least twenty-one since the current legal drinking age in the United States is twenty-one. Seeking participants who are of legal drinking age is both optimal and ethical. Even though there is an age minimum, there is no cap on the age requirement to participate in this study. The decision to base the sample from Atlanta is largely a result of the city's history and inclusivity of queerness. Atlanta is generally perceived as a "safe space" for those in the LGBT community with a history of centering the experiences of Black LGBT individuals. The decision was also based on proximity to respondents since I also live in Atlanta.

Including the term "same-gender-loving" was a crucial component in the eligibility process. Same-gender-loving is an identifier crafted out of Black feminist and Womanist theories as an identifier for Black queer women that is not predicated within a Eurocentric, white racial frame (Harris and Battle 2013; Cole and Guy-Sheftall 2003). The term also, "…reduces the focus on sexual activity and instead highlights the loving relationships that Black individuals can have with those of the same gender" (Harris and Battle 2013:200). Including the term was also an

attempt to involve aging Black lesbians in the sample. In addition to being 21 or older, Black or African-American, and identifying as lesbian or same-gender loving, respondents did not have to be actively drinking at the time of the interview. As the demographic is already limited, eligibility needed to be relatively broad while relating to the overall scope of the study. Therefore, it was necessary to include Black lesbians who 1) currently drink, 2) have drank at some point in their lifetime, or 3) do not drink at all. The impetus behind this research project is to encourage a dialogue that centers Black queer women's experiences with alcohol, why they drink (or possibly abstain altogether), and what may drive their relationships to alcohol.

Theoretical sampling was used to inform the remainder of the data collection process. Black queer women are already perceived as relatively small community in comparison to other demographics. Theoretical sampling is useful in the sampling process as a way to follow themes or narratives that emerged throughout data collection. At the onset of data collection, I sought to only interview participants who self-identified as lesbian or same-gender loving. Throughout data collection, I was able to broaden the eligibility to include a more diverse array of participants. The expanded eligibility therefore includes participants who identify as queer, bisexual, and pansexual. I believe that broadening the sexual orientation eligibility strengthened the sample, as many participants reported similar experiences even with slightly differing sexualities.

The decision to request participants refer through their own social networks as well as be guided by theoretical sampling was perceived to be the most effective method to garner participants from a community that 1) I am not a member of, and 2) is often an invisible subgroup in both heteronormative and LGBT-centered spaces. Each participant was either referred by someone who had knowledge of my flyer or was referred by a previously interviewed

participant, consistent with snowballed sampling. Once a potential participant made contact, I provided some background information about myself, including that I was a queer, white, cisgender woman conducting research for my dissertation. Additionally, I included information about how I was deliberately conducting work that was guided by anti-racist and feminist theories. I thought this was crucial information to include prior to scheduling an interview so the participant could decide their comfort level with discussing alcohol with a white researcher.

Throughout data collection, I routinely assessed for similar themes among responses. These similarities emerged in the language and terms used to describe their experiences and interactions with alcohol. I paid close attention to patterns emerging from some of the structured questions, and made a concerted effort to highlight those patterns and probe deeper with future interviews. For example, some of the participants who identify as "femme" appeared to have similar descriptions of their attempts to order drinks at bars. Using this information, I asked additional probing questions to participants who do not identify as femme; for example, did they know any femmes in their network who report similar experiences? This probe was not initially included in the interview guide, but was a subtheme that emerged during data collection.

I continued data collection until I had a sample that was diverse in gender identity, racial background, and sexual orientation, as well as consistent in terms of age range. Reaching an appropriate sample size continues to pose an existential dilemma for many qualitative researchers. It can be frustrating to know when to cease data collection and to know if one has a sufficient sample size. The goal of qualitative, sociological research is not to simply find data generalizable, but rather to find meaning. Glaser and Strauss (1967), key methodologists for grounded theory approaches, refer to the concept of *saturation* to define adequate sample size. Saturation occurs when commonalities among participants emerge to a point where the

researcher is no longer finding new data. While I was not able to interview any queer Black women over the age of 40, I was still able to obtain a sample of younger participants with similar enough backgrounds providing insight to their lived experiences and relationships to alcohol. I cannot definitively conclude that I reached saturation (especially with a smaller sample), but I did reach a point where I was not obtaining dissimilar enough responses from participants after my eighteenth interview. Therefore, I concluded my data collection efforts after eighteen interviews.

### 3.2 Interview Format

Each in-depth interview followed a semi-structured format with specific interview questions planned. The participants largely had control throughout the interview in terms of what was asked and answered, which is a key component to feminist in-depth interviewing (Hesse-Biber 2014). As previously stated throughout my theoretical framework, it is necessary for me to relinquish as much power and privilege possible for the potential success of this dissertation project. Employing feminist semi-structured interviews attempts to center respondents' sense of agency. All of the interview questions were grouped into four different sections. I introduced the participant to each section so they could feel prepared. As some of my questions asked participants to relay potentially difficult information (for example, experiences of discrimination or how alcohol impacted their childhood or adolescence), I found it helpful to preface the section to not overwhelm the participant. Participants were asked to respond at their own discretion to each question, and to determine how much or how little they wanted to discuss.

The average length of time for all 18 interviews was sixty minutes. The shortest interview was thirty-two minutes, and the longest interview almost two hours. I conducted each interview at a location of the participant's choice. The overall majority of interviews were held virtually

(n=15), and three interviews were held in person. I assumed the decision to participate in virtual interviews is due to participant age and the ease of accessibility with FaceTime and Skype. Each interview was scheduled for either during the day, or in the early evening. Only one interview was scheduled for after 7:30pm. I intentionally scheduled most interviews for during the day or early evening to try and reduce the possibility that a participant may not be sober during the interview. Even though participants may drink problematically during the day, I was able to confirm that each participant was currently sober based on their body language (i.e. not slurring their words, staying awake, etc) and each provided verbal consent to be interviewed.

A key element of the interview process is ensuring the safety of participants. Even though the majority of interviews were held over FaceTime or Skype, I confirmed that each participant felt safe and comfortable speaking to me prior to their interviews. I also provided a detailed explanation of the physical space where I was conducting the interview. I wanted each participant to be aware of whether I was home alone (which was for most of the interviews) or if my partner was home but in another room. I also paused my questioning during the interviews to check in with participants. As a feminist sociologist committed to anti-racist practices, checking in with participants was crucial to centering their experiences. Anti-racism works to directly disrupt the ways in which white people perpetuate systemic racism and practices. More specifically, anti-racism,

> …is about power relations. Anti-racist discourse moves away from discussions of tolerating diversity to the pointed notion of difference and power. It sees race and racism as central to how we claim, occupy, and defend spaces. The task of anti-racism is to identify, challenge, and change the values, structures, and behaviors that perpetuate systemic racism and other forms of societal oppression (Dei 2005:3).

Checking in is also a way for participants to know that I value them more than as data points. It was my goal throughout my research to proactively identify and challenge the ways in which I

myself benefited from my power status. I did not want my research (or the participants) to feel burdened by the whiteness that is deeply inherent in how researchers discuss and present health behaviors, particularly among communities of color. I did not envision my dissertation to merely gather data and fill a potential gap in the existing sociological literature; rather, I intended to co-create a conversational space with participants where they felt in control, respected, and valued.

Discussing alcohol use and motivations for drinking is a sensitive topic that warrants not only a safe environment for the participant, but cultural competency that extends beyond anti-racist ally ship on behalf of the researcher. The interview questions may potentially trigger participants in ways that must be anticipated. As Hesse-Biber (2014) writes, "The feminist researcher needs to be mindful and reflexive on issues of authority and power within the interview situation" (Hesse-Biber 2014:190). I have a background in HIV counseling, with an emphasis on counseling HIV-positive clients with co-occurring substance misuse. I've worked in multiple community-based health environments and gained necessary skills for building compassion and empathy for navigating difficult, sensitive topics. I also have an educational background in women's and gender studies, and continuously strive to unlearn – and rectify - the ways in which I benefit from and/or perpetuate white supremacy and subsequent oppressive systems.

While I cannot guarantee that participants felt fully comfortable with me, it was my responsibility as a feminist researcher to be mindful of the inevitable power dynamic and work tirelessly for the emotional, mental, and physical safety of my participants. This included not just maintaining a physical safe space for the interview, but also knowing the important boundaries required with asking Black and brown communities to retell sensitive topics to a white researcher. The use of alcohol especially can be a coping mechanism in response to certain

stressors or trauma, and I anticipated this emerging during the interviews. I tried to be as mindful as possible to not probe too deeply about traumatic events. I am not trained as a therapist, and I would not be able to provide appropriate care if a participant experienced acute distress. Each participant was provided with contact information for local LGBT sobriety organizations, as well as a list of Black/African-American therapists and counselors in Metro Atlanta who specialize in substance use and sexual orientation. These resources were provided in the event of a participant disclosing issues with drinking or seeking recovery. The list was created from information listed on Gays and Lesbians in Alcoholics Anonymous (www.gal-aa.org), as well as public information on the website *Psychology Today*. None of the provided resources were endorsed by anyone connected to my dissertation.

### 3.3 Compensation for Participants

At the end of each interview, participants were compensated for their time and received $10. Reimbursement for providing insight into their lived experiences and subsequently performing emotional labor for a researcher is an essential component of conducting feminist-driven research. I also reviewed all written notes I made during interviews with participants to ensure clarity and avoid any potential misrepresentation. I was not able to review my notes with two participants, as they did not have time at the end to review. I also offered to send typed copies of transcripts from their interview to each participant. As I have stated throughout, it is my responsibility to ensure that participants' voices are not overshadowed by any external positionality on my behalf, nor will they be represented in an unfavorable manner.

### 3.4 Human Subjects and Confidentiality

My dissertation project was approved by the Georgia State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), H19194. Participants received a copy of the informed consent form prior to

scheduling their interview. I talked through the consent process with all participants to ensure they understood my motivations for the research, as well as quelling any anxieties they may have regarding their involvement with the interview. Each participant was asked to select a pseudonym of their own choice, and I cautioned each participant not to choose a nickname where they could be easily identifiable to those in their social networks.

Due to the sensitive nature of the interview questions (as well as maintaining confidentiality), the informed consent forms did not require any signatures from participants. In order to fulfil the ethical obligations to sociological research, interviews were not conducted if a participant was visibility intoxicated or showed any indicators of inebriation (such as slurred speech or difficulty standing due to consumption of any substances). I did not conduct any interviews in bars, restaurants, or other locations where alcohol was blatantly involved, and did not have any issues with participants drinking during the interviews. Each participant was given the choice to either conduct an audiotaped interview virtually or in-person, and the majority chose virtual interviews.

### 3.5 Sample Demographics

I conducted eighteen semi-structured, in-depth interviews with Black/African-American queer women and non-binary participants living in the Atlanta area. The interviews occurred between January and September 2019. At the time, all participants live within the Atlanta metropolitan area, with the majority of participants residing in Fulton and DeKalb counties. Fulton County is considered the largest, most populated county in Georgia with a population of over one million residents. Approximately 44.5% of Fulton county residents identify as Black or African-American, and nearly one third (32.4%) of Georgia residents identify as Black/African-American (www.census.gov).

*Table 3.1 Participant Demographics*

| Name | Age | Gender | Race/Ethnicity | Sexuality |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Summer | 29 | Woman | Black, biracial | Lesbian |
| Dorothy | 23 | Woman | Black | Pansexual, same-gender loving, queer |
| Liz | 36 | Woman | Black | Queer lesbian |
| Ashlee | 31 | Woman | Black, Nigerian-American | Lesbian |
| Dylan | 39 | Woman | Black | Queer femme lesbian |
| Anastasia | 27 | Woman | Black | Lesbian |
| Sterling | 26 | Woman | Black | Gay |
| Jordan | 30 | Woman | Black | Lesbian |
| Nnena | 28 | Non binary | Black, Nigerian-American | Lesbian |
| Lilith | 30 | Woman | Black, biracial | Queer, bisexual |
| Eve | 34 | Woman | Black, African-American | Lesbian |
| T | 29 | Non binary | Black | Pansexual |
| Jay | 28 | Woman | Black, multiracial | Lesbian |
| Cocoa | 28 | Woman | Black, African-American | Lesbian |
| Karen | 24 | Woman | Black | Lesbian |
| Jamie | 29 | Woman | Multiracial, Black and Latina | Lesbian |
| Ari | 27 | Woman | Black, Jamaican | Sexually fluid |
| Peaches | 23 | No preference | Black | Same gender loving, queer |

Included within Table 1.1 are self-identifiers for each participant. The average age of participants is twenty-nine, with participant age ranging from twenty-three to thirty-nine. This provides an overall sample of participants considered millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996) and one participant considered Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1980). All eighteen participants identify their race as Black or African-American. Of the eighteen participants, two identify as Black and Nigerian-American. Two participants identify as Black and multiracial, and two participants identify as Black and biracial. One participant noted that

they had a white parent, but only identify as Black. One participant identifies as Black and Jamaican.

Participants' gender was slightly varied and included some variance with trans identities. Fifteen participants identify as cisgender women. Two participants identify as non-binary, and one participant identifies their gender with "no preference". Sexual orientation also varied among participants, and at times involved multiple identifiers. Twelve participants identify their sexual orientation as lesbian; of those who identify as lesbian, two identify as queer lesbians. Out of all eighteen participants, seven participants identify as both queer and another identifier. Two participants identify as same-gender loving, with one participant identifying as both queer and same-gender loving, and the other identifying as queer and pansexual. One additional participant identifies as only pansexual, and one participant identifies as sexually fluid. One participant identifies as queer and bisexual. One participant identified specifically as gay -not lesbian– because they, "did not like how the word [lesbian] sounds". All eighteen participants mentioned times when they were in college, though I did not specifically ask about their educational background or socioeconomic status.

## 3.6 Interview Questions

Each interview followed a semi-structured interview format. Below, I provide explanations and rationalizations for each interview question. (See Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide.)

### *3.6.1 Background Information and Participant History*

1. Can you tell me your background, including your age, and how you self-identify in terms of your race, gender, or sexuality?
    a. Is there a preference with how these social identities are organized?
2. How would you describe your current relationship to alcohol?

Question #1 is merely a question to capture the participant's demographic information. In order to protect the identity of each participant, they were asked to create an alias or fake name of their choice. The age of participants is requested to possibly assess for any cohort effects that might arise in data analysis. I also asked each participant to use as many identifiers or labels to describe themselves that are not only limited to their sexual orientation. Many Black/African-American women who date other women often identify as same-gender loving instead of lesbian, especially among some older Black lesbians (Woody 2015). This is a strategic way to denounce any influence of systemic racism or whiteness within the creation of their identity. They may also identify with particular labels that are unique to their being queer-identified. The positioning of Black queer identities is a crucial component to this research project. The chosen framing and self-identifiers must be centered at the onset of the interview in hopes of setting a framework that remains intersectional and amplifies the voices of the participants, especially with how they organize their identities (Lorde 1982).

Question #2 opened up a discussion about the participant's relationship to alcohol. I strategically did not ask participants to divulge the amount of alcohol they drink. Asking participants to assess how much they drink neither does not answer my research questions nor does it provide an accurate depiction of their relationship to the substance. Question #2 also allowed the participants to describe their experiences without obligation to highlight the frequency in which they drink.

#### *3.6.2 Recall 1st personal narrative*

3. What do you remember about the first time you drink alcohol?
4. What role, if any, did alcohol play in your childhood or adolescence?
5. What are some perceptions of alcohol use in your community/communities?

Section 2 is designed as an invitation for the participant to open up about their first experiences with drinking alcohol. Oftentimes the age in which an individual is exposed to alcohol use (and the social setting) is crucial to influencing their perceptions of alcohol in the future. As highlighted throughout the literature, lesbians and other queer women often report earlier exposure to alcohol use than heterosexual women. Within this section, I asked each participant to engage me with their childhood or adolescent experiences with alcohol use and exposure. Asking someone for their first memory with a substance is helpful to pinpoint the origins of a relationship. My follow-up questions asked whether the experience overall was positive or negative for the participant, as well as their motivations for why they drank alcohol. Were these motivations a result of peer pressure, or something much deeper that may hint at a coping mechanism? I then led into question #4, which sought to provide insight into the role alcohol played in a participant's childhood or adolescence, as well as to how the role changed over time.

Question #5 asked participants about the perceptions of alcohol use within their communities. Alcohol use has many different connotations in multiple communities, yet I argue that society often perpetuates alcohol use as only an issue in relation to whiteness. The two questions above are designed to address potential social stressors experienced by Black queer women and to contextualize their relationships with alcohol among their networks. Within my theoretical framework I theorize that Black queer women have unique motivators for drinking that are separate from other queer women (especially white lesbians). I also find these questions to be necessary as Black queer women may find themselves belonging to multiple communities, which, in retrospect, may offer different insights into the formation of their relationship(s) to alcohol.

### *3.6.3 Location and Space*

6. What is your experience or familiarity with attending gay bars?
7. How connected do you feel to gay bars?
8. Where do you feel the most comfortable drinking alcohol?

The following section deals specifically with public spaces, the historical significance of gay bars, and whether or not Black queer women conceptualize gay bars as a "safe space". Location, setting, and the symbolic meanings intertwined with both can provide useful information regarding drinking patterns. Question #6 asked respondents to highlight their familiarity with gay bars and whether they had positive or negative experiences. I further asked if gay bars were utilized for drinking alcohol, or if other activities occurred in these spaces as well. I specifically asked this question to examine for a possible relationship to the social functioning of gay bars. Participants' perception of connectedness (question #7) seeks to address the historical significance of gay bars for queer women of color. I then asked each participant multiple follow-up questions to address possible memories or narratives of aging QPoC discussing their experiences of gay bars.

Question #8 asked where participants felt the most comfortable drinking alcohol. This question looks into how one's location (as well as setting) factors into the decision to drink alcohol. This question refers to not only if they choose to drink in public or private spaces, but also if they choose to drink exclusively in gay and lesbian bars. I also attempted to incorporate any differences in comfort with specific gay and lesbian and/or queer bars and bars that are LGBT "friendly" (i.e. providing some measure of safety for the queer community, but not a designated queer drinking space).

### *3.6.4 Recall 2nd Personal Narrative*

9. I would like to move into the next section of our interview where I will ask you to recall a second event that has occurred in your life. Can you tell me about a time where you experienced discrimination due to your race, gender, or sexual orientation?
10. Have you experienced discrimination where alcohol was involved?

Section 4 asked participants to recall a second narrative or memory. This part of the interview asked if they experienced discrimination. One of the major strengths to qualitative research is the ability to inquire the degree in which one's lived experiences are impacted or influenced by discrimination or institutionalized racism. Question #9 provides an opportunity for participants to not just provide a response that can be coded as intersectional, but allows for the response to be told in a way that organically encourages an intersectional response. Question #10 intends to unpack feelings of discrimination and the potential relationships to discrimination experienced *while* participants are drinking or where alcohol was involved. My theoretical framework supports the possibility that Black queer women may drink alcohol at higher rates than white lesbians due to experiencing multiple intersecting stressors, yet there is another side to this narrative that I hope to unpack. Black queer women may seek alcohol as a coping mechanism to alleviate numerous social burdens related to discrimination, but that does not necessarily indicate that discrimination ends – or even begins - with their first drink. The social and emotional effects of white supremacy are so deeply ingrained that to fully assess experiences of discrimination (especially where alcohol is involved), the questions must attempt to address all sides of the possible narrative. This requires assessing if 1) alcohol is used as a coping strategy from various stressors, 2) if they feel comfortable drinking in publicly acceptable places

for drinking, and 3) if their experiences drinking in the aforementioned public space have been discriminatory as well.

#### *3.6.5 Closure & Ending Statement*

11. As a __(use their given social identities), what does alcohol symbolize or mean to you?
12. Is there anything you would like to include or discuss that I have not mentioned or asked about in this interview?

My last interview question attempted to divert the interview from a possible negative standpoint and end on a note that addresses where the participants see themselves as free agents in relation to alcohol use. While it is not my intention to guide interviews that seek only negative answers, it is resoundingly clear that discussing alcohol use of any sort may result in a heavy, emotionally-driven dialogue. Asking what alcohol symbolizes to them allows space for meaning-making to occur on behalf of the participants. While prolonged alcohol use has demonstrated negative impacts on the body, alcohol use in a social setting (whether within a bar or elsewhere) may symbolize a possibly queered way of building community. I therefore tried to conclude the interviews in a space that recognizes their motivations and subsequent behaviors with alcohol may not be entirely negative as prior research indicates.

### 3.7 Initial Coding

Each interview was recorded using a digital audio recorder, and in some cases two digital audio recorders were used. I transcribed each interview verbatim into Microsoft Word documents. I elected to transcribe the documents myself instead of soliciting the use of a transcription service, primarily to better familiarize myself with the data. As a way to soothe any possible concerns with confidentiality, I let each participant know that I planned to transcribe each interview and only I would have access to the data.

Participant data were coded using both NViVO and manually by hand. The coding process was completed using thematic analysis. I developed an initial codebook that followed the structure of my interview questions. I was not entirely sure what might emerge during each of the interviews, so I organized a codebook of five parent codes that initially matched the flow of each section of the interview. These include: first time drinking; gay bars; experiences of discrimination; coping strategies; and meaning making with alcohol. After transcribing all of the interviews, I conducted line-by-line coding using a grounded theory approach to find additional emerging themes and patterns. The three emergent themes I focus on for my dissertation are: participant origin stories, historical memory and experiences with gay bars, and embodied control with alcohol use.

Chapters four, five, and six are organized in a way that follows participant's life histories. Life histories are often a useful methodology in life course research to highlight various trajectories and change over time with health behaviors (Elder 1998). Even though none of my participants are considered middle-aged, I chose to organize my findings in such a way that encompasses their first time drinking (chapter 5), experiences drinking publicly at gay and lesbian bars (chapter 6), and how they currently conceptualize their connections to alcohol (chapter 7). I find this beneficial to the overall study of substance abuse, as in-depth interviews allow for participant-driven responses that are non-linear and alter over time. Relationships to substances are not entirely fixed; its benefit to the user shifts depending upon a variety of environmental, social, and economic factors.

I was invited into the lives of eighteen Black queer women and non-binary people to talk about the role of alcohol, their experiences in gay bars, and the relationships they have to the substance. The responses from my participants give rich context to how connections and role

changes occur with substances over time. These responses support existing quantitative data that indicate LGBT communities are drinking more than their straight counterparts, but instead of focusing only on quantity assessments and reasons for drinking, this project attempts to focus on the relationships to alcohol among a sample of Black queer women and non-binary people.

# 4 ORIGIN STORIES: QUEERED RELATIONSHIPS TO ALCOHOL

For many, one's youth and adolescence is a time for rebellion and exploration. There may be a thrill to engage in deviant behavior, and often, procuring alcohol is one of them. Over time there may be increased usage with alcohol caused from stressors, such as experiences of discrimination across the life course. The time at which someone first drinks alcohol could have influences on their relationships as they age. There are some notable factors of interest; what was their environment like? Were they drinking alone? Did they feel pressure to drink that first time?

Available research overwhelmingly links substance use and environmental factors. As indicated in the literature review, LGBT community members often begin alcohol use in their youth and adolescence, with a notable uptick of use in college. Many studies highlight a possible connection between age of first exposure and prevalence of use later in life. There is an association between drinking early in life and the potential for riskier drinking patterns across the life course, particularly among men and children growing up with alcoholic parents (Jester, Wong, Crawford, Buu, Fitzgerald, and Zucker 2015). The age of onset drinking is often earlier for queer women than for heterosexual women. However, the available research that highlights Black queer origin stories with alcohol is marginal at best.

This chapter seeks to contextualize Black queer women and non-binary people's experiences with early onset drinking. The narratives in this chapter provide nuance into possible motivations for drinking alcohol, as well as providing context for how relationships form when they first drank. For some, this meant recalling memories of their first time "getting drunk". For others, they remember parents or extended family members drinking around them. Some participants witnessed a family member misuse alcohol during adolescence, which influenced their decision making long term. Knowing where these lasting influences originated can be

beneficial for understanding connections to alcohol and alcohol misuses and how they develop over time.

Data shown in this chapter provides context to my first research question of, "What motivates Black queer women to drink?" The answer is complicated as Black queer women's and non-binary people's experiences are not monolithic, nor are their trajectories with alcohol linear. However, there are some patterns with first exposure that are of interest. These patterns include: first time drinking; participant misuse of alcohol as an adolescent; and witnessing alcohol misuse from others during adolescence. Some participant's first time drinking or exposure to alcohol reportedly impacted how they viewed alcohol at the time of the interview, possibly indicating how the symbolic meaning and associations that form to the substance early on may provide insight into future, more problematic drinking patterns. Within this chapter, I seek to highlight the intricate and often unique variances surrounding how our relationships initially form to alcohol, and how this may have future implications for alcohol use across the life course.

## 4.1 First Memories

A key question I asked during the interview was to recall a memory of their first time drinking alcohol. All eighteen participants were able to recall their first time, as all eighteen participants drank at least once during their lifetime. A few participants differentiated between their first memory of alcohol and their first time actively drinking alcohol. These memories were often from early childhood exposure to alcohol. Three of the eighteen participants have memories of their first time *tasting* alcohol, which were separate from first time drinking alcohol. T immediately remembered their first time tasting alcohol while at a family gathering:

> Alcohol has been like at family reunions and I think I probably was like, 10 or something where we snuck like wine coolers from the cooler... and

> we snuck the fruitiest, colorful, most colorful thing. And we shared it amongst like four kids (laughter) (T, 29, Black, non-binary, pansexual).

Nnena also recalled a memory of sneaking alcohol as a young child. They say, "I was probably five or six and it was like in the context of a family gathering, and I was sneaking someone else's drink…no one gave me alcohol" (Nnena, 28, Black, Nigerian-American, non-binary, lesbian). Similarly, Peaches remembered her first time drinking when she was around nine or ten-years old sneaking alcohol from the house:

> ...I remember my mom used to have Seagram's gin in the cupboard...and I remember I wasn't in school that day (laughter) so I went and grabbed the Seagram's gin and just like poured myself a glass and it was really just like, feeling like I was doing something that adults were supposed to do, something I wasn't supposed to do, like a rebellious act but - that was the first time I remember drinking alcohol (Peaches, 23, Black, same-gender loving, gender non-conforming).

While not an exact memory, Summer recalls that she may have had, "a sip of shandy when I was younger because my family is British" (Summer, 29, Black, biracial lesbian). Jordan was also around five years old when she had her first taste of alcohol:

> The first time that I drank alcohol I was probably five, and I was at my father's house and he was watching basketball with his friends, and I told him I was thirsty and he was like take a swig of this and it was beer. I didn't know it was beer and I hated it and I spit it out and that was that (laughter) (Jordan, 30, Black lesbian).

Embedded with the responses above is the underlying idea that alcohol was a prohibited substance. With the exception of Jordan, these four participants (T, Summer, Peaches, and Nnena) knew enough about the substance to recognize that alcohol as symbolic of behavior enacted by the adults around them. When asked about their first memories drinking alcohol, all five participants specifically differentiated between their first memories of tasting alcohol and actively drinking alcohol. Peaches' account of her first time drinking is similar to both T and

Summer's experiences. Peaches alludes to mirroring behavior related to alcohol consumotion, nothing that she knew what she was doing wasn't appropriate behavior of someone her age. Available longitudinal data indicates that first time drinking (or exposure) typically happens at family gatherings and may indicate a potential relationship to problem drinking later in life (Warner and White 2003). However, there is still much that is unknown about age of first exposure to alcohol and long term effects; even less is known about age of first exposure and added trajectories of coming out during adolescence, for example, among Black queer women and non-binary people.

Asking participants to recall their first memories with alcohol often elicited memories of their first time actively drinking underage. These memories were coded as active underage drinking because the intent was to imbibe (and potentially solicit drunkenness). Furthermore, the alcohol was accessible, to an extent, making these experiences different than their first time "sneaking" the substance when they were younger. Fifteen of the 18 participants also reported that their first time actively drinking alcohol was in high school, whereas three waited until college. The high school occurrences typically happened at house parties, or in secret with one or two friends. A few referred back to these experiences fondly or with laughter; these were mostly when they knew they were underage drinking and involved in perceived "deviant" behavior. Summer remembers turning sixteen the first time that she actively drank:

> ...The first time I remember drinking outside of the home...would be when I was, I think my sixteenth birthday...we were in a park, out late - we had snuck out, later than we should have been, with a friend of mine and we met up with some boys and uhm this friend had purchased Smirnoff Ice (laughter)...I don't remember like getting drunk but I'm sure I probably did because I was sixteen and hadn't really drank before (Summer, 29, Black, biracial, lesbian).

She remembered not feeling pressured to drink at the time, and her motivations were simply to celebrate her birthday. She notes that while she doesn't remember "getting drunk", she notes that it was a possibility because she was underage and "hadn't really drank before". Ari also did not feel pressured when she first drank as a sixteen-year-old away at boarding school. She remembers, "I wanna say I was 16...we went to my friend's house, and it was just me and my best friends and this other friend, and she gave us a bottle of wine...and then my other friend and I just hung out in the backseat and drank a bottle of wine" (Ari, 27, Black, Jamaican, sexually fluid). Similar to Summer, Ari described the environment as "low key" and "very low pressure". Ashlee also remembers the first time she drank in high school. The environment was at a very relaxed New Year's party. She did not feel pressure to drink at the time, and was excited for the opportunity to partake. She says,

> I was at my girlfriend at the time's apartment. She was having a party; I think it was like New Year's. And her - I think her aunt or something like that had some beer or some like wine coolers around so I tried beer for the first time...I was seventeen and you know it was like a chance to drink a Corona or something so I remember being like a rebel... (Ashlee, 31, Black, Nigerian-American, lesbian).

Ashlee's experience differs somewhat from both Summer and Ari. Even though all three participants were drinking underage (in low pressure environments), the party Ashlee attended still had adults present (i.e. Ashlee's girlfriend's aunt). She still attaches the act of underage drinking with feeling rebellious, and the same could be assumed for Ari and Summer. All three participants describe not feeling pressured to drink when they are still in high school.

Some of the participants who first drank in high school discussed how they grew up in environments where alcohol was not considered off-limits, but instead openly discussed between family dynamics. Often, alcohol was considered a casual, social aspect to family gatherings and other events. Karen remembers being a "rule follower" and "wanting to wait". For Jordan,

having conversations with her mother about moderation and the potentially negative effects of alcohol use on her health impacted her current relationship to alcohol:

> "...I always associate drinking with being around other people, events, things of that nature...but also 'cause my mom is a nurse and she was always really open and honest about things and so she talked to me from an early age about the impact of alcohol and you know, I think because she was so open and honest instead of making it taboo that I didn't feel like I had to drink just to see what it was like" (Jordan, 30, Black lesbian).

The responses above describe various first time experiences among participants. For many, their first time drinking alcohol occurred in high school. These participant responses are consistent with available research that show higher prevalence of first-time alcohol use among young queer women (Caputi 2018; Talley, Hughes, Aranda, Birkett, and Marshal 2014). Additionally, many of the participants who drank in high school (or prior to high school) reported doing so in environments that were low pressure, or lacked the typical peer pressure often associated with teenage behavior. The occurrences described by Jordan and Karen, for example, indicate lasting effects on how they formulate their relationships to alcohol over time. Jordan describes how having an open dialogue about alcohol was instrumental with how she formed a connection to the substance. She states that she "didn't feel like I had to drink just to see what it was like" because of the transparent conversations she had with her mom about the effects of alcohol. While this may not be considered an early intervention for preventing alcohol use, it's potentially useful information about how honest conversations about substance use can lessen the potential for misuse later in life.

### *4.1.1 Alcohol Misuse with Participant*

Sociologists who follow the theoretical foundation of symbolic interactionism promote the importance of meaning making with everyday symbols and values. Within participant responses, clear representations and themes emerge to better understand where initial

connections to alcohol are formed. These connections can have long-term effects on how the role changes over time for participants. The role changes do not always designate a negative change; rather, as described by participants, the role experiences a positive change due to an adverse experience. Three of the eighteen participants described their first time drinking alcohol as a time where they also misused alcohol. For each participant, this first time misusing alcohol left a lasting impact with how they conceptualize their relationships to alcohol later in life. With her first time, Anastasia recalls:

> Oh my gosh, the first time I drank alcohol was in excess and naivety, just like innocence maybe. I drank my first time my senior year of high school and I went to a house party. I didn't know anything about drinking 'cause my parents didn't really drink in the house. So I had just about every kind of liquor, all in one sitting...and I had the worst hangover ever when I got home (laughter) (Anastasia, 27, Black lesbian).

Anastasia's first time drinking in excess is reportedly because there wasn't an external factor to help her navigate alcohol usage. She mentioned that her parents "didn't really drink", leading her to not have a lot of knowledge that may be more typical to others her age. This instance did have a lasting effect on her how she presently perceives and connects to alcohol. She continues,

> ...I've always believed in having it [alcohol] in moderation. Even that was like a one off experience. I wasn't a big partier in high school so it wasn't something I did or wanted to do every weekend...so I've always been I guess like a proponent of like moderation (Anastasia, 27, Black lesbian).

Cocoa's first time drinking was similar to Anastasia's. She remembers being 18 and "pre-gaming" in college one evening. When asked about her first memory drinking, she remembers how she "can no longer drink vodka...it was a wild night. I was out of control" (Cocoa, 28, Black lesbian). Her first time drinking comes with a potential lesson that she can no longer drink a particular substance due to what happened that first time. She described the event overall as

"rough", "a lesson", and "growth". Cocoa and Anastasia similarly misused alcohol their first time drinking, and both acknowledge that it was a moment of development.

Dorothy also discussed her first time getting drunk in high school at a house party. She says,

> I don't think I remember the first time that I had a drink, but definitely the first time that I got drunk...I grew up kind of like having sips of alcohol and it was never really restricted or anything like that. Uhm but then when I got to high school, I was just living with my mom, and I went to a very white prep school, so there was a lot of drinking in that environment just 'cause of like, who I was around (Dorothy, 23, Black and Afro-Caribbean, pansexual, same-gender loving).

Dorothy continued to discuss her experiences at her mostly white prep school, and how alcohol was, "just the culture of the school that I went to". Her alcohol intake was also at its highest while she was in high school; once she got to college, her use tapered off. When asked if her high school experiences influenced her relationship to alcohol, she says,

> ...that experience and the experiences after that, like that were similar to that...I think are why I don't really drink that much now. Like I would say I drink less than my peers now…that was the peak of my relationship with alcohol I think (Dorothy, 23, Black and Afro-Caribbean, pansexual).

Dorothy points to her drinking experiences in high school as formative to how she currently uses alcohol. The increase in alcohol use for Dorothy may be related to being in a predominately white environment in high school. Preparatory schools throughout the United States can act as a precursor to elite universities and colleges. Sociologist Wendy Moore refers to these academic sites as institutionalized white spaces, where social structures within the academic institution replicate the domineering system of whiteness (Moore 2007). White spaces are designed, created by, and benefit whiteness. While Moore focuses more so on higher education (particularly law schools) as white space, there are still close associations to be made between attending white preparatory schools, increased access to alcohol, and navigating these spaces as a Black queer

woman. Dorothy mentions later in the interview that she attended a historically Black college or university (HBCU), yet she felt she reached her "peak" with drinking while attending a mostly white preparatory high school. Because of this high school environment, being in this "institutionalized white space" appeared to have a noted, negative effect on her drinking patterns and it was not until her time at an HBCU that her drinking decreased.

Interestingly, the experiences relayed by Anastasia, Dorothy, and Cocoa all highlight a time when they misused alcohol as teenagers. These experiences still impact their decision making when it comes to alcohol. Anastasia, for example, evokes moderation with alcohol; Dorothy explains that her drinking habits "peaked" in high school, meaning she does not currently find herself drinking to same level from high school. Even though environments and situations change for each participant, these experiences with misuse still impact their relationships to alcohol over time. More importantly, the environment in which they're drinking (particularly in institutionalized white spaces) may have impact on both the development of early drinking patterns, as well as providing insight into how the existence of white spaces affects Black queer women's alcohol use.

#### *4.1.2 Alcohol Misuse from Others*

Another recurring sub-theme among participants is having exposure to a family member who abused or misused alcohol. This exposure mostly occurred in their childhood or adolescence. While it may be relatively common to know someone with substance issues (based solely on ease of access and the normalization of alcohol), understanding the relationship to one's exposure can highlight future motivations for use. Some participants remember having a parent figure or an extended family member who, in their words, abused alcohol. Witnessing either a parent or close family member misuse alcohol was formative to how some participants

viewed alcohol as they aged. One participant, Jay, remembers how the youngest had to get an uncle a beer, described as a "rite of passage" for those in her family. Ashlee remembers a time when her mom briefly married a man who was "an alcoholic and abusive".

Liz described her stepfather as an alcoholic who would often get violent due to alcohol. This exposure to alcohol (and how she perceived her stepfather) impacted her relationship to alcohol over time. She states,

> ...my stepfather would get really violent uhm when he drank...turned into a real monster when he drank, so I was really afraid of it. And so while everyone is doing like underage drinking, I didn't drink until I was twenty-two. Like first time ever trying anything. And a lot of that had to do with like peer pressure like you know, I really just had no desire to because for [me] it was like, that's the thing that's gonna turn you into a monster (Liz, 36, Black, queer lesbian).

Liz describes how witnessing her stepfather's abuse of alcohol (and the emotional ramifications it had on her) meant that she felt little desire to drink while underage. The effects of alcohol on Liz's stepfather led her to believe that alcohol was "the thing that's gonna turn you into a monster". Due to framing the effects of alcohol as monstrous, Liz grew fearful of how alcohol would affect her. Other participants may have witnessed a family member misuse alcohol, but did not experience or perceive violence. Peaches also remembers being a teenager, and connecting with her sister over alcohol:

> One of my sisters used to be an alcoholic so it was a loaded relationship growing up with it. It was kind of like, 'oh don't drink alcohol, alcohol is bad' type of thing...so when I was around 15 or 16, we would bond with one another with drinking and other things. So it was kind of a way to get closer to one another until it became problematic for my sister. But it never like prevented me from drinking alcohol or anything like that, except for when I was younger (Peaches, 23, Black, same-gender loving, gender non-conforming).

Even though Peaches recognizes that bonding with her sister over alcohol wasn't entirely beneficial for both of them, it was still a way for them to have a familial connection. She also recognizes that even though she witnessed a "problematic" relationship with her sister, this did

not impede her from drinking as an adult. Similar to Peaches, Karen remembers having two family members who misused alcohol. Her uncle, primarily, was described as an alcoholic; her mother also sometimes took sleeping medication with her wine in the evening. This exposure led Karen to take on a caretaker role, as she would periodically worry about her mother's safety:

> I had to like make sure she didn't try to go out and you know do something or go to the pool, so I think all of those like childhood sort of things," she says. "You know, seeing my uncle being a really, really heavy drinker and an alcoholic makes me you know, sort of like, apprehensive about drinking a lot or drinking at all (Karen, 24, Black, lesbian).

Karen was able to immediately pinpoint her feelings towards alcohol with what she witnessed during adolescence. Taking on this role became a source of stress for Karen - who was in middle school at the time- and ultimately left an impact on how she conceptualized her motivations (or lack thereof) towards alcohol. Her lack of desire is rooted in witnessing her uncle and mother misuse alcohol. She uses this memory, the feelings of unease, and the stress associated with needing to care for her mother during this time as a protective factor towards alcohol. Karen's past memories and experiences influence how she currently relates to and maintains a relationship to alcohol.

Nnena's experience was slightly similar to Karen's narrative. When asked about the role of alcohol during their childhood or adolescence, Nnena remembered how their mother's drinking was considered "scandalous", particularly by their father (who had stopped drinking in his youth), yet Nnena did not feel that it was an issue. Instead, they say,

> ...it's not like she was chugging the bottle but he it was-he like made a big deal about her like drinking alcohol casually on weeknights. It was something you know that I don't this is necessarily scandalous myself but it was in their household at the time...it's like something that I recognize it doesn't have to [be] that all the time (Nnena, 28, Black, Nigerian-American, non-binary, lesbian).

Nnena later conceptualized the importance of moderation from witnessing this interaction. While their father viewed his partner's alcohol intake as potentially "scandalous", Nnena mentions how there can be various interpretations of alcohol. Here, Nnena alludes to how even though drinking alcohol is a normalized, culturally accepted activity, the perception of alcohol use during adolescence is relevant to how relationships form to the substance across the life course.

The lived experiences and memories of first time drinking are important to analyze from a life course perspective. While the experiences above may vary slightly, there is much to gain from asking about first time drinking or first memories of alcohol. Elder's (1998) research with life course theory encourages viewing various patterns for the potential of linked lives, meaning, "lives are lived interdependently, and social and historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships" (1998:4). The memories expressed within these participant responses can be assessed within this major life course principle of lived, interdependent lives. Including Black queer women and non-binary people's memories within the field is absolutely vital. As Feagin (2006) notes, "individual and collective memories are central to the reality of racial oppression, both in the past and the present. For Black Americans, collective memories of past experiences move along the generations and assist in honing strategies for resistance to systemic racism" (2006:82). Understanding memory, particularly in reference to a health behavior, provides additional groundwork to how these relationships form over time, particularly within white supremacy.

## 4.2 Conclusion

One's youth and adolescence can be a pivotal time period with alcohol consumption and exploration. It is relatively common for underage high school and college-aged youth to seek out alcohol at various events, gatherings, or parties. While each participant offers a unique

description of the moment they first drank alcohol, getting to know the formative aspects of how one views alcohol is a crucial (and often missing) factor in how we discuss substance misuse. A major theme that emerged was coded as “origin stories” as well as a sub code of “first memories of alcohol”. Often, these two themes influenced each other. For many participants, their first time drinking was directly connected to the accessibility of alcohol (or lack thereof) growing up.

Some participants, like Anastasia and Liz, grew up in religious households; alcohol was not readily available. For others, alcohol was openly discussed or neutrally perceived. However, a majority of participants could pinpoint a relative, friend, parent figure, or themselves who misused alcohol during their youth and adolescence. Peaches, Karen, Liz, Jay, Sterling, and Nnena all witnessed a family member (or close friend) misuse alcohol in some capacity, and this also left a lasting impact on how they continue to perceive and interact with alcohol. These early experiences had a potentially mediating influence on their relationship to alcohol over time. While it is beyond the purpose of my research to determine the exact trajectory of childhood experiences with alcohol and change over time, these responses do yield important insight that warrants future, more in-depth inquiries.

A lot of participants’ first times with alcohol had lasting influences on their relationships to the substance as they aged. For Jamie, Cocoa, Anastasia, and Dorothy, these influences were connected to their own experience misusing alcohol at an early age. They each discussed how their experience left a lasting impact on how they conceptualize their relationship to alcohol in the present day. For Dorothy in particular, her experiences being at a white preparatory high school impacted her drinking patterns. Due to being in this white space, Dorothy found herself drinking more because it was a normalized behavior among her white peers. For a Black, Afro-Caribbean, pansexual and same-gender loving woman, being enmeshed in a white academic

space led to her increased drinking habits; because of this experience, she finds herself drinking significantly less than her current, college-aged peers at an HBCU.

The findings discussed in this chapter uncover a sample of Black queer women and non-binary people's first exposures to alcohol, and the meaning making deeply embedded in how they perceive alcohol. In chapter 6, I discuss how participants take a more holistic approach to understanding what alcohol means to them, often referencing the foundation created from their first experiences. Many participants described their first time drinking in environments where there was a low amount of pressure; as they age into their 20s and 30s, these motivations shift depending upon location, their environments, and intentions with drinking. As we see within participant responses, their motivations become impacted by the historical significance of gay bars and the racism they experience while existing in these (white) spaces. In chapter five, I embark on a journey with participants into how they perceive and experience alcohol in public spaces -namely, gay and lesbian bars- as Black queer women and non-binary people.

# 5 HISTORICAL MEMORY AND GAY BARS

As a white queer person who is afforded the privilege of navigating gay bars with substantial ease, I have many memories of fellow queer community members wax poetic about what gay bars symbolize to them. A physical space was created for queer members when a space did not publicly exist. Most are well aware of the history of acceptance for LGBT communities; what was first considered a sin became mandated by the state as illegal, to then be considered a mental illness, to ultimately be given acceptance (or value, depending upon your participation in heteronormativity) in the form of state recognition.

I find the historical shift in how gay bars are perceived by those without visibility within the confines of homonormativity of grave importance to this dissertation topic. Discussing gay and lesbian bars often became the bulk of many participant interviews. This is perhaps due to the availability of gay bars in a major city, as well as each participant having prior experience being in these spaces. A major theme surrounding visibility emerges in this section as well that highlights how Black queer women and non-binary people are treated in public drinking spaces, as well as how they are perceived by bartenders and other bar patrons while at gay bars. This chapter seeks to contextualize the placing of gay and lesbian bars as white space that ultimately impacts participants' relationships to alcohol.

## 5.1 Sociohistorical Influences

The placement of Black queer women and non-binary people within the history of the gay bar warrants a sociohistorical perspective that addresses the complex history of their visibility within the institutionalized system of white supremacy. During the transatlantic slave route, African women's bodies were utilized as a means of capital and property. There is documentation from enslaved women that discuss experiencing violence that was heightened by

a slave owner's drunkenness (Zieger 2008). The implementation of chattel slavery and the racial hierarchy implemented by white colonists meant that many Black women were often brutally raped or at risk of other forms of sexual violence (Brown 2015; Feagin 2006; Collins 2005). It is possible to assume that the impacts of white men's drunkenness, coupled with the reality of sexual and racialized violence, left lasting, intergenerational trauma.

The temperance movement of the early 1800s in the United States was directly an attempt to curtail the selling of alcohol, yet it was also a movement to protect the bodies of white women from the falsely perceived threat of Black men and alcohol. In tandem with the majority of U.S. women-led movements, the focal point was primarily to secure the safety and well-being of white women. Doing so directly placed the Black body in a social position that was unnecessarily feared by white men and women. Following the temperance movement (and the eventual repeal of Prohibition) was a desire among those seeking recovery from their alcoholic influences. Alcoholics Anonymous, often considered the primary resource for treatment and support for problems related to substance abuse, started in 1935 by two white men. However, the organization's major tenants and subsequent resources arguably only benefited white, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender men seeking recovery (Whitaker 2019). This did not leave space for women, particularly Black women, the necessary visibility to seek resources for sobriety.

Multiple historical documents and research studies relay experiences of those in the LGBT community who sought gay bars as a place of refuge. Until the advent of the gay and lesbian rights movement, it was standard for many bars to refuse service to homosexuals. For many, being out about one's sexuality could get you fired from jobs, loss of familial support and social networks, as well as facing punishment by the state in the form of fines or imprisonment. A lot of queer histories promote the bars within a nostalgic framework (Hankin 2002), and the

bar is often remembered as a place of "safety". Gay bars are often referred to as "sacred" (Lin, Hect, Plenty, Siedl-eKhan Zamudio-Haas, Ayala, and Charlebois 2019) and "a safe haven" (Croft, Hubanch, Currin, and Frederick 2017). As Mattson (2015) writes, "For 20th-century gay men, bars were the most important cultural institution where newly 'out' men were socialized, interpersonal contacts were made, social isolation was alleviated, and community art exhibitions, charity auctions and political meetings were held" (Mattson 2015:3145). Queer women also frequented bars both before and after the events at Stonewall. Queer women may patronize gay clubs and bars since they have the, "…added advantage of providing a safe space to dance away from the surveillant gaze of heterosexual men" (Valentine and Skelton 2003).

Inadvertently, I collected data during the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall riot. During this time, new publications and archival documents emerged to garner continued visibility for the events that transpired back in 1969. Multiple sources conflict about the exact, precise moments that led up to and during the events that occurred at Stonewall. Most historical sources agree that the Stonewall bar was raided one evening by New York City cops, and the community responded by throwing coins, bottles, bricks, and other assorted items. The event itself has become a narrative for whitewashed queer (read: gay) experiences. As Jason Baumann (2019) writes in the new *The Stonewall Reader,* "The movement's own choice of the Stonewall uprising as a symbol for LGBT struggles for liberation has in many ways skewed the story to focus on the experiences of urban gay white men" (Baumann 2019:xvi).

Many correctly argue that that at the forefront of the events were Black and brown trans women and drag queens. However, what is consistently missing are representation from Black queer women - where are documents that fully encapsulate their experiences? Audre Lorde wrote of her experiences being a Black lesbian in New York bars in the fifties, stating, "Downtown in

the gay bars I was a closet student and an invisible Black" (Lorde, 1982:179). As I describe throughout this chapter, this sentiment from Lorde remains present among many participant responses.

## 5.2 Historical Memory

Throughout my interviews, I asked participants to relay their feelings about the historical significance of gay bars and whether their social networks felt connected. This question highlights both associations with Stonewall, as well as how prominent gay bars were to securing a "safe space" for community. The majority of participants report that while they understood or acknowledged the historical significance of gay bars, they did not feel entirely connected to these spaces. Only one participant did not know about the history associated with gay bars. There seems to be a noted challenge of wanting to patron gay bars because of their significance while simultaneously feeling disconnected from what they represent. Sterling noted their importance, saying,

> ...I think they're important, like I completely understand why gay bars came about...I see how important they are because they've paved the way for normalizing social situations where queer people can exist in and stuff (Sterling, 26, Black, gay).

Nnena wished to know a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the history of gay bars. They further alluded to a desire for what gay bars could represent for them. "I wish I knew more about like the history," they said. "I wish that I knew more about like what that space meant for previous generations and I kind of wish that bars served a lot more of that same purpose...like community spaces and like spaces to find friends" (Nnena, 28, Black, Nigerian-American, non-binary, lesbian). Jordan brought up the importance of gay bars serving a safe space for communities of color and how presently, few still exist. She says,

> You know historically speaking these are places where we could truly express ourselves, especially Black and brown people. I mean 'cause of course with us having that added layer of race you know these spaces were very, very important to us and I think that's tragic that you know that they're disappearing, like I mean there's really only one place that I can think of for you know lesbians in particular in Atlanta versus you know there's still several places for gay men (Jordan, 30, Black lesbian).

Interestingly, Jamie mentioned how her friend group recognizes the importance of gay bars but does not regularly discuss the associated importance. She notes,

> I don't think any of us have had like a specific conversation about gay bars…we've had loose conversations about just the queer scene in Atlanta and the support system and the network and the resources…but I don't think we've specifically touched on gay bars. Like it's come up, but not specifically (Jamie, 29, Black and Latina, lesbian).

T noted about the historical significance of Stonewall and the origins of the movement, and how important it is for trans community members.

> I mean if we talk about like Stonewall and Marsha Johnson like, if we talk about like trans awareness, of course," they say. "Being who I am in the world, it's like of course I see like a direct connection to trans women of color...I'm just super grateful to be you know, one of those people who know where I come from and know that that was a fight that had to be fought (T, 29, Black, non-binary, pansexual).

Summer remarked that she does in fact feel connected to the history associated with gay bars, and has a social network that feels a connection as well. Like other participants, she agreed that patronizing gay bars is important to their sustainability. She says,

> You know, obviously like they're notoriously sometimes the only safe spaces for some people and you think about places like Stonewall and then the riots there that set off the movements, and you think about Pulse and how that could have been any of our friends…I think that they are significant in our history and I want to keep them alive and well (Summer, 29, Black, biracial, lesbian).

Eve, Dorothy, and Dylan had similar feelings about wanting to keep gay bars open. They recognized bars as a place where they could talk comfortably to others away from heteronormative judgment. It is necessary to have a space where queer community members can

freely converse with one another. Interestingly, Dylan noted that while she has an acute knowledge of the history of gay bars, her priorities concerning the space have shifted. She says,

> ...you know, I remember coming out, before I came out, reading all the books and being online and you know, like knowing all of it because I wanted to be on the lingo [laughter]...so yeah, I think people my age get it. But then also I think...people my age are getting to that point where we're like, we don't have to go to bars all the time to kind of appreciate it and to know like the movement started there (Dylan, 39, Black, queer femme lesbian).

Dorothy remembered visiting the infamous Stonewall bar in New York City; while she was happy for the experience, she was saddened by how whitewashed and commercialized the bar now appears. Not only does Dorothy bring up the importance of queer history, she foreshadows another theme that emerged between participant interviews. She says,

> ...we went to Stonewall and all that and it was a good experience in that like I know my history and I know like who were the founders of the movement...but it was also sad because Stonewall has become the white gay bar that I don't like...it has become the white gay bar that I like try my best to avoid (Dorothy, 23, Black, Afro-Caribbean, pansexual, same-gender loving, queer).

The experiences described above point to a complicated yet nuanced relationship to the historical significance of gay and lesbian bars. In addition to the historical significance of gay bars, I asked participants to relay any memories they have of older Black lesbians discussing gay bars and related history. Only one participant recalled any memories with older Black lesbians and gay bars. Jay's experience, for example, is unique in the sense that she frequented a gay bar in Ohio owned by two Black lesbians. Jay noted that going to this bar was formative for her, though she was not aware of it at the time. Seventeen of the eighteen participants did not have any memories of older Black queer women talking about the significance of gay bars. While many experienced being in community with older Black lesbians, they unfortunately did not discuss alcohol, gay bars, or the history attached to gay bars.

### 5.3 Feelings of Exclusion in Gay Bars

In addition to feedback about the historical significance of gay and lesbian bars, all of the participants also agree that gay bars (whether lesbian, gay, or 'queer' bars, however they were defined) are a safer space than straight bars. The overall consensus among participants is that they would choose to attend a gay or lesbian bar over a straight bar. Gay bars allow for participants to feel more at ease and more successful with navigating these spaces. While these spaces were still considerably 'safer' than straight bars, some participants still vocalize apprehensions with navigating gay bars. Building from historical memory, another major theme emerges regarding participants' experiences with gay bars. Approximately half (N=9) of the eighteen participants referred to their overall perception of gay bars using terms such as "not a space for me", or a place where they feel like they "didn't belong." These participants used terms that described feelings of exclusion or invisibility pertaining to the space. Often, this relates to how the majority of available gay bars are typically full of white, cisgender, gay men.

When asked to discuss her connection to gay bars, Karen immediately responded,

> I don't always feel like it's my space…I just feel like I don't necessarily belong, like I just feel – and I know people aren't looking at me, but like I just feel like I stand out more. And maybe like the ones we frequent have less people of color, so not only am I one of five women there, or maybe less, but I might be the only Black person, or I might be one of two Black people, you know. So I definitely feel like I stick out more and with my personality I prefer to like blend in (Karen, 24, Black lesbian).

In addition to gay bars having a mostly white, cisgender, gay men clientele, Karen also references feeling a lack of representation of other Black people while at gay bars. When accessing these spaces, she notes that not only is she potentially the only woman (which renders some discomfort), but she may also be the only Black woman or other Black person in the space. Because of this lack of representation available in these spaces, Karen feels as if she "doesn't belong" even though gay bars are intended to be a safe space for the LGBT community.

Ashlee had a similar response to Karen, yet her experience is grounded more so within her race, sexuality, and queered masculine identities. Ashlee noted that her experiences in both Atlanta and other Southern cities still has an underlying feeling of exclusion. She says, "...there is still like a point where it still doesn't feel like my-like a space for me necessarily as a Black, masculine-identified lesbian. It doesn't feel right" (Ashlee, 31, Black lesbian). For Ashlee, gay bars still do not feel representative of who she is as a Black masculine lesbian. Her comments of "it still doesn't feel like my space" and "it doesn't feel right" allude to the possibility that she feels uncomfortable and less visible due to her intersecting identities as a Black lesbian whose gender performance is more masculine. For some Black studs and other masculine women, embracing Black female masculinity is considered a buffer from repeated discrimination (Lane-Steele 2011). However, gay bars may not provide a buffer or protective factor based on Ashlee's recollection, and instead appear to be a space of exclusivity for those performing Black queer masculinity.

Peaches mentioned that she does not have a lot of experience frequenting gay bars or clubs. She also does not feel very connected to them, either. On frequenting gay bars, she notes,

> …that feels to me like an experience of like white queerness, if that makes sense, you know. That's just not something that I've ever like been into, like never something I wanted to aspire to do or wanted to go (Peaches, 23, Black, gender non-conforming, same-gender loving).

Here, Peaches describes a distinct disconnect between the historical memory of gay bars and alcohol. She recalls not having a desire to frequent these spaces, whereas visiting gay nad lesbian bars is something more akin to "…an experience of like white queerness". Peaches is therefore alluding to the notion that while gay and lesbian bars are a known entity, these spaces may hold a different symbolic meaning for Black queer women. Peaches' perspective is similar to Ashlee, who felt gay bars weren't meant to include her as a Black, masculine lesbian.

Others were very frank about their lack of connectedness to gay bars. When asked if she felt connected to gay bars, Jay simply responded, “Hell fuckin’ no...hell no, I don’t feel connected to gay bars.” (Jay, 28, Black, multiracial lesbian). Anastasia discussed how for her, she wants to have a sense of community in who she sees at the bar. She wants to feel represented by other bar patrons; more specifically, she wants to be able to see other visible Black queer women in the space. There is often an overwhelming majority of white gay men at the bars and a smaller percentage of Black gay men. She says,

> Just in general, a feeling of I guess of like out of place-ness or that I have to be somewhere else where I’m more comfortable so it’s not - I don’t feel the desire to go out and spend money to be somewhere that I don’t feel represented or that I’m not gonna meet anybody that I can connect to (Anastasia, 27, Black lesbian).

Dorothy mentioned how certain bars in the city particularly cater to gay men. She feels more comfortable entering these bars if she’s with a friend who is a gay man, saying, “...I know that that’s who those bars are catered toward and so it just wouldn’t occur to me to want to go otherwise”. She continued to describe the complexity of being a Black woman navigating public spaces, particularly with her feelings of exclusion regarding gay bars. She says,

> ...I think there’s always discomfort when you’re in a place that’s not necessarily designed for you to be in and that’s kind of like most of the places I go as a Black woman period. So I wouldn’t say that that comfort just registers off the charts for me when I walk in there, but of course I’m not completely comfortable...it wasn’t made for me in mind (Dorothy, 23, Black, pansexual, same-gender loving, queer).

Dorothy mentions the difficulty tied to having to navigate public spaces as a Black woman. This difficulty exists both within and outside of the gay bars. For Dorothy, there are few places she can safely access because of the social limitations placed upon her as a Black woman. Lilith also recalls a time in New York City with a group of queer-identified people, and how a white lesbian in the group wanted to visit a gay bar. Lilith’s feelings sum up many participants’ feelings of exclusion with gay bars not fulfilling their needs. She says,

> When I was in New York City, someone mentioned it…there was one white lesbian in the group, and she would talk about going to bars, and I was like, I don't wanna go to one (laughter) like I dunno, does that make me less gay, y'all? And like one of my friends, she's a Black queer woman, she was like, 'no, I don't really feel like those spaces are made for us. So maybe that's why you don't like it or the idea of it' (Lilith, 30, Black, biracial, queer, bisexual).

Within her memory, Lilith feels compelled to question the legitimacy of her queerness based on her disinterest with gay bars. It is another Black queer woman that summarizes their lived reality of not wanting to frequent gay and lesbian bars. Kennedy and Davis' (2014) accounts of Black and white lesbians from the 1930s through the 1950s in Buffalo, New York, hint that Black queer women were assuredly part of organizing efforts (and present in some public spaces) but may have been less present in bars. "Black lesbians felt they were taking a risk when they entered a bar, and preferred to go in groups" (Kennedy and Davis [1993] 2014:117). Prior to the gay and lesbian rights movement, it was illegal to serve someone who was considered "homosexual" or presumed as such via stereotypes from the time period. Bar raids were not unusual, and due to the heightened police presence, many Black bar patrons may not have been able to jeopardize the added surveillance.

Additionally, many cities (especially in the South) were still racially segregated and operating within redlining procedures, meaning many sections of a city or town were forcibly segregated based on a socially constructed idea of home value. These were from accounts right around when bars were beginning to desegregate in the 1950s. Many Black lesbians and other queer women instead organized and built community in more private spaces –such as house parties- which was historically common throughout Black communities (Thorpe 1996; Kennedy and Davis [1993] 2014). Lilith's response points to a disconnect in queer temporality as an example of the whitewashing that continues to occur with who gets to lay claim to queer memory, and consequently, "queered" space. We see this occurring with who is afforded the

historical memory with Stonewall, and appears to continue influencing how Black queer women navigate gay and lesbian bars nearly fifty years post-Stonewall. This moment presents a stark contrast to how even white lesbians are able to freely move about designated "gay spaces", as ultimately, gay bars are spaces that serve the interests of whiteness. This further alludes to the possibility that the historical significance of gay bars is more complicated, with even less documented for Black and brown queer communities.

### 5.4 Experiences of Discrimination

In tandem to how participants feel about gay bars, some participants report experiences of various forms of racialized violence while attending gay bars. Many participants who identified themselves as femme or feminine presenting (either currently or in the past) recalled specific instances where they experienced discrimination. Eve remembers a time presenting as "high femme" and experiencing negativity from one of the gay bar's emcees. She was with a friend who was also femme. She recalls,

> ...we were watching the drag show and I remember the announcer, the performer - whoever the emcee was - looked at us and goes, 'well we don't go to your bars, we don't go to your bars'. And I thought that was the most interesting thing ever because this was, like I said, discrimination within you know, a safe space, a supposed safe space. I remember feeling like terrible about myself and not understanding why. You know because I was like passing, I think, in that case, and there was anger projected at us for doing so as well...I just remember feeling humiliated (Eve, 34, Black lesbian).

Eve's narrative is telling of how queer women who identify as femme or feminine may be read as "straight", and therefore a potential "threat" to other patrons in the gay bar. This is even further pronounced for Black queer women and non-binary people due to the racialization of the perceived "threat". This ultimately made an environment where Eve didn't feel welcome as a queer Black woman. Jamie also notes that at times when she presents more feminine, she often

receives differential treatment from those around her. On presenting different gender presentations in gay bars, she notes:

> ...generally, if I'm more masculine presenting, going to a predominantly gay club, then usually there's more attention...it wasn't uncomfortable, but I was aware that it was different...when I present more feminine, people have a harder time figuring out if I'm the straight friend or not (Jamie, 29, Black and Latina, lesbian).

Other participants who identify as femme or feminine presenting also recalled moments where they weren't served in a timely manner, or were passed over for drinks by the bartender. These events occur in both gay and straight bars. Even though these experiences happen in both places, participants indicated earlier that they feel more comfortable in gay bars as opposed to straight bars; this indicates that while they may be experiencing various forms of discrimination, when it happens in a "safer" space, the harm is much more pronounced.

Dylan experienced discrimination while she was a bartender and a patron at gay bars. She says,

> ...while I was working I felt discrimination as far as serving and clients, certain guests, so that was more of a race thing...and then as a patron I definitely felt it being a woman at a mostly gay male bar, just kind of you know like we'll get to you when we get to you, because I'm a woman, and they are dealing with the men first (Dylan, 39, Black, queer femme lesbian).

Dylan also knew other Black femmes during her time in New York City who had difficulty ordering drinks. They were not taken seriously while standing at the bar, and states, "...other like butches would have to come in and maybe order for them and then the bartenders would take the butch, the more masculine person, seriously". Again, there is both a devaluing of femme identity when attempting to publicly order alcohol while also prioritizing masculinity as the more "visible" queer marker. Anastasia had a similar experience to Dylan with not getting service while attending certain bars. She noted how at some bars she is ignored by the bartenders or

other bar employees and is made to wait; this tends to be a universal experience for others in her network. She says,

> Certain bars have been more challenging than others...like you see me at this bar but you're serving other customers and other patrons before me...I think everyone I know probably has had one if not many similar experiences in one way or another (Anastasia, 27, Black lesbian).

Anastasia's experiences of being ignored while waiting to order occurred at both straight and gay bars. She continues,

> I think sometimes I've been to a few where I don't know if it was necessarily because I was Black as much as it was because I wasn't a man, and so they just weren't kinda queued into seeing me but yeah definitely at straight bars too...really to like the point where I had to say you know, like aside from the initial 'hey excuse me I'd like to order whatever' like where they had to kinda get in the face of that person when they're serving somebody else to say 'I'm here and I want you to know x y and z' (Anastasia, 27 Black lesbian).

Anastasia describes being ignored while waiting to order drinks at the bar. These microaggressions enacted by the bartenders towards Black patrons leaves participants such as Anastasia wondering if she is not getting served because of her race, gender, or both. This indicates further how their lived experiences as Black queer women are often at the nexus of intersecting systems that operate in tandem when faced with discrimination. Where alcohol is involved, it becomes harder for participants like Anastasia and Dylan to obtain quality service in public establishments.

In addition to the racialized sexism experienced by Black femmes and feminine persons, participants also discussed instances of microaggressions and other acts of violence from white gay men and women. This adds to the invisibility felt by Black queer women and non-binary people in those spaces. Liz recalls both previously and recently being in gay bars with white gay men and experiencing different forms of racialized violence. With some of the interactions, she explains,

> ...It'd be like a gay guy - and it's mostly white gay guys - and they'll come up with the "*yass queen*" and I'm like, here we go, microaggression time...I don't know what that's about, but mainly gay white guys are like slobbering on my face and like touching my boobs and I'm like, stop touching me! And they're like, "*yas* Black woman, give me a hug" and I'm like, I didn't consent to this (Liz, 36, Black, queer lesbian).

Liz mentions experiencing microaggressions and inappropriate touching from the white gay men around her at the bars. She describes how white gay men participate in cultural appropriation of language and idioms of culture that is unique to Black queer communities. In addition to experiencing microaggressions, the gay men at the bar are also enacting sexual violence on her body in ways that harken to feelings of ownership over her Black body. Liz continued discussing a second particularly painful experience while attending a local lesbian bar. She was around young queer women, particularly white lesbians, who were singing along to hip-hop music and gloss over the n-word. She notes,

> ...white queer girls, like when the hip-hop comes on and I know the n-word is in the song, I'm like, they're gonna say it, I know they're gonna say it...and it's hard to be in community and connected with them when stuff like that happens, when they're like, you know what I'm saying, they're loud and like you know and it's just like, you still can't say it...and it makes me feel like, well now I gotta keep you at a distance because you don't understand race...that always comes up...and it's kind of hurtful, you know, 'cause it's a reminder, you're a Black queer, not just a queer you know (Liz, 36, Black queer lesbian).

Liz brings up not just a hurtful moment she experienced, but a bodily knowledge of how systems of race, gender, and sexual orientation are constructed and maintained within white supremacy. Lis is presumably pushed out of feeling included at the gay bar, effectively garnering an "outsider within" (Collins 1986) status. Even though she is able to access the supposed "safe space" provided by the gay bar, the microaggressions and other forms of racialized violence from white gay men and women made her feel unwelcome and unsafe. Liz and others experience

what Greene (1996) refers to as the "triple jeopardy" facing Black queer women, as Liz notes, they're not just queer, but Black queer women.

Similar to Liz's experience, Nnena remembered the pain they felt at a gay bar with being purposefully ignored by white gay men. They recall,

> ...there have been times where I'm like having a great night and I dance and I make a bunch of friends and like there have also been times where like white gay men have just like straight up ignored me...and I'm pretty sure that it's just because I'm Black...it's just something that makes me feel like, oh maybe I shouldn't even stay here and spend money on alcohol if like I can't like, engage with people. And it also just hurts my feelings. I'm just like, I'm gay too! (Nnena, 28, Black, Nigerian-American, non-binary, lesbian).

Nnena's statement is telling of how Black queerness not only has to fight for visibility in heteronormative spaces, but also consistently counter invisibility while in queer spaces. In addition to experiencing racism and feeling devalued for not being perceived as queer, the sentiment in Nenna's response is similar to an earlier response by Anastasia. Anastasia mentioned not wanting to spend money in a place (i.e. gay bar) where she didn't feel welcome. Both Nnena and Anastasia have to work through the emotional decision making of deciding where to place economic value in relation to available gay bars. Both Nnena and Liz remark about experiences of discrimination in gay bars as Black people, indicating that while some white gay community members may feel that a queer identity absolves them from being racist, they are still partaking in and benefiting from white supremacy.

The microaggressions, racialized non-consensual touching in bars, and being denied adequate service with alcohol are examples of white queer culture enacting colorblind racist tactics (Bonilla-Silva 2018). Bonilla-Silva argues that within "dominant racial ideology" (Bonilla-Silva 2018:54) such as colorblind racism are specific frames that act as roadmaps. Two of the frames within colorblind racism include abstract liberalism and minimization of racism, both which arguably are present in the violent white responses narrated by participants.

According to Bonilla-Silva, abstract liberalism presents itself within *liberal* arguments, such as arguments against equal opportunity endeavors; the minimization of racism frame occurs in lieu of overt racism and instead minimizes or "eliminates the bulk of racially motivated actions by individual white and institutions by fiat" (Bonilla-Silva 2018:57). We see both of these frames used by white queer people in gay bars as a way to casually denigrate the lived experiences of Black queer women and non-binary people and their ability to safely drink alcohol.

## 5.5 Conclusion

Two major themes emerged from the interviews relating to gay bars: historical memory and feelings of invisibility or exclusion. All but one participant acknowledged the history of Stonewall and gay bars, broadly. Many participants noted that they acknowledged or understood the historical significance of gay bars, especially noting the Stonewall riots being largely fueled by Black and brown trans women. Only one participant had any memories of older Black lesbians discussing gay bars. A few participants wanted to continue supporting gay bars by keeping them open; the whitewashing of the space saddened others, such as Nnena and Dorothy, as they no longer held the original, symbolic intent.

Navigating both gay and straight bars often correlated to their overall motivations for drinking. Many participants vacillated between wanting to patron gay bars and not wanting to go at all. The reasons for not attending gay bars varied; often, some participants stated that, given the option, they simply prefer to stay at home. However, there is a noted consistency among many participants that while familiar with gay and lesbian bars, their motivations to avoid these spaces are based upon experiencing microaggressions, racism, and racialized sexism while in these spaces.

This chapter also highlights what it means to drink publicly while existing within the multiple intersections of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Gay and lesbian bars are often promoted as a safe place to build community, find relationships, and to locate various forms of intimacy. However, participant responses allude to the reality that gay and lesbian bars are not spaces that serve the interests of Black and brown queer communities. Jordan alluded to this when she mentions, "...even then we're in literally the one city in America with the largest Black gay population and we still don't have enough for us" (Jordan, 29, Black lesbian).

As noted in my literature review, available research attempts to explore the role of gay bars with an increased prevalence of alcohol use among those in the queer community. In addition to having multiple marginalized statuses, the symbolic meaning and social function of the "gay bar" may also influence alcohol use as well as having significant implications for determining who can drink publicly in queer spaces. While the bar symbolizes security for the LGBT community, there is scant documentation on the perceptions of safety for queer people of color. A lack of perceived safety may have isolated implications for Black queer women due to the complex intersections of being unable to escape the intersections of racism, sexism, and homophobia. There are significant social implications for women and public alcohol use, and this places further strain on women of color (Parks and Hughes 2005).

Collecting qualitative data from Black queer women and non-binary people's experiences in (and perceptions of) gay bars yields crucial insight into how influential these spaces are in relation to their connection to alcohol. The proliferation of gay and lesbian bars (as well as the historical significance attached to these spaces) must be interrogated for their centering of whiteness. Black women and Black queer women are often forced to create alternative spaces because white women, white men, and white queer women often fail to appropriately understand

the prevailing concepts of intersectionality, as well as utilize intersectionality as praxis. These fissures were witnessed in the second wave feminist movement, and continue in many current social justice organizing spaces. Addressing these areas is paramount for how we conceptualize alcohol use among Black queer women and non-binary people.

In my next chapter of findings, I attempt to contextualize relationships and symbolic meaning ultimately attached to alcohol among participants. I give witness to Black queer experiences with themes of embodiment and control with alcohol use. Additionally, I place a noted emphasis on the specific strategies participants use to decrease potentially negative outcomes with alcohol use.

# 6 EMBODIED CONTROL: CONTEXTUALIZING ALCOHOL USE, MEDIATING FACTORS, AND PROTECTIVE BEHAVIORAL STRATEGIES

This chapter attempts to highlight participant responses with how they conceptualize their relationship to alcohol. Chapters four and five describe varied experiences with gay and lesbian bars, as well as the potentially lasting impacts of their first time drinking alcohol. This chapter highlights the relationships participants form to alcohol, coded as embodiment with alcohol use and the stress process model. These relationships speak predominantly to three major themes, including: manifestations of embodied control, alcohol mediating self-reported anxiety, and various strategies employed by participants to decrease potentially negative alcohol-related outcomes.

This chapter is helpful not only to further contextualize their experiences, but to also provide a framework for how these relationships undergo changes over time. Alcohol use is impacted by various patterns surrounding the types of alcohol that are publicly consumed, and these patterns may be strategic. What factors shape motivations when around trusted friends and family, versus drinking while in public spaces? What factors go into feelings of comfort for Black queer women and non-binary people, and how can we, as sociologists, best learn from their experiences?

## 6.1 Embodied Control

A recurring theme with how participants articulate their motivations concerning alcohol relates to their sense of physical control with alcohol. Participants report or allude to phrases of "wanting to be in control". This sense of control extends from *being* in control of the physical self, as well as *staying* in control of their physical space. This theme of embodiment manifested in two distinct ways: control with drinking in public spaces, and control with experiencing

various types of anxiety. Eve discussed how she desires being in control of her body while she is drinking. She referred back to her first time drinking, remembering how alcohol gave her a "warm feeling" inside. This feeling is still present when she drinks, though the concept of bodily control is still a recurring theme. She says, "I like that feeling of control. I don't like feeling like my words are slurring. I don't like feeling like people are looking at me differently" (Eve, 34, Black lesbian). Nnena also notes that certain environments may impact the quantity of alcohol consumed. Prior experience drinking around a lot of men made them uncomfortable to do so in the future. They noted,

> Like if I'm at a sports bar like where people are like watching some game, I don't know what's going on and it's like a lot of dudes there, I probably wouldn't drink a ton there. And I don't think that like, men are inherently dangerous, but I often don't feel like the safest around men so it's not like a space where I would wanna be like impaired at all (Nnena, 28, Black, Nigerian-American, non-binary, lesbian).

Drinking heavily or even being intoxicated in public is surveilled differently for Black queer women and non-binary people. Even just being perceived as intoxicated could signal issues with safety. Anastasia and Jordan both alluded to this in their responses. Anastasia notes how within her community, there is a heightened awareness of being held accountable for one's actions in public. She notes,

> ...I can think of times where I've been you know the only Black female or you know with other Black folks and we see different races of people, different communities of people, and they clearly seem to have no concern about how they behave or how they're perceived. They don't seem to feel that same kind of danger around being drunk in general or even the consequences that come with the behaviors that sometimes alcohol elicits...And maybe that has to do with the fact that they probably won't be held as accountable as other communities (Anastasia, 28, Black lesbian).

Anastasia mentioned previously that in her experience, bars and gay spaces that are predominately Black often come with an increased police presence. Because of the underlying

foundation of white supremacy, police surveillance is utilized under the guise of "security", when patrons, such as Anastasia, more accurately perceived it as direct targeting. Anastasia also mentions the dangers of being drunk in public and the added risk of surveillance. Black women in particular experience a form of marginalization due to the pervasiveness of controlling negative imagery surrounding the "Strong Black Woman Syndrome" (Collins 2000), which depicts Black women as lacking affect or emotional responses. For Black queer women, there may be fear of public vulnerability in white-dominated spaces if they are found consuming alcohol loudly or perceived as intoxicated in a crowded bar (Parks and Hughes 2005).

Similar to Anastasia, Jordan highlights the potential danger of being intoxicated as a Black queer woman, particularly if she is the only other Black person in the space. She described her experiences drinking with white queers (and straight people) during her time in grad school in the South, noting:

> Like in my experience [with] white queer people when you party with them they don't have a lot of boundaries and so there's a lot more, 'oh I'mma touch you whether you like it or not, I'mma say whatever the hell I want to you'...and just being real, queer or not, what I've experienced as a Black woman or a Black person in white spaces, in white bars in particular...when you're the only Black person in a bar, everybody's gonna buy you a drink. And that's always like the joke, but on the flip side nobody considers if all of y'all are buying me a fuckin' drink, I'm fucked up and I'm way more fucked up than all of y'all. There's no real consideration for safety and so you have to be a lot more mindful (Jordan, 30, Black lesbian).

Jordan described the danger of being Black and drinking publicly with and around white people. The lack of mindfulness on behalf of white bar patrons reinforces a power dynamic deeply situated with access to alcohol and who has the ability to control the physical space around them. Jordan also describes the racialized dichotomy enacted by white people and public spaces. There is a noted "front stage" and "back stage" performed by the white people surrounding Jordan at the bar. Goffman (1959) referred to this dichotomous performance as the front stage being the

behaviors and identities most on display; the back stage is the secret, though still relevant behaviors committed in private. Feagin and Picca (2007) further extend Goffman's dramaturlogical theory when reviewing private journals and notebooks kept by college-aged white students. Most notably, Fegain and Picca (2007) found that the majority of what is considered visibly racist behavior was enacted by students via back stage behavior. Fegan and Picca's research can be applied to Jordan's experience because the other students with her at the bar were effectively engaging in front stage/back stage behavior. The white students did not realize that by pressuring Jordan into drinking more, they were engaging in behavior that was devoid of boundaries yet still marked as safe (front stage) whereas the "joke" referenced by Jordan is that her fellow white students were strategically getting her drunk without consideration of her safety as the only Black woman in the group (back stage). For Jordan and other participants, there is no such thing as safety when drinking with and around white people.

Often due to these power dynamics, some participants would look for certain social clues or markers within a space to designate safety. When asked where they would feel the least comfortable drinking, many participants' responses involve being in a public space where there are no other Black patrons or Black queer people. Ashlee feels that being in straight bars would likely impact her decisions with drinking. Of a time when she was visiting Dallas, she says, "...when I was in Dallas going to a straight bar caused me a lot of anxiety 'cause I just didn't know how people were going to react to me uhm as a Black lesbian, so if I did go to a space that I didn't know for sure was queer, I usually would like either didn't drink at all or just didn't drink that much just to make sure I was like safe" (Ashlee, 31, Black, Nigerian-American, lesbian). Again, we see how accessing spaces with alcohol as a Black queer person often elicits emergent decision making to determine their safety.

Liz also mentioned how her friend group may negotiate whether certain bars will be safe spaces for them. These negotiations were needed in *both* straight and gay bars. Even though the outcomes for either space vary, how other bar patrons view her Blackness determines her perception of safety. She says,

> I would say if it's a gay bar it's more about, safety is a concern but it's more about like, are we gonna have fun here? You know, it's a little bit more about the fun level when it comes to the gay bars. More about the safety at straight bars...sometimes it's more about I'm a Black woman in this queer space...and when I go to like straight bars it's more about like I'm a Black person (Liz, 36, Black lesbian).

The responses above describe the often fraught connection participants have to alcohol and maintaining bodily control, especially in public. Participants describe their experiences of embodiment with alcohol, and how maintaining control is often a crucial component. Some participants also discussed the ways in which they are surveilled while drinking in public, and how whiteness reinforces a power dynamic at the bar. Here we can defer to DuBois' (1903) concept of 'double consciousness', particularly with regard to how Liz mentions her perception of self as a Black woman in queer spaces and as a Black person in straight spaces. Double consciousness refers to the internal perception of self, existing in a Black body within a white supremacist society (DuBois 1903). For Liz, this perception stills holds a negative connotation, as in neither spaces is she perceived authentically as a Black queer woman with intersecting identities. Existing at the intersections of one's Blackness and queerness means often having to navigate certain social situations with alcohol and ultimately where their physical and emotional safety may be at risk. Drinking alcohol and who is allowed to consume alcohol publicly is a behavior that is sexually racialized; white women are under different social cues and

expectations when drinking publicly, whereas Black women and non-binary people have starkly different consequences.

### 6.2 Mediating Anxiety

In response to questions about their relationships to alcohol, seven of the eighteen participants mention varying levels of anxiety that influence their relationships to alcohol. Many reported having social anxiety in addition to generalized anxiety. These were not only just "feelings" of anxiety, but rather woven into how they relate to others, to alcohol, and being in public spaces. There are often factors that determine whether a space would increase a participant's anxiety or not, including if the space was crowded, if there were other queer people around, and if there were other Black queer people in the space. Nnena remembered how their social anxiety was often alleviated by alcohol, saying,

> ...now that I'm older and my social anxiety isn't as bad and I like, you know, know how to take care of myself through that but when I was younger, I think that it was probably like in part drinking so that I wouldn't be dealing with my social anxiety, which I think that a lot of young people do (Nnena, 28, Black, Nigerian-American, non-binary, lesbian).

In addition to revealing their experiences using alcohol to respond to anxiety, Nnena also mentions how common this was among other people their age. Sterling described how alcohol can often help mediate feelings of anxiety, particularly in crowded spaces. She notes,

> ...I have anxiety so like going into like social settings and stuff I'm like ahh there's so much going on and then like that [alcohol] dulls it...and I'm like very aware of like okay, I don't wanna dull it too much though, I don't wanna be drunk to where I can't talk and remember what's going on. I just want to like not feel like my skin is screaming because I'm around so many people (Sterling, 26, Black, gay).

Interestingly, Sterling notes how even though alcohol is helpful in these settings, she is aware of not "dulling" the feeling too much by getting *intoxicated*. Rather, Sterling prefers to maintain a level where she still feels in control of her body and in control of her anxiety. Even though

Sterling feels the physical onset of anxiety, she maintains control over her body with the added use of a substance. She still feels in control of her body vis-à-vis the controlled addition of a substance. Ashlee also had a similar response to using alcohol in social situations, which occurred mostly while she was in college. She says,

> I do struggle with social anxiety so I have to be - I find myself needing to be careful that I don't overuse it 'cause it does definitely help me relax in social situations...I've learned some better tools to deal with it but I can't say that it's ever like, outside of college, it's never been like something that I overused or anything (Ashlee, 31, Black, Nigerian-American, lesbian).

Ashlee describes how alcohol helps to reduce her social anxiety, but similar to Sterling, she still desires a feeling of being in control. More specifically, when Ashlee mentions, "needing to be careful that I don't overuse it", she is emphasizing the threshold she needs to ensure she doesn't drink what she would consider as "too much". From what both Ashlee and Sterling describe, there seems to be a reliance on alcohol to temporarily mediate the effects of anxiety as well as a noted emphasis to not rely on the substance for too long. This controlled reliance (i.e. knowing one's limits and when they've reached a predetermined threshold with alcohol) adds an interesting component to how we socially conceptualize alcohol use. Further, the language used by Ashlee and Sterling on still being in control of their bodies amidst their alcohol use is an important area of consideration in terms of harm reductionist tactics.

Peaches had a similar response to both Sterling and Ashlee, yet she contextualizes the importance of shared anxieties within a physical space. She says,

> I have really bad anxiety, and a lot of my friends, a lot of my queer friends that I know also have anxiety. So like when you have alcohol, you don't really tend to think about your anxiety. You're kind of like, just willing to be open and not really care (Peaches, 23, Black, no gender preference, same gender loving, queer).

For Peaches, having alcohol present in a queer space also helped alleviate some of her anxiety. She also noted that her environment (whether she's at a house with friends or going out) can largely influence her motivations with alcohol. Peaches is indirectly alluding to the use of alcohol as a coping mechanism for herself and for her friends. With alcohol, one's anxiety is no longer at the forefront, or an immediate need. These participant responses illustrate embodiment and being present within their physical bodies, while also incorporating a substance to help minimize how fully present they are in their environments. Another participant, T, similarly described their feelings of anxiety and how alcohol helps them in various situations, including social interactions. On what alcohol symbolizes to them, they say,

> Uhm alcohol is for anxiety and for me to be able to get out of my skin and just have a good time no matter what the situation may be, and alcohol has taught me, I mean its [sic] taught me limits. It's taught me social skills...alcohol definitely has taught me limits and taught me to how to get out of my skin (T, 29, Black, non-binary, pansexual).

For T, alcohol holds a deeper, more symbolic meaning for them compared to other participants. They feel that alcohol helps to positively impact their social skills because it alleviates some of their anxiety. While the participants above do not directly link their reasons for increased alcohol consumption, some briefly discuss how alcohol helps them cope with various external stressors. Jay recalls how she previously drank to cope with the stressors of graduate school and stressors tied to her childhood. She says,

> I was using alcohol as a mechanism to cope with reality, to cope with being [in graduate school], to cope with coming from poverty, imposter syndrome...I remember there was times where I was drinking every day, like I would leave class…and go straight to the bar. Now, not so much. I have a little bit more like tools in my arsenal. I have a little bit more like healthier coping skills (Jay, 28, Black, multiracial, lesbian).

Jay specifically names the use of alcohol as a coping mechanism as a result of experiencing poverty and feelings of invisibility in their academic program. The use of alcohol to help mediate

feelings of anxiety is consistent with Meyer's implementation of minority stress model (Meyer 2003). As indicated in chapter two, the minority stress model emphasizes how long-term stressors that are unique to the LGBT community can have lasting effects on heath. For seven of the eighteen participants, alcohol is considered a helpful aide to accessing a level of comfort in certain social situations. Participants use alcohol to mediate their experiences of anxiety. Alcohol is therefore used as a coping mechanism to effectively handle the proximal stressors related to or as a result from their anxiety. Because alcohol is a known depressant, it's widely viewed as an effective coping mechanism to numb or quell feelings of social anxiety. While alcohol is known to reduce one's mental and bodily inhibitions, many participants welcomed alcohol to mediate their feelings of anxiety, particularly when in crowded, public spaces.

### 6.3 Protective Behavioral Strategies (PBS)

A crucial component to discussions about alcohol includes unpacking how we form and implement decision making tactics with alcohol usage. Participants reported an acute awareness of their relationship to alcohol, their motivations for drinking, and how they can often reduce negative consequences related to drinking. In addition to alcohol mediating feelings of anxiety (or used as a coping mechanism), many participants incorporated the use of protective behavioral strategies to negotiate their drinking patterns. Protective behavioral strategies (PBS) are mechanisms that can aid in reducing certain consequences often associated with drinking (Martens, Pedersen, LaBrie, Ferrier, and Cimini 2007). These strategies are often decisions that can potentially alter particular outcomes with alcohol, such as seeking a sober driver or not engaging in popular binge drinking games, such as beer pong (Ebersole, Moorer, Noble, and Madson 2015; Martens, et. al. 2007).

Similar with many studies on alcohol among younger populations, the effectiveness of PBS uses is well documented on drinking patterns among college students. Martens et. al (2015) found that when sampling college-aged LGB students, "PBS did moderate the association between alcohol consumption and alcohol-related negative consequences, such that students who reported higher alcohol consumption and higher PBS use also reported fewer alcohol related-negative consequences" (2015:194). Even if students reported an increase in their drinking habits, the use of PBS helped alleviate the potential for an increase in negative outcomes related to their drinking.

A majority of participants indirectly noted instances where they engaged with PBS. Sometimes, their use of PBS involved developing a more acute awareness of how their bodies felt while drinking. For others, it was negotiating what they drank in relation to their location. Nnena, for example, notes, "I feel like I can see when I'm like turning to alcohol to like, you know, not engage with, to get out of being present basically...I guess I'm more aware of when that's happening you know" (Nnena, 28, Black, Nigerian-American, non-binary, lesbian). Similarly, Karen discussed how she pays attention to the quantity she's drinking as well as how her body feels. She says,

> I know my limits. I'm not one to test my limits. I know that like if I go too far and I have a margarita, like I know I can only probably have one margarita...I know sort of like where [and] when I have to stop...like I get a little dance-y and I say once I'm at dance-y like I'm good, dance-y is good. Once I feel like floating and I'm wobbly like I know I need to like calm down and kind of like stop, cause at that point I'm losing control, you know (Karen, 24, Black, lesbian).

Karen's response above highlights both the relationship she has to her body in regards to drinking, as well as continuing an earlier theme of wanting to be "in control". By listening to how her body feels (and creating distinct, recognizable drinking levels for herself) she utilized PBS in an effort to reduce the chance of a negative, alcohol-related outcome. Previously, in

chapter four, Karen recalled her first time drinking and noted that seeing her family members' alcohol misuse impacted how she currently relates to the substance. It appears that wherever alcohol is involved, she uses this memory as the impetus for engaging in PBS.

Sterling discussed how she has an internal scale she uses to define her limits with alcohol intake. This scale is helpful with remaining present while still imbibing. She says,

> If I'm not in a good place, I'm not gonna feel comfortable getting drunk...If I'm in a good state of mind then it doesn't matter where I am as long as the safety thing has been checked off, then I'll probably get a little drunk...So I always try to stay between tipsy and drunk. I don't ever try to be any more than that. Uhm sometimes it accidentally happens but I'm pretty educated on alcohol so I'm like okay if I drink no matter what (Sterling, 26, Black, gay).

Other participants discussed specific strategies they employ to reduce potentially negative, alcohol-related outcomes. When asked where she felt the most comfortable drinking, Summer noted how she prefers to drink at home over going to a bar. She says,

> I think I drink more when I'm out in public, which is stupid, because it's very expensive...I think I do end up drinking more when I'm out in public but I drink more often at home than I drink going out...Let's like, if we had a week, right, I wouldn't go out and drink every night of the week. But I might drink every night at home. But when I do go out, I drink more (Summer, 29, Black lesbian).

For Summer, drinking at home is more cost effective, and a safer option since she does not have to find a designated driver. Additionally, while she may drink more frequently throughout the week, she is aware that drinking at home is still a more positive option, as the chance that she will drink more alcohol while out in public in one evening increases. The biggest factor with determining her quantity of alcohol was merely location; if she chooses to drink in a public space, there's a higher chance she will drink a higher quantity of alcohol than she would if she were to stay home. For others (in addition to Summer), these pattern shifts depend on physical location and how participants feel. In chapter four, for example, Dorothy noted that her drinking habits peaked while she attended a mostly white preparatory high school. However, she notes, "I

don't think that I ever got into the habit of like using alcohol as like a catharsis of like anything like that. I would say it kinda had the inverse effect where I used it more of like a celebration" (Dorothy, 23, Black, Afro-Caribbean, pansexual, same-gender loving, queer).

Ari noted that her motivations for drinking - and choice of alcohol - are often contingent upon her expectations for the evening. Ari noted how her choice in alcohol is often determined by what she anticipates for the remainder of her evening. "Instead of location," she said, "it's more about intention." She continued,

> So if I'm at a bar, like a dance bar, and my intention is to dance till three in the morning, I'll probably have liquor, like a mixed drink. If I'm just at a house party...I'll probably just have like a cider or some wine...And so it's more the intention of what I'm doing. I know if I'm at a gay bar or straight bar, I think I'd drink liquor...I think I'd just keep my eye on the vibe for how much I drink, or if I keep drinking, or if I change my drink or anything else (Ari, 27, Black, Jamaican, sexually fluid).

Nnena, Summer, Sterling, and Ari all refer to specific uses of protective behavioral strategies used to determine alcohol-related outcomes. These strategies include being attuned to how they were feeling, specifically within their bodies, as well as negotiating the type of alcohol they chose to drink. Some participants, like Ari, felt that what she chose to drank depended more on her intentions for the evening as opposed to the location of where she is drinking. In addition to these protective behavioral strategies, some participants employ other strategies that impact their desires for drinking.

### *6.3.1 Alternatives to Gay Bars/Public Drinking Spaces*

Nine out of eighteen participants also indicated two additional protective behavioral strategies that are prominent with their motivations for drinking alcohol. While earlier accounts of PBS were more about *intent*, the two additional strategies stem directly from a specific, safer need for community and social networking with alcohol. These include the acknowledgement of

safety while drinking among Black queer community, as well as ultimately desiring alternative spaces away from alcohol. Many participants discuss the normalization of alcohol use in general; they often feel that drinking is the norm, yet some feel this normalization is more pronounced in queer bars and spaces. Participants present a duality with how safe they feel at gay bars; while they all prefer gay bars over straight bars (with some providing a caveat of not wanting to go out at all) many wish for alternative activities and community building that does not center the use of alcohol.

When asked about how the role of alcohol has changed for them, many participants provided detailed and thorough explanations of both their drinking patterns and what influenced their patterns. Changes in their drinking patterns seemed to occur when they left college or aged out of their early 20s. Dylan, the oldest participant at 39, noted that as she has gotten older, her relationship to "going out" and drinking also changed. Both Eve and Ashlee also agreed that as they get older, they felt differently about going out or going to bars. Karen remembered recently watching a queer comedienne, Hannah Gadsby, discuss the normalization of alcohol in queer culture. She noted how there's less options for queer people who want community away from alcohol. She says,

> ...in queer community, I think there's a decent amount of pressure to you know, to go out, to party, to drink, like that's just what you do to some extent...I was watching some sort of uhm I think it was a comedy show or something but the comedienne, she's queer, and she was an introvert...she's like 'oh you guys are drinking a lot and you guys are partying a lot but where do the quiet gays go?'...like there's really not like a lot of spaces for queers who don't wanna be a part of that lifestyle and who don't wanna drink and who don't really care to party, but to some extent if you want to be with your people, that's sort of the space that you have to go into (Karen, 24, Black, lesbian).

Additionally, many participants discussed factors that made them feel comfortable while drinking alcohol. Aside from general logistics (such as proximity of the bar to their house,

whether participants ate beforehand, etc.), an important consideration involved drinking alcohol among other Black and brown queer community members. Doing so not only leveraged their sense of comfort, but also provided the most safety for participants. Jordan, for example, noted that when she is drinking, she is typically only drinking with other Black queer friends or community members. Anastasia notes that because she feels like gay bars and gay spaces are typically white spaces, she seeks out alternatives, noting,

> So they're [gay bars] not places that I'm like, 'oh I really wanna go out, I wanna go to a gay bar', I wouldn't think that. I try to find events that again are probably a little more private, a little smaller, and geared towards women, geared towards lesbians, geared towards Black people, geared towards people of color (Anastasia, 27, Black lesbian).

Dorothy felt similarly, and strategically chose to imbibe in spaces among fellow Black queer community members. On where she feels the most comfortable drinking, she says,

> Honestly in more intimate like private settings like at people's houses, at like what people call kickbacks...that's kinda more like my social comfort zone when it comes to like really like drinking uhm heavily, just cause it feels safer and I feel like I can let my guard down and the people that I want to be there are there, which is at the end of the day mostly like other Black queer people (Dorothy, 23, Black, Afro-Caribbean, pansexual, same-gender loving, queer).

Dorothy mentions that even though she doesn't drink as much as she used to, if she were to imbibe heavily, it would need to be in a private setting in the company of other Black queer people. Peaches felt similarly to Dorothy, Anastasia, and Jordan. She described her feelings about being able to drink in safe spaces (that is, spaces she is able to create among her friends) as a place where, she described, "joy is radical". There is a subversion of what it means to be able to relax and feel comfortable around her friends. She is able to be her authentic self in these spaces, and alcohol is often an added bonus. She notes,

> So like for a lot of people, queer Black people...you can't really be open and be fully yourself and show up as yourself. You have to perform like these certain expectations, things that are expected of you. So for me it's like making your own space…my queer friends are family to me you know...People you can be completely yourself with, around and with...Having a space where you can do that and not feel threatened and not have these anxieties like upon you, and sometimes alcohol can help with that. It's not necessary but sometimes it helps (Peaches, 23, Black, no preference, same-gender loving, queer).

The participants above described how alternative spaces outside of the gay bar or other spaces (with or without alcohol) can be considered a protective behavioral strategy. Some report they may drink more when they're in these environments, but at the same time, these spaces feel the safest. Feeling safe does not equate to drinking more, per se, but it does highlight the complexities of alcohol use and the decision making process for Black queer women and non-binary people. Based on many participants' experiences receiving overt discrimination and forms of violence attending gay and lesbian bars, as well as desiring the safety afforded when drinking around other queer Black people, many participants seek out alternative spaces as a way to counter the effects of a white, heteropatriarchal society. Participants are ultimately alluding to what Muñoz (1999) refers to as *disidentifications*, which are strategies queer communities of color utilize and renegotiate for survival, and for new measures of identity. Muñoz continues, stating:

> Disidentifications is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture (Muñoz 1999:31).

Participants highlight their own disidentifications by seeking alternative spaces and events away from alcohol, as well as reframing their own safe spaces while drinking around other Black queer

community members. There is a sense of empowerment among Black queer women and non binary participants who actively build community in these alternative spaces, both with and without alcohol. These alternative spaces create a "positionality" that was "rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture" – alternative spaces that allow for the "radical joy" to exist among Black queer and trans community members, away from the surveillance and domineering gaze of whiteness. While doing so can be perceived as a protective behavioral strategy, I find it relevant to extend Muñoz's theories further to indicate both resiliency and a reframing that is more conducive to the participants.

## 6.4 Conclusion

The two previous chapters of findings discuss various factors that may shape or influence a sample of Black queer women and non-binary people's relationships to alcohol. This chapter attempts to provide context with motivations for drinking alcohol. For participants, there is a constant negotiation of accessing space, feeling comfortable enough to drink, and leveraging control over their bodies. These include: embodied control over their bodies and surroundings; engaging in protective behavioral strategies to reduce negative outcomes with alcohol; and yearning for a space where community is centered (similar to the safety that is offered from gay bars), but perhaps away from the influence of alcohol. Regardless of whether the participant currently drinks or not, each participant relayed crucial insight into how they continue forming and reforming their relationships to alcohol. Often, these relationships were influenced by feelings of bodily control pertaining to alcohol or the space around them.

Anastasia, Jordan, Ashlee, and Liz all described a double consciousness with drinking in public spaces, particularly when around white queer and straight people. Due to existing power dynamics within a white, heteropatriarchal society, Black queer women and non-binary people

often experience surveillance while drinking in public. The added layer of surveillance means that participants face issues with perceptions of security related to alcohol. This was clear from their responses, and is arguably a crucial aspect to the overall discourse of alcohol use among Black queer women and non-binary people that warrants further investigation.

An additional theme related to embodied control with alcohol stems from how participants articulate the mediating effects of alcohol, predominantly with self-reported descriptions of anxiety. Participants also discussed various protective behavioral strategies they employ to reduce the potential for negative alcohol-related outcomes. Even though alcohol can be used as a coping mechanism (and some participants acknowledge having used it as such in the past), there is a noted tenderness among participants towards themselves as they described their experiences. This sentiment arguably contributes to how they form and negotiate relationships to alcohol.

As described in the previous chapter, participants unanimously preferred gay and lesbian bars to attending straight bars. However, these spaces did not always provide them with the sense of safety they needed in order to feel comfortable drinking. While Sterling, Dylan, and Cocoa reportedly enjoyed gay bars, they were a point of contention for many other participants. Instead, they discussed seeking alternative spaces or activities that do not center alcohol, suggesting a distinct desire to move away from a cultural reliance on gay bars, or a disidentification (Muñoz 1999) from the oppressive culture these spaces symbolize for queer people of color. Rather than feeling obligated to go to spaces surrounding alcohol, many participants preferred spaces that are specifically created for and maintained by other Black queer community members. These spaces were reportedly much safer spaces to drink alcohol as they are away from the white gaze, and as Peaches describes, places ultimately where “radical joy” can propagate.

# 7 DISCUSSION

## 7.1 Major takeaways

Qualitative research can provide acute insight into the formation of alcohol use within various communities. I argue that the insight gained is strengthened when the focus shifts from assessments of frequency or quantity of use and more towards the self-reported relationship that forms to the substance. The relationships that form to substances indicate commonalities among both individuals and communities that share identities or similar experiences. Within this dissertation project, I presented in-depth responses from eighteen Black/African-American queer and non-binary participants about their relationships to alcohol. Consistent within participant responses are three major themes. These major themes include: 1) lasting impacts of first memories with alcohol across the life course, 2) navigating white space inherent in gay and lesbian bars, and 3) desire for embodied control with alcohol with harm reduction tactics.

### *7.1.1 Memories with Alcohol and the Life Course*

I was not able to directly answer my initial research question of "what motivates Black queer women and non-binary people". However, I was able to provide substantial context to their experiences with alcohol and what potentially mediates changes in patterns over time. These motivations often begin with experiences and influences from adolescence, particularly with first time exposure to alcohol in high school. Participant responses were consistent with available quantitative data indicating early exposure to alcohol among queer women. A key factor with these early exposures was how participants discussed their feelings about their first time drinking. Namely, the lack of pressure relayed by some participants provided additional, anecdotal evidence to how Black queer women and nonbinary people negotiate motivations for drinking. For others, their first times drinking were due to drinking in excess, and not initially

knowing their limits with the substance. Over time, these first moments with alcohol provided a foundation for how they relate to alcohol as they aged. These responses contribute to potential gaps in the literature because they are not rooted within negative connotations typically associated with underage drinking.

### *7.1.2 Lasting Impacts of White Spaces Involving Alcohol:*

Throughout participant responses, I learned that two of my research questions inform each other. (These include if motivations to drink are influenced by experiencing multiple marginalization and/or impacted by gay and lesbian bars). There were multiple instances where participants experienced racism or other forms of violence in spaces that involved alcohol, including gay and lesbian bars. The historical impact of gay and lesbian bars often does not center the experiences of queer Black and brown communities, and some feel alienated by what the space currently represents. Experiencing a double consciousness in these spaces may be an additional stressor for Black queer women and non-binary people, particularly if they are seeking alcohol as a coping mechanism. Additional research is needed to better assess this factor when surveying this community.

The responses described in both chapters five and six point to white cisgender gay men (and white lesbians, to an extent) as having a means of capital with queer culture, and arguably suggest white gay men and white lesbians incorporate a habitus of white space within gay bars. Bourdieu's (1993) concept of capital involves the knowledge, physical ownership, and social awareness of various aspects of culture. Having access to social, economic, or cultural capital allows for social mobility, or the ability to easily navigate social structures. As demonstrated by participant responses, white gay cisgender men have an advanced means of habitus via their access to gay bars. The gay bar itself serves as a space that while available, is not entirely as

accessible to Black queer women and non-binary people. Over time, white gay cisgender men (and white lesbians) are afforded the luxury of being able to navigate the space in which they initially created, organized around, and ultimately have the social and economic power to determine who can be afforded a measure of safety. Participants relay that while they (as Black queer women and non-binary people) can access the space within gay bars, they experience limited visibility due to the whiteness inherent within and embedded in the space

#### *7.1.3 Implementing Harm Reduction Tactics:*

Additionally, participants described their relationships to alcohol using harm reduction tactics and language. Participants did not readily label these as harm reduction, but more so as tactics used to "reduce harm" with alcohol. Harm reduction is a more radical way of envisioning our lived experiences and possible trajectories outside of medicalized discourses on substance use and misuse. Harm reduction has worked to completely reframe the ways in which we discuss substance use and misuse through language, and places an emphasis on various trajectories and lived experiences that could impact someone's ability or willingness to cease misusing substances. This approach attempts to subvert the focus of alcohol misuse from viewing it as a "disease" and most importantly, abstinence is not the overarching goal. This model is considerably successful because it acknowledges that alcohol use occurs under a variety of circumstances, and therefore makes more of an accepting space for individuals to seek care in ways that are conducive to their needs (Lee, Engstrom, and Peterson 2011). Harm reduction approaches have worked in the areas of mindfulness and substance use (Bayles 2014) and reducing risks associated with opiate use via clean syringe exchange programs (O'keefe, Blumenthal, Kral, Aitken, McCormack, and Dietze 2019).

This particular model further places power and knowledge back within the individual, which drastically opposes the widely accepted treatment model of care with substance abuse. It does not merely focus on the goal of abstaining but instead on reducing specific outcomes; instead of limiting the self to drinking altogether, finding ways in which certain alcoholic beverages are used as a means to cope and locating the emotions attached to the behavior. Advocates of harm reduction are instrumental in working towards redirecting public health policy towards a more nuanced understanding of opiate use and misuse.

Harm reduction approaches were clear in both participants' discussions of how they describe their relationships to alcohol, and within the various protective behavioral strategies they employ to reduce potentially negative alcohol-related outcomes. Harm reduction tactics are also prominent with the language participants use to describe their relationships to alcohol. Participants who were more cognizant about their drinking patterns were able to highlight issues with other people and/or identify family members or friends as alcoholics. However, no one was comfortable with the term "sober" to describe their relationship. For Liz, she felt that she could best conceptualize her relationship as having "an issue with alcohol" and she currently does not drink. She did not feel comfortable identifying with recovery-based language. Instead of the identity of "sober", she feels best using harm reductionist language. Nnena was also uncomfortable with the term sober.  According to Nnena, the term sober felt "finite", and simply didn't fit how they saw themselves in relation to alcohol. Summer describes her relationship to alcohol as "problematic"; Cocoa and many others refer to it as "social". The language used by each participant yields valuable insight into their motivations to drink and the continued formation of their relationships to alcohol.

Additionally, harm reduction strategies were arguably implemented when participants discussed their being inside gay and lesbian bars, as well as many straight bars. Dorothy, Anastasia, Liz, and others all bring up hesitations around certain public spaces due to feeling surveilled. Often, being in perceived white spaces would influence their relationship to alcohol in the moment. (For others, this was more about intentions with their drinking, the space itself, and location.) Participants like Sterling and Karen, for example, described times where they enacted a threshold for determining how much they would drink; once they felt "out of control", they knew to stop. Working within a framework of critical race theory and anti-racism, I believe there is a much deeper connotation and meaning with their use of the phrase that indicates their being "out of control". Similar to the myriad narratives and lived experiences from Black men and women being surveilled in public (whether by the police state, carceral system, or any other continued legacy of white supremacy), the potential fear of being in an intoxicated state where Black queer women are not in control of their body may preemptively lead to the creation of the aforementioned threshold.

## 7.2 Conclusion

These responses overall suggest a possible movement in how we conceptualize decision making, alcohol use and recovery, and overall relationships to alcohol. Queer Black women and non-binary people (and perhaps other communities who exist within multiple intersections of race, gender, and sexual orientation) present a unique way of discussing alcohol. There is a heightened sense of compassion towards themselves concerning substance use, as well as to their peers, whenever appropriate. As explained by Peaches, the act of community gathering among other Black queer people was where she felt safest drinking, and other participants had similar

responses. These compassionate responses are embedded in a framework that uses harm reductionist, strengths-based language to highlight their experiences.

While drinking alcohol is generally viewed as acceptable and "normal" behavior in the United States, what can the formation of one's relationship to alcohol tell us about the positive outcomes related to drinking? What kind of sociological impact are we able to postulate from reframing the narrative with alcohol consumption? As McNair and colleagues note, "Shifting the focus from a culture of drinking to drinking for connection allows a more nuanced understanding of the drivers of higher rates and heavier alcohol consumption among lesbian, bisexual, and queer women, and questions the tendency in the literature to pathologise their alcohol consumption while ignoring any supportive effects" (2016:417). What McNair and others are referencing is envisioning a radically different approach to how we discuss and research alcohol misuse among communities of queer women. As it is important to acknowledge "a culture of drinking", it may be of relevance to highlight how Black queer women and non-binary people form relationships to alcohol and how they conceptualize their own consumption patterns.

Additionally, participants expressed a need for alternative queer spaces away from the influence of alcohol. There is a noted desire to build community away from the bar, and this was especially noted by participants who consider themselves as current drinkers. While queer recovery spaces have always existed, there has been a recent push towards sober events (Bendix 2019) and other social events that do not explicitly involve alcohol. Finding or creating alternative spaces away from the gaze of whiteness was often in response to experiencing discrimination in gay bars (as well as experiencing feeling hyper visible in many straight spaces). Recognizing the overarching need for physical and emotional safety when drinking alcohol is a necessary factor to incorporate when attempting to highlight drinking patterns among Black

queer community members. Even though alcohol use continues to be a normalized social activity, this particular sample of eighteen Black queer women and non-binary people indicate new directions for how we study the sociology of substance use and misuse.

# 8 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

## 8.1 Limitations

As with any research project, there are limitations to my dissertation research. One of the biggest limitations relates to the sample itself. My current sample size is eighteen Black queer women and non-binary people recruited from one major city in the South, and all with a background of some form of higher education. While I could simply posit that a major limitation to qualitative research is the typically smaller sample size, I believe the sample itself to be sufficient. However, increasing sample size does strengthen the overall analysis, and future research should consider a larger sample.

A larger sample size would also afford more opportunities for varied gender and sexual identities. I initially started data collection with a stricter requirement for sexuality; I eventually relaxed this option to be more inclusive as data collection progressed. The snowball sampling method worked well for recruitment in this particular community. As I received more inquiries for participation (and found patterns among their experiences regardless of difference in participants who identified as lesbian versus pansexual, for example) I felt compelled to slightly alter the sexual identity requirement. While I was able to include two participants who identify as non-binary, I did not have any participants who are Black trans women. Future research will benefit from being able to include the experiences of queer Black trans women as well as gender non-conforming people assigned female at birth (AFAB).

An additional limitation involving sample size concerns the missing experiences of Black queer women and non-binary people over the age of 40. Unfortunately, I was not able to obtain interviews from participants in this age bracket. This may be due to a few reasons. Primarily, snowball sampling favors those with similar interests, and participants were either referred by a

previous participant or saw my information posted (hence the consistency in a younger age range). A gatekeeper in this age bracket is necessary if utilizing snowball sampling or any other respondent-driven sampling method. Second, social media platforms were a factor for sharing my recruitment flyer. Because there is a noted dexterity among younger populations with social media, reaching aging communities could be more challenging. Lastly, there is still historic distrust in academic research due to white supremacy; my whiteness could be an understandable deterrent among those unwilling to be vulnerable with a white stranger. This is a huge ask of a community, and I may not be the appropriate person to carry out such an endeavor without building sustainability and trust.

A continued limitation of life course research involves a bias with recalling past memories. Recall error from participants was also a limitation in my research. This limitation was prominent when asking to elaborate on their feelings or emotions present during times of alcohol use. During the interviews, I asked participants to recall two separate memories: age of first drink and a time where they experienced discrimination. While I wholeheartedly trust the responses provided to me by the participants, there is always the possibility that the memory itself is not entirely accurate due to the time elapsed. Recall error may also be influenced by alcohol use, wherein the participant may not remember the entire event due to the aforementioned substance use. I also do not believe the latter option occurred to bias the sample, but there is always room for uncertainty in any research endeavor.

Lastly, issues with reliability and validity continue to be limitations for qualitative research methods. Due to my small sample size, there may be concerns with replicating the study in other communities. Qualitative interviews tend to be viewed as subjective data, in that responses are 1) impacted by their unique lived experience, and 2) are subject to interpretations

by an outside researcher. The analysis for my dissertation research involved me as the sole coder, meaning I am the only source of reliability. Investing in an additional outside coder would emphasize inter-rater reliability (Morse 2012).

## 8.2 Future Directions

There are limitations to my research endeavors and my dissertation is by no means an exhaustive analysis on Black queer women and non-binary people's experiences with alcohol. In an effort to further the field, I provide a few key directions that may be beneficial to the field overall. These directions are primarily towards more focus on the importance of oral histories; addressing the intersections of race, gender, sexual orientation, and alcohol use in the life course research; and shifting a focus to harm reduction strategies within the realm of public health policy.

### *8.2.1 Oral Histories*

Oral histories are an important method of obtaining less visible information that occurs over time in a participant's life. Kennedy and Davis's (1993/2014) oral history of Black and white working-class lesbians in the pre-Stonewall era continues to be a prominent study on how queer women developed community. There is still a dearth of compiled accounts of Black queer women's experiences before and during the events at Stonewall. Oral histories can be a useful methodology for highlighting the lived experiences of older Black queer women and comparing their experiences to younger generations. This method is applicable for assessing change over time, as well as analyzing individual-level studies. Including these experiences may help to combat the persistent reliance of queer history to center the experiences of white gay and lesbian cisgender members.

### *8.2.2 Life Course Methodologies*

Another area of potential impact concerns life course methodologies. Life course research identifying various trajectories with alcohol use among queer and trans communities of color is still relatively limited. While implementing research across the life course can be time consuming, the inclusion of lifeline methodologies and in-depth mapping of life trajectories can overall enhance the field. Relationships to alcohol may continue across the life course for many queer women as they age, though not much is known about sustained alcohol use among the LGBT community. Obtaining data across the life course that captures the aging LGBT population is costly and often time consuming. There is also the chance of attrition among aging communities. Establishing a cohort of aging gay men, for example, can be difficult with considering the high numbers of gay men who passed away from complications with the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s.

Aging members of the LGBT community may be susceptible to substance misuse due to coming of age with heteronormative and heterosexist assumptions regarding sexuality (Anderson 2009). In a survey of 416 aging LGB individuals (with 119 respondents identifying as lesbian), only 9% of repondents were identified as having significant drinking issues, with gay male respondents reporting higher than lesbians (Grossman, D'Auguelli, and O'Connell 2008). Continued, long-term exposure to external and internalized homophobia is often a barrier to sustaining a healthy concept of self. In a qualitative study of twenty aging lesbians (with at least one year of sobriety), Rowan and Butler (2014) found that dealing with various stressors related to sexual orientation over time could ultimately provide a framework of resiliency for maintaining sobriety. Recent research highlighting queer Latinx and Black/African-American's experiences with alcohol using lifeline methodologies yielded interesting insight into trajectories,

minority stress, and alcohol use (Cerezo, Williams, Cummings, Ching, and Holmes 2020). More specifically, Cerezo et. al. (2020) found that participant-driven mapping of distinct life events (or trajectories), participants indicated alcohol use to cope or to alleviate various stressors. Incorporating lifeline methodologies has the potential to foster richer data in the field of substance use. It may be useful to incorporate lifeline methodologies in future research.

### *8.2.3 Implications for Public Policy*

There is also potential for this research to influence various forms of public policy. One example may be with how stakeholders implement both prevention strategies and substance use support among younger communities. In the state of Georgia, for example, there are nine recovery support centers for youth ages 13-17 seeking solutions to their substance use. (These centers are labeled 'clubhouses' and implemented by the state.) These centers provide supplemental support for youth and strive toward a more person-centered, youth-driven approach to recovery. Understanding youth's motivations for substance misuse may be a beneficial component in addition to understanding various environmental factors contributing to their substance misuse.

Additionally, a discourse on health policy of substance use among Black queer women and non-binary people must attempt to address incarceration rates and the continued criminalization of Black bodies. Black and brown communities are disproportionately affected by increased incarceration rates due to systemic racism (Alexander 2010). Implementing more harm reduction approaches can aide those who are seeking more sustainable treatment options as well as provide more insight into Black queer women and non-binary people's experiences with incarceration and substance use or misuse. I would further argue that a more 'person-centered', strengths-based, or harm reductionist approach mirrors the resiliency that is apparent through

historical generations of Black and brown queer organizing, healing, and community building. Public health policy can benefit from additional research that is both guided by Black queer and trans experiences (Lassiter 2017), as well as research that highlights successful harm reduction approaches with sexual minority populations.

## 8.3 Conclusion

In this brief though descriptive chapter, I discussed the various limitations to my dissertation research. Some of these limitations, such as lack of a generalizable sample and issues with validity, are derivative of qualitative research methods as a whole. However, implementing qualitative methods best answered my initial research questions and yielded insightful knowledge into a presumably hidden community. As described in the previous chapter, the responses from participants indicate multiple opportunities for growth in the sociological study of substance use. While my dissertation contributes to existing literature, additional research is needed to build a more cohesive narrative of Black queer women and non-binary people's motivations for drinking and overall relationships to alcohol. Primarily, I argue that the effectiveness of qualitative research on relationships to substances has the potential for positive impact with oral histories, life course research, and public health policy. There are myriad directions to take on the topic of alcohol use among Black queer women and non-binary people. The examples provided in this chapter are by no means exhaustive, but hopeful directions for expansion.

# 9 CONCLUSION

People use alcohol for a wide range of reasons. In the United States, drinking alcohol generally understood as an accepted activity for adults at various social gatherings and utilized as a way to relax and celebrate. As someone becomes of legal drinking age (twenty-one in the United States), it is unusual that consuming alcohol in public or private settings is socially frowned upon. There is a societal expectation that normalizes alcohol use to an extent. The media portrays imagery, movies, and television shows that continue to promote the use of alcohol, as well as alienating those who imbibe to excess and find themselves and find themselves in trouble with the law. Labeled a "neurological sledgehammer" (Grisel 2019:93) due to its various bodily enhancements, alcohol also can fashion itself into a coping mechanism to relieve any number of stressors. These stressors can vary from pre-existing mental health issues to stigma or experiences of discrimination.

Throughout my dissertation, I presented a known health issue within available research on alcohol use among Black queer women and non-binary participants. As stated throughout, there is a noted reliance to consider comparisons between white and Black queer women in large, aggregate samples. I argue instead that a deeper, more personalized analysis -grounded in an anti-racist framework- can help assess relationships to alcohol within this community. These relationships can yield further insight into what motivates or influences this community to drink. A consistent, positive aspect of in-depth interviews is being able to extract the nuance of someone's lived experience. For better understanding motivations for drinking alcohol, I add that incorporating narratives or storytelling can be quite impactful. While there are many similarities within participant response, the highly detailed articulation of how, when, and what they decide to drink can almost be identified as individual case studies. This points to the greater possibility

that qualitative research can tell a more specialized narrative, and yields invaluable insight into how Black queer women and non-binary AFAB people form and sustain relationships to alcohol over time.

Detailed throughout this dissertation is a roadmap for how I completed my analysis. My initial chapter introduced the impetus for my research endeavors. This chapter included my research questions, as well as a detailed (though not exhaustive) review of available data on the topic. In my second chapter, I illustrated the importance of intersectionality, triple jeopardy, and minority stress process as essential theoretical foundations guiding my research. Supported by my theoretical framework, chapter three expanded on my choice in methodology conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Chapter four provided an introduction to participants' first exposure to alcohol. For some participants, this included their first time "getting drunk". The majority of participants recalled their first time drinking in high school, whereas three participants waited until college to drink. Participant responses are consistent with available data indicating earlier, underage alcohol exposure among LGBT communities, and warrants additional insight for life course trajectories with alcohol consumption.

Chapter five highlighted participants' experiences with gay and lesbian bars. Participants described both their current and historical connections to these spaces. Many participants, such as Peaches, Dorothy, Lilith, and Karen, recalled feeling that gay bars center white gay cisgender experiences and that these were not spaces ultimately designed for them. These participants used phrases such as, "not a space for me" or "experiences of white queerness" when referring to their feelings about gay bars. Others recalled moments where they experienced various forms of microaggressions, being ignored while ordering drinking, and other forms of violence. These experiences at gay and lesbian bars often left some participants, such as Anastasia, Nnena, and

Liz to question whether these moments were due to their being Black or a combination of how others perceived their gender and race. Even though they were in spaces that were deemed "safe" for those in the broader LGBT community, Black queer women and non-binary people are still not immune from experiencing various forms of racialized violence.

Chapter six provided context to participants' overall relationships to alcohol. A major theme that emerged in this chapter involves embodied control (both of their physical bodies and the physical space). Building off of their experiences with gay bars, many participants felt unjustly surveilled in public drinking spaces due to white bar patrons' perceptions of their Blackness. This often fueled a feeling of double consciousness among participants; again, their presence in a gay bar was often not a protective factor from experiencing various forms of racialized violence. Participants like Jordan, Liz, and Ashlee described moments where they have to navigate various clues within bars to determine if the space is conducive to their safety. Many participants like Liz, Nnena, and Summer conceptualized their relationships to alcohol using harm reductionist language and strategies. Other discussed their relationships to alcohol using protective behavioral strategies to reduce or minimize negative, alcohol-related outcomes. Additionally, there is a need for community building and networking to occur away from bars and other alcohol-centric spaces. This further indicates a foundational layer of empowerment felt towards alcohol among the sample and potentially new directions for the field.

While there are limitations to this study, I believe my dissertation contributes to the sociological field in three major ways. First, available research on Black queer women and non-binary people's relationships with and to alcohol across the life course is marginal. My dissertation expands upon available research and attempts to center their experiences in lieu of between-group analyses. Second, my dissertation documents first-hand accounts of young Black

queer women and non-binary people's experiences with gay and lesbian bars. Applying a critical race lens to analyze their experiences denotes gay and lesbian bars as white spaces. Due to these bars being historically white spaces, Black queer women and non-binary people may not find solace in these spaces, even though they are perceived as "safer" than bars that are not designated as gay, lesbian, or queer. Finally, my research expands the sociological study of substance use by highlighting the implementation of harm reduction tactics with alcohol among Black queer communities. The effectiveness of harm reduction strategies with alcohol is still largely an emerging area, especially within sociology. There is much to learn from applying these lenses (critical race theory and harm reduction) to how we research and discuss Black queer women and non-binary people's relationships to alcohol. Doing so arguably centers the resiliency that is prominent throughout the community.

The experiences of Black queer women and non-binary people are not monolithic, and an argument can be made for not designating these experiences as such in aggregate samples of various health behaviors. Quantitative research correctly posits that Black queer women and non-binary people exist within multiple identities and therefore must navigate multiple, intersecting oppressive systems. There are multiple intersecting layers of identity, experience, and institutional access indicated by each participant. These experiences can, in turn, lead to adverse health outcomes or trajectories, particularly with alcohol use. While this is often true, the responses from eighteen participants present a more nuanced perspective. Even though queer community has historically built community within bars, this may not have a strong impact on drinking prevalence rates among Black queer women, specifically.

More research is needed that appropriately captures the lived experiences of this community concerning substance use and misuse. Arguably, we can best further the field by

implementing methodologies that shift research foci from health disparities and instead subvert the narrative that substance use always elicits a potentially negative outcome. Receding from a reliance on making data ‘generalizable’ or comparative is helpful towards reducing systemic inequities entrenched in many academic fields. This requires us, as sociologists, to address the sociohistorical aspects connected to a known health issue as developed across the life course, as well as focus on reframing the dominant white narrative implicit in health research.

While still a relatively small sample of Black queer women and non-binary people between the ages of twenty-three and thirty-nine, these responses provide an intersectional response to how race, gender, and sexual orientation are framed within known health disparities involving alcohol. Sociologists who study substance use, life course, and health disparities can benefit from applying anti-racist frameworks to better ascertain the nuanced relationships Black queer women and non-binary people form with alcohol.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Interview Guide

### Interview Guide

*Thank you for agreeing to participate in this dissertation project. My research involves learning about drinking patterns and relationships to alcohol among Black/African-American lesbian and queer women. I appreciate you taking the time to discuss your experiences with me.*

*I would like to ask you some questions related to your feelings about alcohol, childhood or adolescent experiences with alcohol, experiences of discrimination, and familiarity with gay bars. Your involvement with the interview is completely voluntary. You will not be assessed on how much alcohol you drink, or judged by your alcohol consumption. You may choose to decline a response to any question, as well as end the interview at any time. Your identity will be confidential, and only your pseudonym will appear in publications or presentations that result from my research. Please do not use names or other identifying information about other people in your answers.*

***Let's begin with your history:***

1. Can you tell me your background, including your age, and how you self-identify in terms of your race, gender, or sexuality?
    a. Is there a preference with how these social identities are organized?
2. How would you describe your current relationship to alcohol?[1]
    a. (If yes): Can you describe the feelings you have towards alcohol?
    b. (If answer is no): Why have you chosen not to drink alcohol?

***First Personal Narrative: In this next part of the interview, I will ask you to recall a past memory or event.***

3. What do you remember about the first time you drank alcohol?
    a. How old were you?
    b. Can you describe to me what your environment was like?
    c. Were other people with you? If so, who were they? Friends? Family members?
    d. What was your motivation(s) to drink alcohol at this particular time?
    e. Overall, how would you describe this experience?
4. What role, if any, did alcohol play in your childhood or adolescence?

[1] If respondent does not currently drink, the remaining interview questions are in past tense to address prior experiences. If respondent has never drank, skip Qs 3 and 8.

   a. What memories do you have, if any, from your childhood or adolescence that involves alcohol? Please be specific.
   b. As you have grown older, has the role of alcohol changed?
      a. Can you elaborate on what, specifically, has influenced this change?
5. What are some perceptions of alcohol use in your community/communities?
   a. How is alcohol viewed?
   b. What kinds of activities or behaviors involving alcohol occur in your community/communities?
   c. Throughout your community/communities, how much pressure is there to drink alcohol?
      a. Can you tell me about a specific time where you felt pressured to drink alcohol?

***Location: Place and Space***

6. What is your experience or familiarity with attending gay bars?
   a. How would you describe your experiences? Please be specific.
      a. What other types of activities, outside of alcohol, occur at gay bars?
7. How connected do you feel to gay bars?
   a. What feelings do you have, if any, regarding the historical significance of the gay bar?
      a. How do other members of your community feel about the historical significance of the gay bar?
   b. What memories do you have, if any, of older members in your community discussing the gay bar?
      a. What stories or experiences do older members of your community have concerning gay bars?
8. Where do you feel the most comfortable drinking alcohol?
   a. Are there specific locations?
   b. What factors go into making you feel comfortable?
   c. Where would you feel the least comfortable drinking alcohol?
   d. How do you feel about drinking alcohol in public spaces? In private spaces?
      a. Is there a difference for you? Why or why not?

e. How influential is location with what you choose to drink?
    a. How does your choice in alcohol change when you are drinking in public? In more private spaces, such as your home or a friend's house?

***Second Narrative Recall: Experiences of Discrimination***

9. I would like to move into the next section of our interview where I will ask you to recall a second event that has occurred in your life. Can you tell me about a time where you experienced discrimination due to your race, gender, or sexual orientation?
    a. How did you respond?
    b. How did you handle your emotions or feelings related to this experience?
10. Have you experienced discrimination where alcohol was involved?
    a. (If yes): What was your environment like? Can you elaborate on who was around you?
        a. What affect did this experience, if any, have on your decisions related to alcohol?
        b. Have others in your community/communities experienced discrimination related to alcohol?

***Last Question and Final Remarks:***

11. As a __(use their given social identities), what does alcohol symbolize or mean to you?
12. Is there anything you would like to include or discuss that I have not mentioned or asked about in this interview?

(Before interview ends, review responses with participant to ensure they feel well represented.)

*Thank you for talking with me today! If you think of anything else you would like to include or clarify, please do not hesitate to contact me.*