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# “Getting Freaky”: Perversion and Promiscuity Within Alternative Relationships and Sexual Modalities Among People Of Color

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“GETTING FREAKY”: PERVERSION AND PROMISCUITY WITHIN ALTERNATIVE RELATIONSHIPS  
AND SEXUAL MODALITIES AMONG PEOPLE OF COLOR

by

MARLA RENEE STEWART

Under the Direction of Wendy Simonds

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how people of color, particularly black people in the Atlanta area, navigate inside and outside of their sexual communities – particularly, BDSM, polyamory and swinging communities. I investigated how participants’ (N=11) identity construction and sexual actions/behaviors contributed to the benefits and/or consequences that fostered the navigation of non-sexual and sexual communities using queer theory and intersectionality theory with a womanist approach. Particularly, I found that my participants migrated towards communities based on privilege, comfort, and acts of resistance. In addition, I found that while they all identified as “perverts of color,” they did not identify as “promiscuous.” Overall, this study highlights the potential for people to resist certain oppressions, all while maintaining a sex-positive politic inside and outside of their alternative sexual communities. It also emphasizes the need to broaden our scopes on sexual liberation movements that marginalize those with various intersections of identities.

INDEX WORDS: People of color, Black sexualities, Sexual communities, BDSM, Kink, Polyamory, Swingers, Lesbian, Bisexuality, Heterosexuality, Sexual liberation, Queer theory, Intersectionality, Womanism

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MARLA RENEE STEWART

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

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2013

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2013

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

People of color (POC)<sup>1</sup> have been stigmatized in the past regarding their sexuality and it has negatively affected people of color in many ways (Collins 2004). Historical stereotypical behavior, including but not limited to hypersexuality, animalistic sexuality, and sexual immorality, have constricted the expression of black sexualities and have made it almost impossible for “freaks”<sup>2</sup> to embrace and express positive sexuality while simultaneously maintaining a black community supporting politics. For an example, historically, black freaks have been closeted and subject to forms of double, triple, and even quadruple jeopardy (i.e. race, gender, class, sexual orientation) based on their sexuality – inside and out the black community. Yet, sexual liberation movements arguably have done less to facilitate public acceptance of, social justice for, or self-affirmation of black freaks than other groups (such as the Free Love Movement or the Gay Liberation Movement). Thus, research like this is essential to push the envelope on sexual liberation discourses and social justice movements related to sexual expression. Black freaks take their sexuality a step further by not only identifying as people who push the boundaries, but push the boundaries so much that many people in the black community ostracize them or think “that’s what white people do.”

### *Pop Culture and The “Freak” in Alternative Sexual Communities*

In *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), Collins touches on the idea of black “freaks,” particularly in framing the jezebel as a woman whose sexual desires fall into the realm of deviant sexuality. Because of her desires, she has an insatiable sexual appetite and always has

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<sup>1</sup> POC refers to people or person of color.

<sup>2</sup> “Freak” is a black language term that refers to unusual, abnormal or deviant sexual practices.

“one foot over the line” (Collins 2000; 84). Anyone who becomes involved with her is also a “freak,” whether if it is a woman or man and Collins argues that her excessive sexual appetite and her sexual aggression stigmatize her. In *Black Sexual Politics* (2004), she goes on to expand on the definition of “freak” by showing us how pop culture has influenced our definitions of “freak” which permeate our ideas of sexuality, sexual identities and sexual practices. However, the undertone of her work pulls us in a negative direction. Even though she implicates the objectification and perpetuated racism of black freaks, she does not acknowledge that black freaks may feel empowered by their own sexuality, sexual identities, and sexual practices.

Even though there are damaging stereotypes in the media about black women, there are also images in the media that perpetuate the idea of black women as independent, strong, self-reliant agents of their own desire, and the masters of their own destiny (Emerson, 2002). Janet Jackson’s *Discipline* Album (2009) and Rihanna’s single, “S&M” (2011) exemplify a statement in popular art, particularly music, which publicly represents Bondage/Discipline and Sadism/Masochism for people of color, specifically, black women. For Janet Jackson, *Discipline* signifies a part of her sexuality and portrays this as part of her identity. In Rihanna’s video, “S&M,” she acts as the Dominant, demonstrating possible traits of her personality for the world to see.

Although people of color have been forming various sexual communities for years, including BDSM<sup>3</sup> sexual communities, the emergence of these sexual behaviors in pop culture reflect how POC, particularly black people, are creating dialogue and publicly announcing their

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<sup>3</sup> BDSM stands for Bondage/Discipline, Domination/submission, Sadism/Masochism.

sexual acts and identities inside and outside of these sexual communities. More freaks are emerging and their public dialogue can help create sexual communities that are sustaining and dynamic.

Although there are many different types of sexual communities, the communities that I focus on are BDSM, polyamorous and swinging communities. According to the academic literature regarding kinksters<sup>4</sup>, polyamorists<sup>5</sup>, and swingers<sup>6</sup>, there is little information about POC in these communities. There are two things happening at this point. First, because the literature does not talk about POC in these communities, POC are marginalized in these sexual communities. This perpetuates sexual stigma and suppresses mainstream images of POC in these communities. Second, people doing this research clearly have lack of access into these communities to understand how the intersections of their identities shape their abilities to act within and out of these sexual communities.

### *Reclamation of 'Pervert' & 'Promiscuous'*

The reclamation of identities that have been previously (and possibly currently) stigmatized is nothing new. As more and more people reclaim the words and identities that were used to discriminate against them in the past, it seems like a natural progression that words such as “pervert” and “promiscuous” are reclaimed, especially when it comes to

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<sup>4</sup> Sheff and Hammers' (2011) definition: “people involved in “kinky” or “perverted” sexual acts and relationships frequently involving Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, and/or Sadism/Masochism (BDSM, also referred to as sadomasochism).”

<sup>5</sup> Sheff and Hammers' (2011) definition: “people who engage in openly conducted, multiple partner, romantic and/or sexual relationships.”

<sup>6</sup> My definition (led by the research): Swingers are people (single people, non-monogamous and monogamous couples) who engage in sexual acts with other couples and/or single people in swinging environments. Swinging environments are places that designate themselves for people who identify as swingers.

empowering one's own sexuality. Although there is no academic literature regarding the reclamation by people of color of these words, people of color have been reclaiming these words in recent years in other contexts. For instance, POC who engage in swinging, kinky or polyamorous behaviors here in the United States are calling themselves "perverts of color" (Perverts of Color 2011). In addition, another woman of color pop singer, Nelly Furtado, popularized the term "promiscuous," which was the title of her most popular song from the *Loose* album (2006). Although there are minimal popular examples, I aimed to find people who participated in these sexual communities who identified as "perverts" and participated in promiscuous activity whether it was detrimental to their own sexual health and/or empowered their own sexual agency.

### *Defining Terms*

In this study, I use the term "freaky" as a racialized umbrella term for any sexual actions that are unconventional among people of color. As previously noted, I focused on three sexual communities and the people who engaged in the associated sexual activities:

- 1) Kinksters – a popular term for people who engage in Bondage/Discipline, Dominance/Submission, and Sadism/Masochism (popularly known as BDSM),
- 2) Polyamorists – people who engage in multiple partnerships that are loving and/or sexual, and
- 3) Swingers – people (single people, non-monogamous and monogamous couples) who engage in sexual acts with other couples and/or single people in swinging environments.

The second concept that I operationalize is "sexuality." "Sexuality" is a fluid concept, so I am highlighting certain aspects of sexuality with the intention of raising awareness among

varied facets that are interrelated. This includes, 1) sexual desire, 2) sexual behaviors, 3) sexual partners, 4) sexual attitudes, 5) sexual communication, 6) sexual orientation, 7) sexual risks, 8) sexual agency, and 9) sexual fantasy.

“Sexual desire” is the participant’s passionate longing and/or wanting of a subject and/or object. “Sexual behaviors” are sexuality-related acts that participants may do by themselves or with a sexual partner, including those behaviors that are experimental and/or purposeful and may use objects or people. “Sexual partners” are people who engage in sexual behaviors with the participants. These sexual partners can be fleeting or long-term, as long as they have engaged in some type of sexual behavior with the participant. “Sexual attitudes” are participants’ beliefs and feelings on what is appropriate or inappropriate when it comes to their own sexuality. This refers to their beliefs about sexual ideas/mentalities and behaviors and their interest/non-interest in those ideas/mentalities/behaviors. “Sexual communication” is how they talk about their bodies and their sexual experiences with other people. This can be in a sexual situation and/or talking to someone about a particular sexual situation. “Sexual orientation” is how the participants perceive their sexual interests or actions with other people in relation to their own sex or gender; their own identity endorsement. “Sexual risks” are actions that may threaten their sexual health; including sexually transmitted diseases or sexual actions that may relate to trauma. These actions may result in physical damage to the body and/or mental damage on the participant’s psyche. “Sexual agency” is about the participant’s capacity to initiate, enjoy, and explore sex and their sexuality. It is the ability to go into these

sexual communities and possibly negotiate a positive sexual experience. “Sexual fantasy” is the participant’s use of their imagination to reflect on sexual events that they have previously done, seen, read about (Leitenberg & Henning 1995) or created that can be based on reality or fiction.

### *A Black Queer Woman’s Perspective*

As a black, queer, womanist, it is important to note my standpoint in relation to the research. Indicating my standpoint helps to delineate any biases that might occur, as well as note any privilege that might have taken the place while conducting the research.

My interest in this subject came from two places. First, I have been involved with these communities in one way or another. Whether I had friends who identified as polyamorists, swingers, and kinksters or participated in a scene<sup>7</sup>, I was aware of various events and happenings that involved all of these communities. I find myself not belonging to any of these sexual communities, but have consistently been around them and participated in these communities. This places me in a gray area where I am a person who is not in that particular sexual community, but trusted as a person who can understand the lifestyle. My reasons for not identifying as any of these sexual identities lies in my own personal biases, but am often excited to learn and seek new ways of understanding sex and relationships. For instance, although polyamory is theoretically sound, I do not think it is personally manageable. While I can imagine that different people can contribute different things to my life, I do not have the

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<sup>7</sup> A consented negotiation of sexual activity.

time, energy, or patience for more than one relationship at a time. With that said, this research is an attempt to open my mind of various perspectives and gain a better understanding towards my participants.

### *Research Questions*

Considering the lack of literature regarding people of color in these sexual communities, my interview guide was led by the following research questions:

1. How do freaks construct their sexual identity/ies?
2. How does the construction of their sexual identity/ies contribute to their sexuality and sexual actions/behaviors?
3. How does their sexual experimentation affect their identity and their sexual actions/behaviors?
4. How does race play a particular role in their understanding of their actions/behaviors versus sexual identification?

Although my particular focus was on race, these questions helped me to formulate how other intersections of identities demonstrated their influence on a particular person's insight to their sexual identity formation and alternative sexual community. Ultimately, I explored how participants' identity construction and sexual actions/behaviors contributed to the benefits and/or consequences that fostered the navigation of non-sexual and sexual communities.



## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Interdisciplinary Insights and Sociological Importance*

Goffman (1959) states, “society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way” (13). With my 11 participants, I knew them as people who belonged to an alternative sexual community and because a friend who was also in an alternative sexual community recruited them, they trusted that I would be morally inclined to treat them in an appropriate and respectful manner. Although I may not have stigmatized them, the ways that stigma might have affected them in the past draw interdisciplinary recognition. In this particular case, I wanted to connect the concepts of mental and sexual health especially as they pertain to social institutions, such as families, friends, media, etc.

It is extremely essential that we link mental and sexual health because mental health might affect a person’s sexual actions. If a person has negative thoughts, ideas and behaviors, these may lead to negative actions pertaining to their sexual self and having negative mental health may lead to destructive sexual behavior. Very few lesbian and bisexual women perceive themselves to be at risk for sexually transmitted diseases or infections and HIV/AIDS (Morrow and Allsworth 2000) and rarely use protection when having sex with other women. Men, particularly black gay men also have perpetuated stigma (and negative outcomes of that stigma) of being HIV/AIDS carriers (Kelly, St. Lawrence, Amirhanian, DiFranceisco, Anderson-Lamb, Garcia, and Nguyen 2013). Without proper education or proper self-care, the lack of protection used in the black community is detrimental to the community’s health.

Positive mental health means that some people will have positive sexual health and make decisions accordingly. The aspects of positive mental health include 1) accepting one's sexuality, 2) having a positive sexual agency, 3) high self-esteem, and 4) openness with one's sexual orientation (Waldner-Haugrud & Magruder 1996). These positive aspects of psychological functioning may lead to healthy, safer choices with their sexuality and sexual behavior, and they may also have more positive experiences with their sexuality (Tolman 1999).

If freaks have an internalized thought that their sexual behavior is deviant and disgraceful, various social institutions may reinforce those attitudes. For example, a woman who comes out to her parents as a lesbian and rejected by them, she may not act on her lesbian behavior. If she wants to preserve her parents thought of her as good and not deviant or disgraceful, she may object to participating in those behaviors that are stereotypical of lesbian behavior. Where people learn about sex is an "instrument for sexual and social control in which the effectiveness of such programs is judged on the basis of sexual behavior and its observable consequences" (Sears 1992: 7). So if she does not engage in the behavior, then the family institution is effective in enforcing which behaviors are appropriate or not. When these social institutions redundantly teach that identities, particularly sexual identities, are wrong or they are absent, oppression may set in and may become internalized within that individual. However, when social institutions, such as sexual communities, uphold rules and practices that resonate for black freaks, they realize their sexual empowerment inside and outside of that social institution. For instance, the same lesbian in the example above may come out to her colleagues who are supportive in her sexual identity. With this support, she may feel

empowered to date other women and bring her date around her colleagues. With this newfound confidence, she may also bring her date around her work environment – and it may even be possible for her to reject her family because of this new realization.

Examining freaks in marginalized sexual communities could help mitigate the oppressions that they face in everyday life; particularly because they will get to use their voices to connect and educate others who are not like them. My work may help sexual and mental health professionals who reach out and connect to these communities, including specific fields such as sex therapy, counseling, and psychology. This study is sociologically important because my findings highlight marginalized identities within marginalized sexual communities and assesses the needs and wants of these communities. This study contributes knowledge about a poorly documented community and informs future scholars of ways to access and understand POC who have unconventional sexualities.

Proclamations from freaks are sprouting up in popular culture, despite that some sexual communities have existed underground for many years. New POC sexual communities have also formed in recent years and the growing numbers indicate that people are opening themselves up for new sexual possibilities. The stereotypes of alternative sexual communities are for white people are slowly fading with time.

### *Kinky People Of Color*

“People often think that BDSM is a ‘white thing,’” writes Juno Parreñas (2008), a woman of color who participates in the BDSM community. Although BDSM has existed in a variety of cultures, Parreñas highlights a general sentiment within some POC communities. The

stereotype that these BDSM groups only exist in white communities is inaccurate and it marginalizes POC BDSM communities in academic literature, as well as personal narratives.

When it comes to BDSM studies and the demographics of their participants, many studies do not address race (Richters, de Visser, Rissel, Grulich, and Smith 2008; Williams 2006; Lenius 2001; Brame, Brame & Jacobs 1998; Sandnabba, Santtila, Nordling 1999, 2002; Moser, Lee, Christensen 1993; Breslow, Evans, and Langley 1985; Spengler 1977). If the studies address race, they have few or no people of color (Bauer 2008; Connolly 2006; Dancer, Kleinplatz, and Moser 2006; Matthews 2006; Moser and Levitt 1987; Sprott 2006; Newmahr 2006, 2008; Mosher, Levitt, and Manley 2006; Yost 2006; Weinberg, Williams, and Calhan 1995).

Although there are no studies that accurately represent people of color in kink communities, there are two studies that over-represent people of color (Tomassilli, Golub, Bimbi, Parsons 2009; Sisson and Moser 2005). However, Tomassilli et al's and Sisson and Moser's samples are limited by other aspects of identity, such as lesbianism, bisexuality and professional domination. Tomassilli et al's study (2009) focuses on lesbians and bisexual women (48% are women of color) and Sisson and Moser's (2005) study includes professional dominatrixes (26% women of color). Tomassilli et al's study (2009) focuses on four aspects of BDSM: 1) bondage/domination, 2) sadomasochism, 3) photo/video exhibitionism, and 4) asphyxiation/breath play. In this quantitative study featuring 347 participants, they found that white women were more likely to participate in bondage/domination than women of color. Unfortunately, Sisson and Moser's (2005) study did not address any differences regarding race.

With very little research on kinky people of color, it is necessary to collect data that can contribute to the limited knowledge about kinky people of color.

Despite the lack of academic knowledge about kinky people of color, there is documented evidence that kinky POC have been around since the 1930s (Dark Connections 2009), but not necessarily organized as groups. The explosion of pornographic bondage magazines in the 1970s featuring Black women and Black gay men exposed more people of color to BDSM; so much so, that Ron Moore, the first Black gay man to win the International Mr. Leather Competition in 1984 helped to boost a movement of Black people forming various BDSM communities (Dark Connections 2009).

Although there are various BDSM communities of color, there is a common shared experience amongst the POC in these communities: the people tend to be the only one or one of few people of color during a BDSM event (unless they are fortunate to enter a space where it is all POC). Freaks may be reluctant to participate in the space because their race marks them as easily identifiable and they may not want stigma attached to their actions or a fetishized<sup>8</sup> experience in that space.<sup>9</sup>

### *Polyamorous People of Color*

Shows such as Showtime's *Polyamory: Married & Dating* (2012) and MTV's *True Life: I'm Polyamorous* (2009) have exposed more people to the concept of polyamory. Because

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<sup>8</sup> A fetishized experience in this space would include a white person seeking a freak out because of their race. For example, a Black slave/white Master scene or a Black Master/white slave scene that invokes various feelings within these individuals.

<sup>9</sup> It should also be noted that Black people's relationship to BDSM and its depictions has been influenced by the lingering iconography of slavery and possibly a desire to not re-invoke those images in public imaginations; especially in white-dominated kink communities.

polyamory is gaining more popularity due to the media and popular culture, people of color have ventured into the lifestyle to enjoy the benefits of these various relationships. Benefits such as sexual empowerment and freedom in their relationships (Sheff 2005) seem to outnumber the consequences of the stigma of a polyamorous sexual identity.

Polyamorous people of color have been speaking out continually about their struggle with stigma. Hong and Rivera (2005) define polyamory as “the non-possessive, honest, responsible, and ethical philosophy and practice of interacting intimately with multiple people simultaneously. It gives one the option of having relationships outside of social norms” (17).

Hong and Rivera (2005) ascribe to polyamory for several different reasons:

Polyamory fits into our life, because of our politics, our practice and our beliefs. Even when we are considered outsiders and not understood because of these beliefs, we continue to pursue our desires and ideas with passion. We don't claim to be perfect or better than anyone else, but we do understand that we live in a country that oppresses our actions, thoughts and desires. These are the things that we are trying to break out of . . . As people of color, we work to find creative ways to expand our culture, language and relationships outside of the box that we are pushed into by dominant culture. (17)

Hong and Rivera understand they are oppressed because of their identities as polyamorous and people of color and it affects their sexual desires and pursued actions. Their struggle already shows the resiliency of these communities and their ability to stand up for what they truly believe.

Many researchers who have studied polyamory have excluded polyamorous people of color in their research (Barker & Ritchie 2007; Aviram 2007; Ley 2006; Cook 2005; Barker 2005b). With the few studies that have POC inclusion, POC are either underrepresented or do not draw any comparisons by race (Barker 2005a; Klesse 2007; Pallotta-Chiarolli 2006,2010; Wolf 2003; Weber 2002; Weitzman 2006; Kirsten 1996; Walston, 2001; Pallotta-Chiarolli 2010;

Keener 2004). This research is valuable because the sample is all people of color and concrete comparisons show how polyamorous people of color differ from polyamorous white people.

### *Swinging People Of Color*

Past research has reported that people of color, especially Blacks, are discouraged from joining swinging communities because of the discrimination that they have received from swinging, young, white, middle class, highly educated, heterosexual people (Fang 1976). Like the polyamory studies, swinging studies under-represent people of color and/or don't address racial issues at all (Bergstrand 2010; de Visser & McDonald 2007; Jenks 1985; Dixon 1984; Varni 1974; Bartell 1970).

However, individual experiences within swingers' communities show that there are people of color engaging in these communities with other people of color, exploring the benefits as well as the consequences (Solomon 2006; Habtezhgi 2006). Consequences, generally, come in the form of jealousy and emotional cheating. Benefits include open and honest dialogue, attention, and compersion<sup>10</sup>. Groups in the past, such as the Black Swingers Alliance, have helped people of color, particularly black people, confront stigma and take pride in alternative sexual relationships.

Not only do swingers have to deal with the stigma of deviant sexuality, but they also have to deal with stigma surrounding sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Most swing communities encourage participants to use condoms, but swingers have been accused of

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<sup>10</sup> Compersion is often referred to as "the opposite of jealousy" and is a feeling of empathetic happiness and joy when one's partner is romantic/sexual/emotional with another person. This was coined by the defunct Kerista Commune in San Francisco in 1971. It is usually used in the context of Polyamory/Polyfidelity, but I felt that it was an accurate description of a phenomenon that was more than just a voyeuristic relationship.

infecting those who are in the swinging community, as well as those who are not by people in and outside of the swinging community (Hegeman 2011; Hope 2010). People of color consistently deal with the stigma of the stereotype of being a hypersexual person of color possibly transmitting disease. With that said, the reality of statistics shows how African-Americans, particularly heterosexual women, are the new face of HIV as they are the population that has the most recent infections (DiRamio & Bersch 2010).

### *Queer Freaks Of Color*

“Queer” tends to be a word that most people understand as an umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and questioning, or as a political term meaning “not normal” – referring to those who stay away from normative archetypes. There have been many ideas regarding definitions of “queer,” ranging from an “unfixed site of engagement and contestation” (Berry & Jagose 1996: 11) to not having “fundamental logic, nor a consistent set of characteristics” (Jagose 1996: 96) to “the instability of identity” (Gamson 1995: 390) to Halperin’s (1995) idea of queer:

Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality *vis-à-vis* the normative . . . [Queer] describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance. (62)

In my study, I will implement Halberstam’s (2005: 6) use of the word, which highlights both aspects of these definitions: “‘queer’ refers to non-normative logic and organization of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time.”



The one thing common among these various freaks is their queerness. For instance, BDSM communities of color are largely dominated by black queers,<sup>11</sup> particularly black, gay men. Black queer men are still on the forefront of the black BDSM scene with heterosexual black men being in the background among POC (Dark Connections 2009). Women and queer women of color in kink communities are largely represented in those scenes, so it was interesting to see this dynamic reflected in my research as well.

Like the Kink/BDSM Movement over the last two decades for POC, POC have also been participating in polyamory discourse, predominantly by queers of color. Queers of color deal with a variety of oppressions, so holding a particular standpoint on sexuality outside of the heterosexist, monogamous model of society is not new to them. Although “pervert” has not been racialized in the past, queer, polyamorous (and more) people of color have accepted the word “pervert” as an empowering word to describe their identity as transgressive while adjusting to the implications behind their race (Perverts of Color 2011). Pervert as a moniker is subversive; it can be enticing, it can pique curiosity and/or it can be combative depending upon people’s perceptions. An out, queer, polyamorous person of color would have to be confident in their sexual identities - especially to encounter whatever comes their way.

Queerness in the swinging community is not new. It is expected that the women in these communities will and do have sex with other women. While the women might identify as bisexual, men, are generally, actively prohibited from enacting same-sex interactions at most mainstream swing venues (de Visser and McDonald 2007; Cooper 2003; Dixon 1984).

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<sup>11</sup> My use of “Black queer” might be anomalous to someone self-identifying as a Black, gay man in this particular moment. I am imposing on their own identity with intention to unify this particular group.

### 3 THEORETICAL APPROACHES

In line with symbolic interactionists, phenomenologists and labeling theorists, I use queer theory, intersectionality theory and a womanist approach to frame the context of sexuality for freaks. These theories are inherently feminist/womanist; coined and evaluated by feminist/womanist scholars and support and analyze constructions of marginality, the instability of identity, and the alleviation of all oppression.

#### *Queer Theory*

Queer theory tends to construct and deconstruct, destabilize and stabilize definitions that are problematic to people who are non-normative, and therefore, oppressed by a variety of social institutions. Freaks' experiences may exemplify queer theory. While destabilizing essentialist notions of what a person is supposed to do sexually, they are stabilizing their sexual acts as durable parts of their sexuality. At the same time, they are visible as people of color, and because of this, they destabilize the notion of being kinky, polyamorous, and swinging (because studies reinforce that participants who engage in these communities are white). Concurrently, they stabilize the hypersexual moniker of perversion and promiscuity that are ascribed to kinky, polyamorous and swinging communities, not because they are hypersexual or sexually immoral, but because of society's lack of knowledge about freaky practices.

#### *Intersectionality Theory*

Kimberle Crenshaw coined "Intersectionality" in 1989 to explain how Black women were experiencing the law. The main concept of intersectionality is that race is the first and foremost

attribute that is signified to people. When intersected with being a woman, two concurrent oppressions are taking place at the same time. This theory works for a multitude of identities and attributes. Intersectionality theory posits that categorical identities (i.e. swinger, polyamorous, and kinky) and/or demographics (i.e. race, sex, age, class, ability, gender, education, occupation, etc.) work dialogically to shape people's experiences. Collins (1995) states that intersectionality is:

a model describing the social structures that create social positions. Second, the notion of intersectionality describes micro-level processes—namely, how each individual and group occupies a social position within interlocking structures of oppression described by the metaphor of intersectionality (492).

Sandoval expresses it a bit differently in her text, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000). She states that in *ourselves* and in *our* bodies and identities, *we* are both the oppressor and the oppressed. Similarly, participants in my study may identify as a member of a sexual community (which might be an indicator of education) and in turn, have privileges and oppressions that shape their sexual lives and identities.

### *Womanist Approach*

When considering queer and intersectionality theoretical frameworks, I feel that a womanist approach is necessary. My standpoint as a Black woman directly affects the way I approach the world and the people in it. Phillips (2006) describes womanism as encompassing five different characteristics: 1) antioppressionist, 2) vernacular, 3) nonideological, 4) communitarian, and 5) spiritualized. *Antioppressionist* refers to a womanist easing the tension behind all specific sources of oppression and even those oppressions that cannot be/are not labeled. *Vernacular* is thinking about how people function in their everyday lives with practical

human concerns. *Nonideological* is how a womanist “build[s] structures of inclusiveness and positive interrelationship” by erasing the rigid lines and boxes that people often assess of those structures. *Communitarian* is the womanist view that all members of a community should sort out the imbalances of those who are in different groups in order to maximize the outcome of everyone’s (and everything’s) well-being. *Spiritualized* is the “potentially controversial” concept that is spirituality rooted in all humankind including our political considerations. These concepts are in congruence with Sandoval’s *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000: 142) where “revolutionary love” is a necessary belief when understanding those who manage multiple oppressions. It is Sandoval’s notion of love that allows us theoretical and political freedom to help us understand communities based in difference, as well as sameness. It is revolutionary love that allows us to include people who are different from us. It also allows people to help each other understand each other when it comes to varying forms of oppression. This is also the case when it comes to freaks. Freaks (whether consciously or not) are doing their own consciousness-raising through their daily activities, which is a fundamental value and core objective of womanist ideology.

### *Queer Theory, Intersectionality and Womanism Working Together*

Queer theory, intersectionality, and womanism can work dialogically together. While queer theory allows me to destabilize (and concurrently stabilize) the identities of these subversive communities individually, womanism allows me to group them and label them as one (freaks in sexual communities), thus, addressing the needs of this population based on a common sexual oppression. Queer theory and intersectionality discuss labels and categories as

a part of human existence; however, labels and categories generally render invisible important details of people's experience and meaning systems (Phillips & Stewart 2008). This is where womanism comes in - it helps us to understand and love those who are different and take each person's experience as a viable source of information about how they relate in the world, and in particular, how they relate to their sexual and non-sexual communities.

#### **4 METHODS**

An interview-based study was best for this topic because researchers will be able to hear the stories of freaks in their own voices, their situations and behaviors in that specific space and time. One of the main reasons I decided to do this qualitative study is because with these methods, I can target the meanings behind the experiences of everyday life and the study fits especially well with movement goals of visibility, cultural challenge, and self-determination (Gamson 1995).

As different disciplines have crossed over and exchanged methodological ideas, my qualitative research may set a precedent when it comes to investigating freaks in their sexual communities. By gathering information from feminist and queer critical theorists and methodologies and previous researchers who have minimally studied people of color in these sexual communities, I was able to understand what best works for my participants. In addition, as Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2011: 117) point out, "similar populations or in similar contexts," qualitative studies now have the capabilities of meta-analyses. This is because of the growing body of knowledge around certain groups that are able to inform those who are interested in the changing of policies and sparking social justice movements.

### *Participants and Design*

For this study, I interviewed 11 participants. In order for a person to participate in my study, they had to identify as a person of color who identified as a kinkster, swinger, and/or polyamorist, and they had to live in the Atlanta Metropolitan Area. Although it would have been beneficial to get freaks from different areas, staying in one area might reflect the ideologies of this particular city. This is important because this allows me (and other scholars) to make comparisons with different cities in the future.

Considering sexuality is a difficult and emotional subject for people to talk about and as I am not fully immersed in these communities, I decided on a snowball sampling method. My first interview was Coco, my friend who identified as polyamorous and a swinger, and acted as the snowball seed (or initial informant). For future interviews, I provided her with a script to say to other people who might participate in my study (Appendix A) and told her they had to contact me via phone if they were interested in doing the study. I asked her to refer me to people who might reflect differences in race, gender, sexual orientation, sexual identity, age and class. Although I will not be able to generalize my findings to the population at large, snowball sampling has the capability to provide an understanding of a subject that had been concealed (Adler and Clark 2003), implicating the importance of “friend-of-friend” contact, especially with subversive communities.

As people contacted me, I scheduled interviews, told them that the interviews would be audio-recorded, and transcribed by me. All of the participants chose their private location for the interview. Before the interview, I gave them the Informed Consent Form (Appendix B) to read and gave them an opportunity to ask questions if they needed to do so. I also informed

them that if I were unclear about something that I had transcribed, I would ask them within the week to clarify and that it should not take more than an hour of their time if they chose to speak with me. After that, I would delete their phone number to maintain Georgia State University's Institutional Review Board guidelines for participant confidentiality. After I gave them the informed consent, I gave them a counselor referral sheet that I prepared (Appendix C) if they should be triggered by any discussion of trauma. All of the places and people listed are associated with being "freak"-friendly places and people.

The interviews were in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended conversations. The interview guide focused on race and sexual experience (Appendix D). I asked questions like, "How many other people of color are generally present in these settings? Tell me about any negative and/or positive experiences that you have had while in [their sexual community]. Do you belong to any specific groups?" The interviews lasted from 44 minutes to two and a half hours, with the average interview being a little bit more than an hour long. They provided their own pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and all information has been de-identified just in case I need to use it in the next five years.

### *Sample*

Overall, there were 11 participants – nine women and two men (Table 1). Their ages ranged from 30 to 51 years old (mean age = 36.18 years; median age = 35). While I wanted various races, sexes, genders, sexual orientations and sexual community identities, my sample was limited by the contacts of my snowball seed. All of the people who contacted me identified as black. Eight participants identified as polyamorous, while the other three participants were

“open to polyamory.” Six participants identified as swingers; six identified as kinky; and one participant identified as “a little kinky.”

Both men identified as heterosexual and queer-friendly and seven women identified as lesbian and queer. Two of the women identified as bisexual and of those two women, one identified as queer. As far as gender identity, four people identified as feminine, two people identified as masculine and five people identified as having both feminine and masculine qualities. As the researcher, I noted that seven participants were presenting as feminine and four of the participants presented as masculine.

All of my participants were employed and eight of the participants stated they were middle class. Two of the participants were poverty/lower class and one participant gauged herself as being lower-middle class. As far as the highest level of education completed, two participants had graduated high school or received their GED, four were college graduates, and five had Master’s degrees or equivalent. There were three participants that were newly single, four participants who were married, two who were engaged to be married, and two who were dating and in open relationships.



Table 1.1 – Demographic Table A

Participant	Sex	Sexual Orientation	Gender	Queer?	Relationship Status	Sexual Identity
Coco	Female	Lesbian	Feminine	Yes	In an open relationship; dating	Polyamorous; Swinger
Feathergirl	Female	Bisexual	Feminine	No	Newly Single	Polyamorous; Swinger
LaLa	Female	Bisexual	Mix of feminine & masculine	Yes	Married	Polyamorous; Swinger
Bam	Male	Heterosexual	Mix of feminine & masculine	Queer-friendly	Married	Polyamorous; Swinger
Conrad	Male	Heterosexual	Masculine	Queer-friendly	Newly Single	Polyamorous; Swinger; a little kinky
Taliba	Female	Lesbian/ Queer	Feminine	Yes	Married	Polyamorous; Kinky
Beefcake	Female	Lesbian/ Queer	Mix of feminine & masculine	Yes	Married	Polyamorous; Kinky
Chub	Female	Lesbian	Mix of feminine & masculine	Yes	Newly Single	Swinger; Kinky; open to Polyamory
Sir	Female	Queer/ Pansexual/ Lesbian	Mix of feminine & masculine	Yes	In multiple relationships	Polyamorous; Kinky
DC	Female	Lesbian	Masculine	Yes	Engaged	Kinky; open to Polyamory
Soko	Female	Lesbian	Feminine	Yes	Engaged	Kinky; open to Polyamory

Table 1.2 – Demographic Table B

Participant	Age	Race	Education	Occupation	Economic Status
Coco	31	Mixed Race – Black & White	Master’s	Social Worker	Middle class
Feathergirl	34	Black	High school graduate	Massage Therapist	Lower class
LaLa	32	Black	Master’s	Entrepreneur	Middle class
Bam	30	Black	GED	Carpenter	Middle class
Conrad	38	Black	College graduate	Radio Station Promoter	Poverty
Taliba	37	Black	College graduate	Executive Administrative Assistant	Middle class
Beefcake	30	Black (not American)	MBA	IT Manager	Middle class
Chub	35	Black	College graduate	Nurse	Middle class
Sir	38	Black	2 Master’s Degrees; EDS	Therapist; Educator	Lower-Middle class
DC	51	Black	EDS	Teacher/Tutor/ Speaker	Middle class
Soko	42	Mixed Race – Black & Japanese	College graduate	Retail Management	Middle class

## 5 DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

As each interview was completed, I analyzed themes that emerged from the data, informed by a modified grounded theory approach (Donnelly, Burgess, Anderson, Davis & Dillard 2001; Strauss & Corbin 1998). With this method, I analyzed the data by using less inductive (building theory from data) and more deductive approaches (questions guided by previous literature and building on theory) to the research.

### *Multitude of Sexual Community Identities*

It is not surprising that all my participants identified as polyamorous or identified themselves with someone who was open to polyamory, simply because of the convenience sample that I had. If my seed identified as polyamorous, then it was highly likely that other people would probably identify as being polyamorous. However, the theme highlighted the most was the fact that they all connected to more than one sexual community. Whether they were “open” to it or engaged “a little” into it, all participants found themselves connecting to more than one sexual community and felt empowered to engage in that community via their own sexual agency.

### *Finding & Defining Poly*

Those participants that identified as polyamorous explained it as “loving multiple people for different reasons,” as Beefcake explains. Taliba says that “it’s a wonderful space where you can be yourself with multiple people and potentially have various intimate relationships with

these people.” Feathergirl states that it is the “Love of many. That I could love more than one. That more than one person can bring me joy and I can bring joy to more than one.”

Although many of the participants had been practicing non-monogamy and polyamory before knowing the “technical definition,” ten of the participants learned about it through the media, particularly by watching television shows, documentaries, internet searching and reading about the subject. From this media, they were able to assess the community they belonged to and were able to do their own research about the lifestyle. LaLa tells us:

Well, I didn’t know it was called poly, I just knew that I was not a monogamous person from probably the age 14 on up, so when we finally watched a documentary on poly, I was like “whup, that’s me.” So I was probably about 21, 22 when I saw the documentary on the whole poly community and the different terminologies and I was like “okay, we go to Atlanta, I know what to look for and what type of groups,” but that was probably 2001, 2002. We moved down here and the first step was Yahoo Groups. So that was the initial entry into the poly world, was internet, websites and anything that was geared towards either swingers, open marriage, open dating.

Considering that polyamory was a “new” cultural phenomenon to her at the time, it was important for her to find like-minded community. For her, finding these communities played a valuable role in how she wanted to live her life, but a place where this life is possible. Her migration to the South, and in particular, the metropolitan area of Atlanta, is a direct reflection of her not only finding the like-minded community, but a place where there is an abundance of POC who engage in these alternative sexual communities.

### *Polyamory versus Swinging*

When participants discussed their polyamorous lifestyles, they also interwove their swinging lifestyles to their answers. Some people felt the need to distinguish the difference

between being polyamorous and swinging, while some people felt that those two communities overlapped so much, it was not clear to them where they began and where they ended. For instance, LaLa explains the difference between the two:

The actual definition [of polyamory] to me makes sense. The love of many. Being able to love more than one person. When I break it down even further, to me, it's not just about sexually, you can love someone on a friendship level, on an emotional level, a comfort level, so when I speak of polyamory, yeah, I might have more than one circle or network or groups of people, but it doesn't always mean sexual. So poly for me has always been a step above swingers, by taking it past the random sex.

In this quote, LaLa clearly ranks polyamory over swinging. Random sex is seen as less valuable than compatibility on a friendship, emotional, comfortable and sexual level. Not to say that random sex is worthless to LaLa, but rather she prefers the possibilities of being in other relationships over an extended period of time. This also allows her the opportunity to be empowered over which sexual communities she would like to engage in according to what she wants at the time.

Conrad makes another distinction that is unique about polyamory and swinging. He adds:

[Polyamory] is not really swinging. Swinging is more of an open relationship. Polyamory is having multiple, for lack of terminology, multiple monogamous relationships, where you have more than one partner, you know. And you value each one of them the same.

For Conrad, swinging is a behavior that can be accessed by all parties involved. If he is to engage in a swinging situation, this means that his partner also has access to this other partner. Polyamory, on the other hand, keeps him at the focal point and does not allow other partners to have concurrent access to his other partners. His boundaries are exclusive in his

polyamorous relationships and he is empowered in this sexual community by regulating partner access.

However, Coco overlaps her thoughts on polyamory, swinging and being queer. She begins with her development in recognizing her feelings on dating multiple people at a time:

It began with the overall development of my sexual personality and sexual development as an adult. I was previously really reserved and as I was coming into opening up myself to partners in general, I started opening myself up to multiple partners as a possibility. And for quite a while, I was, even when I was in love, I was always interested in other partners and I never felt like it was wrong and despite all of the information around me telling me it was wrong, I still was like, "oh goodness. I don't really feel like it's wrong. Maybe I just don't know any better because I'm young or whatever."

Because most people are socially conditioned to think that monogamous is the main (or only) way of being in relationships, she finds herself in a moral dilemma. Her thoughts on her desired behaviors/feelings contradict how society may see her. This makes her cautious and conflicted; even to the point that she thinks that this could be accounted for because of her young age.

She continues:

But ultimately, I realize that if I don't think it's wrong, maybe there's a community of people who also doesn't think it's wrong. And as I got older and started accessing the swinger community, it started making me feel a little bit more whole and a little bit more accepted, a little bit more part of something. Part of a community that understood me and a community that I could be open with about my desires and my interests and my partnerships and it blossomed from there.

She found a community who did not judge her for her feelings about having multiple relationships, whether they were sexual or not. This gave her the opportunity to explore her feelings more, engage in the community more, and see the various perspectives of swinging lifestyles. Not only was she able to be honest with herself, she was able to express her feelings to a community that had connections to other communities, such as polyamorous

communities. Expanding her horizons allowed her to be honest with other feelings that she had regarding her queerness. She states:

It's strange though because my coming out as queer came at the same time as me beginning to participate in the swinger community and those two elements don't always intersect very well, so it was a little confusing. But I was ready to kind of chart my own course at that point 'cause that's what I'm about.

Her ability to be open, honest and express all of the feelings that she had came about because she was able to express them in multiple environments that were all supportive. Even though there were not many queer people that engaged in the traditional swinging community, the support of both of those communities allowed her to engage in both and feel comfortable in being herself in both environments. This way, she was able to empower herself and find a space for queer people in swinging environments.

These three examples show us how the random sexual acts of swinging can lead people into a polyamorous lifestyle by subjecting individuals to a unique set of sexual behaviors that can be understood as a way to sexually empower themselves. The possibility of being sexual with multiple people opens individuals up to take it a step further to have relationships with multiple people – which not only empower their sexual agency, but also renegotiate their sexual attitudes and expand their sexual horizons.

### *Intersectionality and Sexual Community Identity*

Even though I found commonalities among those who identify as polyamorous, it was more fascinating to see what type of person was drawn toward a certain sexual community; in this case, those who were drawn towards the swinging lifestyle versus those who were drawn towards the kink lifestyle. In the following sections, I analyze sexual orientation and sexual

community identity through an intersectional lens. Interestingly, I found that bisexual women and heterosexual men tended to identify as swingers and that the lesbians who identified as swingers were feminine-presenting. In addition, I found that the majority of the lesbians found BDSM more suitable for their sexual community needs.

### *Bisexual Women and Swinging*

In previous academic literature, I learned that researchers do not study black bisexual women. Although we can attribute the lack of research to racism, sexism and heterosexism, for the black bisexual women of my study, they are (or were) in relationships with heterosexual men. This allowed them to access heterosexual privilege inside and outside of their sexual community. For an everyday audience outside of their sexual community, they are black women in heterosexual relationships, despite that they are bisexual and swingers. Even when they “come out” as swingers to family and friends, it is generally hard for people who are not in the swinging community to understand why they are being “superfreaks” (Collins 2004: 120). Those people that they come out to tend to be curious or ignore that part of their identity altogether. Feathergirl describes her sister’s inquisitiveness and support:

She’s supportive. It’s not an ongoing conversation that we have. But she feels like “this is your life and if that works for you.” She probably wishes that she could have done some of the things that I do or done and I share with her and she did mention something like that before. She said, “You do so many things and I don’t even understand, but okay.” I’m like uninhibited sometimes, so that’s a part of my journey. But she’s supportive.

Feathergirl’s sister’s curiosity shows how she does not feel empowered to engage in the type of sexual behavior that has been a part of Feathergirl’s journey. Her sister acknowledges that



Feathergirl's sexuality empowers her and continues to support her whenever they discuss sexuality. She understands that what may work for one person, may not work for another.

Disclosure is a sensitive issue outside of these sexual communities. LaLa states:

Family tries not to speak about it for the most part. My mom's religious so it's a non-issue. With her, she will just keep praying until it changes. For my dad, it's just don't ask, don't tell. He's cool. Everyone else, as far as friends, they pretty much know, yeah, if you know me, then you probably associate me with the open lifestyle.

LaLa considers it a non-issue because she knows that this is just another part of her lifestyle and she is confident in it. Even though her family knows about her lifestyle, they want to keep that part of her life "in the closet," so to speak, and that way it is easier for them to cope with her because from the outside, she looks just like another heterosexual married couple. This disclosure shows us how they access privilege when they withhold their bisexual and swinging identities (purposeful or not) outside of their swinging communities.

Past research has reported that people of color, especially blacks, are discouraged from joining swinging communities because of the discrimination that they have received from swinging, young, white, middle class, highly educated, heterosexual people (Fang 1976). Within black bisexual women's swinging communities, addressing the issue of bisexuality posed as somewhat of a challenge for them. White swinging communities are known for bisexual women being in their spaces. This is not the case when it comes to black swinging communities. When talking about other black bisexual women in swinging atmospheres, LaLa claims that "there's a lot of [women] that are not into women." She estimates that bisexual women make up less than twenty-five percent of the women in that environment (the other seventy-five percent being straight), and therefore, it is harder to find a woman where she can

act out her sexual desires. Feathergirl also stated how difficult it was to find other bisexual women in swinging communities and decided to go in a slightly different direction. She claimed, "My last venture out was to find a girlfriend, but now I'm out to find a family." Before, she went to swinging communities to find a girlfriend. Now, she wants to find a family where she has a girlfriend and other kids and parents to foster her family dynamic and polyamorous desires. Not only is she seeking companionship, but she is also looking for people to help her raise her kids and ideally finding people to collaborate on familial dynamics.

These black bisexual women are limited with finding their ideal relationship situation and in addition, have to think of their roles as mothers. With the intersection of motherhood, this shapes their standpoint and gives them a varied perspective on their sexual community. Collins (2000: 176) states, "motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment." Even though they are "freaks," the intersection of motherhood (with being black, bisexual swingers) allows these bisexual mothers to embrace being a freak. They are essentially empowering themselves and their sexuality through the lens of motherhood. In our discussion about how she felt about other swinging bisexual women of color, LaLa stated:

They're all pretty much positive. We can relax and talk about whatever and discuss how it feels to share. Or how you deal with jealousy and how do the kids feel about the other person's kids. When you have other women who are in the lifestyle, we can have those type of conversations about being a woman and a mother and a wife or however, and how you incorporate your daily work.

The support that she is able to gain from other swinging bisexual mothers of color helps to reassure her that there is a community for her and that it is possible to have the relationships

that she wants and desires. Not only can she sequester that part of her identity in hopes that it will not affect other parts of her social life as a mother, but she can treat her outing in a swinging community as a way to express recreational interests with like-minded mothers. With all of these intersecting identities, we can learn from these mothers about how people evaluate their relationships inside and outside of these sexual communities.

Despite finding women in swinging environments are difficult, black bisexual mothers might be drawn to swinging communities more than they might be drawn to other sexual communities. Welcoming bisexual women has been the standard for swinging communities, despite that these communities are mostly straight. Bisexual women may find these places more enticing to act out their sexual desires with limited judgment because most of the women there are open to same-sex sexuality, whether they have previously engaged in it or currently engage in same-sex sexual activity. Going in an environment with heterosexual privilege and swinging privilege,<sup>12</sup> they limit their social inequalities in these environments. These swinging environments can be self-affirming in expressing positive sexual politics for these black bisexual moms. However, when they are not actively professing their sexual identities, it limits sexual liberation movements in black communities because of the privatized nature of swinging communities.

### *Heterosexual Men and Swinging*

Black men who get involved with Black bisexual women become “freaks” by association (Collins 2000). And not only are they “freaks” by association with these women, they are already seen

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<sup>12</sup> In this case, swinging privilege indicates that partnered bisexual women are preferred in these sexual environments because of their attractions to both women and men.

as hypermasculine with an “excessive sexual appetite” (Collins 2000: 129). By identifying as a swinger, those people outside (and possibly inside) of the swinging community may see these black men as STD carriers. Not only does this highlight racism, it also perpetuates the idea that men are sexually threatening to women’s health. Bam found himself contracting and accidentally spreading chlamydia while in a swinging environment and infecting his future wife (who was not in the same environment at the time). He claimed that he had been “out there” while his girlfriend was not, in the beginning of their relationship. From that point forward, he learned that if he were going to be “out there,” he would need to communicate to his wife about it. Facing the shame and guilt of spreading an STD, he has to carry the stigma that black men are possible carriers of disease. This might also reflect in his partner’s behavior by his partner rarely seeking out men because of fear that she might possibly get a disease. In addition, his behavior directly affects how he approaches any more sexual situations by communicating and seeking approval from his wife.

Intersectionality theory helps us to explain why straight black men choose to be swingers and participate in swinging communities. Stereotypically reinforcing their excessive sexual appetite, one woman is not enough for them. They are accustomed to seek more women. By partnering with bisexual women, they might be able to access an “excess” of women within the heterosexist structure that guides their everyday life, whether it is outside or inside of their sexual community. Fulfilling their “ultimate male fantasy,” not only deems them as sexually desirable to (most) women, but “could possibly elevate [him] in the eyes of his peers” (Steig & Jones 2002: 39). For Bam, he only deals with bisexual women because that is

his ideal sexual situation; not only for him, but for his wife as well. His struggle with straight women is that they want to be with him, so much so that they will compromise their own sexuality:

I actually had [a woman] approach me. And actually, she approached my wife first and was like, "Was it cool and everything?" It was like, "Yeah, go over there." It's good. We had talked, conversating [sic], and my thing was, "Is you straight or is you bi? If my girl walk in the room with us, is it cool?" But that's what I like to see. And if it's not, then, it's not going to work. . . . You can get some of them to just, I don't know. They act different sometimes. One time they want to be like "well." And once you tell them that I only deal with that certain type and then they see where you come from, most of them be like, "well, back in my day, I did use to like girls," or "I did do this one time," or "I thought about it." And I'm not really trying to be your first in or your first time or this what you thought about what you wanted to do, but not really. I really want you to be full-blown and know what you want. I don't want to play around and do games with you. Like I said, they different.

This demonstrates how some straight women who are freaks may compromise their sexuality and sexual behaviors to help men achieve their male fantasy. It also shows how their range of sexual behavior may be fluid over time via various forms of sexual experimentation and exploration. In addition, this quote shows how the heterosexual male viewpoint sees that most of the women of color in swinging environments are bisexual, not only with identity, but specifically tied to sexual behavior. Conrad explains this in-depth:

Nine times out of ten, we'll say six times out of ten, they're appeasing their mate. They've always been curious about women, but that's the extent of it. I don't think they ever want a girlfriend, they just want to experience it. They like to experience the sexual part. They want to live out the fantasy. . . . But I think the majority of them are bisexual, mostly out of curiosity and the other half are just truly bisexual and they enjoy sex with both men and women.

Fulfilling the male fantasy of two women being sexual is idealized and realized in swinging environments and even though both Bam and Conrad felt that most of the women of color in those environments are bisexual, it should be noted that their partners and ex-partners, who were bisexual women, did not feel the same way. Being heterosexual in a swinging environment is strictly about fulfilling sexual desire and regulation of sexual behavior. Being a bisexual woman in this environment is about fulfilling sexual needs, as well as finding an additional partner to engage with outside of their swinging community.

Even though this manly bravado takes place in swinging environments, straight black men can carry this attitude outside of their swinging community, with limited effects. In my research, when the men came out as swingers to family and friends, it is no surprise. Conrad states, "They just think I'm still sowing my oats." For people outside of this community, their beliefs about men wanting more than one woman coincide as something that is "natural" for men. Not only do their beliefs validate the stereotypes of men, they also validate the sexism that is happening against women. In addition, their beliefs also invalidate their sexual identity to those outside of their sexual community.

Straight black men who pair up with black bisexual women can monitor their partner's behavior without much struggle. The men in my study say that it is "rare" when their partner wants to have sex with another man, but they acknowledge that their partner has sexual desires for other men and compromises with their partners' desires. However, they are not

involved in that sexual interaction. The men of this study uphold the “one penis rule”<sup>13</sup> which is inherently heterosexist and regulated by all the men involved. An example Conrad gives is:

[Black bisexual swinging women are] usually in a relationship with a guy and there’s only a one penis rule. And that’s what I find a lot of ‘cause I tend to go to these clubs as a single guy. Me and my partner, because we have kids, we tend to swap off or my ex-partner, switch off when we go off in those environments, and so I’m there as a single guy. So unless there’s another single woman who is interested in a guy and it so happened that I fit in her life, and you know . . . That’s just been my experience.

Bam shows another perfect example of how men monitor their partner’s behavior and enforce the “one penis rule:”

It’s a lot of different examples and lot of boundaries that people set before they go into. And then a lot of people just say, “hey, well, this what we do.” And it works with different ways with people and I appreciate all the ways. It’s just my way is a little different. I’d rather for me to be there, you know what I mean? I’d rather for us to be there. Like with females, I let her play with females all day, I have no problem with that. They’ll go on dates, they’ll go to female parties, you know, different parties. It’s cool. I have no problem with that ‘cause you need your female time, so it’s cool with me. But like as in couple parties, I’d rather for me to be there. You know what I mean? I have no problem it’s a couple and two females. You know what I mean? Dude can be there; he can watch. You know what I mean? Or he can participate with his female, but not with mines.

Even though he acknowledges there are many different people who have various boundaries in relationships, enacting the “one penis rule” is a common element in these environments.

Loving and having sex with black men might be easy for these women, but they can only do it one at a time. This is where the “love and trouble” (Collins 2000: 152) dynamic between black women and men can be problematic. The trouble lies in these black men’s lack of acknowledgement about sexism in and outside of these sexual communities and accepting the “one penis rule” as valid and worth enforcing. This is also problematic because these beliefs

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<sup>13</sup> This means that there can only be one penis during a sexual act, preferably the penis that is partnered with the bisexual woman that is involved in a woman-woman-man sexual interaction.

are based on “heterosexist, Eurocentric gender ideology” (Collins 2000: 152) within sexual politics. These hegemonic gender ideologies are paradigmatic and instilled on black women and men about appropriate gender behavior in these swinging environments, possibly without conscious acknowledgement. So even while there are bisexual black women in these communities, the lack of bisexual acknowledgement (including sexual behavior) inside and outside of these communities limit the perspective on sexual liberation movements. Therefore, sexual liberation movements are stunted in these various sexual communities.

#### *Heterosexual Men and Polyamory*

The heterosexual men in my study did not have any negative reactions from family and friends when they came out as polyamorous. Although family and friends reacted in different ways, there were no situations that had the men worried about how their family perceived them. Conrad shares his story:

Again, like most of my family, [my mom] didn't really know what it really meant, didn't take it too seriously and it wasn't until they saw me living this way that it hit home. . . . She doesn't realize that this is a viable option for love, you know, to her, it's different.

His friends had similar responses:

Well, most guys are like “Oh yeah. That's it. That's the life dude!” So none of my male friends, it was ever an issue. Female friends, like I said before, everybody just thought that I just wanted to be a whore. They didn't understand that it wasn't so much. It wasn't about the sex. It was more about having romantic relationships and like what people still don't get. Yes, sex is involved with any intimate relationship or it can or cannot be, but it's not the main incentive.



Although Conrad feels a little frustration over people not understanding all his levels of intimacy, he uses it as a chance to educate them and tries to get them to understand that monogamy does not have to be the only option for people who want to be in relationships. The ability to live their life like they want makes them the “exception” as Bam explains when he tells about coming out to his family:

[My mom] was like “All right.” But I don’t think it hit her until I came home with my wife and girlfriend. And then, we all slept, like, in one room and she kind of was like, “hold up, that’s not your wife.” I’m like, “Well, but, if my wife,” so she kind of like accepted and she kind of start understanding. More like, generations do change. ... I’d rather be together as a family. She know that that’s my wife, she know my wife likes women, so I mean, we all have to accept it. So she’s cool about it. She ain’t going really have no problem. She love [my wife] to death...Well, my father’s side, like my grandmother, they live right down the street. So, I took her down there and everything, met the family and everything, so they all basically know. Half of ‘em on my Facebook page, so whatever you see is what you going see. And I always been like that since I was younger, too, so it’s like “Ay, he wild.”

Again, he is a freak because he is associated with his bisexual wife and the hypermasculine sexual appetite becomes more of a reality when the family is face-to-face with these men’s sexual partners. Not only is the “ultimate male fantasy” played out in a sexual way, but it becomes magnified by creating that sexual situation all the time, especially for those outside of that sexual community. For these two men, the polyamorous relationship is a way to satisfy all partners involved. They are satisfied sexually, romantically and emotionally and this seems to be important to their family dynamic.

*Feminine Lesbians in Swinging*

With the limited perspective in swinging communities framed by heterosexism and appropriate gender behavior, it should not be a surprise that most of the black lesbians in my study do not find themselves in swinging environments. Two out of eight lesbians who are in swinging environments participate in casual sex with other partnered women, particularly those who identify as bisexual. These lesbians, in turn, act as the straight couples' "unicorn"<sup>14</sup> who can fulfill the woman's sexual desires while the men are titillated by the visual effects of the two women having sex.

In these environments, the black lesbians have the power to be the jezebels/whores with limited negative effects. The only negative aspect of being in this environment is that "men think that they can feel free to touch you," says Coco. For these women in this heterosexist environment, men feel like the women are there for them, available for "use," even though they are not. Even when they come out as lesbians in this environment, they are still seen as possible sexual prospects and purely objectified by others in that environment, including bisexual women and straight men. This objectification is sordid and entrenched by heterosexual privilege in these swinging communities.

Despite the heterosexual space in these swinging communities, these women feel empowered by their sexual desires and actions; which in turn, helps them to solidify their swinging identity. Because they are empowered by their swinging identity, they view these swinging environments as safe spaces. It is possible that they see this space as safe because, as lesbians, they have a kinship with other women. Their kinship with other women might act as a

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<sup>14</sup> A unicorn is a single woman who will have sex with women and might occasionally have sex with men.

strategy of resistance in an environment where it is dominated by heteronormative appropriate gender behavior. Dialogically, they also enact and embody appropriate gender behavior for that environment because it is a safe space and acknowledged as a place where women can partake in sexual behavior with each other.

Particularly, when it comes to her lesbian and queer identities, Coco explains why she feels that being in swingers environments are safe spaces:

I don't fit in a number of ways, but the way that I do fit in is how we theoretically understand the relationships and the things that we feel that are most important to sustaining a healthy relationship. . . .And if we all believe that and we all believe that the most important element is our ability to seek the highest level of pleasure and satisfaction while being respectful of the people we love, then I think we have a lot in common.

Despite that she has made her own spaces in swinging environments, she recognizes that lesbians might not always feel comfortable in those spaces. However, she has found a sense of community that respects healthy relationships, regardless of her queer identity. However, because she is feminine-presenting, she has also had her share of challenges in those safe spaces. She states:

It has been occasionally uncomfortable because, since I am feminine and appear straight a lot to the community at large, I'm approached pretty regularly by guys who assume that I'm a single female who is open to playing. And often times, I just have to be assertive and say, "No, I'm not. I'm gay and I'm only interested in playing with women." . . . Until there is a queer space for this type of community, I'm going to continue to access it wherever I can.

Even though Coco is resolute about her place in swinging environments, at the same time, she is struggling with men's (and women's) advances. While she sees other swingers as people who objectify her and want to engage in casual sex, she also views the same people as upholding the highest standards for healthy relationships. She is ambivalent about being in swinging

environments. However, her ambivalence also points out the complexities of defining a safe space.

The lesbians' feminine presentation acts as heteronormative appropriate gender behavior. This might be seen as less threatening than if they were to present as stereotypical masculine black lesbians. Because of the already existing masculine bias in these environments (such as the "one penis rule"), the likelihood of a partnered bisexual woman having sex with a masculine lesbian is imperceptible.

### *Lesbians and Kink*

For black lesbians who are masculine, swinging environments seem like an obvious choice as a place where they would not express their sexuality. Masculine lesbians in that environment might pose a challenge to the heteronormative swinging environment. However, lesbian freaks (feminine, masculine and in-between) who need a sexual outlet that caters to their various intersections of identities, find themselves searching in other sexual communities. In my research, I found that the majority of black lesbians engage in BDSM/kink/leather sexual communities. They flock to these communities because these communities are open to all people, regardless of race, sex, gender presentation, and sexual orientation.

Six black lesbian women in my study, who have various backgrounds and gender presentations, have found their place in the kink community and are quite comfortable being in those spaces. Since kink communities have been dominated by gays and lesbians, these spaces act as safe spaces where all people can go to have a good time and explore another facet of

their sexuality. And since there are more groups who are race/gender/sexual orientation-specific, there are enough people in that particular subculture who feel they belong to a strong community.

Even though the BDSM community caters to all sorts of people, the kinky lesbians in my study found themselves in a difficult place. While they identified as kinky and had interactions in the community, they found that finding other kinky black lesbians was a difficult matter. In this case, they joined groups or went to conferences to try to find any community connection that would be accepting of them with no luck. Beefcake confessed:

We have tried to join so many [groups] . . . The ones that we tried to join though, some of them are about status and sometimes they don't feel like, well, our experience, they don't feel if you're at a certain status or age limit, they don't let you in. And I kind of understand, rightly so, because a lot of people hang around their own age group.

For Beefcake, trying to find a connection with other people in the BDSM community is difficult because she feels that they rely too much on status and age requirements. She is trying to build a relationship based on one the common fact that they are in the BDSM community. However, because of these limitations, she is unable to connect with them on those levels. It gets even more complex when race is also an additional factor when it comes to connecting to various BDSM communities. She explains:

It's been difficult joining some of these groups because and also we're in the South and so sometimes race plays a huge thing about it. . . . If I join a group, I'm not going to be, honestly, some of the groups that I've actually checked out, the black people there, they're a little whack. I'm sorry. They're all about praising these white people, whatever, it's not like that. I'm from a world that is not about your color. It's really about you as an individual, as a person. So, I don't fit sometimes in the Southern groups that I've seen. . . . The black folks in the groups, they're weird, they're downright weird. I don't think they even want to talk to you because they might seem too black if they talk to you...

In addition to age and status, her connections are also limited because of race. Her disconnect with other black people in the group indicates that some of the black people in those BDSM groups that are predominantly white are used to being one of few black people in those groups. However, she also felt alienated with groups that were predominantly black. The fact that she has all these intersecting identities puts her in a position where she is not able to connect to these people and groups based on one or two identities alone. For her, she may find a place in the BDSM community, but it may have to be a place where three or more of her identities intersect.

Sir explained that she had previously sought out black communities, but like Beefcake and Taliba, she did not fit in. She found herself going into multiple communities to get what she wanted, but also noticing how each particular community might not understand her role in that it. For example, she says:

It really depends on where I am. I belong to some communities that are very straight and our common-thread is that we're lifestylers. And so they don't really get how I could be a femme daddy. . . . I'm not a daddy to everybody. I'm not a top to everybody. I'm not a domme to everybody.

Sir's multiplicity of identities shows how she is able to pick which identities feel right in various BDSM communities, but she never feels complete in one community alone. Better yet, one community alone is not able to capture all the identities that she has and so she is confronted about how she can be all those identities at the same time. She indicated in the interview that sometimes this was stressful to her because she did not want to have to explain herself all the time to every single sexual community where she participated.

Both of these examples show how these women try to satisfy their needs with multiple sexual community groups, but are unable to get everything they need from this particular sexual community. This highlights the fact that they may have to choose parts of their identity that are the most congruent to the sexual communities that they chose in order for them to feel empowered by their sexual community identity.

What is most fascinating about this particular group is the lack of “coming out” as kinksters to family and friends and people outside of the community. Already stereotypically labeled as a sexual deviant as “out” lesbians, to further marginalize themselves in other social institutions is not a priority on their list. For instance, DC’s children do not know about her lifestyle. She feels that coming out to them is not necessary at this time. Her primary goal is to have the children understand that she is in a serious, committed relationship to another woman. All the matrixes of domination come into play and implicate how the oppression is overwhelming to these women. Being open with their sexual community identity might prove to be stifling and not worth the risk to their emotional or sexual well-being. Resisting to out themselves on this “invisible wound of oppression” (Arora & Hardy 2012) might act as a way of empowering their psychological well-being by using coping methods to preserve their outside relationships. Taliba is out to everyone, except her coworkers. She explains, “it’s none of their fucking business.” The implication here is that she does not have a deep relationship with her coworkers and feels that her job may be at jeopardy if she comes out to them as kinky. For her, she is not willing to take that risk.

Beefcake, on the other hand, is out to everyone and will tell them if they want to know, but will not willingly give out that information. However, she also feels the repercussion of coming out as kinky to possible dating prospects. She explains:

Sometimes, I'm too forthcoming with that information because sometimes, it actually have scared people away from dating me. But, I like to let them know because it's longevity, right? At the end of the day, I don't want to, like, fuck you tomorrow. I don't have to. I like to fuck you eventually, but I like to know eventually what you're going to get into instead of creating your own world. I don't like that because technically, it's also my world. So yeah, I'm out to everybody.

Coping with the consequences of coming out and finding community is not easy for kinky lesbians of color mainly because of all of the other day-to-day issues that they are dealing with. Their work lives and their social lives already give them enough to think about; thinking about the possible consequences about coming out as kinky may be too stressful and therefore, gets sidelined when dealing with people outside of that sexual community.

However, there are upsides to identifying as a lesbian or queer and being kinky. For instance, being a lesbian has helped Soko's grown children understand her, not only in a queer context, but in the BDSM context as well. Since both of her children identify as people being in the queer and BDSM community, coming out to them was easy. Soko spoke about her children's inquisitive minds:

As my children have gotten older, we've always spoke plainly. In other words, the rule is, if you're asking me the question, I'm going to find a way to answer it truthfully. Because if you're asking me, that means if you're asking me, you obviously want to know. So, it's not as if it was something. But it did become, "What do you think about this?" And that opened the discussion. And from there, the door opened. . . . On the other side of that coin, for his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, my son took *me* to the club and dressed *me* in fetish wear.



Soko shows how freaks who are kinky can appropriately assess the risk involved when coming out inside and outside of their sexual communities and how even these communities may overlap into various social institutions. As Sir explains, “I’ve had minimal [negative reactions]. I’ve been really lucky and I think a lot of that has to do with discernment of who and when to tell.”

### *Perversion Without Promiscuity*

I asked all my participants, “Do you call yourself or think of yourself as a ‘pervert of color?’” Everyone I interviewed identified as a “pervert of color.” “Pervert” was defined as voyeurism, exhibitionism and it included watching porn, being uninhibited and having an open mind. LaLa defined “pervert” as:

Someone who, I guess, takes the sexual advantage, or the sexual mind-frame out of the box. The cute little box that we’re taught when you’re young what’s appropriate. You don’t really know that anymore. Your appropriate line has expanded a little more than the typical person. So anyone who is like, yeah, I didn’t really catch the memo on how to reel it in. I don’t have the boundary on what I think or feel when it comes to sex.

When I asked LaLa about why she identified as a pervert, she responded:

I look at things with such an open mind that the average person would probably think it’s perverted or they might feel uncomfortable with me speaking the things that I think, but that’s just what I think. And I don’t always have a filter, . . . whatever I think, I’m going to share. So yeah, when it comes to sexuality, I’m a little open verbally and that might make me a pervert. I’m down for a lot of adventurous sexual things. Doesn’t mean I’m going to participate, but sure I’ll come out, why not? “You’re having a queer boat party at Lake Lanier? Sure. Why the fuck not? Let’s go. Pasties and all, fuck it, let’s go.”

When I asked Coco why she identified as a pervert of color, she said:

Just because I also don’t find the word pervert to be negative. I think that I’m definitely sexually inclined and I’m definitely very open-minded about any freaky

idea that comes my way or I'm at least open to listening to it and I'm open to watching or I'm open to exploring. Whether or not I'm interested, but I'm definitely sexually curious and it definitely verges on the word pervert making sense. I mean to say that I identify as that because it doesn't make me squirm. That word makes a lot of people squirm, but it doesn't make me squirm. It makes me kind of glad. Especially being a female pervert makes me glad because I think we need more of those.

For everyone, being a pervert meant that they were open to exploring new sexual horizons and being a part of these communities were ways to do so. Identifying as a pervert feels empowering to these individuals because they are in charge of the sexual agency by being able to acknowledge their sexual desires and behaviors with the support of people around them in those communities.

Despite the fact that they all identified as perverts, none of them claimed to be promiscuous. They all had suspected that someone would call them out as being promiscuous, because of their lifestyles and flirtatiousness, but in reality, they were not promiscuous and had no desire to be promiscuous. In a sense, promiscuous felt outdated to them and because it had such a negative connotation, no one wanted to be seen in that light. Coco explains:

Oh, I've been called names, and I've been, rumors have been spread about me and all of that. Mostly, you know, calling me promiscuous, and a slut and whore and all that other stuff, but I always just take it as ignorance. I don't really try to take offense to it. I just feel sorry for them for not having had the opportunity for more freedom in their education, I guess. Like, why on earth is it that you would have never come across it as a possibility within all the diversity in our culture? And I mean, it stings here and there when it's somebody that you moderately care about, but if it's just an acquaintance, it doesn't bother me at all. I don't necessarily attack back. I just try to just offer some education on the possibilities of alternatives to traditional monogamous relationships and say these are the reasons why it works for me. It may not work for you, but this is part of you know, the possibilities that are available to us.

In her explanation, Coco combats the stigma of promiscuity by offering education. She offers an alternative viewpoint on traditional monogamous relationships with an understanding that it is not for everyone. One could see this as a womanist approach; her assessing the stigma allows her listener to be tolerant. If they are tolerant, then they may possibly accept her alternative lifestyle. By offering education, she opens the door for people who would like to seek out the opportunity that she was already been given.

At the same time, embracing words such as “slut” and “whore” empower freaks. Taliba states, “If someone called me a slut now, I’d probably say, ‘Oh okay. Thanks.’ But [back] then, I probably would have been offended. I hadn’t embraced my inner slut yet, but now she’s here and it’s great. I welcome it.”

Throughout the interviews, there is tension between rejecting the word “promiscuous” and embracing promiscuous identities, such as “slut.” In a sense, the sexual behavior is rejected outwardly, and the promiscuous identity is inwardly fostered. The ability to foster these promiscuous identities gave them power and confidence in themselves to acknowledge their own sexual expertise without attaching that socially unacceptable sexual stigma.

However, whenever the issue of promiscuity was discussed, it always was discussed in a way where they understood that the people who called them promiscuous did not know them or understood who they were. Beefcake states:

I don’t even think I have sex like that, but people really do think that five days a week, that’s all I do. But no, that’s not what I do. For me, it just tells me that whoever thinks that or whoever says that, because I end up hearing from other people, is that they don’t know. They don’t know me and I’m okay with you not knowing me. But I do get labeled [promiscuous] a lot.

Conrad explains the same feelings of people not knowing him and labeling him something that he isn't:

I'm not hurt by it. I just understand that they have no clue of how I really am. They haven't ever listened to me when I talk to them about what I do and how I live my life. They've only heard what I said, but never tried to see it through my eyes. They just try to put their lenses and when it doesn't fit, "He's just promiscuous." And that's their opinion. . . . And I'm not as promiscuous as most people think. I'm really not.

There is an underlying frustration with them being misunderstood and mislabeled by people outside of their sexual communities. Differentiating between sexual behaviors (i.e. promiscuity) and sexual identities (i.e. slut) can help us understand how freaks value their identities more than the actual behavior that the identity insinuates. Identity is empowering, but actually engaging in promiscuous behavior is not empowering.

## 6 CONCLUSION

### *Implications of Research*

In my research, I found that certain combinations of intersecting identities shaped the way that people migrated toward a certain sexual community. Although most people identified as polyamorous or were open to polyamory, this identity seemingly bled into other sexual communities with ease. The broader implications suggest that once you identify as being part of a sexual community, that particular framework of sexual community opens you up to other sexual communities where it is possible to find community connections.

Although I cannot generalize to other freaks of color, these participants elucidate how black freaks living in the Atlanta area construct their sexual identities in different ways. First,

they acknowledge and admit to themselves that their ways of thinking about traditional societal models are different from everyone else's. Second, they affirm those beliefs by gathering information from outside sources (i.e. media, friends, etc.). Third, they reject traditional monogamous relationship models and opt to seek alternative ways of living their loving relationships. In addition, they maintain these identities by 1) assessing the amount of risk involved when and if they "out" themselves, 2) educating those around them who they come out to and 3) having resiliency toward people inside and outside of their sexual community who may have negative reactions or false understandings of their sense of self.

Black bisexual mothers may find themselves gravitating towards swinging and polyamorous communities because of several reasons. One reason is that they have the ability to act on sexual desires with other women and men. In swinging and polyamorous environments, they have accessibility to other bisexual women or mothers who may be interested in short-term or (preferably) long-term dating. With swinging, they have access to bisexual privilege in swinging communities. Outside of swinging and polyamorous communities, these black bisexual mothers have heterosexual privilege which may alleviate them from oppression. Black heterosexual men may be inclined to find themselves in swinging and polyamorous communities because of their accessibility to more than one woman in a sexual and non-sexual situation. They also have community approval and heterosexual privilege inside and outside of their sexual communities. Black lesbians are drawn toward polyamory and BDSM communities because 1) there are several different groups that may cater to their multiple identities, and 2) feel little pressure to "come out" because of the exclusivity of the private nature of these two sexual communities. All of these intersecting identities among

these black freaks highlight how sexual experimentation and information can help to foster their identities, as well as expand their sexual horizons.

With the intersection of race, we can determine that these particular sexual communities vary greatly from the European-centric models of polyamory, swinging and kinky communities. Black freaks are free to form a collective sense of what these sexual communities mean to them and how they are to function in these communities. For Coco, she is able to form what swinger means to her and she is able to create a space for herself (and other queer swingers) in that community. For Sir, she is able to carve out the identity of “femme daddy” and create a space for herself despite already being marginal in a marginalized community. In a sense, black freaks are pioneers in these sexual communities and shaping the future for these communities – in black sexual communities and non-black sexual communities. These black freaks look to be in spaces where they can be all of their points of intersection at the same time; which, in turn, is the quintessence of not only sexual liberation, but liberation from all ‘isms’ in general.

At the same time, by not outing themselves as members of these freaky communities, their sexual lives are hidden from the mainstream black community. Because they are hidden, it stunts the sexual growth of the black community, in general, because they do not see any other various sexual or relationship models. Despite that they may come out to family and friends, it is possible that the education stops there. If the education stops there, the knowledge about how these black sexual communities function become limited. At the same time, it is acknowledged that if non-black people were to find out what black people were doing in these sexual communities, it activates a facet of “new racism” (Collins 2004) and the

perpetual stigma associated with the stereotype of black hypersexuality. However, it might also be a positive stepping-stone in establishing how other non-black communities perceive black communities. Because these black freaks feel empowered by their sexuality, this may show other non-black communities that alternative sexual lifestyles are possible in black communities and that anyone may have accessibility into these communities if they wish to do so.

### *Limitations*

There were a few limitations with my study. First, I would have liked more diverse participants, particularly across race, gender, and age. If I would have had participants from different races, I might have been able to find running themes with non-POC people and I possibly may have been able to establish how various races (and intersectionalities) migrate towards various sexual communities. Although I make gender comparisons between women and men, my research did not have any transgender people. Transgender POC are marginalized in our society, but they have been a part of these sexual communities (Hong & Rivera 2004). Taking a look at another intersectional perspective would have been helpful in providing more knowledge about which transgender POC migrate towards certain communities. In addition, it would have been useful to see which communities appeal to non-heterosexual men and heterosexual women. Most of my participants were very close in age. To see if age was a factor in deciding which communities they participated in would have been useful. For instance, would someone in their 60s be inclined to participate in the BDSM community, as opposed to someone in their 20s?

Second, I would have liked to get more information about their queer identity and how they saw that particular identity intersecting with other identities, predominantly, their sexual identity. It would have been better to ask explicitly about their queer identities and what “queer” means to them. It also would have been useful to see how they see their queerness in the context of their sexual identities. Coco was the only person who spoke about it and it was very little. Unfortunately, I did not get to capture more ways of how they were able to destabilize some or all of their identities in these sexual communities.

Third, I think the research could have been more in-depth using a social psychological perspective. Although I implicate that there might be social psychological factors that connect mental and sexual health with regards to attitudes and behaviors, it should be noted that other social psychological perspectives, such as fostering of the ego or modified behaviorism theories might relegate how people form and migrate towards their alternative sexual communities. Learned behaviors in these environments can contribute to how people of color navigate in these communities, as well as make sexual decisions that nourish their emotional and physical well-being.

#### *Future Research*

For future studies, I recommend asking about how their income and/or social class have affected their sexual community identity. This information may give us more insight about status in sexual communities, accessibility into these sexual communities, access to healthcare, and the time and energy that is needed to pursue multiple partnerships or engaging in sexual community functions.



I would also recommend an increase in sample size and a slightly different sampling method. Although I found commonalities with my sample, an increase in size would have been helpful to see if various demographics were factors in why someone would be more inclined to go toward a certain sexual community. For instance, if I found that black, heterosexual women were more inclined to go into swinging because they would have access to men with substantial income (because typically single men who enter swinging clubs have to pay phenomenal fees) might highlight how their sexual migration may be income-based. Because of my snowball sampling method, my sample were people who were similar, which was expected. Even though I was able to have access and gain their trust because of this method, a slightly different method may be better to increase sample size, as well as get people that vary in all of their identities.

This study is an example of how queer theory and intersectionality theory with a womanist approach can work together to provide better understanding of freaks of color in sexual communities. In general, this study can be used for other communities of color who may have similar dynamics as black communities or who have a saturation of people of color in a particular city or area of a city. For this particular case, intersectionality theory is necessary to see how various oppressions might affect certain individuals. However, future research may look to other theories that work with intersectionality to gain a different perspective. Although my study is limited in its scope, its contribution can be a driving force for future researchers that study marginal identities in marginalized communities. It also opens the door for various understandings of what sexual communities look like and how certain sexual communities function when applying race. It also highlights potential access into these

communities and the lack of community resources. Overall, this study highlights the potential for people to resist certain oppressions, all while maintaining a sex-positive politic.

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## APPENDICES

### *Appendix A.*

#### Script for Snowball Sample Recruiting

Hi [name of person]. I'm calling you because I thought you would be interested in participating in a study that Marla Stewart is conducting. She's a graduate student working on her PhD in Sociology at Georgia State University and she is studying people of color who participate in BDSM, polyamorous and swinging communities. She is interested in this subject because there is little research about people of color in these communities and she would like to know more. The interview will have questions about race and your experiences in these communities. If you think you might be interested in being interviewed about this topic, please contact Marla at 415-871-1255.

## *Appendix B*

Georgia State University  
Department of Sociology  
Informed Consent

Title: "Getting Freaky": Perversion & Promiscuity Within Alternative Relationship  
& Sexual Modalities Among People Of Color

Principal Investigator: Wendy Simonds, PhD  
Marla Renee Stewart, Student PI

### I. Purpose

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to see how people of color talk about their sexual identity. You are invited to participate because you live in the Atlanta Area and you are a person of color who belongs to a sexual community. A total of 10 to 15 participants will be in this study. The interview will be 1 to 2 hours of your time. You might do a follow-up interview after your first interview and it will be, at the most, one hour of your time.

### II. Procedures

If you decide to participate, Marla Stewart will interview you. The interview will be audio-recorded. It will also take place in a private room at Georgia State University or a private place of your choosing. It will last between 1 and 2 hours. After the interview, Marla Stewart may call you to ask if you can answer follow-up questions. You may choose not to participate in the interview and/or the follow-up phone call at any time.

### III. Risks

There is a chance that talking about sex could remind you of the past and you may feel uncomfortable. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to and you can stop at any time. If you become upset, Marla Stewart will refer you to a counselor at your own cost.

### IV. Benefits

Participation in this study may or may not benefit you personally. Overall, we have to gain knowledge about people of color in a sexual community.

### V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

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

*Consent Form Approved by Georgia State University IRB February 05, 2013 - February 04, 2014*

#### VI. Confidentiality

We will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. Dr. Wendy Simonds and Marla Stewart will have access to the information you provide. Information may also be shared with those who make sure the study is done correctly (GSU Institutional Review Board, the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP)). We will use a fake name rather than your name on study records. The information that you provide will be stored in a locked cabinet and on computers that are password and firewall protected. All of the information will be destroyed after 5 years. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in group form. You will not be identified personally.

#### VII. Contact Persons

Contact Dr. Wendy Simonds (404-413-6512, [wsimonds@gsu.edu](mailto:wsimonds@gsu.edu)) or Marla Renee Stewart (415-871-1255, [marla@gsu.edu](mailto:marla@gsu.edu)) if you have questions, concerns, or complaints about this study. You can also call if you think you have been harmed by the study. Call Susan Vogtner in the Georgia State University Office of Research Integrity at 404-413-3513 or [svogtner1@gsu.edu](mailto:svogtner1@gsu.edu) if you want to talk to someone who is not part of the study team. You can talk about questions, concerns, offer input, obtain information, or suggestions about the study. You can also call Susan Vogtner if you have questions or concerns about your rights in this study.

#### VIII. Copy of Consent Form to Participant

We will give you a copy of this consent form to keep. If you are willing to volunteer for this research and be audio-recorded, please sign below.

_____	_____
Participant	Date
_____	_____
Principal Investigator or Researcher Obtaining Consent	Date

Version 2.0

Consent Form Approved by Georgia State University IRB February 05, 2013 - February 04, 2014

Appendix C

# Counseling Referral Sheet

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Angelique L. Burke, MS, EdS, LP

404.849.9100

[ABurkeATL@yahoo.com](mailto:ABurkeATL@yahoo.com)

Specializes in individuals, couples, households, groups, queer, polyamorous, BDSM, LGBT, & lifestyle.

Anna Kaye, MA, LPC, CST, NCC

404.549.5151

49-C Lenox Pointe NE, Atlanta, GA 30324

Individual, Couples, and Sex Therapy

Metropolitan Counseling Services

Low-cost counseling services

2801 Buford Hwy, Suite 470

Atlanta, GA 30329

404.321.1794

Fax: 404.321.1928

## *Appendix D*

### **“Getting Freaky” – Interview Guide**

#### Primary Demographics

1. What is your sex? Female, Male, Transgender, Intersex?
2. What is your gender? Are you feminine, masculine, a mix of both, or another gender?
3. What is your sexual orientation?
4. Are you queer-identified?
5. What is your current relationship status?

#### Semi-structured, Open-ended Questions

What sexual community or communities do you belong to? Do you identify as someone who is kinky (engages in BDSM), polyamorous, or a swinger? How long have you identified as a [their identity]?

Tell me about your journey in coming to that realization.

Are you out as a [their identify]? To whom are you out to?

How did your family and friends react? How have other people reacted?

How have you had to deal with any negative reactions? Positive reactions?

#### For Kinky POC-

What does kink/BDSM mean to you?

Do you belong to any specific BDSM groups?

If Yes: What is the name of the group or groups? How did you find that group? Is that group centered on race or anything in particular? What kind of activities does the group participate in?

If No: Have you ever thought about joining a group? If you haven't, what are your reasons?

What are the rules in these particular spaces?

Do you have a particular role in the BDSM community? What is it?

What kind of scenes do you participate in? How do you negotiate those scenes with people? Is there anything that you deem inappropriate in the kink community? Have you ever felt like you were a part of someone else's fetish experience?

Tell me about any negative and/or positive experiences that you've had while being in the BDSM community.

Do you see differences between kinky people of color and kinky white people?

How many other people of color are generally present in BDSM settings?

Tell me about those experiences.

Are there times where you are in multi-racial scenes? How does this make you feel?

Do you ever see or experience racism in environments where there are people of different races?

Tell me about your experiences with queer people in BDSM. What are your experiences around queer people of color?

### For Poly POC:

What does Polyamory mean to you?

Do you belong to any polyamorous groups?

If Yes: Which group(s) do you belong to? How did you find that group? Is that group centered on race or anything in particular? What kinds of activities happen in/with your group?

If No: Have you ever thought about joining a group? If you haven't, what are your reasons?

What are the rules in these particular spaces?

What have your experiences been like? Tell me about any negative and/or positive experiences that you've had while being in the poly community.

Do you have an ideal relationship constellation?

If Yes: What is it? Have you achieved it? What do you like about it?

If No: Can you give me some ideas of what your past relationships have looked like? What worked best for you? What didn't work for you?

How do you meet other polyamorous people? Do you only get into relationships with other polyamorous people?

Do you see differences between poly people of color and poly white people?

How many other people of color are generally present at poly events?

Tell me about that experience. How did that make you feel?

Do you ever see or experience racism in environments where there are people of different races?

Tell me about your experiences with queer people who are polyamorous. What are your experiences around queer people of color?

### For Swinging POC:

What does swinging mean to you?

Do you belong to any specific swinger's groups?

If yes: Which group(s) do you belong to? How did you find that group? Is that group centered on race or anything in particular? What kinds of activities happen in/with your group?

If No: Have you ever thought about joining a group? If you haven't, what are your reasons?

What are the rules in these particular spaces?

Tell me about any negative and/or positive experiences that you've had while in the swinging community.

Do you see differences between swinging people of color and swinging white people?

How many other people of color are generally present at swinger's events?

Tell me about that experience. How did that make you feel?

Have ever thought about or sought out swinging people of color? Why or why not?

How do you meet other swingers of color?

Do you ever see or experience racism in environments where there are people of different races?

Tell me about your experiences with queer people in the swinging community. Have you ever felt like you didn't belong in a certain swinging community, event and/or party?

If yes: Can you describe to me what happened in the situation?

If no: Why did you feel like you belonged there?

What are your experiences around queer people of color in the swinging community? Do you think that most swinging women of color identify as bisexual? Why or why not? What are your experiences being/being around swinging bisexual women of color?

*For Everyone:*

Are you ever labeled "promiscuous" by others? How does it make you feel?

What does "promiscuous" mean to you?

Do you call yourself or think of yourself as a "pervert of color?" Why or why not?

What does "pervert" mean to you?

Do you go get tested for STD/I's regularly? Why or why not?

Do you have or have you ever had a sexually transmitted disease or infection?

If Yes: Do you know how you got the STD? Tell me about that experience.

If No: How do you protect yourself from getting STD's?

Have you ever had any sexual trauma, such as physical abuse, mental or emotional abuse?

If Yes: Does that affect you and your lifestyle now? Have you sought out help for it?

Why or why not?



## Demographics

1. Pseudonym
2. Age
3. How would you classify your race and/or ethnicity?
4. What is your highest grade of school completed?
5. What is the size of the city or town where you currently live? Is it a big city, medium-sized, small town or is it rural? Were you born here? If not, where did you come from? Why did you come here?
6. What do you do for a living? How do you make money?
7. What is your current personal annual salary? What best describes your economic status? Would you say that you were lower, middle, or upper class?
8. Do you have any disabilities? If you do, what are they?

Is there anything else you want to say or anything else that you want me to know? Do you have any questions for me?