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Mapping Intimacies: Black Queer Women in Chicago's Urban-Digital Sphere

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ABSTRACT

Theoretical and empirical inquiries into queer geographies have focused primarily on how white gay subjects navigate urban landscapes. Consequently, there has been little empirical work that examines (1) queer placemaking within Black and brown urban spaces; (2) placemaking among queer women of color; and (3) the relationship and interplay between urban and digital contexts as it relates to queer placemaking. Through multimethod qualitative analysis using interviews and urban and digital ethnography, this project explores how Black queer women navigate and respond to spatial marginalization in Chicago. Specifically, I examine the intersectional contours that shape Black queer women's experiences living in Chicago, including the structural and cultural factors that limit and facilitate intimacy and community. I forward intimacy mapping as a critical intervention and methodological framework to empirically capture Black queer women's intimacy practices at the intersection of the urban and the digital. In doing so, I focus on three distinct phenomena: online dating, pop-up parties, and social media groups. My findings illuminate how intimate infrastructures like mobile dating technologies function as digital pathways toward romantic, sexual, platonic, and communal pursuits. This study also demonstrates how Black queer placemakers strategically employ digital and urban placemaking practices to transform normative geographies into ephemeral erotic scene-spaces. Additionally, I find that Black queer women cultivate digital lifeworlds on social media platforms through collective vulnerability acts that congeal around Black lesbian love, sex, and relationships. When taken together, the findings contribute to understandings of the increasingly important role that digital technologies play in mitigating the spatial marginalization that intersectional queer subjects encounter in their pursuit of pleasure, intimacy, and community.

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CHAPTER ONE

Beyond Invisibility: Intimacy Mapping as a Critical Intervention

1. INTRODUCTION

> "You have to look around. You have to be plugged into somebody who will tell you something in order to get to some of these places."—Kiana (Black queer woman, mid-twenties)

> "When I think of gay community in Chicago, I think of Boystown, Andersonville, and that whole area. When I think of the Black community, I think of the South Side. There are a lot of queer folks on the South Side, but Boystown still comes to mind, and I don't even know anyone from Boystown."—Katherine (Black queer/lesbian, mid-twenties)

> "If you're not from Chicago, Black queer spaces can feel kind of insular and hard to access."—Laila (Black queer woman, late twenties)

> "I think it's always hard for Black queer women to find their spot."—Jess (Black gay/queer woman, mid-thirties)

Space: a nebulous term that signifies expansiveness, freedom, availability, and the unoccupied. Place: a more precise term that simultaneously conjures notions of belonging and unbelonging; presence and absence; everywhere, somewhere, and nowhere. This chapter's epigraph quotes reveal how Black queer women think about *their* place in Chicago: a place unknown, unimaginable, exclusive, and hard to find. In a city heralded as both a "chocolate city" (Hunter & Robinson, 2018) and gay mecca (Ghaziani, 2014; Orne, 2017), one might be surprised to hear Black queer women describe their sense of place in Chicago in terms of absence and invisibility. However, the racialized and queer spatial imaginary of Chicago, in which Black and

queer spaces and people are imagined as seldomly intersecting (and only in spectacularly violent ways), functions as a central lens through which Black queer women interpret their sense of place. When Jess says, “It’s always hard for Black queer women to find their spot,” she is not referring to the struggles to find an inconspicuous locale. Rather, she is alluding to the sense of *placelessness* that Black queer women experience in navigating various sociospatial contexts in the pursuit of intimacy, community, and belonging. Thus, these quotes emphasize how Black queer women experience Chicago’s urban landscape as a place that renders them materially and symbolically absent and invisible.

That Black queer women perceive themselves as absent from and invisible within existing geographies is further complicated when considering how notions of absence and invisibility animate queer spatial discourse. Indeed, discourses on absence and invisibility resonate with existing literature in lesbian, gay, and queer geography studies, which have long remarked on the disappearance of lesbian spaces (Brown-Saracino, 2020; Browne, 2011; Forstie, 2020); the spatial displacement and migration of lesbians (Ghaziani, 2015); the invisible and underground nature of lesbian geographies (Giesking, 2020; Podmore, 2006; Rothenberg, 1995; Valentine, 2000; Wolfe, 1992); and the decline and precarity of gay urban enclaves and establishments (Doan, 2015; Ghaziani, 2014; Mattson, 2020; Orne, 2017). This literature, which I revisit later in this chapter, comprises a distinguishable cross-section of queer placemaking research that largely centers iconic gayborhoods and white gay subjects’ placemaking practices. Queer cultural and media discourse reflects this literature, bemoaning the paucity of lesbian spaces and the fragility of gay establishments and enclaves. Even while conducting this study, the COVID-19 pandemic ignited a new wave of concerns about the loss and precarity of gay spaces (Miles et al., 2021).

Importantly, scholarly discourses about the absence and invisibility of lesbian and queer women's spaces mirror lesbian community organizers' and activists' concerns. When I began collecting data for this project, I traveled to Detroit, Michigan, to attend the National LGBTQ Task Force's annual conference. Each year, queer and transgender individuals, including activists, educators, and professionals, descend in the thousands on an American city to organize grassroots efforts, build professional networks, share best practices, assess the state of the movement for LGBTQ rights, and engage in community-building practices. On the first day of the conference, I made my way to the lesbian caucus, a small room packed with younger, older, white, Black, Latinx, Asian, cisgender, and transgender lesbians and queer women. The facilitator of the caucus, a Black lesbian in her thirties, provocatively asked, *"Why are our lesbian spaces disappearing?"* Older lesbians reminisced about the long-gone era of vibrant lesbian bars, coffee shops, and bookstores, while a younger cohort of lesbians expressed a deep longing for spaces they had yet to experience and could only imagine. Attendees then offered responses to the facilitator's question, attributing the absence of lesbian spaces to economic injustice, gentrification, disparate resources allotted to lesbians by queer organizations, and the perceived lack of demand among lesbians for such spaces. While responses to the question varied, everyone voiced their agreement when an attendee proclaimed, *"We do not have enough spaces for us to exist, love, and survive."*

While concerns about lesbian spatial precarity exist in scholarly, media, and community discourse, Black queer women's spatial concerns remain unnamed and unaddressed. That is, these discourses fail to investigate and theorize the particular racialized and gendered dimensions of queer spatial precarity. These racialized and gendered elisions mirror those indexed by Hammonds (1994) with regard to literature in lesbian and gay studies and early queer theory scholarship.

Indeed, Hammonds points to how "Black women's sexuality, when viewed from the vantage of the dominant discourses, [is almost universally described] as an absence" (p.305). Additionally, Hammonds explicates how Black feminist theorists have also produced their own kinds of elisions by reproducing "Black women's sexualities as a silent void" (p.312).[1] At the intersection of queer theory and Black feminist theory, then, Black queer female sexualities represent what Hammonds refers to as a "black hole," in which Black women are always already proximate to discourses on "silence, erasure, and invisibility" (Hammonds, 2004, p.304).

Extending the metaphor of the black hole, Hammonds notes how "the observer outside of the hole sees it as a void, an empty place in space. However, it is not empty; it is a dense and full place in space" (1994, p.310). Nevertheless, black holes litter the existing maps of queer life, indexing Black queer women's absence in ways that reproduce Black queer women's sexualities as a "silent void" (p.312). To rectify this epistemological blind spot, Hammonds issues a theoretical and empirical charge: "How do you deduce the presence of a black hole? And second, what is it like inside of a black hole?" (p.310). Furthermore, Hammonds asks, "What methodologies are available to read and understand this perceived void and gauge its direct and indirect effects on that which is visible?" (p.304).

This dissertation moves *beyond* invisibility to map the intimacies of Black queer women living in Chicago. I expand on Hammonds' questions to ask, "What does Black queer women's placelessness reveal about the material and symbolic terrains of queer (and Black) life more broadly? Furthermore, are there "alternative sexual universe[s] within the metaphorical black hole" that contest, negate, and resist discourses of absence and invisibility (p.312)? I contend that

[1] I revisit this strain of Black feminist literature in Chapter 5.

if we only train our theoretical and empirical gaze on the landscapes that exclude Black queer women, our understanding of their place will continue to be marked by "silence, erasure, and invisibility," or "black holes." Therefore, this dissertation focuses on the "no place" *and* "someplace" of Black queer women's intimacy. More specifically, this study uncovers the discourses and everyday placemaking practices that develop in response to and despite Black queer women's material and symbolic placelessness in Chicago.

To that end, I forward *intimacy mapping* as a critical intervention that uses a constellation of urban and digital ethnographic methods to map Black queer women's individual and collective intimate lifeworlds. When employing intimacy mapping, I ask, "What happens if we expand our traditional maps of queer life beyond the urban to consider placemaking at the intersection of the urban and the digital?" I argue that examining Black queer women's intimacy projects at the locus of the urban and the digital, which I refer to as Chicago's *urban-digital sphere*, illuminates and complicates notions of invisibility and placelessness. This dissertation reveals how Black queer women cultivate intimate lifeworlds at the intersection of the urban and the digital, including individual intimacy practices, erotic scene-spaces, and intimate publics, in ways that contest invisibility and placelessness.

In the following sections, I review the dominant strands of sociological research on queer placemaking; situate the *place* of Black queer women in sociology; elaborate the conceptual and methodological perspectives that guide intimacy mapping as a critical intervention; outline the methods employed in this study; and provide an overview of the chapters in this dissertation.

2. QUEER MAPS, QUEER PLACEMAKING: DOMINANT PERSPECTIVES

Extant sociological research on queer placemaking emerges across three geographical focal points—in the gayborhood, in the city, and beyond the city—which betray the racial, gender, and class contours of, and exclusions within, existing queer maps. While the majority of this literature centers on the political and cultural salience of gayborhoods for collective white gay urban life, a subset of literature focuses on alternative urban and non-urban geographies that illuminate queer placemaking among a wider swath of racialized and gendered queer subjects.

In the Gayborhood

Much of the extant sociological literature on queer placemaking centers on the sociocultural practices that emerge within gay enclaves, or "gayborhoods." As delineated by Ghaziani (2014), gayborhoods are defined by their (1) distinct geographical focal point; (2) uniquely gay culture; (3) large concentration of gay and lesbian residents; and (4) cluster of commercial spaces run by and/or catering to gays and lesbians (Ghaziani, 2014, p.2). Prior to World War II, gays and lesbians "found each other in places that were scattered across the city: a bar here or there, a cabaret, a public park, a restroom" (Ghaziani, 2014, p.8). Gayborhoods emerged in Western countries in the post–World War II era between the 1950s and 1970s, a period that Ghaziani refers to as the "coming out era" in which gays and lesbians were "open and out about [their] sexual orientation" (Ghaziani, 2014, p.8; Gorman-Murray, 2016).

Gayborhood research has long demonstrated gay enclaves' role in facilitating collective identity, creating safe spaces, and developing political power (Castells & Murphy, 1982; Lauria & Knopp, 1985). For example, in *The City and the Grassroots*, Castells (1983) argued that the development of San Francisco's Castro district was inextricably linked to the development of the

gay liberation movement. Castells elaborated on the cultural and political significance of gay enclaves, writing:

> In order publicly to express themselves, gays have always met together – in modern times in night bars and coded places. When they became conscious enough and strong enough to 'come out' collectively, they have earmarked places where they could be safe together and could develop new life styles [sic] (Castells, 1983, p.138-139).

For Castells, spatial organization, or gay territoriality, was instrumental to building gay culture and power. Additionally, Castells argued that spatial organization and *temporal* longevity were necessary for these processes: "Gays need a spatially defined community for a long period, where culture and power can be reformulated in a process of experimental social interaction and active political mobilization" (p.139). From these processes, "a 'city' emerges within a city (not outside the existing city and not necessarily against other communities) transforming established cultural values and existing spatial norms" (p.139). Similarly, Chauncey's (1994) ethnographic study on the emergence of New York's gay subculture traced how urban development, culture, and politics inspired gays to "construct a gay city in the midst of (and often invisible to) the normative city" (1994, p.23).

Importantly, Castells's (1983) account of San Francisco's Castro district and Chauncey's (1994) study of gay New York revealed the gendered contours of early queer placemaking as a distinctly *gay* project. Indeed, Castells noted that "We can hardly speak of lesbian territory in San Francisco as we can with gay men, and there is little influence by lesbians on the space of the city" (1983, p.140). Castells linked the absence of "lesbian territory" to two structural and cultural explanations, both of which have been critiqued by feminist scholars of lesbian geographies (Adler & Brenner, 1992; Rothenberg, 1995). Castells argued that (1) women lack economic resources

that, in turn, limit their residential choices, and that (2) women lack "territorial aspiration," or the desire to "dominate" space "to liberate themselves from cultural and sexual oppression" (1983, p.140). In critiquing these arguments, Rothenberg (1995) noted that Castells "neglect[ed] to mention the difficulty women long have had in achieving political power, even when they have tried; women in general are less likely than men to achieve local power" (p.152). Feminist geographers have complicated Castells' argument to assert that (white) lesbian placemaking largely happens in ways that "leave no trace of their sexualities on the landscape" (Bell & Valentine, 1995, p.6). For example, Peake (1993) and Valentine (1995) found that (white) lesbian placemaking largely happens through the clustering of lesbian households within heterosexual neighborhoods. Moreover, "women learn about these areas and make contacts with people in the neighborhoods through the 'lesbian grapevine'" (Bell & Valentine, 1995, p.6).

Building on Castells's (1983) and Chauncey's (1994) early work, more recent scholarship explores the structural and cultural shifts occurring within gayborhoods (Ghaziani, 2014; Green, 2014; Orne, 2017). As argued by Brown (2013), "in both popular media and academic literature, there seems to be wide recognition that the gayborhood is not just changing but receding in size, scope and function" (p.457). Ghaziani's (2014) *There Goes the Gayborhood?* uses an urban sociology lens to query the common perception, as indicated by the book's title, that America's gay enclaves are disappearing and losing relevance in the current "post-gay" era. Ghaziani argues that "depending on who you ask," gayborhoods like Midtown in Atlanta, New York's Greenwich Village, Seattle's Capitol Hill, Dupont Circle in DC, and Boystown in Chicago, "might appear on a list of endangered urban species" (Ghaziani, 2014, p.2).

According to Ghaziani, the post-gay era is doubly marked as a period of acceptance by straights and the assimilation of gays, or the intensification of what Lisa Duggan (2002) pointedly calls *homonormativity*. Duggan (2004) defines homonormativity as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (p.50). For Ghaziani and other gayborhood scholars, what is at stake in the post-gay era is whether and how gayborhoods are shifting in response to "unprecedented societal acceptance of homosexuality" (2014, p.6). According to Ghaziani (2014), gayborhoods are changing but are not necessarily disappearing. Instead, he argues that the post-gay era is marked by the proliferation of "cultural archipelagos," which he defines as "multiple clusters of gay and lesbian populations [that] are emerging in cities of different sizes" (2014, p.137). This proliferation of cultural archipelagos is tied to perceptions among gays and lesbians that link straight acceptance with an "expanding set of options about where they can settle" (p.138). Rather than concentrating within iconic gayborhoods, Ghaziani (2019) argues that gays and lesbians are creating "new clusters for specific subgroups of people," where "the spatial expressions of sexuality are becoming more diverse and plural" (p.7).

Other scholars follow Ghaziani's (2014) research by tracing how gay men navigate and respond to the post-gay turn taking place in gayborhoods. In his ethnography of Boystown, Orne (2017) observes the consequences of "straight invasion" on the placemaking practices and sexual culture of gay men in the neighborhood. Orne argues that the increasing presence of straight white women in gay men's sexual spaces notably changes and disturbs the sexual energy of gay bars and clubs. In responding to the so-called straight invasion, gay men flock to the city's "raunchier" spots

to engage in “sexy community,” or “webs of sexual kinship” that reject respectability and straight assimilation in the pursuit of the erotic (Orne, 2017, p.62). Rather than flee the gayborhood, Greene’s (2014) study shows how former and symbolic Boystown residents, which he terms *vicarious citizens*, “fiercely protect the spaces they symbolically claim from heteronormative threats” (Greene, 2014, p.106). Such protective strategies include resisting and making claims to community through everyday interactions, like gay men subverting the unwanted attention given to them by straight women (2014, p.109). Other tactics are more formal and explicitly political, whereby vicarious citizens use and appeal to political and institutional entities to safeguard their communities. When taken together, these studies reveal how gayborhoods are changing amidst widespread cultural change (i.e., straight acceptance and gay assimilation) and how gay residents and people with an affinity to gayborhoods respond to such changes.

While under threat from heteronormative pressures, scholars note that gayborhoods produce their own set of exclusions. Indeed, a subset of gayborhood literature reveal the multiple racial, gender, and class exclusions that continue to shape gayborhoods in the twenty-first century (Blair, 2016; Greene, 2021; Nero, 2005; Rosenberg, 2017). As argued by Gorman-Murray (2016), “subtle and overt exclusions operate along lines of gender, race, and class, as well as age and ability” that mark gayborhoods as places “primarily for the comfort and privilege of White, middle-class gay men” (2016, p.438). In his essay, “Why Are Gay Ghettoes White?” Nero (2005) postulates “that one of the paradoxes of contemporary gay male life is that homosexuality is considered pancultural, multiclassed, and multiracial even while the overwhelming ‘whiteness’ of the ‘gay ghettoes’ contradicts this reality” (Johnson & Henderson, 2005, p.12). Nero offers two plausible and interdependent explanations for this paradox: “gay strategies [that focus] on

integrating into the middle classes [and] the purpose of white hostility toward African Americans" (p.229). In forwarding this argument, Nero argues that the "widespread controlling image of black gay men as impostors" works to mark gayborhoods as "racially homogenous neighborhoods" that serve as "white inner-city outposts" (p.243).

In the City, Beyond the Gayborhood

Another growing body of scholarship offers rich glimpses into queer placemaking in cities and beyond the gayborhood. These works support Brown's (2014) simple assertion that "The gayborhood certainly does not capture or exhaust all sexualities-and-spaces, and it never did" (p.463). Importantly, their works provide insight into how Black and Latinx LGBT-identified people carve out places for leisure and play in contexts not specifically designated as queer (Bailey, 2014; Hunter, 2010; Lane, 2019). Specifically, this literature illuminates two strategies that queer people of color use to combat spatial marginalization and placelessness: (1) occupying Black spaces that are not explicitly designated as queer and (2) carving out distinctly Black and Latinx queer ephemeral spaces.

In an ethnographic account of a downtown Chicago nightclub, Hunter (2010) notes how Black gays and lesbians participate in the "nightly round" within a predominantly Black heterosexual space: a "process encompassing the social interactions, behaviors, and actions involved in going to, being in, and leaving the club" (2010, p.166). As expected, the nightclub offers its patrons "sensual release, intense dancing, and the selection of sexual partners," but also provides club-goers with a space to develop ties of social support, like getting information about babysitting services and employment opportunities (2010, p.172). Interestingly, Hunter found that Black gays and lesbians were more likely to use the club for these auxiliary (i.e., non-erotic)

purposes. In the absence of additional data, such a finding points to the potential reasons (i.e., social support) that Black gays and lesbians venture into predominantly Black heterosexual erotic spaces. Of course, the use of these spaces by Black gays and lesbians is unsurprising given the discrimination, isolation, and symbolic violence often experienced by queer people of color in white gay and lesbian spaces (Johnson & Henderson, 2005; Moore, 2006; Nero, 2005). That is, the salience of Black identity and community among Black gays and lesbians, as well as the social and cultural distance from white gays and lesbians, likely contribute to Hunter's findings.

Bailey's (2014) ethnographic research on Detroit's ballroom scene explores the placemaking practices of Black and Latinx queer people as they "transform normative geographies" (p.490). By centering his analysis on the ballroom scene's spatial arrangements, Bailey highlights how Detroit's Black and Latinx queer community, most of whom are poor and working-class, carve out exclusive—albeit makeshift and ephemeral—spaces in the city. For example, Bailey's interlocutors transformed an after-hours club "situated in an area of the city that reflects a socio-economic geography in transition" into a ballroom hall. According to the author,

> Ballroom members often respond to forms of exclusion and marginalization by using performance to carve out—to engender—and transform normative geographies into spaces of communal celebration, affirmation, and support. For Ballroom members, space is a cultural production rather than a concretized fixed location (Bailey, 2014, p.490).

Unlike the Black gays and lesbians in Hunter's study, Detroit's ballroom community creates a distinctly queer of color space untethered from a "concretized fixed location."

Similar to Bailey (2014), Lane (2019) explores Black queer placemaking within spaces that are indistinctly Black or queer, such as book clubs, sporting events, house parties, semi-public events, happy hours, and annual Black Pride events. Importantly, Lane (2019), a cultural and

linguistic anthropologist, offers the first ethnographic account of Black queer women's urban placemaking. In *The Black Queer Work of Ratchet: Race, Gender, Sexuality, and the (Anti)Politics of Respectability*, Lane (2019) conducts an "ethnography of ratchet" that offers an empirical account of Washington D.C.'s Black queer women's scene space. Lane provides a rich account of D.C.'s "BQW Scene," which she defines as "an amorphous, loosely connected set of social networks comprised of BQW and their allies, as well as the spaces those social networks create in order to socialize space" (2019, p.1). Lane theorizes the "quare work of ratchet" to flag the discursive deployment and enactment of *ratchet*, which she defines as "a kind sexuality that does not require permission to exist and which centers on their pleasure" (2019, p.108). Lane further contends that "being ratchet activates opportunities to represent oneself in a way that is not concerned with prescriptive dictates as to what constitutes 'classyness'" and has "the potential to expand the boundaries around that which is possible for all Black women while also calling out and critiquing the delicate sensibilities of middle-class Blackness" (p.108). Lane argues that the quare work of ratchet creates boundaries around notions of respectability, carves out spaces that center Black same-sex desiring women's bodies, and shapes cultural representations and discourses about Black lesbian sexuality.

When taken together, research in and beyond gayborhood contexts tackle two distinct issues regarding queer placemaking. Gayborhood studies tackle the issues of safeguarding spaces that already exist, while research beyond the gayborhood confronts the issue of Black and Latinx queer placemaking amidst urban spatial marginalization. This distinction reveals the racialized contours of placemaking: as white gay men confront the structural and cultural shifts within gay institutions and neighborhoods, queer people of color confront various forms of spatial

marginalization to curate spaces in contexts where there are "none to claim" (Giesking, 2020, p.230).

Beyond the City

Though beyond the scope of this study, a growing body of scholarship has shed light on queer placemaking outside an urban context, expanding conceptualizations of queer space to include small cities (Brown, 2008; Brown-Saracino, 2018), suburbia (Gorman-Murray & Nash, 2018; Podmore & Bain, 2020; Tongson, 2011), and rural landscapes (Forstie, 2018; Gray, 2009; Gray, Johnson & Gilley, 2016; Herring, 2010). These works challenge the metronormativity of queer geography studies, or the prevailing "conflation of 'urban' and 'visible' in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities" (Halberstam, 2005, p.36). Further expounding on the metronormativity of existing accounts of queer life, Halberstam writes:

> The metronormative narrative maps a story of migration onto the coming-out narrative. While the story of the coming-out narrative tends to function as a temporal trajectory within which a period of disclosure follows a long period of repression, the metronormative story of migration from "country" to "town" is a spatial narrative within which the subject moves to a place of tolerance after enduring life in a place of suspicion, persecution, and secrecy (Halberstam, 2005, p.37).

In short, metronormative narratives construct queer rural-to-urban migration as a taken-for-granted and compulsory phenomenon, thereby rendering non-urban contexts as void of queer life.

Increasingly, scholars of queer placemaking embrace what Herring (2010) terms *queer anti-urbanism*, which describes a theoretical perspective that "critically negotiates the relentless urbanisms that often characterize any United States based 'gay imaginary'" (2010, p.13). According to Podmore and Pain (2020), Herring's (2010) queer anti-urbanism perspective

functions as a "counter-hegemonic framework that unifies the rural, the small town, the provincial, and the colonized against the powerful norms emanating from the queer metropolitan" (p.3). Expanding scholarly inquiry of queer placemaking beyond urban contexts is important given the cultural and structural shifts that have impacted queer residential patterns. For example, as argued by Christensen and Caldwell (2006), ongoing gentrification, increased housing costs, homonormativity, and the cultural acceptance of gays and lesbians has meant that sexual minorities are increasingly living in small cities, suburbs, and rural areas. At the same time, scholars have argued that queers have always made their home outside of the metropolis (Podmore & Bain, 2020; Stone, 2018). Thus, in line with Herring's (2010) queer anti-urbanism perspective, scholars are increasingly focusing on queer placemaking in ordinary and small cities (Brown-Saracino, 2011, 2015, 2018; Bruce, 2013, 2016); suburbia (Brekhus, 2003; Podmore & Bain, 2020; Tongson, 2011); and rural contexts (Abelson, 2016; Forstie, 2018; Gray, 2009; Kazyak, 2011; Nichols, 2017; Silva, 2017).[2]

Though moving outside of the gayborhood sometimes decenters whiteness, the placemaking practices of queer women of color do not figure prominently in literature on queer placemaking within and beyond urban contexts. Indeed, Lane's (2020) anthropological research on Black queer women's "scene space" is the only study to date that explicitly considers Black queer women's urban placemaking practices. Rather than a simple empirical oversight, this absence points to the limits of our collective queer imaginary that continues to privilege dominant white gay subjects, spaces, and placemaking, oftentimes at the exclusion of the experiences of other racialized and gendered queer subjects (Greene, 2021).

[2] Within these studies, some scholars also interrogate the problematic aspects of queer placemaking as a form of white settler colonialism (see Nichols, 2017).

3. THE PLACE OF BLACK QUEER WOMEN: SOCIOLOGICAL ACCOUNTS

As shown in the previous section, Black queer women's placemaking practices are marginal within empirical accounts of queer placemaking. In more recent years, extant sociological literature on Black queer women's lived experiences provides insight into the communities and spatial contexts in which they are embedded (Brooks, 2016; 2017; Moore, 2010; 2011; 2015). Thus, while not explicitly focused on the spatializing practices of Black queer women, this research sheds light on some of the dimensions of Black queer women's placemaking. Moore's (2006; 2010; 2011) extensive interview-based research on Black lesbian identity, relationships, and motherhood reveals how Black lesbians are in tight spatial and cultural proximity to Black community life. Drawing on census data, Moore (2010) notes how "the majority of Black same-sex couples reside in cities, towns, and rural areas that are predominantly African American. They are more likely to live with other Blacks in minority communities than to live with White homosexuals in cities and neighborhoods with high percentages of same-sex couples" (p.316). More than a story of racial segregation, Moore's interview data show how Black sexual minorities experience a strong sense of racial group connectedness, "see[ing] their own self-interests as linked to those of the racial group, despite the disapproval of some over their sexual preference" (p.315). This sense of "linked fate," then, influences Black sexual minorities' desires to "remain in predominantly Black neighborhoods and social contexts and negotiate daily with family and community" (p.330).[3]

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[3] Similarly, Acosta's (2008) interview-based study of Latina lesbian migrants demonstrates the strong investments respondents have to their families and countries of origin, even though their identities as *lesbianas* remains largely silent in these contexts.

As articulated by Moore (2010) and Brooks (2017), claiming a non-normative sexuality can preclude full belonging and acceptance in Black community life. In comparison to whites, Black queer people "perceive themselves as facing more disapproval from their families and from heterosexual Blacks" (Moore, 2010, p.317; see also David & Knight, 2008; Jones & Hill, 1996; Moore, 2008; Stokes & Peterson, 1998). This is not to indicate that Black communities are more homophobic than other racial and ethnic communities (Hill, 2013). For example, in her essay, "Homophobia in Black Communities," hooks (1989) posits that "Black communities may be perceived as more homophobic than other communities because there is a tendency for individuals in black communities to verbally express in an outspoken way anti-gay sentiments" (2004, p.207). hooks argues that a distinction must be made between the anti-gay sentiments expressed within Black communities and "homophobic white people who never make homophobic comments but who have the power to actively exploit and oppress gay people in areas of housing, employment, etc." (2004, p.208). Moore (2010), Brooks (2017), and hooks (1989) suggest that anti-gay sentiments are activated in response to the perception that claiming a non-normative sexuality threatens racial group solidarity. As such, Black sexual minorities must negotiate "multiple identity statuses based in race and sexuality to create a sense of belonging in Black environments" (Moore, 2010, p.316).

While Black sexual and gender minorities live in Black communities, they are often invisible within the context of Black geographies (Moore 2010). That is, Black LGBT people often lack formal institutions and spaces that offer social support and services, as well as commercial businesses and leisure spaces that affirm their sexual subjectivities. Instead, as argued by Moore (2010) and Brooks (2017), Black LGBT people engage in practices and strategies that allow them

to claim and negotiate their multiple identity statuses within Black community life. Drawing on ethnographic data on Black LGBT people in Los Angeles, Moore (2010) finds that "When in Black social spaces, many gay people do not express a public gay identity" (p.317). Rather, Black gay people "minimize what they believe is a stigmatized status by practicing 'covering'…. [which is] the process of making efforts to prevent a stigmatized or disfavored identity from looming large in order to reduce tension and deflect attention from the stigma" (Moore, 2010, p.317).[4] Similarly, Brooks (2017) argues that "the concept Don't Ask, Don't Tell regarding Black LGBT sexuality in Black communities has been an acceptable form of identity management for Black LGBT people" (p.1573). That is, "Black LGBT people are accepted as long as they are not vocal about their sexuality" (Brooks, 2017, p.1573). Similar to the practice of "covering" that Moore (2010) delineates, Brooks (2017) finds that Black LGBT women engage in several strategies that allow them to blend into the social fabric of Black community life. These strategies include (1) "the ability to pass as the perceived appropriate gender," (2) "bonding around shared political issues affecting the larger Black community," (3) "disidentifying with LGBT spaces and politics," and (4) "educating the Black community about LGBT people" (Brooks, 2017, p.1582-1587).

The gendered dimensions of sexual minority status also influence how queer women navigate Black community life. As demonstrated by Moore (2011) and my own work on Black queer women's coming-out narratives (Adams-Santos, 2020), racialized gender and sexual respectability scripts, for example, position motherhood as important to achieving the status of a respectable Black woman, scripts that still hold traction despite claiming a queer sexuality. Indeed, Moore's (2011) study on Black lesbians in New York demonstrates how motherhood and family

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[4] Here, Moore (2010) draws on Goffman's (1963) concept of covering.

are important to enacting respectable Black womanhood within the context of lesbian sexuality. Moreover, Moore (2018) posits that marriage and the marriage-equality movement "vehicle[s] through which people, and particularly people of color, could begin to talk about LGBTQ issues with their family members and individuals on their racial and ethnic and cultural communities" (p.75). Supporting Moore's (2018) findings, Brooks (2016) notes how Black lesbian and bisexual women regard Black lesbian marriages "as a symbol of racial pride and family connection" (p.41). Indeed, Brooks argues that "Unlike the white mainstream gay and lesbian marriage movement, which in addition to state benefits focuses on political visibility, Black lesbian and bisexual women primarily view marriage as giving them community recognition as group members" (p.43-44).

The aforementioned studies capture the experiences and strategies that Black LGBT people, and Black sexual minority women, in particular, employ to *blend* into the sociospatial fabric of Black community life. However, rather than wholly *assimilate* into Black heteronormativity, Moore (2018) and Brooks (2016) illuminate the transformative effects that Black LGBT people bring to their communities by claiming non-normative sexualities. Take, for example, Moore's (2018) autobiographical remarks delivered at the "After Marriage" conference, in which she reads everyday practices of "normalization," including marriage and motherhood, as revolutionary acts:

> I do not see my efforts to gain access as a replacement of my Black lesbian identity—and all that has meant historically—with a staid, conformist, Black heteronormativity…. I also want to posit the idea that "normalization" can in itself be radical, depending again on the context. As a person from a racial community whose people have been stereotyped as failing to live up to their responsibilities and not conforming to the expectations of "mainstream" society, the idea of having a same-sex marriage and having that relationship publicly acknowledged is experienced by many as revolutionary. Specific communities

> stand in complex and often unequal relation to broader societies, and this adds further nuance to how we think about concepts like "normalization" and "radical" (Moore, 2018, p.78).

For Moore, the practice of conforming to respectability politics can be interpreted as revolutionary given how Black queer women have been historically positioned outside of various forms of citizenship. In this way, Moore provides insight into some placemaking practices (i.e., "normalization" practices) that Black queer women engage within Black community life.

When taken together, extant research on queer placemaking and Black queer women's lived experiences demonstrate that Black queer women (1) are absent from mainstream queer spaces like gayborhoods and (2) spatially and socially blend into Black community life. In both scenarios, Black queer women are peripheral, if not wholly invisible, in these geographies and in empirical accounts of these spaces. In these accounts, less clear are the placemaking practices that encompass Black queer women's intimate lifeworlds, including what Hammonds (1994) calls Black queer women's "alternative sexual universes" (p.312). Moreover, we know little about Black queer women's movements within and across the multiple sociospatial landscapes they inhabit and navigate in their everyday lives.

4. INTIMACY MAPPING AS A CRITICAL INTERVENTION

In this section, I outline *intimacy mapping* as a conceptual and methodological intervention that maps Black queer women's individual and collective intimacy projects in Chicago. First, I discuss the dominant theoretical perspectives on intimacy in psychology, sociology, and feminist and queer studies that inform how I conceptualize intimacy. Subsequently, I discuss the *digital*

urbanist approach as a conceptual and methodological guide for mapping Black queer women's intimacies.

Theorizing Intimacy: Psychological, Sociological, and Feminist and Queer Perspectives

In our collective imagination, intimacy evokes the kinds of connection that materialize out of sight and behind closed doors. Indeed, intimacy is often deployed as a less crude expression of, and proxy for, sexual-romantic intimacy. Across disciplinary fields, intimacy is a notoriously ambiguous and broad concept that encompasses psychological, sociological, feminist, and queer perspectives on various intimate arrangements, relationships, and attachments. In psychology, intimacy variously describes what is produced and shared in the context of romantic, sexual, familial, kinship, and platonic relationships. Similar to colloquial understandings, psychological perspectives regard intimacy as inextricably bound to the domestic, private sphere and emerges in the context of intimate relationships. Sociological perspectives, on the other hand, offer empirical analyses that span various micro-, meso-, and macro-level social contexts to capture the relationship between intimacy and other social conditions (i.e., inequality, social cohesion, alienation, etc.). Alternatively, feminist and queer theoretical approaches are concerned with the disciplinary and regulatory functions of intimacy (i.e., intimacy as a field of power), as well as the potential of minoritized subjects to subvert intimacy as a regime of power. Below, I draw on key studies to outline the aforementioned perspectives. Then I articulate the integrated approach to intimacy that guides the intimacy mapping framework.

Psychological Perspectives

Psychological perspectives on intimacy focus on intimacy as a positive, intersubjective experience (Prager, 1997; Halling, 2007). Here, intimacy is linked to mental and emotional health and well-being, and is, therefore, seen as personally beneficial. As Prager (1997) poignantly and simply puts it, "intimacy is good for people" (1997, p.1). Indeed, intimate relationships have been variously linked to positive health outcomes, including "buffer[ing] people from the pathogenic effects of stress" and improving overall mental and physical health and well-being (p.1). Moreover, the absence of intimacy, and intimate relationships, in particular, has been linked to "higher mortality rates, more accidents, and higher risks for developing illnesses" (1997, p.2). These empirical findings align with theories that extol the pragmatic value of intimate relationships, such as Thibaut and Kelley's (1959) *social exchange theory*. As argued by Halling (2007), this model "assumes that we approach relationships in a way similar to how we approach business exchanges" (p.204). This social exchange theory holds that individuals will participate in relationships so long as those relationships are personally beneficial.[5] Undergirding such an argument is the assumption that individuals are rational beings who approach relationships (and business) primarily through the lens of loss and gain.

Working in the phenomenological tradition, Halling (2007) critiques the pragmatic perspective, arguing that while "many of us think of relationships in these terms, at least at times….it is also obvious that such a lens is both limited and limiting" (p.204). Instead, Halling argues that the benefit of intimacy lies in its capacity for interpersonal transcendence:

[5] Similar to the pragmatic approach taken by some psychologists, scholars working in the tradition of sociology of emotions draw upon the social exchange theory to explain the motivations that drive and sustain interpersonal relationships (see Lawler and Thye, 2006).

> To be a person is to live in the world with others. And anytime we become truly present to this reality, we are both enriched and humbled…. In such a moment we experience deep empathy, appreciation, or love for the other. It is also a moment when we, paradoxically, come to our senses as we allow ourselves to move past self-absorption and self-consciousness to a connectedness with something or someone that includes us and also surpasses our own boundaries. In discovering the other we rediscover our own capacity for openness, and it is this openness that is at the core of what it means to be a person (Halling, 2007, p.216).

Thus, while Halling does not eschew the intersubjective quality of intimacy, he subtly offers an alternative conception of intimacy that locates *openness* and *connectedness* as defining features of what it means to be intimate. In doing so, Halling untethers intimacy from the realm of "close relationships with friends and family members," and embraces a definition of intimacy that aligns with "the etymological sense of having to do with the inmost part of oneself or the other" (2007, p.10).

Sociological Perspectives

Within sociology, intimacy is broadly used "as a short-hand term for emotional connectedness" (Forstie, 2017, p.2). Sociologists have long sought to describe and measure intimacy (e.g., strong/weak and cold/warm) within various social contexts (e.g., home, work, nation); relationships (e.g., marriage, family, community), and practices (e.g., care, sex, parenting). This literature seeks to understand how institutions of intimacy, such as marriage, family, and community, affect, and are affected by, political, economic, and cultural forces. If psychological perspectives extol the value of intimate relationships as personally beneficial and potentially transcendent, sociological perspectives view the quality of intimacy as evidence of social cohesion,

alienation, and change (Bauman, 2003; Forstie, 2017; Jamieson, 2011). One dominant strand of intimacy research examines the place of intimacy in society by focusing on "the changing modern world and the role of intimacy within it" (Forstie, 2017, p.3). Concepts like "collective effervescence" (Durkheim, 1912), "sentiment" (Cooley, 1909), and "sociability" (Simmel, 1910) were theorized as "remedies for the harsh, instrumental, increasingly individualized, and rationalized modern world" (Forstie, 2017, p.3).

More recent scholarship has "bemoaned the loss of an affectively warm, presumably more authentic, style of intimacy as a new set of norms has emerged around cold intimacies" (Forstie, 2017, p.3). For example, various studies demonstrate how care, sex, and romance have been rationalized and commodified in ways that reflect the entrenchment of modern capitalism (Bauman, 2003; Bernstein, 2007; Hochschild, 1979; Zelizer, 2007). In theorizing intimacy in the late twentieth century, scholars like Giddens (1992), Bauman (1995, 2003), Beck with Beck-Gernsheim (1995), and Castells (1997), point to the increasing individualization of intimacy "emerging from the social and economic conditions of global capitalism" (Jamieson, 2011, p.2). These works offer optimistic and pessimistic analyses of the individualization of intimacy in contemporary society. For example, forwarding an optimistic analysis, Giddens (1992) argues that the emergence of "the pure relationship" in late modernity—a relationship predicated on mutual satisfaction and "confluent love"—engenders democratic possibility (p.188). Giddens postulates that the democratization of the private sphere can positively affect social change by "spreading democracy through the search for more intimate and equal relationships" (Jamieson, 2011, p.2). In a more pessimistic vein, Bauman (2003) argues that the dual forces of individualization and technological change have rendered human bonds increasingly tenuous and frail. In Bauman's

view, intimate relationships, or what he calls "real relationships," have been usurped by connections, or "virtual relationships," that are "easy to enter and to exit" (p.xii). In lacking the commitment and messiness of "real relationships," Bauman regards "connections" as fleeting and meaningless.

These theory-driven perspectives contrast sharply with empirical analyses that focus on intimacy practices, or the 'doing' of intimacy across multiple domains. As articulated by Jamieson (2011), scholars can capture the 'doing' of intimacy by attending to the "practices of intimacy," by which she means "the practices which cumulatively and in combination enable, create, and sustain a sense of a close and special quality of a relationship between people" (p.3). Such practices are enumerated in Forstie's (2017) discussion of the four dimensions—affect, knowledge, mutual action, and norms—that differently and cumulatively compose intimacies (p.1). In drawing on Gould's (2009) discussion of affect, Forstie (2017) argues that intimacy is "a distinct type or quality of affective relationship that is both cognitively and bodily felt by individuals in social contexts" (Forstie, 2017, p.5).[6] As compared to other relationships, intimate relationships, then, are uniquely defined by their affective dimensions and the extent to which they engender emotional connectedness. In addition to affect, sharing of "intimate knowledge" is argued to be a critical component of intimacy (see Duncombe & Marsden, 1995). For example, in theorizing love, Luhmann (1998) forwards the concept of "interpersonal interpenetration" to describe the ongoing knowledge-sharing processes in which "individual, unique attributes of each person, or ultimately all their characteristics, become significant" (1998, p.13). Forstie argues that the "process of introjection," encapsulated by Luhmann's concept of interpersonal interpenetration, is a

[6] Gould (2009) defines affect as a "bodily, sensory, inarticulate, nonconscious experience" (Gould, 2009, p.20).

constitutive element of "dyadic intimacies to group intimacies of subculture, community, nation, and globe" (2017, p.6). The third dimension of intimacy—mutual action—refers to how intimacies are sustained through interactions, specifically "ongoing rituals of inclusion" (Forstie, 2017, p.6). Examples of such interactions include patriotic, sexual, marital, and familial rituals that sustain social cohesion across domains. Lastly, intimacy shapes and is shaped by norms. That is, intimate relationships often operate within a distinct set of socially acceptable norms, and these norms are, in turn, positioned as normatively desirable (Forstie, 2017, p.7).

The perspective elaborated by Jamieson (2011) and Forstie (2017) is less interested in classifying relationships as "pure" or "real"; instead, their focus on intimacy practices examines the rituals, interactions, scripts, and meanings that emerge at the intersection of various subjectivities (e.g., white, Black, heterosexual, queer), relationships (e.g., marital, familial, erotic, communal, platonic), and spatial contexts (e.g., home, work, school, leisure spaces). Crucially, in focusing on intimacy practices, sociologists examine how everyday intimacy practices, enacted by everyday people, reinforce and disrupt existing power relations and social hierarchies. For example, scholars have studied the relationship between interracial marriage and the racial order (Buggs, 2017; Childs, 2005; Twine, 2010); same-sex relationships and gender norms (Carrington, 1999; Moore, 2008); homosociality and hegemonic masculinities and femininities (Arxer, 2011; Hammarén & Johansson, 2014); and queer kinship and heteronormativity (Acosta, 2018; Gamson, 2017; Mizielińska, Gabb & Stasińska, 2017; Moore, 2011; Walters, 2012; Weston, 1997). This literature views the intimate sphere as a fraught terrain that reproduces and challenges the social inequalities associated with the public sphere.

Feminist and Queer Perspectives

While psychological and sociological perspectives tend to approach intimacy as behaviors, actions, and relations that take place in the private sphere, scholars working in feminist and queer studies traditions have argued that intimacy (and the intimate sphere) has been forged historically to sustain a public/private binary for "fundamental political interest" (Berlant, 1998, p.283). Berlant (1998) argues that the binary of "controllable space (the private-affective) and an uncontrollable one (the public-instrumental)" has "organized and justified other legally and conventionally based forms of social division (male and female, work and family, colonizer and colonized, friend and lover, hetero and homo, 'unmarked' personhood versus racial-, ethnic-, and class-marked identities)" (Berlant, 1998, p.283). Drawing on Habermas's (1989) writing on the bourgeois development of the public sphere, Berlant argues that institutions of intimacy emerged as critical sites for the development of liberal society by dispensing "intimacy expectations between the public and the domestic" (Berlant, 1998, p.284). Thus, "intimate spheres of domesticity" surfaced as places in which individuals "would learn (say, from novels and newspapers) to experience their internal lives theatrically, as though oriented toward an audience" (Berlant, 1998, p.284).

If sociological perspectives seek to understand the place of intimacy in society and within specific social contexts, feminist and queer perspectives approach intimacy as an always already politically constituted and consequential terrain. As argued by Wilson (2016), intimacy is "a flexible, provisional reference" and "placeholder" that "emphasizes linkages across what are understood to be distinct realms" (p.251). Likewise, Pain (2014) posits that intimacy is "not only part of the connective tissue of relations that stretch across and between communities, cities and

states, but [is] foundational to them" (p.352). To be sure, feminist and queer theories of intimacy argue that "disciplinary power, governmentality, or biopolitics—chiefly in the form of discourse—use intimacy to regulate bodies and populations in ways that distribute life chances unevenly" (Wilson, 2016, p.251). Drawing on legal and cultural analysis, Povinelli (2007, 2011) and Berlant (1998) demonstrate how "law, policy, and popular media in liberal Anglo settler societies distribute resources according to evaluations of worthy and unworthy forms of intimacy" (Wilson, 2016, p.251). Discourses of intimacy are sites of disciplinary power that not only regulate bodies in juridical terms but establish and reinforce norms and ideologies about what it means to have "a good life" or to have a life at all (Berlant, 2011). For example, Roberts (1997, 2005, 2009, 2014) offers critical insight into how laws, policies, and discourses on welfare, reproductive rights, adoption, and interracial marriage have been used to regulate kinship "to preserve a racial hierarchy that essentially disregards Black humanity" (1997, p.305).

As a regime of power, intimacy "build worlds" that both reinforce and resist "universalist collective intimacy expectations" (Berlant, 1998, p.284). That is, intimacy is a critical site of subversive potential, or what Berlant and Warner (1998) term "queer world making" (p.558). Expanding on their discussion of queer worlds, Berlant and Warner (1998) argue:

> Queer and other insurgents have long striven, often dangerously or scandalously, to cultivate what good folks used to call criminal intimacies. We have developed relations and narratives that are only recognized as intimate in queer culture: girlfriends, gal pals, fuckbuddies, tricks. Queer culture has learned not only how to sexualize these and other relations, but also to use them as a context for witnessing intense and personal affect while elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation. Making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation (1998, p.558).

In theorizing queer world-making, Berlant and Warner (1998) provide an important bridge between intimacy and placemaking that is critical for the present study. My invocation of *intimacy projects* and *intimate lifeworlds* indexes Black queer women's intimacies as a collective project of "belonging and transformation" that pushes against the normative boundaries of what Plummer (2003) terms *intimate citizenship* (1998, p.558).

In drawing upon and bridging the aforementioned literatures, I approach intimacy as intersubjective affective experiences enacted through a constellation of individual and collective practices, all of which are politically implicated and potentially subversive. As I am less interested in arriving at a concrete definition of intimacy, I examine how Black queer women think about intimacy and cultivate intimate lifeworlds shaped by their subjectivities, desires, and everyday spatial contexts. In doing so, I expand on the aforementioned scholarship to explicitly consider the where, how, and what of Black queer women's intimacy projects. As I clarify in the following section, a focus on these critical dimensions of placemaking reveal and address the conceptual and methodological gaps in extant queer placemaking research that render Black queer women's intimacies unremarked and undertheorized. I outline the *digital urbanist approach* as a conceptual and methodological guide for mapping Black queer women's intimacies.

Intimacy Mapping: The Digital Urbanist Approach

Intimacy mapping takes up the challenge invited by Jess's proclamation at the beginning of this chapter: "it's always hard for Black queer women to find their spot." Intimacy mapping involves using mapping methods to capture Black queer women's intimacy projects in spatial contexts that often render those projects absent, invisible, and unimaginable. It also involves

broadening conceptualizations of urban space and placemaking to illuminate Black queer women's intimacy practices. Specifically, intimacy mapping requires an integrated approach, which I conceptualize as the *digital urbanist approach*, to empirically account for the various placemaking practices that give rise to Black queer women's intimate lifeworlds. I ground the digital urbanist approach in cross-disciplinary scholarship, including geography studies, urban sociology, and digital ethnography, that collectively embrace the "digital turn" in urban placemaking. The digital urbanist approach captures three dimensions of placemaking—movement, interplay, and innovation—salient to examining Black queer women's intimate lifeworlds. Together, the three dimensions of the digital urbanist approach specify the where, how, and what of Black queer women's placemaking.

The digital urbanist approach to intimacy regards urban place and placemaking as inextricably tied to *movement*. By attending to movement, this study recognizes that Black queer women traverse multiple sociospatial contexts (e.g., home, work, commercial, and leisure spaces) across Chicago's landscape, including Black and queer spatial territories. Rather than focus on one spatial territory, the dominant approach taken by scholars of queer placemaking, the digital urbanist approach trains its analytic scope on Black queer women's movements across distinct spatial territories. In theorizing the "new mobilities" approach to queer urban placemaking, Nash and Gorman-Murray (2014) define place as "constituted and linked through forms of mobilities tied to social categories (e.g., race, gender and class) and power relations" (p.767). Importantly, such a definition of place resists treating "urban spaces as fixed and static and directs our attention to a consideration of socio-spatial relations as constituted through complex networks of ideas, peoples, practices and patterns" (2014, p.757). Places, like bodies, are shaped by race, gender,

class, and sexuality, in ways that impact whether, how, and under what conditions certain bodies can occupy and move through certain places (Bailey & Shabazz, 2014). To be sure, the (in)ability to move across Chicago's landscape necessarily impacts the kinds of intimacy projects that Black queer women are able to leverage. Thus, while modern citizenship has become increasingly tied to the idea of mobile citizenship, we must consider how spatial arrangements enable and constrain Black queer women's movements in the cityscape (Cresswell, 2006).

The attention to movement central to the digital urbanist approach resonates with Hunter and Robinson's (2018) conceptualization of Black placemaking in *Chocolate Cities: The Black Map of American Life*, which indexes "movement, migration, [and] resistance" as defining features of Black American life (p.58). Indeed, drawing on the early public-scholarship of Ida B. Wells at the turn on the twentieth century, Hunter and Robinson maintain that "the power of Black people's agency was rooted in their ability to resist through movement and make places for safety and freedom in the process" (p.66). Despite the ways in which Black bodies are frequently depicted as always already proximate to confinement, the chocolate cities framework highlights the ways in which "Black people have used the resources at their disposal to change their circumstances and change the places in which they find themselves to make them more amendable for survival, even in places where they are not meant to survive or thrive" (p.120). Therefore, the digital urbanist approach foregrounds the centrality of movement and agency in Black queer women's placemaking.

In addition to movement, the digital urbanist approach captures Black queer women's placemaking by examining the *interplay* of the digital and the urban in mediating intimacies. Forwarding one of the earliest sociological works on the impact of information and communication

technologies, Castells (1996) theorized the notion of "the network society" to describe "a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communications technologies" (Castells, 2004, p.3). Critiques of "the network society," as well as other early theories on the digital (Giddens, 1990), claimed that scholars "focus[ed] so much on informational flows that [they forgot] that for information to flow, it must flow through specific places" (Frith, 2012, p.131). More recently, human geographers and urban sociologists have embraced the "digital turn" in theoretical and empirical accounts of urban life to better understand the relationship between digital technologies and the physical geographies in which they are embedded (Ash, Kitchin & Leszczynski, 2016; de Souza e Silva, 2006; Elwood & Leszczynski, 2018; Giesking, 2019; Goodspeed, 2017; Kinsley, 2013; Leszczynski, 2019; McQuire, 2017; Sassen, 2011; Sheller, 2014). For example, de Souza e Silva (2006) argues digital technologies intersect with physical spaces to create *hybrid space*: "a conceptual space created by the merging of borders between physical and digital spaces, because of the use of mobile technologies as social devices" (de Souza e Silva, 2006, p.264). However, de Souza e Silva resists a technologically deterministic position by arguing that hybrid spaces are "built by the connection of mobility and communication and materialized by social networks developed simultaneously in physical and digital spaces" (2006, p.266). Scholars across several disciplines have forwarded concepts like *open-source urbanism* (Sassen, 2011); *geomedia* (McQuire, 2017); *the digital city* (Couclelis, 2004); and related concepts to describe the impact of technological innovations on urban life.

Understanding the interplay between the digital and the urban has important implications for the study of intimacy, particularly because these spatial arrangements are reconfiguring the public and the private. As argued by Sheller (2014), "new forms of mobility, new technologies of

communication and novel convergences between travel, mobile communication and the infrastructures that support them have arguably reconfigured public and private life" (p.48). Indeed, "new modes of public-in-private and private-in-public" are blurring the boundaries between what sociologists have regarded as two distinct spheres (Sheller, 2014, p.48). For example, (public) social media platforms are increasingly the spaces in which (private) intimacies are mediated and enacted. Nevertheless, the digital has been largely "internalized and taken for granted" (Ash, Kitchin & Leszczynski, 2016, p.26). The infrastructures of intimacies, as materialized through the digital and the urban, are often regarded as static backdrops upon which seemingly autonomous intimacies emerge (Adams-Santos, 2020; Wilson, 2016).[7] This oversight is due, in part, to the invisible and taken-for-granted quality of infrastructures, expressly designed to blend into the sociospatial fabric and routines of everyday life. Yet, examining the interplay of the urban and the digital, including the infrastructures that support them, can illuminate the "rich material-symbolic assemblages" that enable and constrain intimate relations (Wilson, 2016, p.249).

To capture the interplay between the digital and the urban in mediating intimacies, the digital urbanist approach embraces the useful heuristic offered by geographers Ash, Kitchin, and Leszczynski (2016), which involves documenting geographies "produced *through*, produced *by*, and *of* the digital" (p.25; emphasis original). Writing on the first dimension, Ash and colleagues argue the need to examine how "digital artifacts"—i.e., artifacts produced *through* the digital—serve as "objects, sites and modes of knowledge production" salient to geographical inquiry (2016, p.28). Secondly, in terms of geographies produced *by* the digital, the authors argue that our

[7] Wilson (2016) defines infrastructure defines as the "systematic assemblage of objects, codes, and procedures" that is often "an embedding environment for intimate life" (p.275).

inquiries should investigate how the digital mediates and augments spatial production and transforms sociospatial relations (2016, p.29). Lastly, a focus on geographies *of* the digital, explores “the digital as a particular geographical domain with its own logics and structures” (2016; p.32). As I will discuss in the methods section of this chapter, these three dimensions reflect the empirical scope of this dissertation.

Lastly, the digital urbanist approach recognizes that Black queer women’s placemaking can be meaningfully understood through the lens of *innovation*. While theories of innovation have been largely developed within organizational and economic sociology, the concept of innovation offers an asset-based approach to placemaking that considers the interplay of structure and agency in cultivating intimate lifeworlds. Dahlin (2014) argues that innovation consists of “generating novel solutions that simultaneously exploit knowledge and resources that are both available to [a group] and in the [group’s] environment” (Dahlin, 2014, p.671). When applied to the present study, the concept of innovation simultaneously accounts for Black queer women’s material and symbolic placelessness *and* how Black queer women creatively respond to placelessness through the knowledge, resources, and infrastructures available to them.

Importantly, this application of innovation resonates with existing conceptualizations of Black/queer placemaking. For example, the concept of Black placemaking forwarded by Hunter and colleagues (2016) “privileges the creative, celebratory, playful, pleasurable, and poetic experiences of being black and being around other black people in the city” (p.31). Specifically, Black placemaking “refers to the ways that urban black Americans create sites of endurance, belonging, and resistance through social interaction” (2016, p.31). Critically, Black placemaking is a counter-hegemonic framework to normative social scientific approaches to Black urban life

that almost always hinge on danger, assault, and indignity (2016, p.32). Moreover, Black placemaking is about how Black people and "other deeply disadvantaged, stigmatized, and often segregated groups… find meaning in hostile places" (2016, p.32-33). Similarly, Giesking (2020) forwards a notion of queer placemaking about cultivating spaces "when there was none to claim or share physically" (2020, p.230), Bailey (2014) conceives of Black and Latinx queer placemaking as the practice of "transform[ing] normative geographies" (2014, p.490), and Berlant and Warner (1998) posit queer world-making as "elaborating a public world of belonging and transformation" (1998, p.558). In bridging these concepts, we can discern that the innovation of placemaking lies in the capacity to transform normative and oppressive spatial arrangements for Black/queer life.

Intimacy mapping, as explicated through my discussion of the digital urbanist approach, positions *movement, interplay,* and *innovation* as key dimensions to the study of Black queer women's placemaking. In attending to movement, this study understands that Black queer women occupy and traverse multiple sociospatial contexts in their everyday lives, all of which matter to the kinds of intimacy projects they are able to individually and collectively leverage. In focusing on the interplay between the urban and the digital, this dissertation recognizes that Black women's intimacy projects materialize within spatial contexts and through infrastructures shaped by the urban and the digital. Through the lens of innovation, the digital urbanist approach illuminates Black queer women's placemaking as a transformative practice. As will be shown in the next section, the dimensions of movement, interplay, and innovation inform the methods of data collection and analysis that comprise intimacy mapping as a critical intervention.

5. MAPPING METHODS

In employing a digital urbanist approach to intimacy mapping, this study uses a constellation of urban and digital ethnographic methods to map Black queer women's intimate placemaking in Chicago's urban-digital sphere. I draw inspiration from Halberstam's (1998) notion of a *scavenger methodology*, which uses different methods, including those from distinct disciplines, to collect and produce knowledge on groups who have been intentionally or unintentionally excluded from extant accounts of social life (Halberstam, 1998, p.13). As a queer method aimed precisely at uncovering that which has been systematically hidden, the scavenger methodology is well-suited to tackle the charge promulgated by Hammonds outlined at the start of this chapter: "What methodologies are available to read and understand [the perceived void of Black queer women's sexualities] and gauge its direct and indirect effects on that which is visible?" With this orientation in mind, I pair conventional urban ethnographic methods, such as in-depth interviews and participant observation, with digital ethnographic methods to capture Black queer women's intimacy practices. The next sections elaborate the distinct methods used in the data collection process, the breakdown of which corresponds to specific chapters.

In-Depth Interviews

Chapters 2 and 3 of this study draws on the narratives of Black queer women storytellers. The invocation of storytellers indexes the protagonist-driven narrative approach to intimacy mapping that I employ in this study. The protagonist-driven approach, as explicated by Cobb and Hoang (2015), places "the lived experiences of research participants at the center of research and writing" in urban ethnography (2015, p.349). Moreover, I extend the method of the protagonist-driven approach by using Black queer women's stories as guideposts to orient me toward the

movements, spaces, and forms of placemaking salient to their everyday lives. Thus, my use of the protagonist-driven approach reflects an inductive approach to urban and digital fieldwork in which the objects of my empirical gaze emerged during the course of interviewing storytellers.

I conducted in-depth interviews with thirty Black queer women, as well as six other Latinx and Asian/Pacific Islander queer women and non-binary individuals who live in the Chicagoland area. Importantly, "Black queer women" is a signifying term that indexes the structural positionality of subjects who share a specific relationship to race, sexuality, and gender that is most accurately by "Black queer women." Indeed, individual storytellers often identify in ways that exceed the categories of Black, queer, and woman. For example, queerness is not always synonymous with lesbianism and does not preclude romantic and sexual encounters with men. Similarly, blackness is not always synonymous with Black American identity and does not preclude biraciality or African, Caribbean, and Latin American ancestry. Additionally, the category of woman is not always synonymous with cisgender femme identity and does not preclude masculine gender presentation. Thus, I use "Black queer women" as a collective signifier with an acute understanding that individual storytellers articulate their subjectivities in ways that refuse the stability and coherence that such a term suggests.

In recruiting the sample of storytellers, I relied on three strategies: (1) personal networks; (2) digital recruitment advertisements; and (3) snowball sampling. When I first began the recruitment process, I first approached my personal network of queer women and people of color living in Chicago, who referred me to potential interview participants within their networks. Concurrently, I posted recruitment advertisements (see Appendix C) to Chicago-based Facebook groups organized for and by queer people of color, as well as dating app platforms like the HER

App and PinkCupid, which cater to lesbian and queer women. Lastly, I used a snowball sampling technique, wherein I asked interview participants to refer me to queer women of color in their networks. The thirty-six storytellers interviewed for this study represent a diverse sample of queer women of color that differ by race, gender, age, sexuality, relationship status, residence, education, and income (see Appendix A). However, the majority of storytellers identify as Black (n=30), cisgender women (n=29), and lesbian (n=15). Additionally, the median age of sample is 33 years old; the average income is $45,000; the majority earned a college degree or advanced degree (n=27); and are partnered or married (n=22).

In line with the scope of the study, in-depth interviews captured (1) the urban and digital spaces that Black queer women traverse in their everyday lives; (2) the salient relationships, investments, and obligations that shape their everyday movements; (3) their digital and urban intimacy practices; (4) the meanings and feelings that they attach to their placemaking practices. Interviews (see interview guide in Appendix B) prompted storytellers to reflect and elaborate on each of these points within the larger context of their lives, particularly as it relates to the everyday lives in and across Chicago.

Urban-Digital Fieldwork

Chapter 4 uses a blend of urban and digital ethnographic methods to map Black queer women's erotic scene-spaces. Importantly, I situate observations of these erotic scene-spaces within the larger scope of queer women of color's placemaking in Chicago. My urban fieldwork included participant observations of physical spaces where queer women of color enact placemaking. For six months, between June and December 2019, I attended Pride events and gatherings (e.g., Pride South Side and the Chicago Dyke March); Black queer fundraising events;

weekly watch parties featuring *The L Word*; book club meetings organized by queer women of color; and events hosted by Black and Brown queer party collectives. Revisiting Hunter et al.'s (2016) definition of placemaking, these spaces function as "sites of endurance, belonging, and resistance" (p.31). My intention here was to be fully immersed in the "scene space" cultivated by Black queer women and queer women of color (Lane, 2016). Following Lane (2016), participant observations captured the physical, if not fleeting, terrain of Black queer women's placemaking in Chicago. In doing so, I enacted what Wacquant (2015) terms *enactive ethnography*, or "the brand of immersive fieldwork" that privileges "embodied practical knowledge arising out of and continuously enmeshed in webs of action" (Wacquant, 2015, p.2). Such an orientation to fieldwork is invaluable because "you have the building blocks for a *flesh-and-blood sociology*, capable of producing multidimensional, polychrome accounts of social life that seize life as it actually unfolds" (2015, p.4).

In addition to urban fieldwork, I observed the digital traces of events and gatherings that materialized in urban space, specifically focusing on the social media presence of Chicago's Black queer women party collectives. The approach to digital ethnography that I employed in this study takes inspiration from the *digital sociality* method outlined by Postill and Pink (2012). The digital sociality approach recognizes the messiness of "emergent forms of social media-driven ethnographic practice" (2012, p.123). In line with the digital urbanist approach, the digital sociality method hinges on the concepts of routine and movement. The concept of routine refers to the everyday routines that constitute digital ethnography practice. Such routines include "catching up, sharing, exploring, interacting, and archiving" social media content (p.128). Catching up, "a taken-for-granted yet crucial routine for most internet users," refers to remaining updated on the social

media activities of Black queer women placemakers (p.128). Sharing, exploring, and interacting refer to the more interactive and exploratory dimensions of digital ethnography:

> These explorations can end in a quick glance at a web page or in longer, more meandering explorations of a potential research site – participant or initiative. Often, they are brief excursions from online haunts that are followed by a return to base. These research homebases (especially Twitter, Facebook and email) can be seen as ports from which the digital ethnographer embarks on short exploratory trips– rarely venturing too far (Postill & Pink 2012, p.129).

Lastly, the everyday routine of digital ethnography involves archiving social media posts and threads, as well as bookmarking and tagging web content derived from those posts. The second concept, movement, further embraces the "the fact that most internet users constantly criss-cross a range of platforms through aggregators, search engines, hyperlinks and other devices" (2012, p.131). In employing digital ethnographic methods, I captured the digital traces of Black queer women placemakers across social media platforms to understand the interplay of the urban and digital in producing Black queer women's erotic scene-spaces.

Social Media Ethnography

Chapter 5 provides an analysis of a digital space that offers glimpses into Black queer women's digital lifeworlds: QWOC Love.[8] I draw on digital ethnographic data from QWOC Love that I, along with my research assistant, collected during the summer months of 2020. The data collection process unfolded in three temporal phases between June and August 2020, in which we captured, stored, and analyzed the group's social media content. The social media content

[8] For purposes of confidentiality, QWOC Love is a pseudonym I have chosen to represent the Facebook group.

comprised three weeks of data collected during the second week of each of the three months. We captured, de-identified, and stored screenshots of the social media content in an external hard drive. Subsequently, using an inductive approach to coding, we built a database in which we coded the social media data to elucidate descriptive, performative, and discursive themes. Descriptive codes captured the metrics of individual posts, including the date, time, and number of reactions and comments. Performative codes indexed the media content featured in each post. For example, performative codes captured whether a post used textual, visual, and/or audiovisual content. Additionally, performative codes identified the rhetorical practices (e.g., acts of self-disclosure and inquiry) members used in crafting and posting content to the group. Substantive codes were used to capture the central topic of each post, which elucidated the various kinds of "intimacy talk" that emerged in QWOC Love. As shown in Chapter 5, my analysis of QWOC Love focuses on the performative and discursive themes to elucidate the practices that give rise to Black queer women's intimate publics.

6. CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In addition to the present chapter, the dissertation is composed of four substantive chapters and a concluding chapter. In Chapter 2, I analyze Black queer women's relationship to Chicago, specifically focusing on their movements within and affective attachments to the city. I theorize the concept of intersectional placelessness to describe Black queer women's sense of ambiguous and contingent belonging within Chicago's Black and queer spaces. Additionally, I present two divergent approaches to placemaking that emerge from Black queer women's narratives—encapsulated by the dialectic of tethered and untethered—which illuminate the distinct strategies that they employ to navigate intersectional placelessness.

In Chapter 3, I draw on interview data to capture the digital intimacy practices that Black queer women individually use to cultivate various kinds of intimacies. I forward *desiring technologies* as a conceptual lens to account for the various desires that animate Black queer women's use of dating apps and social media platforms *and* to flag the centrality of digital technologies in shaping and mediating these intimacy practices. In my analysis, I break away from dominant sociological approaches that position digital intimacy and online dating, and the apps and platforms that sustain these practices, as entirely harmful to Black (queer) women. Instead, I demonstrate the ubiquity, entrenchment, and generative aspects of digital technologies as it relates to Black queer women's intimacies.

Chapter 4 considers the urban and digital placemaking practices that constitute Black queer women's erotic scene-spaces, which I refer to as *Black femme pleasurescapes*. In this chapter, I demonstrate how Black femme pleasurescapes emerge through ephemeral placemaking, in which Black queer women placemakers "take up space" within Chicago to temporarily transform Black geographies into erotic scene-spaces that privilege Black queer women as desiring and desirable subjects. I link Black femme pleasurescapes to a longer history of ephemeral placemaking among Black queer women in and beyond Chicago, and briefly discuss the future of Black femme pleasurescapes in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Chapter 5, intimacy mapping extends beyond the urban environment to examine how Black queer women cultivate digital lifeworlds. My analysis focuses on one digital space, QWOC Love, to elucidate the collective intimacy practices that engender what Berlant (2008) terms *intimate publics*. I draw on the concept of intimate publics and Black feminist theorizing on intimacy and vulnerability to consider how, why, and to what effect digital spaces, such as QWOC

Love, are taken up as affective sites of attachment and identification among Black queer women. Based on this inquiry, I argue that Black queer women collectively engage in *vulnerability acts* in ways that reframe vulnerability as a constitutive element of intimate publics.

In the final chapter, I revisit the concept of placelessness, review the theoretical and methodological contributions of intimacy mapping, and identify and discuss the key analytics that emerge from the study. I end by considering areas of inquiry at the intersection of intimacy mapping and Black queer women's placemaking to be explored in future research.

CHAPTER TWO

(Un)Tethered: Black Queer Women's Intersectional Placelessness in Chicago

1. INTRODUCTION

Me: Tell me, how does it feel to be you in Chicago?

Sasha: Happy but hard. Chicago is my home in a lot of ways.

Home, a place laden and infused with intense feelings and meanings, marks our origins. Home can be a place we've never left, a faraway land from which we've been torn, and an imagined destination. Intimacy mapping begins at home, and in this study, home is Chicago. This chapter focuses on Black queer women's relationship to home, specifically unpacking their affective attachments to Chicago and how these perceptions and sensations influence their movements within and beyond the city. I forward the concept of *intersectional placelessness* to name and describe the condition of spatial marginalization and sense of ambiguous belonging that Black queer women experience within Chicago's racialized and queer geographies. In my analysis, I draw on the experiences of three Chicago natives, a young Black queer woman who was born and raised on the North Side, as well as an older Black lesbian couple who live on the South Side, to illustrate two divergent expressions of and responses to intersectional placelessness. At the center of their narratives, Black queer women theorize both what it *means* and how it *feels* to be at home in Chicago.

Chicago is a city that looms large in urban spatial imaginaries, eliciting intense and contradictory feelings and meanings among residents, local and national policymakers, scholars,

and popular media. Within dominant spatial imaginaries, Chicago is cast as a quintessential "city of neighborhoods," disparately signifying a white Midwestern haven, a great American melting pot, and a global economic hub, and nondominant spatial imaginaries position Chicago as a gay metropolis and a chocolate city (Absher, 2018). At the same time, the city's South and West Sides, like their residents, are often depicted as crumbling, poor, dangerous, and violent, while Chicago's downtown and North Side neighborhoods are depicted as lavish, homey, and family friendly. These signifiers derive meaning from and occur within a context of historically inscribed racial and ethnic segregation, poignantly illustrating what Evelynn Higginbotham (1992) terms the "metalanguage of race": the "powerful, all-encompassing effect [of race] on the construction and representation of other social and power relations, namely, gender, class, and sexuality" (1992, p.252). The metalanguage of race can be used to consider how space is racialized. As Higginbotham puts it, race operates "as a fluid set of overlapping and dialogic discourses and as a global sign that gives power to a host of expressions and to myriad aspects of life" (2017, p.638). Race not only ascribes meaning to people (i.e., processes of racialization) but also operates as a central lens through which people give meaning to their social worlds.

In Chicago, the Black–white racial binary is an ever-present spatializing mechanism, exemplified by what W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) termed the "color line." Black and white Chicagoans generally do not reside near one another; while white residents are spread throughout the North Side and wider suburbs, Black residents are concentrated heavily in the South and West Sides and southern suburbs (Doering, 2020; The Urban Institute, 2017). Shabazz (2015) links the residential concentration of Blacks on the South and West Side to the development of large-scale public housing projects in the years following World War II (2015, p.55). The public housing projects

accommodated existing residents and also “absorbed migrants from the second wave of the Great Black Migration, who descended onto the city in the years after the War in search of work, to escape from Southern racism and have a better life” (Shabazz, 2015, p.56). Despite the concentration of Black residents on both the South and West Side, the city is spatialized in such a way that Chicago natives, themselves, describe how their movements within, and knowledge of, the city are often limited to one side. As Alexis, a “West Sider” in her early thirties, describes: “The South Side gets the shortest end of the stick in terms of Chicago’s reputation. Even for me, admittedly, I grew up and spent most of my life here, but even I know very, very little about the South Side.” Alexis further asserts, “I’ve spent very little time on the South Side and it’s not for lack of wanting; it’s just so easy for us to segregate ourselves here because the city kind of did it for us already.”

Chicago’s spatial arrangements take shape in what Bailey and Shabazz (2014) term “anti-black heterotopias,” which builds on Foucault’s concept of heterotopias. In his essay, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” Foucault (1984) defines heterotopias as “other sites” within which “individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (p.5). According to Foucault, heterotopias “are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (p.3). While heterotopias exist in all societies—containing the sick, elderly, criminal, and subhuman—their existence at the margins of society renders them illusory and seemingly detached from dominant communities. Yet, as argued by Bailey and Shabazz, dominant society depends on heterotopias for their existence:

> Prisons, black ghettos, and sex districts, for example, are not atomized sites; rather, they are spaces that are constitutive of the overall spatial arrangements in a dominant society. They are the spaces by which the white, heteronormative, 'non-criminal' world constitutes itself in and through creating its other and then spatializing it. (2014, p.317)

Applying a Black queer lens to Foucault's concept of heterotopias, Bailey and Shabazz develop the concept of anti-black heterotopias to "expose how race, gender, and sexuality are expressed and constituted in and through spatial landscapes" (p.318). The concept of anti-black heterotopias helps to reveal the ways in which "black spaces [and the bodies within them] are always already seen as spaces of 'crisis' that require state regulation and dispossession simultaneously" (p.318).

From a Black placemaking perspective, the central task, then, is to understand how Black life emerges within geographies marked by crisis, deprivation, and a general sense of inequality (Hunter et al. 2016). Importantly, Du Bois's conceptualization of Black lifeworlds, or what he terms "life behind the veil," offers a perspective that challenges dominant sociological understandings of Black space as inherently pathological, deviant, and crisis-ridden. Du Bois theorized the color line alongside the concept of double-consciousness to understand the psychic toll and emancipatory promise of moving between Black and white lifeworlds, which Brand (2018) poignantly elucidates:

> Beyond its diagnostic lens, double-consciousness communes a fuller breadth of blacks' experiences, knowledge and hopes, capturing how space is also the site through and in which beauty is revealed and cultivated. Double-consciousness is inherently geographical; it is a duality of space. This duality is reflective of ongoing, locally contextualized racial processes, calling attention to how space is a site of and means through which racial oppressions are worked out and where racial categorizations are scaled and made salient….In contrast to an emphasis on space as a container, a Du Boisian sense of space,

> as the empirical work presented in this article suggests, views space as inherently raced, relational and fluidly historical, material, distributional and symbolic. In its duality, space is the site of imagining the ‘‘unreconciled strivings’’ of more racially just geographies. (Brand, 2018, p.6)

Du Bois’s metaphor of the color line and concept of double-consciousness speak to the duality of space as a site of oppression and resistance where racialized geographies congeal and collapse.

In *Chocolate Cities: The Black Map of American Life*, Hunter and Robinson (2018) embrace a Du Boisian approach to the study of Black space to capture “the consequences of enduring patterns of disadvantage and inequality while surviving and thriving as Black in the United States since Emancipation” (p.xiii). Chocolate cities are conceived as “a perceptual, political, and geographic tool and shorthand to analyze, understand, and convey insights born from predominantly Black neighborhoods, communities, zones, towns, cities, districts, and wards; they capture the sites and sounds Black people make when they occupy place and form communities” (2018, p.xiii). At the same time, chocolate cities are a powerful metaphor for “the relationships among history, politics, culture, inequality, knowledge, and Blackness” (p.xiii). Countering longstanding sociological approaches to the study of urban Black geographies, chocolate cities “function as an interpretative template, providing new glasses for those unable to see or blinded by the lenses of ‘ghetto,’ ‘slum,’ ‘hood,’ and ‘concrete jungle’” (p.xiii). The concept of chocolate cities embraces alternative interpretations of urban Black space that make room for individual and collective agency within “unjust geographies” (Soja, 2010). Thus, while our spatial imaginaries often elide complicated and nuanced understandings of racialized spaces, Hunter and Robinson remind us that such spaces are the literal grounds upon which racialized subjects resist oppression.

BQW Placemaking in Chicago

Importantly, Black queer and feminist perspectives provide a necessary lens for the study of Black spaces and other racialized spaces in which Black queer women find themselves, revealing the complex relationship to home ("happy but hard") that they experience. As discussed in Chapter 1, the concept of *invisibility* looms large in scholarship on racialized sexual minority women, describing the various structural and symbolic exclusions that queer women of color experience in media, culture, politics, and at home (Brooks, 2016; Greene, 1996; Keeling, 2005; Moore, 2011; Rodriguez, 2014; Silvera, 1992). Common definitions of invisibility include two distinct yet interrelated meanings: the inability to be seen *and* the state of being ignored or made irrelevant. In both instances, invisibility is a failure of recognition and a function of misrecognition. As some scholars argue, acts of misrecognition represent a "lack of solidarity" and the "absence of moral imagination in seeing others as like ourselves" (Martineau et al., 2012; Rorty, 1993). While not explicitly framed as such, Cohen's (1999) concept of secondary marginalization, which delineates how dominant members of marginalized groups marginalize subordinate members, describes the kind of misrecognition that Black queer women endure at home. Indeed, Black queer women experience what Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach (2008) term *intersectional invisibility*, which describes "the general failure to fully recognize people with intersecting identities as members of their constituent groups" (p.381).

In geographic terms, invisibility is invoked to describe how Black queer women inconspicuously blend into the physical landscape and social fabric of Black communities (Brooks, 2016; Moore, 2011). For example, Brooks (2016) explains the strategic choice that many Black

LGBT women make to "stay in the hood," as well as the requisite identity management strategies that allow them to stay:

> [As] an attempt to manage their various identities, Black LGBT women had these ways of staying in their communities: looking like the perceived appropriate gender, blending politically into the Black community, not being politically active or disidentifying with the LGBT community, and educating people about their sexuality. These ways of staying in allow the women to manage their identity and claim an LGBT identity in a manner that did not threaten their membership status in their community. (2016, p.1590)

Brooks highlights an important trade-off of staying within one's home community: "staying in" often requires not coming out. Invisibility, then, is configured as a placemaking strategy that allows Black LGBT women "to [inconspicuously] claim an LGBT identity without alienating their home communities" (p.1589).

In this chapter, I seek to explore the tensions that Brooks (2016) and others highlight to elucidate the complexities of home experienced by Black queer women living in Chicago. I understand home as the dwellings, blocks, and neighborhoods in which Black queer women reside, as well as Black queer women's relationship to the wider geography of Chicago. This chapter uses an intersectional lens to understand how the spatial arrangements of Chicago influence and shape Black queer women's perceptions of and experiences within the city. To that end, this chapter is based on the narratives of thirty Black queer women, including city natives and transplants, who live in Chicago and its surrounding suburbs. I forward the concept of *intersectional placelessness* to name and describe the condition of spatial marginalization and sense of ambiguous belonging that Black queer women experience within Chicago's racialized and queer geographies. The dialectic of *tethered* and *untethered*, also detailed in the following section, captures two dominant

approaches to placemaking that animate Black queer women's responses to intersectional placelessness. I then present the narratives of three Black queer women to capture the ways in which the spatial arrangements of Chicago, expressed through its racialized and queer geographies, impact Black queer women's placemaking practices, influencing where, when, how, and with whom they enact intimacies.

2. THEORIZING INTERSECTIONAL PLACELESSNESS

Me: How does it feel to be you in Chicago?

Lena: I feel conflicted. I think I just feel like—not even a dichotomy because it's like multiple directions, not just two. I just feel split. Like I have to split up my identity to find community here.

"How does it feel to be you in Chicago?" Responses to this question resoundingly elicit narratives of Black queer women's complex, and often conflicting, affective attachments to Chicago. Complementing Sasha's response ("happy but hard") at the start of this chapter, Lena, a Black, queer, and poly-identified woman and Chicago transplant describes her relationship to Chicago in affectively ambiguous terms. Like Lena and Sasha, Black queer women articulate ambiguous notions of belonging and unbelonging, or placelessness, within and across Chicago.

The concept of placelessness flags the affective dimensions of spatial exclusion that individuals and social groups experience across space and time, a phenomenon that has been most remarked upon in studies on urban life. In *Place and Placelessness*, Edward Relph (1976) poignantly theorizes the taken-for-granted experiences of spatial inclusion and exclusion in Toronto, which he characterizes as *insideness* and *outsideness*. Insideness is experienced as feeling

"here rather than there, safe rather than threatened, enclosed rather than exposed, at ease rather than stressed" (Seamon and Sowers, 2008). By contrast, outsideness is experienced as being separate and alienated from place. The dialectic of insideness and outsideness indexes placelessness as a fundamentally spatial *and* affective phenomenon:

> The crucial phenomenological point is that outsideness and insideness constitute a fundamental dialectic in human life and that, through varying combinations and intensities of outsideness and insideness, different places take on different identities for different individuals and groups, with human experience taking on different qualities of feeling, meaning, ambience, and action" (Relph, 1976; cited by Seamon and Sowers, 2008, p.45).

Relph's focus on the "different qualities of feeling, meaning, ambience, and action" accounts for the spatio-affective affective continuum that exists between insideness and outsideness.

To that end, Relph uses the concepts of *existential* insideness and *existential* outsideness to capture the most intense forms of belonging and unbelonging at either end of the continuum. Existential insideness refers to the "the deepest experience of place" that involves "an unself-conscious immersion in place" (Seamon, 1984, p.132). Relph explicates how existential insideness is experienced most often in one's relationship to home:

> [Existential insideness is] the insideness that most people experience when they are at home and in their own town or region, when they know the place and its people and are known and accepted there. Existential insideness characterizes belonging to a place and the deep and complete identity with a place that is the very foundation of the place concept. (Relph, 1976, p.55)

Simply put, existential insideness is implicitly knowing that one belongs in a place. Contrarily, existential outsideness "involves a self-conscious and reflective uninvolvement, an alienation from people and places, homelessness, a sense of the unreality of the world, and of not belonging"

(Relph, 1976, p.51). Familiarity itself does not preclude existential outsideness. Indeed, existential outsideness also accounts for the ways in which *home* can function as a site of alienation, estrangement, and violence. It is precisely because home is held as emblematic of existential insideness that any deviation from this quality (e.g., experiences of violence) recasts home as a place of profound existential outsideness.

The concept of intersectional placelessness that I forward in this chapter extends Relph's theories of placelessness to explicitly consider Black queer women's experiences as existential outsiders even, and especially, within home places and other spaces that seemingly mark their inclusion. In doing so, intersectional placelessness brings Black feminist epistemologies more squarely into sociological theorizing of space and place. Specifically, intersectional placelessness builds on theories and concepts within the Black feminist epistemological tradition, including Collins's (1990) theorizing of the *matrix of domination*; Crenshaw's (1991) theory of *intersectionality*; Cohen's (1999) concept of *secondary marginalization*; Purdie-Vaughn and Eibach's (2008) concept of *intersectional invisibility*; and Story's (2017) description of the *existential conundrum* of Black femme identity. Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality and Collins's (1990) theory of the matrix of domination collectively name, describe, and critique interlocking systems of power and oppression. While often used interchangeably, Collins (1999) clarifies that intersectionality "refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender... [and] reminds us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type and that oppressions work together in producing injustice" (1999, p.18). By contrast, the matrix of domination "refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized" within "structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power"

(1999, p.18). Despite their differences, intersectionality and the matrix of domination theorize "how oppression affects Black women" within and across different realms of social life (p.18). Indeed, these analytics are frequently used to analyze and document the historical and contemporary material and symbolic injuries, erasures, exclusions, and forms of violence leveled against Black women within legal and juridical systems, social institutions, the media and public discourse, and everyday communities.

Building on these earlier theories, Cohen's (1999) concept of secondary marginalization and Purdie-Vaughn and Eibach's (2008) concept of intersectional invisibility describe how communities, including marginalized ones, exclude nondominant, or non-prototypical, group members. Story (2017) similarly describes this condition as an "existential conundrum." Take, for example, a passage from her autoethnographic essay on the "existential conundrum of embodying a Black femme identity while being a professor of Black, queer, and feminist studies":

> While my blackness in many queer and non-queer spaces has made me extremely hypervisible, it has been the combination of my racialized difference and my performance of intentional femininity through my chosen Black femme identity that seems to deem who I truly am, invisible. Needless to say, this has created a *continual existential conundrum* in my life. Choosing and wanting to be seen for the multifaceted individual I am, and not being seen as such, hints at a longstanding tradition of racial and gendered erasure that functions inside and outside of queer spaces. As such, my incidents with hypervisibility and invisibility do not exist in isolation apart from other Black femmes and/or other queer Black and Brown women. The racist and heteronormative politics at work, within and outside of queer communities of work and leisure, continue to render Black femmes and others as either something they don't declare themselves to be and/or erases the many signifiers they adopt to be seen as who they truly are (Story, 2017, p.408; emphasis added).

Mirroring Story's (2017) lucid description of the existential conundrum she experiences as a Black queer femme professor within queer academic spaces, intersectional placelessness foregrounds the ways in which normative spatial arrangements, of both queer and racialized spaces, render Black queer women existential outsiders.

A focus on Chicago reveals how Black queer women experience intersectional placelessness within the city's Black and queer geographies. Indeed, intersectional placelessness is experienced most acutely within places that Black queer women contingently belong or in places where certain dimensions of their identities are affirmed. Recall, for example, Lena's description of feeling conflicted and split in Chicago, like she has "to split up [her] identity to find community here." Lena is specifically referring to her experiences within Chicago's Black, queer, and polyamorous spaces:

> I feel conflicted. I think I just feel like—not even a dichotomy because it's like multiple directions, not just two. But I just feel split. Like I have to split up my identity to find community here. Like, how community works here, it's like, "Oh, you're in it or you're not" type of feeling. Like I was saying with some of the Black neighborhoods in Chicago—it feels like, "Oh, you're either one of us or you're not." You know, and it feels that way within each space. They're like, "We're here because this is a queer space. We're here because this is a Black space. We're here because this is a poly space." So, I feel like split. I don't know if that's the right word. Disjointed is maybe what it feels like, but I also honestly feel like I would probably feel that everywhere.

In the above excerpt, Lena implicitly alludes to the normative underpinnings of Black, queer, and poly spaces that privilege heteronormativity and whiteness and, therefore, preclude her full acceptance as a Black queer and poly-identified woman. Moreover, Lena's description of feeling conflicted, split, and disjointed points to the affective dissonance that is characteristic of

intersectional placelessness. Her last statement, "I would probably feel that everywhere," is telling: intersectional placelessness is described as both an inevitable and translocal experience.

How do Black queer women confront and respond to intersectional placelessness? How is intimacy cultivated in the context of intersectional placelessness? Extending Relph's theorizing on insideness and outsideness, I argue that intersectional placelessness emerges through a central dialectic that I refer to as *tethered* and *untethered*. This dialectic assumes that Black queer women are always already structurally and symbolically decentered within Chicago's racialized and queer spaces but, nevertheless, accounts for two dominant approaches to placemaking that Black queer women engage within and across these spaces. The concept of tethered, or tetheredness, captures experiences of contingent belonging and embeddedness, while the concept of untethered, and untetheredness, hinges on experiences of unbelonging and disembeddedness.

Tethered and Untethered

The concept of being tethered captures the experiences of Black queer women who intentionally cultivate lifeworlds within Chicago's predominantly Black spaces. These storytellers are natives of the city, born and raised on the South Side of Chicago, and whose placemaking practices continue to cluster there. Their stories evoke the concept of insideness forwarded by Relph (1976) and mirror the placemaking practices that Moore (2011) and Brooks (2016) illuminate in their empirical investigations of Black sexual minority women's experiences within Black social contexts. Storytellers who are tethered are gay- and lesbian-identified Black women who strategically settle and embed themselves within predominantly Black urban and suburban neighborhoods. Compared to untethered storytellers, tethered storytellers also tend to be older,

partnered/married, and mothers. That is, their placemaking practices center on marriage and family life.

Similar to Moore's findings that Black lesbians "experience tolerance but not acceptance within the racial group," tetheredness should not be conflated with full acceptance within Black social contexts (2011, p.181). Tetheredness does not preclude intersectional placelessness but represents the placemaking practices in which Black queer women engage to make space for themselves within predominantly Black communities. At best, Black queer women experience forms of belonging that are contingent upon their adherence "to particular definitions of a middle-class politics of respectability and maintain their community connections through strong racial group solidarity" (Moore, 2011, p.181). Later in this chapter, we meet June and Mona, a Black lesbian couple, who describe challenges they encounter and their strategies to cultivate a lifeworld within a predominantly Black South Side suburb.

By contrast, untetheredness describes the placemaking practices of a younger cohort of Black queer women, the majority of whom are either unpartnered or unmarried, and all of whom are childless. As such, their placemaking practices are not centered on marriage and family life. Instead, their placemaking practices reflect the priorities of many young adults: educational and professional opportunities, friendship, dating, and community. Rather than embed themselves within Chicago's racialized spaces, untethered storytellers reside within urban neighborhoods that they perceive to be racially/ethnically and sexually diverse (i.e., markers of safety) and that offer access to cosmopolitan lifestyle (e.g., cafes, bars, and eateries). Examples of such neighborhoods include Rogers Park and Edgewater on the North Side, Logan Square and Pilsen on the West Side, and Hyde Park on the South Side. Beyond their residential decisions, untetheredness describes

placemaking practices in which Black queer women persistently search for intimacy and community within the city's racialized and queer spaces. In their search for intimacy and community across the city, Black queer women experience the limits of inclusion and belonging within Black, POC[9] and queer spaces that not only restrict intimacy but also render the spaces unsafe. Thus, to be untethered means to not embed oneself within a particular spatial context, which also means that feelings of belonging are highly elusive. In the remaining sections, I turn to the narratives of Black queer women, all of whom are Chicago natives, to illustrate the dialectic of tethered and untethered that animates Black queer women's responses to intersectional placelessness.

3. UNTETHERED: NAVIGATING BLACK AND QUEER SPACES

Stories of untetheredness hinge on the experiences of Black queer women who persistently search for intimacy and community within Chicago's racialized and queer spaces. In this section, we meet Tiffany, a Black queer and femme-presenting woman in her late twenties, who perceives and experiences Chicago, including the city's Black and queer spaces, as a dangerous place. Indeed, discourses of safety and danger animate Tiffany's experiences of navigating geographies marred by the confluence of racism, misogyny, and homophobia.

"The whole city is bad"

Tiffany was born and raised in the historically diverse Rogers Park[10] neighborhood on Chicago's North Side with family roots on the West Side. Nearly fifty years ago, Tiffany's

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[9] Storytellers often collectively refer to Black and Latinx spaces as POC spaces.

[10] According to Mooney-Melvin (2013), Rogers Parks' surplus of rental properties and access to transportation transformed parts of the neighborhood into "a port of entry for immigrants and African American residents displaced from other sections of the city during the last half of the twentieth century" (p.464).

grandparents migrated from Mississippi to the North Side neighborhood of Lincoln Park "before that area was gentrified." Her grandparents settled on the West Side, buying property in the "K-Town" area, "a consecutive pattern of streets starting off with the letter K right outside of the Lawndale neighborhood." Once a safe place to live, K-Town has changed drastically over the years: "Back in the day, maybe like fifty years ago, it was not a rough area. It was predominantly Black, but people took care of their neighborhoods. It was safer to go out on the street. Maybe in the last thirty years, that area has gotten really, really bad. Like, it's very unsafe to be outside playing. So, when it was safe, my grandmother and my grandfather bought property over there." Indeed, K-Town, a predominantly Black residential area that borders the neighborhoods of North Lawndale and West Garfield Park, has "high levels of poverty, high school dropouts, unemployment, and gang membership" (Grunwald and Papachristos, 2017, p.138).

After marriage, Tiffany's parents settled in Rogers Park in the 1980s, raising Tiffany and her siblings on the far North Side of the city. Unlike K-Town, a predominantly Black neighborhood, Tiffany describes Roger's Park as "So diverse. It's segregated, but at the same time, it's really interesting. Like, there's Clark Street, and that's mostly, I would say, Mexican. But I think there's a mixture of like Hispanics and Latinos in general. That's their own part. And then, you get to Devon Street. That's like the Middle Eastern part. There's a part that's just Caucasians. Then, there's Howard Street, where there's a lot of Black people."

Tiffany's childhood was characterized by moving between her racially and ethnically diverse North Side neighborhood and her family's predominantly Black West Side neighborhood. Consequently, Tiffany describes having always been "exposed to different cultures. I had friends that were Asian, Black, white, and Middle Eastern. So, I always felt like I had a good exposure to

other cultures being in my neighborhood. It would be when I would go hang out with my family on the West side, I'd see nothing but Black people. There was always a shift that had to be made from like diverse to just predominantly Black people, which I had no problem with." Here, Tiffany alludes to the mental and emotional shift that accompanied her movements across Chicago's racialized landscapes, of entering and leaving predominantly Black spaces.

Tiffany observes that the racial, ethnic, and class makeup of predominantly Black and brown neighborhoods on the West and North Sides of the city has shifted in line with gentrification and urban renewal projects.[11]

> I'm very aware that the city is trying very hard for the entire land to be gentrified, in my opinion, just from observing construction and things like that. I don't think communities are becoming more diverse. I think there is a plan to specifically push out Black people. Specifically, for Black people, we're really being pushed out of the city. So, there's construction everywhere, and it's these high-end places, it's high-end condos. But people will buy them at, you know, prices that are at a certain price range for a certain group, a certain group that has generations of money. And, of course, Black people don't have money because we weren't paid our dues. So, that's what I see. Even in my diverse area, I'm seeing like more and more white people.

Given that her geographical movements mostly cluster on the North and West Sides of Chicago, Tiffany admits that she knows very little about the South Side apart from the stereotypes she heard growing up in the city. "I don't know what's going on on the South Side. It's so interesting, when you're either a West Sider or a North Sider, there's this idea of 'Never go out South. Out South is really bad.' I've heard it's gotten a lot better because of gentrification. I just

[11] Doering (2020) finds that, since the 1990s, the proportion of white residents has grown in Rogers Park and Uptown, while the number of racial and ethnic minorities and immigrants in those neighborhoods has declined (p.12).

haven't experienced it yet." Contrasting the perils of gentrification that Tiffany previously described with regard to the North and West Sides, she recasts gentrification as a tool that has been used to "better" the South Side. Indeed, Tiffany reveals the ways in which the South Side has, and continues to be, maligned by narratives of danger:

> The narrative around the South Side is it's dangerous. Like, 'People go out there to get killed. There's a lot of shooting. It's unsafe.' That was the narrative growing up, I should say. People would say, 'Oh, I'm going to go to the South Side. Do you want to come?' And, I was like, 'Oh no, I'm good. I'm trying to live.' [laughs] That's how I really felt, like that was my experience of the South Side. And, even going to something like the Bud Billiken Parade, which is a back-to-school parade that is predominantly African American. It's on the South Side, and it gets rough over there. You know, like even during this publicized and televised parade, it gets unsafe. People always die.

Interestingly, however, Tiffany recognizes how the North Side has also been depicted as an especially dangerous place for Chicago's Black residents: "I don't even think it's just the South Side, because there's also a narrative of the North Side. Like, 'There's a whole bunch of white people, and they're gonna hang you or whatever.' So, a lot of Black people, they don't consider the North Side to be a part of the city."

While discourses of white fear often undergird and animate narratives of Black spaces as dangerous, Tiffany reveals how the South Side and North Side are configured simultaneously as dangerous spaces for Chicago's Black residents. From Tiffany's perspective, distinctions between Chicago's South, West, and North Sides, specifically as they relate to matters of safety, are largely arbitrary, precisely because "the whole city is dangerous now." Within the past ten years, Tiffany has witnessed the ongoing transformation of safe spaces into dangerous ones: "I would say like ten years ago, there was hardly any crime on the North Side. And then, there was crime on the

West Side, but it wasn't as bad as the crime on the South Side. So, there were areas where you could be safe, but this past ten years, the crime is everywhere. You go on the North Side, West Side, South Side, Downtown, it gets rough. So, I think that's how the narrative changed. People say, 'Oh, the South side is bad, and the West Side is bad.' The whole city is bad."

"I'm comfortably cautious"

The concept of untetheredness not only accounts for Tiffany's perceptions of Chicago as a dangerous place but also captures the everyday actions and practices that flow from those perceptions. Living in a city she regards as dangerous, Tiffany navigates Chicago by being, what she terms, *comfortably cautious*: "I was raised to pay attention to my surroundings. But, also, just living in the city—really in a city versus like a small town—it forces you to feel more alert than usual. There's a lot going on, and there's more people, so it wouldn't be—I don't know how to describe it—it wouldn't be smart to not be cautious. I'm comfortably cautious." Tiffany conceptualizes 'comfortably cautious' as a vigilant disposition she uses to navigate the cityscape: "Am I constantly checking my purse, holding onto everything, thinking that someone is going to snatch something from me? No. However, I'm aware that can happen. So, I'm probably not walking around with my purse out of reach or like wide open, just like simple things like that. Or, like, locking your door. When you're from the city, that's just the norm."

Tiffany uses the 'comfortably cautious' strategy to protect herself from multiple forms of violence:

> There could be rape. There could be robbing. Someone could break into your car. Someone could steal the muffler from underneath your car. The muffler—there's been an actual trend, right? It was like happening for about two or three years where people were going—and this was all over Chicago—people were going underneath people's cars, and they're

> stealing their mufflers overnight. And then, there was another trend where people were stealing catalytic converters, and it was like multiple locations. It was on the news. So, clearly, there was like a large group going across the city taking these parts. So, things like that. Or getting your car broken into. Or sex trafficking. Roofies. Getting jumped for no apparent reason. Getting shot for no apparent reason. Getting profiled by the police. These are common things that can happen. And, I use 'common,' I put an emphasis on 'common.' It doesn't seem surprising. It's startling, of course, and scary, but it's typical, unfortunately.

Regardless of whether her perceptions of danger are empirically verified, Tiffany delineates the various kinds of danger—from property theft to anti-Black and gender-based violence—that culminate to mark Chicago as an unsafe place.

Tiffany notes how Chicago's queer community experiences particular dangers within Boystown:

> I would say that there's more—and I don't know how much evidence is out there, but this is just something that's kind of spoken among the queer community around Boystown. There's more predators, for lack of a better word. There's more predators that are lurking in that area, especially on the weekends because they know we're out. They know we are drinking. And, when we drink, we get 'drunk drunk,' you know. And, when we're calling Ubers or whatever the case may be, we use a buddy system: you can't leave a bar without us, if you're drunk or not, by yourself. It's not safe. You see somebody standing outside, it is your responsibility as a member of the community to say, 'Hey, are you good? Do you need me to stand here with you?' Over the last year, we've gotten a lot better at doing so. I don't know if it's happening just because it's the queer community and it's Boystown. I'm pretty sure it is. I just don't have any evidence to compare it against other communities. But it's really, really bad. It's disgusting. You'll see people just waiting. Majority it's guys. Majority it's white guys. Majority it's white guys and sometimes it's couples, like men and women. They'll try to take advantage of somebody that's drunk. I've seen that, and I've stopped that. Whether you're gonna rape this person or you're going to take their organs

> and sell it on the black market. Or sex trafficking. These are all stories. Or, just straight up kill somebody because they're part of the community. These are all stories that have happened. It's still happening.

Recounting her experiences in Boystown's nightlife scene, it is clear that Tiffany's strategy of being comfortably cautious is about understanding the particular dangers of a given space—in this case, sexual predation—and extends to collective acts of vigilance that ensure the safety of her community.

Tiffany recounts a specific incident when she and her friends witnessed a couple trying to lure an inebriated trans woman into their car outside of a bar:

> Actually, like me and my friend were coming out of a bar and there was a trans woman, and there was a couple that was trying to take her, and they're saying, 'Oh no, this is our friend. This is our friend.' And she's like, 'No, I don't know these people.' Of course, she was belligerent—she's really, really drunk. And we're like, 'Okay, no, she's calling an Uber. She's getting an Uber. You're not getting into the Uber with her. If you want to meet her later, then that's what you do, but you're not going with her.' So, we sat there, and we waited, and the couple walked off. So, it's things like that. And then, when we call the cops, the cops don't do anything, or they don't come. So, it's really bad.

Despite these incidences, Tiffany and her queer friends regularly frequent Boystown *for* reasons of safety:

> I knew that I would be safer in Boystown. I wouldn't have to watch who I bring with me. I have a lot of queer friends, and so we don't always want to go other places that are not LGBTQIA+ friendly. Because we get a lot of looks. There's a lot of staring and us just feeling uncomfortable and not being welcomed. The city has gotten better at that, but there's a lot of places that are just not welcoming. So, we know we're always going to be safer around Boystown, and we don't have to worry about it. We can walk up in anywhere and just be ourselves and not have to worry about who's either plotting to kill us or, you

> know, who's just so uncomfortable that they will take their time out of the day to stare us down.

Despite concerns of physical safety, like the story of sexual predation previously shared, Boystown is seen as a "safer" space offering respite from the judgment and harassment that her queer and trans friends experience in other parts of the city. Thus, being comfortably cautious does not simply entail avoiding unsafe spaces (according to Tiffany, such spaces do not exist) but intentionally inhabiting *safer* spaces.

"What are you doing here, honey?"

In addition to Tiffany's perceptions and strategies, the concept of untetheredness shows up most acutely in instances when Tiffany reflects on the relationship between her subjectivity as a Black queer woman and Chicago's queer spaces. This relationship is complicated by the fact that, as a femme-presenting cisgender Black woman, Tiffany's queerness is largely invisible. Tiffany explains how she is perceived as a "Black woman, not a Black queer woman": "I've been told, and I'm very aware, that I don't look like I'm queer. I don't look like I like women. I look like I'm heterosexual, like whatever that means or doesn't mean. It doesn't bother me when people say that, because that's just where I'm at in my identity and when I think about my certain physical cues. But, I'm very aware that people see me as a Black woman, not a Black queer woman."

Consequently, Tiffany is frequently met with bewilderment when she discloses her queerness: "And, so, the intersectionality of like how people will treat me differently when they find out like, 'Oh, your partner is a woman? Huh?' They look at me differently, and they're like, 'I don't know where to fit you now because you don't look like—' You know? People, they make their assumptions. And then, they are dissatisfied when they can't put people in boxes." In

invoking intersectionality, Tiffany recognizes that her queer sexuality is largely obscured and subsumed by her racial and gender identity. That is, Tiffany is not recognized as a prototypical (i.e., a white gay cisgender man) queer subject (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008).

The misrecognition of Tiffany's sexuality means that her queerness is not only rendered invisible but also placeless within Chicago's dominant queer scene. Despite feeling that Boystown is a place where she can "walk up in anywhere," her racialized gender and sexual subjectivity as a Black queer woman preclude her full acceptance into Boystown's nightlife scene:

> It's not a place that I would meet other women, although I have. It just feels like in some bars, it is like strictly men, and I don't see one woman. Maybe they, you know, pop in and pop out. But, there is this atmosphere, sometimes, that you'll feel. And, I think this is more so in nightlife. Most of the time, I'm in Boystown during the day, going to the brunches, and just like having drinks. But, the nightlife? There's a lot of bars—I'm not gonna say all of them—but there's a lot of bars that don't want girls to be in there. They only want guys, and you feel like you stand out. Like, "One of these things don't fit, and it's you, girl!" [Laughs] Like, "Why are you here?"

Tiffany's attempts at finding community in Boystown are stymied by the sexual arrangements of the gayborhood's nightlife scene, which center and privilege gay men as desiring and desirable subjects at the exclusion of others.

> There's so much division in the LGBT community, and it really comes out of Boystown. I try to ignore it because [pause] being a Black woman is enough! I'm not trying to take on anymore. But, when you go into those clubs and the gay guys look at you, like, 'What are you doing here, honey?' It's discouraging, because it's like, 'Where do I go?' You know? It's disappointing." In Tiffany's estimation, "Boystown is good for being queer. But as far as like intimate relationships, or having relationships, or, you know, going out and looking for somebody? The pool is going to be smaller for women than it is for men.

Here, Tiffany illuminates a key tension between outsideness and insideness that Black queer women experience in Boystown. While Black queer women experience partial inclusion on the basis of their queerness, the racialized and gendered dimensions of their queerness preclude full sexual citizenship within Boystown's sexual fields.

Similar to her observations of the gentrification of Chicago's Black and brown neighborhoods, Tiffany believes that the city's lesbian spaces were bought out by the gay community:

> Boystown is a *boy's* town. I don't even think there's one—there used to be one lesbian bar or something that was in Boystown, and the boys took that up. I don't really remember what the name was. They probably changed it, and then it's not the same. In Chicago, we used to have a girl's town, and it was in Andersonville. Now, that was around when I was too young to attend. But that had different bars. I don't know exactly where it was, but I suspect there was a few gay bars in Andersonville, and I think its purpose was for being a girl's town. And then, the boys took that up as well.

While narratives of lesbian spatial displacement rarely figure into my interviews with Black queer women, Ghaziani (2014) notes how Andersonville, or what he calls "Mandersonville," has become a place in which older gay men and lesbians settle down, buy houses, and start families. Furthermore, Tiffany's perceptions of gay infringement into Andersonville are echoed by one of Ghaziani's (2015) lesbian respondents who vented, "The gays are coming to pillage. Imperialism is coming up from Boystown."

Moving On

In narrating her experiences of living and moving between neighborhoods on the North and West Sides, Tiffany's story evokes the intersectional placelessness that Black queer women

experience in navigating an urban landscape that, for many, elicits multiple, overlapping concerns over their safety. Indeed, Tiffany issued a powerful indictment when she declared, “the whole city is dangerous.” While some dangers of a large urban environment are shared by many residents, Tiffany’s perceptions of safety and danger are magnified by her positionality as a queer Black woman: “I think some of the things that I named are a risk for everybody. But profiling or police brutality? That is clearly heightened for Black people in general. As far as being a queer Black woman in Chicago, I would say that there’s more—and I don’t know how much evidence is out there—but there’s more of a risk.” Consequently, the hypervigilance that she feels is necessary to live in Chicago, or what she calls being *comfortably cautious*, puts “a strain on [her] body,” a strain she does not want her future children to experience. To be sure, Tiffany plans to leave Chicago in the next couple of years: “I don’t plan to be here in the next two to three years because I don’t want to raise a family here. Over the past ten to fifteen years, the city’s gotten worse. I want a community. I feel like there is so much segregation and separation in the city that one has to get accustomed to. It’s just the way of life. But I want more for my children.”

Although Tiffany plans to leave Chicago, she acknowledges that the “city has [her] roots”: “I will always say Chicago is my home. This city has my roots. So, the fact that I know so much about the city, that I’ve been in so many places, and that I know many people across the city, I feel like pieces of me, pieces of who I am, are scattered in different places of the city.” Tiffany’s description of feeling like pieces of who she is “are scattered in different places of the city” mirrors the affective dissonances—feeling *split* and *disjointed*—that characterize intersectional placelessness. Moreover, these affective dissonances reflect Tiffany’s attempts at finding community within and between the city’s racialized and queer geographies. Like the majority of

Black queer women in this study, Tiffany's placemaking practices reveal a persistent search for intimacy and community in spaces that affirm certain aspects of her identity as a Black queer woman at the exclusion of others. The normative underpinnings of Chicago's Black and queer spaces mark these spaces as not only exclusionary but potentially unsafe. Thus, while "the city has [her] roots," Tiffany's story evokes an overwhelming sense of disembeddedness that characterizes experiences of being untethered. In the next section, we meet June and Mona, a Black lesbian couple who confront intersectional placelessness by strategically embedding themselves within a South Side community.

4. TETHERED: HOMEMAKING IN A CHOCOLATE CITY

Rather than searching for community across the city's racialized and queer spaces, other Black queer women, specifically older Black queer women, cultivate *lifeworlds* within the city's Black spaces. In contrast to Tiffany's experiences of navigating the city's North and West Sides for community, the following narrative captures how June and Mona have strategically embedded, or tethered, themselves within Chicago's South Side. Beginning as neighbors and morphing into lovers and mothers, their story reveals the challenges and strategies of cultivating a queer lifeworld in a *chocolate city*.

A South Side Love Story

June and Mona, a married Black lesbian couple in their early sixties, live in the South suburbs of Chicago in a well-manicured, Black middle-class neighborhood. When I met the couple, we sat around a dining table nestled in the sunroom of their two-story house. As Mona describes it, they have always lived on the South Side: "We were in University Park in our other

house before we built this house. So, we've always been in the South suburbs, too." The couple, together for over twenty-five years, are native Chicagoans with strong family ties to the city's South and West Sides. Mona, a Black femme-presenting woman, grew up in the Chatham area, but her mother moved her family to Mucklow Court, a neighborhood she describes as "a more diverse area." At the time, Mona's grandmother owned beauty salons on the South Side that catered to both gay and straight clientele: "I was always involved with gays and straights. You know, beauty salons tend to draw in everybody." Mona's experience of growing up in the South Side was one of being exposed to the sexual diversity of Chicago's Black community.

In her early adulthood, Mona moved to the South suburbs and lived there with her then-husband and their two sons for almost fifteen years before she met June. June, a Black masculine-presenting and lesbian-identified woman, grew up in "the Cabrini Green area" until her mother moved their family to the West Side of Chicago: "I lived there until I graduated, and then I went to college and I just kind of did my own thing after that." After attending college in Naperville, June moved to the South suburbs with her former partner: "I came out here with another partner I had. She talked me into coming out here. So, I came out here, and then we dated for a while, and then I stayed out here because I had a job."

Years later, June and Mona met each other as next-door neighbors in a suburban neighborhood:

> I [Mona] moved in as a married woman next door to [June] and her partner, and then life just sorta took off from there… I was the nosy neighbor. There's just no other way to put that. I was, I was. I used to see all these women going to [June's] house for parties, and I would tell them to tell her to invite me… I would see her, she would speak, but she never looked at me, you know. It was always like she was looking past me. I never understood that. And then, I used to be intrigued by the conversations I would hear on her deck. I

> would be sitting on my deck. So, the wall was sort of high, but it was only wood, you know, between our decks. And so, when she'd have parties, I'd hear her out there, hear the girls out there. They'd be talking about girls in the house, and I'd be like, 'Oh, they talk like guys, I just can't believe that! I can't believe they're talking like guys.' I mean it was just always so amazing to me that those conversations were—there was a whole 'notha world that I knew absolutely nothing about. I just wanted to have that. I was going to be a part of it.

Mona's story of being "the nosy neighbor" who eavesdrops on her lesbian neighbor's conversations signals a break in the heteronormative fabric of suburban life, recasting Black suburbia as a place of homoerotic potentiality.

Soon thereafter, June confessed her feelings for Mona to her former partner, Barbara:

> Apparently, June had told Barbara that she was interested in me, but it would probably blow over because I was married. And so, June told her girlfriend not to say anything to me, of course. And, I didn't know her partner that well, you know. I'd see her, we'd wave, but we never really had any real conversations. So, one day I came home from work, and Barbara was standing outside of the driveway, and she was like, "Can I talk to you for a minute?" I was like, "Sure." She said, "Let's take a ride." I said, "Okay." So, I got in her car, and we was driving around the neighborhood. So, Barbara started telling me that June liked me. So, she broke that rule by telling me, but I think her hope was that I would say, "Are you kidding me? I mean, girls? I don't do girls. What are you talking about?" So, I let her finish [what she was telling me]. And I said, "So, what you just told me is that June's a really great partner, a wonderful person," you know, some stuff like that. And, I said, "Well, why wouldn't I want that for myself?" Yeah, so I think Barbara realized then that I wasn't going to say what she thought I was going to say.

June and Mona began an affair with each other. As June was navigating the dissolution of her relationship with Barbara, Mona faced new challenges around the stigma of having had a lesbian affair as a married woman with two small children.

> And so, June and I just started talking, and I started having a conversation that I didn't intend to have and doing things that I didn't intend to do. The next day I was so devastated by my own behavior that I told my mother. I told my mom, and my mother said, "Well, you know, you are entitled to be"—my mother's generally always on my side—she was like, "Well, you're entitled to be happy. And you know, sometimes we find happiness in so many different places." I couldn't believe that I had set it up like that, that I had done that. So, then I guess eventually Barbara moved out, which wasn't too long thereafter. But, I was still married to my husband. Barbara told him about us. And so, he confronted me with it. Ultimately, I left. I just never went back, and he tried to get me to come back. He said he would move me back one item at a time, but I knew I didn't want to go back. So, I moved into an apartment. June still lived in her townhouse next door to my husband, which had its own challenges because he keyed her car. You know, funny stuff. But you know, as time went on, he actually has come all the way around full circle. He was like, "You know, you guys did a great job raising my boys."

Lesbian Motherhood in Black Suburbia

Together for twenty-five years, Mona and June's lives revolve around the everyday experiences of Black motherhood in the context of a lesbian relationship. While Mona's two sons are now adults who have since left home, she spends much of her time taking care of their non-birth children:

> We raised up five kids of our own. Two of my boys, the rest of them were nieces and nephews of June's. But we raised the nieces and nephews starting at the third grade? Third grade. So, they sort of filtered in at third grade. So, we raised all of them. And then when June and I got together, my youngest was like two, and my oldest was like eight, nine years

> old. Yeah. Um, which they're all grown now. We have another nephew that's with us, and he's 21. But we've had him since like the fourth grade, too. So, he's the last of our original group that still lives here. Um, my youngest son lives not too far from here with his girlfriend. My oldest son is gay. He lives in the city with his partner of five years. My niece is gay. She lives with her partner…The kids you see now [at home]—I had always promised when I retired, I was going to, we were going to do foster care. So, we have two foster boys that are brothers, and we have Adam, who is transgender.

June and Mona intentionally enact queer kinship practices that extend beyond their marriage and include raising Black queer and trans children. Mona describes how they "purposely looked for kids that were bisexual or transgender because we know how difficult that can be. There's such a shortage of fostering, and you know, knowing that a lot of the kids are still in the hospital because they don't have places to place them, even temporarily." Their teenage son, Adam, was in an emergency shelter for eighty-seven days before joining Mona and June's family. Mona attributes Adams's extended stay in the shelter to the transphobia of prospective foster parents: "The shelters try to do it in thirty days. But most couples, when they hear that you are a girl trying to be a boy, they shy away from that."

As a recently retired high-ranking professional in the security industry, Mona's everyday life consists of balancing her retirement and her domestic responsibilities as a mother:

> So, typically my days—once everybody's out of here, I spend a lot of my time at the thrift store. I love it. So, I go. I may take myself to breakfast. I try to do whatever my honey-do list is. So, I don't usually have one nearly as extensive hers. June's list is always long. I may have to go to the post office or something real small. And, then my day really doesn't get started until everybody comes home, because [the children] have therapy. So, they go to different therapy places during the week. The boys actually have a sibling and parent visit every other week, and that's in the city. So, I have to drive them to the caseworker.

> So, my day starts more in the afternoon. If there's parent-teacher conferences, which there's one I just went to, then I'll go to that. If there's any activities, like band recitals, that June conveniently seems to always be too busy for. So, that's my day. I am usually around here keeping things straight. I'll cook. I don't love cooking. I used to cook more. I cook less, but I make sure everybody eats. One way or another, we all eating. Nobody's starving. But it's not, you know, based on me cooking. But we do try to cook on Sundays. June likes to grill. So, usually, she likes to get down there [pointing to the backyard] and grill or something.

Unlike Mona, June has yet to retire from her career as an administrator of a predominantly Black high school:

> I was a [physical education] teacher before I was a dean. I'm a dean now. So, I just kind of went through that. Just happened. I wasn't even trying to do it. I've been a dean now for thirty years. Actually twenty-seven. I taught for two years. I am in charge of attendance and discipline. I'm four years—three and a half now—from retirement. So, I'm looking forward to that.

As a masculine-presenting, and therefore hypervisible, Black lesbian woman, June's professional life is spent navigating the backlash to her queerness that her role as a disciplinary authority invites:

> I know that our children hear at school, you know that "She's a dyke, she's gay." I'm a dean, so you know, if they're mad, if that kid is mad at me—they might like me, and then I'm just Ms. Johnson—and then, the next thing, "Well, that dyke! I can't stand that dyke." So, our son Adam is experiencing a little bit of that now, because he goes to the same school that I work at. So, he's experiencing that. Although, he has never said anything. He just had a conversation with me yesterday or the day before. We were talking about something, and then he said, 'Oh, they be all over you, auntie. The kids at school talk about you all the time." And, I said, "I know, I know. But more importantly, I want to know how

> *you* feel about that." And, he was like, "I don't care." You know, I don't want him to get into a lot of those conversations because he has a fuse.

In this way, the homophobia that June encounters in her workplace impinges on her relationship with her children and is, therefore, something that she must negotiate in her role as a mother. Indeed, as evidenced in June's excerpt, her children lovingly refer to her as "auntie," reserving "mom" for Mona in a way that mitigates the stigma attached to publicly claiming two mothers.

Living Out Loud on the South Side

The hypervisibility and homophobia that June experiences in her professional life extend into other aspects of her life, including her home life with Mona and their children: "I know that it takes a certain type of woman to be with me. So, I purposely picked a woman who I felt was strong enough to deal with who I am because I knew I wasn't changing. So, she had to be accepting and understand that this is who I am, and you gon' get certain stares, people gonna say stuff. And, I think our kids also developed a thick skin." In addition to developing "a thick skin," Mona and June make a concerted effort to develop relationships with their neighbors to evade conflict in their immediate neighborhood community. During the day of our interview, June explained that the couple had plans to visit their new neighbors:

> Today—we have these new neighbors—we're going down to their house today, and they're all straight. So, the couples that are coming down, they came here. I went down to a fight party, but I went by myself. So, it'll be interesting to see how it goes when I go with Mona. You know, 'cause they just see me as a guy. So, I'm down there hanging out with the guys at the fight party. They don't, they don't discriminate like that. I just don't have those kinds of issues [of discrimination], and most of those guys are like 6'5". You know, like very

> big. So, it'll be interesting to see how that works today, but we have no issues with our neighbors or anything. Two or three sets of them was at our wedding.

In addition to neighborhood events, June and Mona frequently host parties that blend their mostly Black gay networks and Black straight networks. "The parties we generally go to with our gay friends, everybody's gay. I think we're the only people that give parties that cross over. The neighbors will come over, the husbands will come. They'll shoot pool in the basement. Nobody's like hung up. It's just split. I think we're really the only ones giving parties like that." The couple have hosted house parties for years, and, as June explains, Mona built their house specifically for such parties. "We have a monthly card party, it's gay and straight. They come out and play cards. So, yeah, we are fortunate. I think that we are cocooned with people that are a lot like us. We find that lesbians tend to give more house parties than anything because there's not a lot of gay lady clubs. For African American or people of color, it really isn't [any clubs]. The guys seem to have a lot more that they go to, but they do a lot of home parties, too."

Despite their seeming ability to blend into the social world of their South suburban neighborhood, June's discourse on meeting their new neighbors ("it'll be interesting to see how that works today") hints at the contingent nature of belonging. Participation and initiation of neighborhood gatherings are part and parcel of the performative labor and rituals integral to gaining acceptance by their straight neighbors. However, these performative rituals are also tenuous. Unaccompanied by Mona, June is seen as one of the guys, but Mona's presence brings their queer sexuality to the fore. Recalling June's earlier statement, the couple understands that hostility toward their queerness is inevitable: "you gon' get certain stares, people gonna say stuff."

Nevertheless, Mona feels like they "live in some kind of fantasy world here in Chicago," recognizing that acceptance is both relative and contextual.

Indeed, June and Mona point to how the "fantasy world" of their South Side suburban neighborhood does not safeguard them from stigma and violence in all parts of the city. Similar to the strategies (i.e., comfortably cautious) Tiffany uses to navigate Chicago, June and Mona are cautious about their movements throughout the city and engage in strategies to prioritize their safety as two Black lesbian women. Despite her own vulnerability as a Black woman to threats of racialized gender-based harassment and violence, Mona often demands that June stay in the car when they are in areas in which Black straight men are clustered:

> When we go out, especially when we go out at night—on the way home, you want to stop and get something to eat. So, we would go to like those [Polish hotdog] places. You know, everybody's all lined up outside. I would be like, 'Just let me, just let me go.' I was afraid for her to get out the car. Or, I was afraid for her to get out the car, because June dresses like a guy. She doesn't dress like a girl. She don't even look like a girl. So, people been drinking, you know, and she get out the car, and then you can see, you can see the facial changes people go through when they first see her. I can see. Now incredibly, she never would see it. But, I'm watching everybody around us. I mean, they're like, "Is that a girl? That's a girl." You know, they be doing all of that, so I don't want anyone to hurt her. So, I lived in fear in the beginning that somebody's going to hurt her. So, I was always like, "Maybe we just live in this fantasy sort of world." I had to quickly realize that is not the case. People do not see us exactly the way we see each other. So, I used to live in fear that somebody would always hurt her, and I would say, "Don't get it, I'll get it for us. Just stay in the car. Just watch me." Because I knew guys would say a few words to me and move on.

June, too, recognizes Mona's vulnerability as a Black femme-presenting woman but agrees that her own hypervisibility as a masculine-presenting Black woman, at times, renders her more susceptible to harassment and violence:

> So, Mona's right. But, I don't always think about it like that. I just think that she's my wife, she's getting out, so I'm going to get out with her to get the food. But when we're in certain places, she does not let me get out. And then, I'm nervous that she's out. But she's probably—depending on where we are—she's probably safer doing that than I am. So, we know that. So, we don't even do it now. The older we get, we just don't go to those places. But, when we were younger, we did do that.

Despite the misogyny and homophobia that June and Mona sometimes encounter on the South Side, the couple ultimately believes that their neighborhood community offers a level of protection they have yet to experience in other contexts less familiar to them. Mona recounts incidents of homophobic hostility that they experienced while traveling together as a family to Jamaica:

> So, we took the kids on a cruise. Okay, so we get off in [a port]. Now, when we were [in Jamaica] before, we were with my brother, who happens to be gay. I don't think we felt it quite as much because I think everybody thought my brother and June were together and me and his partner. But, we didn't get the real feeling until we took the kids. So, when we get off the ship, we went to downtown, sort of their marketplace to get coffee and stuff. And, we were going in and out of the jewelry stores. But, my youngest son, I heard him saying to somebody in the store, "Why do they keep asking me that?" And, I didn't know anybody was asking him anything. So, when he came over, I said, "What? What are they asking you?" The people in the store kept asking, "Who is she? Who is [June] to you?" They wanted clarity on who June was, and my son said, "That's my aunt." So, we weren't clear on why they were asking him that. But ultimately, we could tell it was starting to turn ugly. So, at that point, I was like, "Let's just wrap this up and get back in the cab."

In another incident, Mona, June, and their kids hailed a cab to a local restaurant famous for their jerk chicken:

> So, the cab driver who had brought us there was an older Jamaican guy who started out really pretty nice. Before we got into the cab, everybody was trying to get a ride. So, he said, "I tell you what, if you go with me, I won't charge you for the little one." So, we went with him. We get to the jerk chicken place, and then he started saying loudly, "I never told you I wasn't going to charge you for the little one! I don't know what you're talking about!" I mean, he just started yelling, and all it did was draw attention to us from everybody else. Everyone around there was Jamaican, except for us and the kids. So, at first, I said, "Yeah, you did tell us that." But he was getting really argumentative, and he was drawing the crowds. So, June said, "Mona, don't say anything else to him. Let's just go, let's get back in the cab, let's go." So, we left, but you could feel the hate and animosity. Now, when I got back, and I was talking to a lot of my gay friends, they were like, "God, you shouldn't have been there [in Jamaica]. That's not the place to be." My girlfriend, who is straight, actually went on a cruise to Jamaica. There was a gay guy out on the cruise. He got off the ship and he got beat up so bad he had to stay there in the hospital. He couldn't even get back on the ship. So, yeah. You could just feel the hate. So, it was not the place to be.

As native Chicagoans, Mona and June have cultivated a lifeworld of marriage and motherhood in the place they have always called home: the South Side. Contrasting Tiffany's perceptions of the South Side as a place of looming danger, their story offers an alternative interpretation of the city's Black topography as one of acceptance and belonging. On the South Side, June and Mona have been able to dissolve their previous partnerships, birth and foster children, marry each other, advance to professional leadership positions, and partake in the full life of their neighborhood. To be sure, Mona and June's story speaks to the insideness that Relph (1976) defines as feeling here rather than there and safe rather than threatened. Still, their story is not completely devoid of the fear and danger around which Tiffany's story pivots. Outside of the

parameters of their neighborhood, June's hypervisible queerness and Mona's vulnerability as a Black femme-presenting woman expose them to threats of homophobic violence and sexual harassment. To mitigate these dangers in their daily lives, June and Mona embed themselves within the fabric of their Black suburban community. As such, they experience belonging contingent upon adhering to what Moore (2011) describes as "middle-class respectability politics" and what Duggan (2002) describes as "homonormativity."

Despite the apparent trappings of respectability and homonormativity evoked by June and Mona, such a conclusion elides the subversive possibilities of suburbia illuminated by their story. In the context of a predominantly Black neighborhood on Chicago's South Side, suburbia is reimagined as constitutive of Black queer intimacy manifested through marriage, motherhood, friendship, and community. Indeed, marriage, motherhood, friendship, and community—institutions endemic to hetero- and homonormativity—are suffused with new meaning when examined through a Black feminist and queer lens. Specifically, June and Mona's story of building a life on Chicago's South Side exemplifies what Hunter and Robinson (2018) term, "the village," or the "intricate, tight networks and strategies that Black communities developed behind the veil of segregation to survive and thrive" (p.10). Villages, like the one cultivated by June and Mona, are not utopias—a fact made clear by the looming threats of homophobic violence and sexual harassment that June and Mona endure. What their story does reveal are the choices they've made and the strategies they've employed to carve out a small lifeworld, what they call a "fantasy world" and "cocoon," within Black suburbia that allow them to experience a sense of membership and belonging within their most immediate geographic networks.

5. CONCLUSION: TO BE (UN)TETHERED

The stories in the previous sections demonstrate two divergent approaches to placemaking that Black queer women enact in response to intersectional placelessness. Tiffany's story echoes the experiences of young Black queer women whose longings for intimacy and community direct their geographic movements and placemaking practices to Chicago's racialized and queer spaces. However, rather than finding intimacy and community, Tiffany's narrative reveals how concerns over safety and danger dominate the perceptions and experiences of Black queer women in these spaces. While most of these concerns are tied to Tiffany's perception of antiblackness, misogyny, and homophobia, others are also tied to her middle-class consciousness. Indeed, some of the dangers that Tiffany flags in her interview, particularly as it relates to the South Side, betray her fear that Black people without resources might victimize her and that because she has some resources, she might be victimized. The culmination of antiblackness, misogyny, homophobia, and middle-class privilege, therefore, means that Tiffany does not feel completely safe within or tethered to Black and queer spaces.

June and Mona's story captures a different approach to placemaking that supports existing research on Black sexual minority women—specifically Black lesbian wives and mothers—who strategically embed themselves within Black heteronormative middle-class spaces. To be sure, June and Mona's narrative mirrors the findings from Moore (2011) and Brooks's (2017) research on Black middle-class lesbians who negotiate their multiple identity statuses to embed themselves into Black community life. When taken together, the narratives explored thus far reveal the experiences of Black queer women in Chicago's pre-existing racialized and queer geographies, none of which center or privilege Black queer women. Indeed, their stories reveal the everyday

strategies to navigate and find home within geographies shaped by racism, misogyny, class inequality, and homophobia.

The following chapters explore how Black queer women use digital technologies in ways that address the condition of spatial marginalization and intersectional placelessness. What the subsequent chapters reveal are the individual and collective placemaking practices that constitute Black queer women's intimacy projects within Chicago's urban-digital sphere. Importantly, in the next chapter, we hear from Chicago transplants, some of whom envision the city as a geographic stepping-stone for educational and career opportunities, and others for whom Chicago is a final destination. Specifically, I focus on the digital intimacy practices that Black queer women use to satiate their desires for queer sociality.

CHAPTER THREE

Desiring Technologies: Digital Pathways Toward Queer Sociality

1. INTRODUCTION

Dominique: If, as you said, the bars and clubs in Boystown are spaces where "boys" can hook up and meet each other, is there an equivalent scene for women of color?

Michelle: For us to hook up?

Dominique: And to meet each other or even build friendships or community?

Michelle: No, we do most of that online. There are no spaces in Chicago, and that's just crazy 'cause we're the third-largest city. But we don't have that here. So, we create our own, but we do it, you know, virtually now 'cause it's easier.

My dialogue with Michelle poignantly illuminates the emerging role of digital technologies in Black queer women's intimate relationships. When I met Michelle, a forty-year-old Black femme lesbian, she was one year into her long-distance relationship with Heather, a Black stud lesbian in her mid-thirties. The two women met each other in a Facebook group for lesbians of color, one of the virtual spaces that Michelle alludes to in our dialogue. Their story, which I recount later in this chapter, captures the role of digital technologies in facilitating and mediating queer romance. However, more than a conduit of romantic relationships, digital technologies, particularly social media platforms and mobile dating applications, mediate myriad desires and intimacies that coalesce around queer sociality.

Extant sociological research on digital intimacy and online dating has mostly centered the experiences and practices of heterosexuals and gay men, often through a prism of inequality (Conner, 2019; Han & Choi, 2018; Wu & Ward, 2018). When Black women emerge in online

dating studies, they do so in research on *racial preferences* and *sexual racism* that instantiate Black women as undesirable romantic and sexual partners. By shifting our focus outside a heterosexual matrix, this chapter explicitly foregrounds an analysis of Black women as subjects whose desires and longings are not overdetermined or animated by heteronormative structures and dictates. Moreover, in centering Black queer women's digital intimacy practices, I seek to embrace a more fluid understanding of desire that is not measured by success or failure and one that encompasses a wide range of desires and intimacies. In doing so, this perspective counteracts another tendency within existing scholarship to examine desire from a dualistic perspective, in which desires for romantic partnership and casual sexual encounters are privileged at the exclusion of other intimacies.

In this chapter, I forward *desiring technologies* as a conceptual lens to capture and situate the various desires that animate Black queer women's use of dating apps and social media platforms, or what some scholars refer to as *intimate infrastructures*. Intimate infrastructures refer to "the often unseen digital media infrastructures that run underneath, through, and in the background of intimacies" (De Ridder et al., 2018, p.1). As I later discuss, the concept of desiring technologies indexes the ubiquity, entrenchment, and generative aspects of intimate infrastructures shaping Black queer women's digital intimacy practices. In applying the lens of desiring technologies to Black queer women's narratives, this chapter reveals three kinds of intimacies emerging from their use of intimate infrastructures: queer romance, collectivity, and encounter. I center four storytellers' narratives to trace Black queer women's digital pathways toward these queer intimacies and capture the meanings they attach to their digital intimacy practices. In light of this analysis, I show how dating apps and platforms—all of which have been seen as pernicious

and harmful to Black women—are subversively used in ways that position Black queer women as desirable and desiring romantic partners, lovers, and friends. Moreover, in using intimate infrastructures, Black queer women engage in digital intimacy practices that respond to intersectional placelessness by satiating their desires for queer sociality.

2. DIGITAL INTIMACY & ONLINE DATING: SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Sociological studies on intimacy and online dating examine the macro-level trends and micro-level practices of desire, attraction, and dating that take place online. Online dating, as defined by sociologists Barraket and Henry-Waring (2008), refers to the "purposeful form of meeting new people through specifically designed internet sites" (p.149). Sociologists have largely approached online dating as a new social phenomenon, specifically investigating whether digital dating technologies, including mobile dating applications, are sites of social reproduction or social change. Scholars are fascinated by how digital dating platforms, including mobile dating applications ('dating apps'), allow individuals "to present personalized profiles of themselves, review the profiles of others, send expressions of interest to other users, and facilitate synchronous (for example, instant messaging) and asynchronous (for example, email) communication between users" (2008, p.150). Such works question whether and how such practices either complement or supplant traditional forms of dating and courtship, as well as the effects that these practices have on marriage and family formation (Hobbs, Owen & Gerber, 2017; Schmitz, 2017). In *Liquid Love*, for example, Bauman (2013, see also 2003) argues that traditional partnership arrangements are being transformed or "liquified" by processes of individualization and technological change. In Bauman's estimation, online dating is "symptomatic of social and technological change that

transforms modern courtship into a type of commodified game" (Hobbs, Owen & Gerber, 2017, p.271).

Within the larger corpus of sociological research on online dating, two dominant literatures systematically address the racialized and gendered dimensions of online dating: research on *racial preferences* and *sexual racism*. Macro-level, quantitative research captures the general trends in racialized desirability and attraction by focusing on the racial preferences of online daters, demonstrating the racial and gender dimensions of online dating patterns. Another growing literature focuses on how digital dating platforms enable micro-level interactions and practices that reproduce sexual racism. While markedly different in their analytic approach and theoretical orientation, I argue that their focus on inequality has specific implications for understanding intimacy and online dating among Black women, Black queer women, and queer women of color more broadly.

Racial Preferences

Macro-level analyses of online dating data often seek to understand online daters' racial preferences. With the ability to bypass immediate social networks in search of prospective mates, digital dating platforms and mobile dating applications allow individuals—at least in theory—to meet potential partners from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Tsunokai, Kposowa, & Adams, 2009). Of great interest, then, is whether racialized dating patterns in online contexts differ from those in offline contexts. One area of research assesses the degree of racial homophily among heterosexual daters, or the likelihood that individuals attract and select romantic and sexual partners of a shared racial/ethnic background. Drawing on survey data from an online dating site, Yancey (2009) conducted one of the earliest studies on the racial preferences of online daters and

found that individuals across all groups are significantly more likely to date within, rather than outside, their racial/ethnic group (2009, p. 130). Similarly, Hitsch, Hortaçsu, and Ariely (2010) analyzed survey and activity data from 22,000 users of an online dating service, finding that both men and women across racial and ethnic groups exhibit same-race preferences (p.419). Indeed, even when controlling for political ideology, liberal and conservative online daters choose "same-race preferences," suggesting that the "opportunity [to select partners beyond one's immediate networks] alone will not eliminate the preponderance of same-race romantic relationships" (Anderson et al., 2014, p.39).

Racial preferences scholarship also captures the racialized and gendered contours of heterosexual desirability, revealing, for example, that Black women are the least-desired dating partners compared to women of other racial backgrounds (Clarke, 2011; Lin & Lundquist, 2013; McGrath et al., 2016; Robnett & Feliciano, 2011). For example, in a study on online dating and racial exclusion, Robnett and Feliciano's (2011) found that "Black women are the only female minority group who are more excluded than their male counterparts" (2011, p. 819). Lin and Lundquist (2013) uncovered similar patterns of racial homophily and exclusion by examining the initiating and reciprocating behaviors of online daters, specifically analyzing the likelihood of sending and responding to an initial message. The authors found that even when controlling for the education of online daters, college-educated Black women received fewer messages than other women, regardless of their level of education (2013, p.209). Other racialized and gendered patterns emerged in relation to men of Asian descent who were posited as the least-desired dating partners compared to men of other racial and ethnic backgrounds (Robnett & Feliciano, 2011). Scholars

attribute such patterns to historical tropes and ongoing media portrayals that depict Asian American men as "de-masculinized" (Hwang, 2013).

More than a story of racial homophily and exclusion in online dating, these studies point to the racialized and gendered dimensions of contemporary sexual hierarchies. At the same time, these studies do not unpack why white, heterosexual men and women are viewed as the most desirable partners on digital dating platforms or why Black women and Asian American men are rendered undesirable. Instead, the racialized and gendered patterns of online dating preferences are largely taken for granted and are rarely considered within a larger sociohistorical context. Indeed, other scholars critique the language of racial preferences as a neoliberal logic used to neutralize accusations of racism in the context of intimacy (Robinson, 2015). The use of *preference* implies that individual intimacy and dating choices are made in a sociocultural vacuum independent of hierarchies of the broader social, political, cultural, and economic world.

Sexual Racism

Largely in response to the racial preferences literature, scholars have begun to interrogate how micro-level online dating practices reinforce and perpetuate sexual racism (Bedi, 2015; Buggs, 2017; Rafalow, Feliciano, & Robnett, 2017; Robinson, 2015). These studies, while not in direct conversation with Holland's (2012) theorizing of race and the erotic, illuminate how desire manifests as a "quotidian racist practice" (p.42). From a sociology of sexualities perspective, Orne (2017) defines sexual racism as "a system of racial oppression, shaping an individual's partner choices to privilege whites and harm people of color," which manifests structurally, culturally, and interactionally (p.67). Digital dating platforms are posited as critical sites in which sexual racism flourishes across all three of these dimensions. Focusing on the infrastructure and technological

affordances of digital dating platforms, Bedi (2015) argues that such platforms allow users to prioritize "an individual as a possible romantic, intimate partner on account of their race in a way that reinforces extant racial hierarchy or stereotypes" (p. 998).

Much of the extant empirical investigations into the cultural and interactional dimensions of research in this area focuses on gay men's experiences on dating apps (McDade, 2005; Paul, Ayala & Choi, 2010; Callander, Newman & Holt, 2015; Robinson, 2015; Smith, 2017). For example, Robinson (2015) examines this phenomenon empirically among gay users on a popular online gay personals website by asking, "How is the structure of Adam4Adam.com shaping people's racial preferences? And what larger cultural assumptions underlie this individualized discourse about racial desire?" (p.318). These inquiries reveal how structural dimensions of dating platforms, such as the "quick search" feature on Adam4Adam.com, work in tandem with "personal preference" discourse to perpetuate and obscure sexual racism. That is, digital-dating platform users are encouraged to sort and filter potential dating partners by racial and ethnic categories. Supporting Robinson's findings, Han and Choi (2018) argue that whiteness is a central organizing principle of gay erotic life, including on dating apps where users explicitly articulate their preferences (e.g., "no fats, no femmes, no Asians"). According to Han and Choi, "not only do gay white men specifically note that they are not sexually interested in gay men of color, many make degrading and racist comments to demonstrate their 'preferences'" (2018, p.149). These findings reflect what Riggs (2017) calls the "psychic life of racism in gay men's communities" (p.xiii).

While limited, other research explores the online dating experiences of women of color and Indigenous women, including how women navigate and respond to sexual racism on digital dating platforms (Buggs, 2017; Carlson, 2019). These studies illuminate how the intersecting

logics of antiblack racism and misogyny produce experiences of blatant dehumanization, sexual harassment, and fetishization. To curb incidents of sexual racism, the "browner skinned multiracial women" in Buggs's (2017) study employed vetting strategies to weed out potentially racist dating partners (p.549). At the other end of the spectrum, the Indigenous Australian women in Carlson's (2019) study "chose to present themselves as white women – enabling them to connect with others without the supervening factor of being Indigenous" (p.135). According to Carlson, Indigenous women's self-performative strategies (i.e., passing as white) were used as protective measures against threats of physical violence. For example, upon revealing her Indigenous identity, an Aboriginal woman and Tinder user in Carlson's study was told: "'you black cunts are only good for fucking'. The person threatened to locate the woman to sexually assault her stating he would, 'fuck you in all your black holes'" (2019, p.145). For both Buggs (2017) and Carlson (2019), analyses of sexual racism within the context of digital dating platforms offer critical insight into patterns of racial and gender inequality more broadly. Buggs (2017) finds that an analysis of online dating practices illuminates "how the racial inequality being witnessed online operates behind the veil of the digital screen" (p.542). Similarly, Carlson (2019) urges researchers to "consider online violence as an extension of offline gender and racial relations" (p.145).

Undesirable and Desireless

Sociological literature on racial preferences and sexual racism approach intimacy and online dating through the prism of inequality in ways that mark racialized and gendered sexual subjects, specifically Black women, as undesirable subjects and digitally mediated intimacy as problematic terrain. As my colleague and I note in a separate study on Black women's perceptions and experiences of using mobile dating apps (Adams-Santos & Pass, 2021, forthcoming), these

studies work in tandem with earlier sociological research on Black women's intimacy (e.g., Black women's marriageability), as well as contemporary popular discourse, to circumscribe Black women's intimate lives within a deficit-based framework. Indeed, these perspectives contribute to what Pass and I (2021) term the *undesirability thesis*, or the tendency in social science and popular discourse to myopically categorize Black women as undesirable sexual and romantic partners.

If the above-mentioned perspectives inscribe Black women's undesirability, they also work to render Black women desireless. Indeed, very few sociological studies position Black women as desiring subjects or focus on the various desires and longings that animate their digital intimacy practices (Adeyinka-Scold, 2020; Buggs, 2017). To date, Adeyinka-Scold (2020) offers the only comprehensive study of Black women's perceptions and experiences of dating in the digital age. The empirical and theoretical scope of Adeyinka-Scold's study focuses on the racial and gender inequalities that college-educated Black heterosexual women experience in searching for romantic partners. For example, she finds that Black women encounter three distinct barriers in their romantic partner search: "locational barriers; adverse interactions with men on and off dating technology; and gendered initiation courtship scripts" (2020, p.v). To be sure, inequality is a critical but nevertheless unsurprising outcome of studies that focus on Black women's online dating experiences within a "hegemonic heterosexual matrix," where desires for love, marriage, and family within a heteronormative structure abound (Freccero, 2006, p.22).

While I do not dispute the empirical findings reviewed thus far, I argue that alternative methodological and theoretical frameworks (including other ways of defining desire) can enhance our understanding of intimacy and online dating beyond discussions of inequality, which have the unintended effect of rendering Black women undesirable and desireless. By shifting our focus

outside a white heterosexual matrix, this chapter explicitly foregrounds an analysis of Black women as subjects whose desires and longings are not overdetermined or animated by heteronormative structures and dictates. Unlike the litany of studies on gay men's online dating experiences, the experiences of queer women, and queer women of color in particular, have been far less examined (Hightower, 2015; Ferris & Duguay, 2019; Rafalow & Kizer, 2018). Indeed, the experiences of Black queer women are virtually absent from existing empirical accounts of intimacy and online dating. In the next section, I expound on the theoretical approach that guides my analysis of desire and digital technologies within Black queer women's intimacy projects.

3. DESIRING TECHNOLOGIES: AN ALTERNATIVE LENS

In analyzing Black queer women's intimacy projects, I embrace an orientation toward digital intimacy and online dating that is both capacious and generative. I suggest an approach to desire that moves beyond discussions of (un)desirability that embraces the erotic, as well as an approach to digital intimacy and online dating that conceptualizes digital platforms as intimate infrastructures (Wilson, 2016). In doing so, I forward *desiring technologies* as a conceptual lens to account for the various desires that animate queer women of color's use of digital platforms, and to index the ubiquity, entrenchment, and generative aspects of dating apps and platforms.

Desire and the Erotic

In *Theorising Desire*, Gorton (2008) argues, "Desire is a fluid, multiple and dynamic force that is transformative, destructive and life-changing. It is a difficult and perhaps an impossible concept to pin down, explain or 'solve'" (p.1). Gorton goes on to say, "Desire's abstract nature is part of its power; its elusive quality is what draws us in and invites us to 'make sense' of its energy"

(2008, p.1). In striving to "make sense" of desire, digital intimacy scholars often approach from dualistic perspectives. Specifically, the duality of success and failure, as well as the distinction between desires for romantic partnership and casual sexual encounters, are reified in existing online dating literature. Regarding the former, online dating scholars unwittingly embrace definitions of desire in which only two outcomes are possible: manifested desire (success) and unmanifested desire (failure). Manifested desire appears in the form of 'successful matches,' and particularly those that lead to intimate relationships and encounters. Furthermore, being unsuccessful (i.e., lack of matches or received responses) was cited as a leading reason for deleting a dating app (LeFebvre, 2018).

Scholars also draw distinctions between desires for long-term committed romantic partnerships and casual sexual encounters (Timmermans & Courtois, 2018). For example, Chan (2017) identifies 'romantic relationships' and 'casual sexual relationships' as distinct motivations (i.e., desires) that animate dating app usage:

> This study considered looking for romantic partners and looking for casual sexual partners as two distinct behaviors. A romantic relationship is defined as "a relationship that is serious, meaningful, and long-term oriented" and a casual sexual relationship is defined as "a purely sexual encounter that is not intended to be a serious, meaningful, and long-term relationship." These definitions are based on prior scholarship (Chan, 2017, p.247).

Within a heterosexual paradigm, manifested desire appears in successful matches that lead to romantic partnerships, the pinnacle of which is marriage and family formation (Adeyinka-Skold, 2020). When queer desires are considered, manifested desire appears in successful matches that lead to casual sexual encounters between gay men (Gudelunas, 2012; Licoppe, Rivière & Morel,

2016). How we theorize desire has critical implications for the kinds of intimacies that are made visible (and invisible) in empirical accounts of digital intimacy and online dating.

In centering Black queer women's digital intimacy practices, I seek to embrace a more fluid understanding of desire that is not measured by success or failure and one that encompasses a wide range of desires and intimacies. Building on Farina (2017), I conceptualize "desire as productive" and inextricably tied to the erotic. Farina (2017) credits Grosz (1994) with forwarding a queer conceptualization of desire in which desire is linked to the erotic:

> [Grosz] proposes we think about desire "as a mode of surface contact" in which bodily regions become covetous of the intensity and excitation of other, adjacent bodily regions. The erotic is a manifestation of an excessive materiality, of "libidinal zones [that are] continually in the process of being produced, renewed, transformed, through experimentation, practices, innovations, the accidents or contingencies of life itself." …Grosz portrays desire not as lack, but as an exuberant, expansive fullness in perpetual movement and transformation (Farina, 2017, p.93).

From Farina's reading of Grosz, we arrive at a 'queerer' understanding of desire in which embodiment, movement, and affect are foregrounded and where desire is tied to the erotic (i.e., excitation and exuberance). That is, Grosz is interested in the productive potential of desire: "As production, desire does not provide blueprints, models, ideals, or goals. Rather, it experiments, it makes" (Grosz, 1994, p.76).

Crucially, approaching desire in relationship to the erotic greatly resonates with Lorde's (1984) classic essay, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," which theorizes the erotic from a Black lesbian feminist standpoint. Like Grosz's (1994) work on desire, Lorde conceptualizes the erotic in productive terms: "The erotic is a resource within each of us…firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (Lorde, 1984, p.53). Lorde further

argues that the erotic "is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which…we know we can aspire" (p.54).

As poignantly argued by Quashie (2012), Lorde positions the erotic as "one's capacity to feel great power and to engage it meaningfully," and in doing so, "privileges what the interior can offer to our living" (p.65-66). While desire and the erotic have a particular relationship to interiority, Lorde's essay also reveals how desire and the erotic work together to enable intimacy:

> The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference (Lorde, 1984, p.55).

For Lorde, the erotic engenders connections that are "physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual," in the same way that desire itself can produce a wide range of intimacies (1984, p.55). Similar to the way that Grosz conceptualizes desire, Lorde conceives of the erotic as a productive and transformative force. As Garcia-Rojas (2017) aptly notes, Lorde's theorization of the erotic invites "women of color to develop different practices of desire that are not exclusively informed by the 'European-American male tradition' (59)" (2017, p.261).

In mapping desire's relationship to the erotic, I embrace an understanding of desire that is not measured by notions of success and failure and where romantic partnership and sexual encounters are not the only possible motivations propelling, and outcomes generated by, Black queer women's digital intimacy practices. In doing so, I echo Rodríguez's (2014) articulation of queer desire, sociality, and kinship in *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*:

> Queers have a long history of loving and living differently, spinning out social and sexual networks and coextensive bonds with other temporal moments of affection and desire. In reality, our lives are always beginning anew, our lifetime is always the new now. Loving madly and with complete abandon (or with calm, reasoned pragmatism), we can enter "committed" relationships over and over again, committing to the forever, to the now, to fidelity, to openness, to honesty, to caring, to pleasure, not always everything, always something else besides. These are the contracts of love in all its forms, contracts that are rewritten, undone, and renewed in time (Rodríguez, 2014, p.53).

As I later illustrate, Black queer women have myriad, overlapping desires—for romance, collectivity, and encounter—that both shape and emerge from their digital intimacy practices.

Digital Platforms as Intimate Infrastructures

Digital intimacy scholars have analyzed and theorized the infrastructural dimensions of social media platforms and dating apps to draw attention to "the material technologies, objects and environments that facilitate erotic encounters" (Race, 2015, p.253). The concept of *intimate infrastructures* indexes how digital platforms and technologies "produce capacities and shape encounters in ways that become more or less durable and hardwired into the routines of everyday life" (Race, 2015, p.253). Given their widespread use and the frequency in which they are used, intimate infrastructures are characterized by their ubiquity. Indeed, a recent Pew Research Center study (2020) found that 48 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds in the United States have used a dating site or app. However, when these data are subdivided by sexual orientation, only 28 percent of straight-identified adults have used such sites or apps compared to 55 percent of LGB adults. As argued by Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012), sexual minorities rely on dating sites to meet potential

partners given the "thin dating markets" they experience in their everyday social contexts (p.524).[12]

In addition to being ubiquitous, intimate infrastructures are also characterized by their *entrenchment* within contemporary intimate life. As argued by De Ridder (2018), individuals are becoming increasingly dependent on intimate infrastructures to the extent that they are "domesticated into the everyday lives of people" (p.10).[13] Indeed, a recent study on heterosexual daters found that more couples are meeting through dating apps than they are meeting through friends, suggesting that dating apps are "displacing" traditional dating practices (Rosenfeld, Thomas & Hausen, 2019). The concept of entrenchment also captures our affective attachments to intimate infrastructures. De Ridder found that individuals who used dating apps were "able to have an always available connected presence with potential close connections, securing them from destabilizing feelings of loneliness" (2018, p.11). Indeed, individuals perceived dating apps as providing them with a sense of what Giddens (1994) terms "ontological security" (De Ridder, 2018, p.11). At the same time, Miles (2017) argues that dating app usage is also experienced as an "inward pressure…to be always searching and always available in order to maximize opportunities for the imagined perfect match" (Miles, 2017, p.1607). Taken together, the concepts of ubiquity and entrenchment index the pervasiveness of, dependency on, and affective attachments to intimate infrastructures.

[12] Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) argue that "individuals are in a thin market for potential partners when the cost of identifying multiple potential partners who meet minimum criteria may be large enough to present a barrier to relationship formation" (p.524).
[13] Relatedly, Shankar and colleagues (2010) argue that the mobile device, in general, is a cultural object that "is part of everyday traditions and practices…[that] facilitates or augments personal and social experiences" (p.112).

In response to the ubiquity and entrenchment of intimate infrastructures, "the transformation of intimacies because of digital media infrastructures is traditionally valued in either positive or negative terms" (De Ridder et al., 2018, p.2).[14] Scholars have meaningfully circumvented positive and negative valuations by explicitly focusing on the *generative* aspects of intimate infrastructures, or what dating apps and platforms do *to* and *for* intimacy. In doing so, scholars seek to understand how intimate infrastructures shape, influence, and produce the desires, practices, and meanings that individuals attach to intimacy. However, in attending to the generative aspects of intimate infrastructures, Wilson (2016) reminds us that we must also attend to how infrastructures, and structures more broadly, enable and hinder intimacy (p.248). Thus, while our analysis of intimate infrastructures focuses on the mediating qualities of dating apps and platforms, such an analysis should also consider how digital technologies interact with other kinds of structural and cultural forces—especially those emerging within physical environments—to facilitate and undermine intimacies.

Desiring Technologies: A Conceptual Lens

Desiring technologies is a conceptual lens that positions (1) desire in relationship to the erotic and (2) digital platforms as intimate infrastructures. In the following section, I apply the lens of desiring technologies to the narratives of four Black queer women to capture and situate the various desires that animate their use of intimate infrastructures. I highlight the structural and cultural forces that enable and constrain Black queer women's individual intimacy projects in

[14] As I argue elsewhere, scholars extol the "social utility" of digital technologies in providing sites of refuge, recognition, and resources to sexual and gender minority groups. Contrasting social utility perspectives, scholars point to the potential dangers and risks activated by digital technologies in relation to pornography, pedophilia, and other forms of sexual deviancy (Adams-Santos, 2020).

Chicago, as well as the meanings they attach to their digital intimacy practices. In the next section, I trace three digital pathways toward queer sociality, in which Black queer women use intimate infrastructures to pursue queer romance, collectivity, and encounters.

4. DIGITAL PATHWAYS TOWARD QUEER SOCIALITY

After returning to Michelle and Heather's story to explore digital pathways toward queer romance, I then turn to the story of Imani to capture the desires for queer collectivity that animate her use of dating apps. Finally, I recount Kayla's story to explore the queer encounters that emerge from her use of various digital platforms and apps. Importantly, these stories explore the perceptions and experiences of three Black queer women who are Chicago transplants (Michelle, Imani, and Kiana), and another storyteller (Heather) who regularly visits the city. As such, I begin each story by discussing the desires that animated the storyteller's migration to the city and transition to exploring the desires and intimacies that each woman forged while living in Chicago.

Digital Pathways Toward Queer Romance: Michelle and Heather's Story

I first encountered Michelle (Black femme lesbian, early forties) in a Chicago-based lesbian of color Facebook group. Within hours of posting my recruitment flyer to the group, Michelle expressed interest in participating in the study. I sent her a private message to schedule our interview, and after several attempts to pin down a date, she asked if I would be willing to conduct a joint interview with her girlfriend, Heather (Black stud lesbian, mid-thirties). I happily obliged and met Michelle and Heather at a coffee shop on the outskirts of Naperville, a predominantly white, middle-class suburb west of Chicago.[15]

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[15] Miller (2015) describes Naperville in the following terms: "A high quality of life accompanied the large population and numerous jobs: Naperville has a thriving downtown with national retail stores, an oft-visited Riverwalk along the

Moving to Chicago

Originally from Indiana, Michelle "moved to the Chicagoland area right out of college." Michelle explains that she actually "failed out of college," and decided to relocate to Chicago because "the opportunities and the money was really good":

> At that time, I was really young. I had my own place, my own car, no kids, single, and living the life. And then, at that time, the nightlife was really good, and it's a big city. So, that's what got me to stay. And then, as time went on, you know, another year would pass, and I'm still here. Another season would pass, and I'm still here. So, I think the opportunities for me is really what did it. I had really great opportunities that I don't think I could have gotten anywhere else.

In the last few years, Michelle moved to Naperville from Chicago to live closer to job opportunities, including the telecommunications firm where she currently works. According to Michelle, her social life in Chicago mostly centers on friendships with her colleagues: "None of my family is here. I don't even have friends out here. It's just me. I do interact a lot with my coworkers because they love me, and I love them."

In addition to the job opportunities, Michelle was drawn to Chicago's nightlife scene. Having lived in Chicago for most of her adult life, Michelle maps the South Side club spaces that she used to frequent:

> I used to go to *Jeffrey Pub* and *Club Escape*. Back in the day, there used to be *East of the Ryan*, which used to have like a gay night, and that's on 79th and Cottage Grove, like up in that area. *The Taste* used to have lesbian night on Friday nights. I don't think they still have that, but on 63rd and Halsted up in Inglewood.

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west branch of the DuPage River, high-performing schools, a median household income of just over $108,000, and low crime and poverty rates" (p.1135).

Heather, who was born and raised in Michigan and currently lives in the city of Grand Rapids, was also drawn to Chicago's nightlife scene. Indeed, Heather spent much of her young adult life traveling to Chicago to frequent the same clubs that Michelle mentioned:

> I come from a really, really small town called Muskegon, and then my family moved to the city, which is Grand Rapids. It isn't a big, big city, but it's the city for us. And Chicago was where you got your nightlife, especially gay nightlife. You know, because we just didn't have that. We have two gay bars. One is literally just a bar. But when you're sick of them, when you're sick of that scene, what do you do? You go to Chicago.

As Michelle explains, while many of these clubs are still active, they cater mostly to Black gay clientele: "There are plenty of spaces for the boys. Like you know, *The Taste* is for the boys, the *Jeffery Pub,* of course, is for the boys. They'll do like a lesbian night, maybe like on Sunday or something."

The Precarity of Lesbian Spaces

In Michelle's view, "the only thing going on when it comes to lesbian clubs or lesbian parties are those one-off parties":

> They'll do like a white party in the summer and then a black party in the fall. That's really it. When it comes to like women of color lesbian parties, there's not like a bar. You could go to Atlanta and probably go to several of those, but in Chicago, I don't know of any.

Echoing her excerpt at the beginning of the chapter, Michelle expresses incredulity at the lack of dedicated lesbian nightlife spaces. Indeed, she gestures toward Atlanta as a potential site of Black lesbian life, a city colloquially referred to as a *Black gay mecca* (Bartone, 2019). For both Michelle

and Heather, their experience of Chicago's nightlife scene has been navigating predominantly Black gay spaces.

According to Michelle, the lack of dedicated lesbian nightlife spaces means that there are limited opportunities to meet potential romantic partners. Instead, Michelle positions *lesbian parties* as essential spaces for kindling romantic relationships. Prior to her relationship with Heather, Michelle met one of her ex-girlfriends at one such party. The pathway into that relationship began while Michelle was married to her ex-husband:

> I used to be married, and I left my husband. The woman who I was in a relationship with—I met her at a party in 2011, and it was a lesbian party. So, I was a married woman, went to the lesbian party with my lesbian best friend, and met my ex at the party. At that time, I was bisexual. So, I would go to *Beast of the Lion* and *The Taste*. This particular party, I think, was a *Lipstick and Lace* party. At the time, they were throwing their parties at *Flirty Girl Fitness*. I don't even know if those parties are still happening. It was on West Taylor Street or something like that. But they used to throw their parties at this fitness place. And so that's where I went. They had a *Lipstick and Lace* party one night, and I met one of my ex-girlfriends there.

In the above excerpt, Michelle alludes to the precarity of lesbian parties ("I don't even know if those parties are still happening"). As will be shown in the next chapter, Black queer women engage in ephemeral placemaking to carve out erotic spaces. Similar to the "one-off parties" or "lesbian nights" that Michelle discusses, the placemakers in Chapter 4 use urban-digital placemaking practices to transform Chicago's landscape into Black femme pleasurescapes.

Searching for Romance Online

Given the precarity of lesbian parties, Michelle turned to dating apps and social media groups to meet romantic partners. Michelle met her previous girlfriend on *Plenty of Fish*, a dating site and mobile dating app with the tagline, "Dating for grown-ups: make a real connection." Both Michelle and Heather have used myriad dating apps in search of romantic partners:

> *Dominique:* *Plenty of Fish* isn't strictly for lesbians, right?
>
> *Michelle:* No, not it's not. No, it's just one of the ways that we can search for lesbian relationships.
>
> *Heather:* And you can use a filter to only look for women.
>
> *Michelle:* The boys can look for the boys, heterosexuals can look for heterosexuals, even couples could look for couples.
>
> *Dominique:* Have you used dating apps, too, Heather?
>
> *Heather:* Oh yeah, definitely. I've used *Tinder*, *Plenty of Fish*, *Bumble*. I've used *HER*.
>
> *Michelle:* Most of the people that are on there are looking for either—definitely number one, to hook up, and number two, they're looking for something serious. I've chatted with people who are like, "Where are you at in the dating game? Are you looking for something serious? Are you looking to hook up? What is it?" So, some people are actually looking for something serious.

In line with dating app literature, Michelle and Heather note how individuals use dating apps to cultivate romantic partnerships and casual sexual encounters. To that end, Michelle argues that the desire to "hook up" often outweighs desires for "something serious." Heather's use of *Tinder*, *Plenty of Fish*, *Bumble*, and *HER*, reveals the extensive network of intimate infrastructures that

Black queer women rely on for their intimacy projects. Of the four dating apps that Heather mentions, *HER* is the only app specifically tailored to queer women.

In explaining why she uses dating apps, Michelle extols the efficiency of online dating, or the ability to quickly determine "if you like a person or not." Michelle says, "It's easier to meet somebody, chat with them, video chat with them, see if you like a person or not. If you don't like them, cut them off. You ain't even got to meet in person. You ain't got to waste no energy with them." Michelle adds, "I have definitely done that. Just cut somebody off. Yeah, my cut-off game is kinda strong. But it's the truth." In extant online dating research, the notion of efficiency is frequently discussed in relation to the "swipe logic" of dating apps, which "describes the pace, or the increased viewing speed" encouraged by dating apps (David & Cambre, 2016, p.1). However, Michelle's invocation of "cutting someone off" reveals another aspect of efficiency that evokes a sense of disposability.[16] Specifically, Michelle frames her "cut off game" as a strategy that she applies in the context of dating, as well as with her digitally mediated friendships.

Similar to Michelle, Heather positions online dating as an ideal avenue to meet women given the lack of dedicated lesbian spaces: "I find that it is easier to meet people virtually, as opposed to meeting in person because there aren't a whole lot of spaces." However, Heather speculates that she would likely meet women online even if more physical spaces existed: "Even though I used to come to Chicago for the nightlife, I think I would still find myself online dating more than meeting somebody at the club because of the caliber of women who are out at these clubs." Heather then qualifies her statement:

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[16] Frohlick and Migliardi (2011) use the term "disposability factor" to flag the anxieties that heterosexual women have "about being readily dismissed by men who wanted to consume as many women as possible in the fast-paced cybermarket-dating world" (p.82).

> There aren't a lot of spaces where it's predominantly women of color that you're gonna meet. I haven't personally dated women of a different race. I mean, I've dated a lot of mixed women but not just white. I just haven't. Not to say that you shouldn't or couldn't, but just for me, I haven't. And, if you're in a space where that's predominantly whose there, then there's not going to be a whole lot of approaching.

For Heather, the ability to meet "women of color" is a crucial aspect of online dating. Importantly, Heather not only articulates her desire to meet "women of color" but also shares her lack of desire to date "women of a different race." In doing so, Heather uses racially coded language, in which "women of color" refers to Black women, and "women of a different race" refers to white women. Heather's invocation of the "caliber of women" speaks to the racialized and gendered desires that congeal around Black women. While dating apps do not allow users to filter profiles by race, Heather can strategically "swipe" on profiles that meet her personal selection criteria. Thus, the very affordances and practices that perpetuate sexual racism can be used to seek and attract Black women in ways that position them as desirable romantic partners.

Drawing on their experiences, Heather and Michelle agree that the main alternative to online dating is meeting someone at a club or lesbian party, two spaces that they have frequented less over the years. Michelle and Heather describe how their priorities have shifted in ways that make the club scene less appealing:

> *Michelle:* I just got tired. I think it's a shift in priorities, and it's a shift in your energy, too. The things that were important to me then, just don't matter anymore.
>
> *Heather:* Yeah, I can't tell you the last time I went to a club. The last time I went to a club I was probably dragged out by some friends, because it doesn't matter to me anymore. I think a lot of people go to clubs for validation. And as I get older, I couldn't care less. [Pause] I actually don't know if it

> was validation, but I'm glad I went to the club when I did because *that* body and *this* body? Two different bodies. I put *that* body to use. I put that body to great use.

> *Michelle:* We're more like the old ladies. We're like the old couple. We go to dinner. We'll go to WNBA games. But we haven't done any nightlife together because, honestly, clubs aren't our thing anymore.

The above dialogue highlights a salient and often underexamined aspect of queer placemaking: the idea of *aging out* of the club scene. Indeed, Michelle not only speaks to a shift in her priorities ("The things that were important to me then, just don't matter anymore") but a shift in her energy ("I just got tired"). Building on Michelle's comment, Heather describes the bodily changes that accompany aging by distinguishing her youthful body ("*that* body") from her older body ("*this* body"). In doing so, Heather associates the club scene with youthfulness. Michelle and Heather juxtapose the frivolity of the club scene with the sincerity of dating apps and, in doing so, position online dating as a productive pathway to meet desires for long-term romantic partnership.

Despite having used dating apps to meet their previous partners, Michelle and Heather met each other in an online group for lesbians of color. As Heather puts it, "We create these online groups. We get in these groups, and we mingle in the groups. We try to plan meet-ups where everybody comes together." According to Michelle, lesbians create online groups out of necessity: "What other way would we meet? What other way? There's no bar that I can just go to and sit down and start having a conversation. There's no space for that. So, where would I do that other than online?" Indeed, Michelle and Heather belong to a number of Facebook groups, including Chicago-based and U.S.-based groups that center Black lesbians and lesbians of color. Both women joined these groups to meet potential romantic partners, cultivate friendships, and as a way to be plugged into the Black lesbian community:

Michelle: I am a part of some of those groups because I look forward to those groups. I look forward to having conversations, making friends, and sometimes I'll comment here and there on some of the topics that we talk about. For some of the other groups that I'm in, I'm just there for entertainment. Somebody gonna be on live shaking they ass or shaking they titties. [Laughs]

Heather: Or smoking a blunt. I don't find any of that entertaining.

Michelle: Well, some days it is!

Heather: I mean, I guess.

Michelle: I met you in one of those groups!

That Michelle and Heather met each other in an online group for lesbians of color is important precisely because extant analyses of intimate infrastructures privilege online dating via dating apps. As will be explored in Chapter 5, social media groups constitute critical spaces in which Black queer women engage in collective intimacy and cultivate digital intimate publics.

Michelle and Heather began dating after Michelle introduced herself to one of the Facebook groups. As the couple explains, Michelle's introductory post prompted Heather to send her a private message, precipitating the start of their relationship:

Heather: Michelle introduced herself to the group. I saw her and I fell in love.

Michelle: You fell in love with me as soon as you saw my picture?

Heather: Instantly.

Michelle: You ain't never told me that!

Heather: I know you were—I won't say I fell in love with you, but I was smitten.

Michelle: Well, I knew you was smitten. I could tell in the message you sent me. And, in our first phone conversation—it was three weeks before my birthday. You were like, "What are you doing for your birthday?" And

> I'm like, "I don't really know." Then you were like, "Well, I'm gonna get a hotel in the city. I'm gonna come and you're not gonna spend your birthday alone." I was turning forty, and you were like, "Yeah, I'll be there." I didn't believe you.

Michelle greeted Heather's romantic overtures with "a healthy level of skepticism." She elaborates: "I could tell that Heather was way more into me at that time than I was into her. Even though Heather was afraid, she was still pursuing me." Michelle then explains her reticence: "My heart had been broken severely, and I was still trying to mend some of that stuff. I was like, 'Heather could decide tomorrow that this ain't it. And I just don't want to get my heart broken.'" According to Michelle, Heather relentlessly courted her with the hopes of pursuing a serious relationship: "She was persistent. She never wavered at all. And I'm so thankful for that because now, I'm in love."

Like its inception, Michelle and Heather's long-distance romance continues to be enabled through digital technologies: "We message all day and usually while we're at work. When I get home, I'll call Heather" (Michelle). However, given that they live in adjacent states, their long-distance relationship is punctuated by intermittent in-person visits: "We see each other every other week for the most part. Sometimes we'll get into a stint where it's every week. But for the most part, it's every other week" (Heather). After nearly two years of being in a long-distance relationship, and one year after our interview, Michelle and Heather wed in a private ceremony and promptly relocated to Hawaii. On their social media accounts, digital traces of their new life together materialize in the form of visual snapshots that celebrate and memorialize their love story. Indeed, the "happily ever after" narrative indexed by Michelle and Heather's story mirrors optimistic accounts of digital intimacy that theorize dating apps and social media platforms as "networks of romantic possibility" (Hobbs, Owen & Gerber, p.282). Of course, not all digital

pathways lead to the same destination nor are they animated by the same desires. The following stories, captured through Imani and Kiana's narratives, reveal how intimate infrastructures mediate desires that exceed monogamous romantic partnership.

Digital Pathways Toward Queer Collectivity: Imani's Story

In contrast to Michelle and Heather's story of exploring digital pathways toward queer romance, other Black queer women use intimate infrastructures to cultivate friendships and to achieve a sense of collectivity with other queer women of color. I turn to Imani's narrative to illustrate the constraints and opportunities that emerge in Black queer women's pursuit of community. Specifically, Imani's narrative speaks to the intersecting issues of racial illegibility, and femme invisibility that frame her experiences living in Chicago and that animate her search for friendship and community.

Moving to Chicago

Imani, a Black queer and poly woman in her early thirties, moved to Chicago several years prior for educational and employment opportunities. She moved from Seattle to Chicago for her graduate studies: "I moved here originally to pursue a graduate degree in social work because I wanted to get out of Washington." Imani explains that she "never intended to stay" but decided to stay in Chicago given her growing professional network. When Imani first moved to Chicago, she settled on the North Side and moved between the neighborhoods of Uptown, Edgewater, and Rogers Park. Describing her time in Uptown, Imani recounts, "It was very diverse in a *weird* way. There was still a ton of Black people in the area, but then there was a new Target and the white

gays with their dogs and all of that stuff that was happening, too."[17] Rather than extol the diversity of the neighborhood, Imani recalls the "culture shock" she experienced when she first moved to Uptown: "I tell people—and maybe I'm being dramatic—but I was like, 'I literally feel like I moved to a different country.' There was a level of culture shock moving to Chicago, mainly because of the segregation."

The juxtaposition of white wealth and Black poverty within a tight geographic radius contrasts sharply with Imani's experiences in Seattle:

> It was like a street-by-street thing. To see Black folks literally on this block, on this side of my apartment, versus this block, on this side of my apartment. I was just like, 'This shit is crazy.' I'd walk down Wilson, right? And then just seeing—there were services for homeless individuals. There would be this line of people waiting for the meal truck that would come by. They were all Black people, and I was just like, "What?" I was like, "Is nobody seeing this?" I was so shocked that this was just a thing and that people are just so used to seeing that. No one even thinks twice about it.

Growing up in Seattle, Imani says she "still associate[s] homelessness and poverty with white people. That's what I associate it with. I mean, the meth heads on the bikes, right? That's white people, you know?" Indeed, Imani felt a sense of shock and despair at the particular racial *and* class segregation she witnessed while living on the North Side.

After graduating with her degree in social work, Imani moved back to Seattle for a year before returning to Chicago: "When I came back to the area from Washington, my ex-girlfriend lived in Bolingbrook, so I moved there because the whole point was to be close to her." Upon moving to Bolingbrook, a middle-class suburb west of the city, Imani began working as therapist

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[17] The Uptown neighborhood is roughly 54 percent white, 17.5 percent Black, 15 percent Latino, and 10 percent Asian (American Community Survey, 2014-2018).

for a counseling agency in the nearby suburb of Naperville. When her relationship with her ex-girlfriend ended, Imani decided to move to Oak Park, a suburb that directly borders Chicago's West Side: "I decided to stay somewhere out west that was in between work and the city, and Oak Park still feels close enough to Chicago." Imani's move to Oak Park was strategic:

> I'm still very cautious and thoughtful about the neighborhood I chose, right? So, there's a reason I chose Oak Park and being in this section of Oak Park, too. I'm on the border of the Austin community, so there's still a huge amount of Black people near me. Whereas if you go deeper into Oak Park, it's very affluent. So, I purposefully chose not to be there. I like that I go into stores and I see a mixture of people. I think there's something about it that makes me feel more at home. Like it's not as heavily segregated, which was something I also liked about Rogers Park. Walking around my neighborhood, I see tons of Pride flags and Black Lives Matter flags. I feel safe here.

Echoing Tiffany in Chapter 2, Imani positions safety as a critical aspect of navigating Chicago. For Imani, the presence of Pride flags and Black Lives Matter flags "makes [her] feel safer as a Black person who likes to go for an occasional walk or a jog." Imani qualifies her statement, stating, "Not that the flags mean all that much, but it just does make a difference to feel like, 'Okay, even though there's probably not Black people living in those homes, they're probably well-meaning white people, which is fantastic. I'll take it.'"

Searching for Community in Chicago

Despite living in a neighborhood where she "feels safe," Imani articulates how her sense of safety has not translated into feelings of belonging or a sense of community in Chicago. Indeed, Imani describes the ways in which she is "always searching for community." As a transplant to the city, community has felt both elusive and challenging to Imani, particularly with regard to

Chicago's Black community. According to Imani, Chicago's Black community is exclusive in ways that limit her romantic and platonic connections to fellow transplants: "I find that going on dates or meeting with people that are originally from Chicago, from the South Side or West Side Chicago—it just doesn't feel like we're compatible." Imani explains,

> I don't feel welcomed by Chicago's Black community. I think it's just something deeply built into the history of the city, and how that community has had to form around itself, and how there's a sense of like, "This is us, and if you're not from the South Side, you don't get it," you know? There's this territorial thing of like, "I'm a South Sider. I'm a West Sider." And if you're neither, I just feel like it's harder to navigate those places.

Imani links the exclusivity and territoriality of Chicago's Black community to protective measures in which Black residents respond to racial segregation and other forms of racial violence by forming insular communities.

According to Imani, the racial politics of the city—as evidenced by her perceptions of the insularity of the Black community and heightened levels of racial segregation—instantiates a rigid Black-white binary that produces other kinds of exclusions. Indeed, Imani articulates how her relationship to Chicago's Black community is made all the more complicated by her biracial identity and appearance as an "ambiguous brown person."

> Finding other mixed-race people is far and few between. I think I just get a lot more invasive questioning about my race, and like harassment about my race. Just things that I'd never experienced before, from both Black and—Actually, mostly from Black people out here. Just like a lot of questioning like, "Well, what are you? Where are you from?" Questions about my hair, questions about which parent is white and which parent is Black. Like these are strangers on the subway, okay? Just feeling like they need to know, like trying to figure me out, right? Like, "Who are you and where are you coming from, and how do I make sense of you?" And then just a lot more fetishization of being mixed race.

The above excerpt reveals the ways in which Imani's blackness is rendered illegible ("Well, what are you? Where are you from?") and suspect ("Which parent is white and which parent is Black?"). At the same time, Imani's "mixed race" identity and proximity to whiteness are rendered hypervisible in ways that invite "harassment" and "fetishization." In reflecting on her experiences, Imani states, "It's just hard to navigate where you fit in when you already live in such a segregated and racialized city."

Imani's experience navigating Chicago's queer community has also presented challenges given her intersecting identities as a Black femme-presenting queer woman. Similar to her Black identity, Imani's queerness is often rendered illegible given her feminine gender presentation: "I have never experienced being read as queer. I think I'm passing." Perhaps because of the multiple forms of misrecognition that she endures, Imani makes a concerted effort to seek out spaces that affirm her Black queer identity, an effort that often proves futile: "I feel like I'm often choosing between like Black and straight spaces or queer and white spaces, you know? Like there's Black spaces that aren't queer-centered, and queer spaces that are not Black-centered." Early into living in Chicago, Imani attended parties and events organized by Black promoters: "I can't even remember the names of them, but like during All-Star Weekend, for example, we knew the events would be all Black people." Those events largely catered to a straight crowd: "Those parties were a beautiful thing, but it's not like the overlap of queer and Black and women specific. That's been very rare."

In terms of distinctly queer spaces, Imani's experience of Chicago's queer scene has mostly centered on Boystown: "I will say, generally as a whole, I've always had positive associations with Boystown." Nevertheless, Imani is critical of the gayborhood's racial, class, and gender politics:

> The place that's supposed to be queer-friendly is very obviously not POC-friendly. Boystown is not even particularly femme friendly, either. So, the fact that our main neighborhood for queerness is so white and so capitalistic and so white-male-oriented, I think that's a huge problem.

Given the various exclusions of Chicago's Black and queer spaces, Imani has yet to find a community that encompasses and affirms her racialized and gendered queer identity: "The most affirming crowd would be people that are Black, that are queer, that are poly, and demisexual friendly. That's even hard to find in one person, right?"

Cultivating Community through Dating Apps

Given her struggles to find community within Black and queer spaces, Imani's sense of community largely emerges from her use of dating apps: "The only way I make friends is through other friends or through apps." Imani describes herself as "a big app person" who uses dating apps to cultivate both romantic and platonic connections: "I would say the majority of connections I make these days is through apps. I have also met partners on apps." Similar to Michelle, Imani uses dating apps to "weed through people," an operating logic that applies to both potential romantic partners and friends:

> Before I waste my time as an introvert by sitting and having a conversation with someone, I like to assess. I like to be able to assess like, "Do I even have a connection with this person?" So, I find it easier to weed through people a lot more quickly, to open myself up to people, and to see, "Is there a basic level of connection that I would want to expand on or not?" Just get it out of the way.

Notions of "assessment" and "weeding through people" speak to the logics of efficiency and convenience that animate swipe-based dating apps (Hanson, 2021). Nevertheless, Imani admits that "it does feel draining at times," especially when she is "active on the apps." Many of Imani's matches "mean nothing and go nowhere. We might message a few times, and nothing happens. Or we may even meet up once and then just not text each other." Indeed, dating app usage is "deceptively time-consuming" in ways that counter prevailing notions of the efficiency of digital intimacy (Miles, 2017, p.1595). Yet, when compared to dating offline, Imani argues that the practice of assessing potential matches on dating apps is "so much better than trying to *manage* that in person" (emphasis added). Here, the logics of efficiency and convenience are crystallized through Imani's invocation of management. However, Imani's narrative offers an alternative interpretation of these ruling logics, where the practice of assessing and "weeding through" potential matches is seen as an act of self-preservation ("Before I waste my time…I like to assess").

For Imani, meeting face-to-face is reserved for individuals with whom she has an already established connection. To that end, she describes her assessment criteria, or what she "looks for" in potential romantic partners and friends:

Imani: Mostly, I'm looking for people that put something in their profile that is alluding to shared values. Whereas I just cannot even have any sort of connection in a romantic or platonic way with someone that doesn't share my values. So, key words that make me more likely to swipe on people are things like people saying, "I'm an intersectional feminist," or people saying things like, "No TERFs," or, "I'm an abolitionist."

Dominique: So, are you saying that you are interested in connecting with people who share your political values?

Imani: Yeah, because to me, those are personal values, in my opinion. But yeah, so those are things that make me want to swipe on people. Or people that say like, "QPOCs only." I'll be like, "Yes," right? So, that makes me more inclined to swipe.

In the above dialogue, we see how the practice of "weeding through people" functions as a vetting strategy in which personal and political values are metrics of desirability.[18] Despite how desirability is often positioned as synonymous with notions of sexual attractiveness, individuals use other metrics of desirability to assess romantic, sexual, and friendship compatibility. For Black queer women, whose everyday lives are implicated by intersecting forms of oppression, explicit articulations that disavow violence ("No TERFs") and affirm social justice ("I'm an abolitionist") signify the value that one places on Black queer women's lives.[19] Such articulations are paramount when vetting users who do not share her identities and where threats of sexual harassment, fetishization, and other forms of violence persist (Buggs, 2017; Carlson, 2019).

Just as Imani "weeds through" potential matches based on their personal and political values, she also uses dating apps to articulate her identities and values in ways that are legible to others. Indeed, critical to dating app usage is an understanding of how one is not only assessing others but also being assessed by others, or the ways in which one is simultaneously "seeing and being seen" (Blackwell, Birnholtz & Abbot, 2015). In using dating apps, Imani explicitly claims and articulates her various identities as a Black queer, poly, and demisexual woman. Social media platforms, dating apps, and other digital platforms are critical spaces in which individuals perform and engage in identity work, including sexual selfhood projects (Adams-Santos, 2020). To be sure, identity work and impression management practices are part and parcel of using dating apps. Still,

[18] These vetting strategies resonate with Buggs's (2017) finding that women of color use metrics of "racial progressiveness" as a key vetting strategy on dating apps.

[19] The term "TERFs" is an acronym that refers to trans-exclusionary radical feminists.

such practices are significant for Imani given how her Black identity and queerness are rendered illegible and invisible in her everyday life.

In using dating apps, Imani continues to cultivate a growing circle of Black women friends, who collectively affirm her various identities:

> I don't have a set place that makes me feel the most affirmed. I would say I am most affirmed by my friends. Not like every single friend here, because one of my friends who I go out with the most actually is straight. She's fine with going to queer events, too, but she's straight. But, on the apps, I've definitely met a good chunk of people that I feel very affirmed by here, because they share my overlapped identities.

Nevertheless, Imani maintains that she has yet to find community in Chicago: "I feel that community is just hard for me to find." Tellingly, Imani conceptualizes community in individualized terms or as something she searches for perpetually. Community takes on an elusive, intangible, and ethereal quality rather than a stable formation that she can readily identify and plug into. Instead, community is a utopic vision and one that Imani intentionally seeks to manifest one swipe at a time.

Digital Pathways Toward Queer Encounters: Kiana's Story

The previous stories centered the experiences of Black queer women who use intimate infrastructures to pursue queer romance and collectivity. In this next section, we meet Kiana, a Black queer femme woman in her mid-twenties, whose simultaneous desires for romance, sex, and community shape, and are shaped by, her use of social media platforms and dating apps. For Kiana, intimate infrastructures facilitate and mediate myriad queer encounters: romantic partnerships,

platonic dates, sexual friendships, and community. My use of queer encounters indexes the fluidity, movement, and simultaneity of Kiana's digital intimacy projects.

Moving to Chicago

At the time of our interview, Kiana had been living in Chicago for one year. Born in Georgia and raised in a predominantly white suburb in New Jersey, Kiana moved to Chicago shortly after completing her graduate studies in Ohio. Unlike Michelle and Imani, Kiana moved to the city with the explicit intention of immersing herself into Chicago's queer women of color scene: "I originally moved here because Chicago was on my list of places that I would allow myself to move to, particularly to have community. So, New York, Philly, D.C., Boston, and Chicago were the only five cities I was considering." Kiana limited her job search to Chicago, as she had a number of professional connections "who had either worked in higher ed in Chicago or who lived here for a summer internship." As a professional in higher education, Kiana "applied to all the schools that had openings in the Chicago area," and promptly moved upon receiving a job offer.

When Kiana relocated to Chicago, she "didn't have any connections in terms of actual people who currently lived here." While her professional connections had since left Chicago, Kiana recalls asking them for residential advice: "I moved to Lakeview, which I like, but I moved to Lakeview, mostly because I asked the few people who I knew who lived in Chicago—I asked them, 'What are the safe, cool neighborhoods to live?' And everything they suggested was up North." Unlike Imani's experience living on the North Side, Kiana enjoys living in Lakeview, particularly given its proximity to Boystown: "I live like blocks from Boystown, so that's really nice. I live two blocks from a really good bar—it's not a queer women of color space, but it definitely has people of color who are queer." Indeed, like Tiffany from Chapter 2, Kiana sees

Boystown as a "good [place] for being queer," even if it does not explicitly center queer women of color. As Kiana describes, "That bar is like the only place I go to dance, and it's so cool. It's two blocks up, so then I can be drunk and walk home with my friends or whatever."

Coming into the Life

Despite her physical proximity to Boystown, Kiana actively pursues community among other queer women of color in ways that move her beyond the gayborhood and into her identity as a Black queer woman:

> When I came to Chicago, I moved here by myself. I was also engaged to a straight cis man at the time. I was about to get married, and then I decided I didn't want to get married. So, in a lot of ways—even though I came out years ago—in a lot of ways, I feel like moving to Chicago has definitely really cemented that identity for me. So, that's why I am super active in the community in different ways.

As explicated in the above excerpt, Kiana's move to Chicago has helped to "cement" her queer identity, a process that Moore (2011) terms "coming into the life." As Moore (2011) explains,

> The concept of "coming out" does not accurately capture the experience of acting on same-sex attraction by entering and participating in Black gay social life. Instead, this experience, broadly understood, is best conceptualized as "coming into" a life and community with particular norms and expectations for its members. The phrase "coming into the life" not only better describes the experience of same-sex desire for Black people who learn how to "be" gay in Black social settings, it also captures the essence of how they learn to label that desire and reveal it to others (Moore, 2011, p.22).

Rather than "coming out," which Kiana did years ago while in college, "coming into the life" captures the communal dimensions and experiences of claiming her queer identity and desires. For Kiana, "coming into the life" does not necessarily mean learning "how to 'be' gay in Black social

settings." Rather, Kiana's process of "coming into the life" has involved exploring her queerness within a curated community of Black and Latinx queer women and non-binary people.

In "coming into the life," Kiana describes her persistent search for community among other queer women of color: "In terms of an actual community, I'm not sure that exists. I've had to build that community myself." Similar to Michelle and Imani, Kiana alludes to the spatial marginalization that impinges upon queer women of color's opportunities to meet one another in physical spaces: "I remember when I first started going to queer parties, even when they were QTPOC-centered parties, there were mostly white people there. And a lot of the places in Boystown are very, very white male-centered, if I'm being honest." Specifically considering the paucity of QWOC spaces, Kiana explains,

> Honestly, it makes me sort of think about lesbian bars and how frequently they shut down, primarily because lesbians don't go to them. I wonder if it's because we're better with one-on-one, like meeting friends of friends, or getting to know community that way. These interpersonal ways of meeting, rather than a party where you meet a ton of people at one time.

The above explanation echoes a popular perception among lesbian and queer women that links the closing of lesbian bars to a lack of desire among lesbians to patron those spaces but does not fully explain the dearth of QWOC spaces (see Mattson, 2019).

Critically, Kiana expands her discussion to explain the racialized and gendered structural and cultural dynamics that she believes contribute to the paucity of QWOC spaces:

> If we're talking about queer women of color, I'm going to say a lot of queer women of color—I'm going to make this guess, but I feel it's true—a lot of queer women of color grow up in households where sexuality is not viewed as something that should ever be in the public eye. White women do not have the same upbringing and are allowed to be more

> open about sexuality. Like, if we're talking about Dyke March, and some people can walk around topless and things, you don't see queer women of color usually doing that. Who you will see doing that is white women, right? We already have so many stereotypes about who we are sexually, that expressing sexuality outside of closed doors, outside of the bedroom, feels unthinkable. I think about how many bars I go to and how many times I see white women just fully making out. And I'll meet a queer woman of color in a bar, and we'll dance, and we'll be like, "Here's my number if you want to fuck." Do you know what I mean? We're very—you know what I mean—it's not as out there. So, I wonder if specifically—and I'm thinking about Black women because that's the experience I know about—there's so much shaming about our bodies and things, so we'll do things that are sexual, like twerking and things, but they're never overtly sexual. You're not going to see, just taking off clothes, making out. That's a little different.

Kiana describes the structural and cultural forces that shape Black women's fraught relationship to public sexuality, in which Black queer women can discretely invite sexual encounters ("Here's my number if you want to fuck") but can "never [be] overtly sexual" in public space. In response to these structural constraints and cultural dynamics, Kiana, like the previous storytellers, uses intimate infrastructures to initiate romantic, sexual, and platonic connections.

Queer Encounters

When Kiana moved to Chicago, she was "adamant about getting on apps and making queer connections, and making queer friends, and things like that." Kiana first began using dating apps prior to moving to Chicago and during a summer internship while still in graduate school:

> After my first year of graduate school, I got an internship in Canada about an hour outside of Toronto. I came out officially to everyone on Facebook when I was in Canada. I made an official Facebook post where I was like, "I'm queer," to let everybody know. I was out

> there by myself. I was going to Toronto, and I was making friends on apps. So, I had been talking to my ex-fiancé about that for a bit, and we had actually decided that we would be in an open relationship for a little bit while I got to explore my identity, and date, and do things.

Kiana used dating apps to explore her queerness and her attraction to women: "I started going on dates with women for the first time. I went to Toronto Pride and met up with people from the apps. We stayed up until like four in the morning in front of the big Toronto sign downtown." Recalling her experiences in Toronto, Kiana explains, "That was a peak for me in terms of feeling like I really was a part of this community."

Echoing her experiences in Toronto, Kiana approached Chicago's queer scene through the use of dating apps and social media platforms. When Kiana told her friends that she was moving to Chicago, they recommended that she use the HER app, an app specifically tailored to queer women: "My friends in undergrad were like, 'Oh, you're moving to Chicago? You're looking for queer community? Here's this app.' I didn't know about HER, and I found out about HER when I was first moving here." Kiana credits HER and other platforms with facilitating the majority of her queer connections in Chicago:

> Yeah, I think I have a few straight friends. I know they exist, like from work. But yeah, the vast majority of the friends I've made from HER, OKCupid, and Instagram personals. And, the vast majority, as well, I've been intentional in making sure they're queer. And actually, a lot of my friends, too, I've met on dates, as well, which is cool. So, we've gone on a date, and we've been like, "This is really nice. Not super interested in you, but like, let's be friends." Some of my closest friends I've made through dating as well, which is something that's so different from straight dating.

Similar to Michelle, Heather, and Imani, Kiana uses dating apps as a conduit for romantic and platonic connections. However, unlike the previous storytellers, Kiana articulates the fluid movement between romantic and platonic encounters that emerge from her use of intimate infrastructures.

Supporting the above excerpt, many of the connections that Kiana has made on dating apps and social media platforms blur the lines between romantic, platonic, and sexual relationships: "All these women that I meet online—or all these *people* that I meet online, because some of them are non-binary—have turned into either a friends-with-benefits situation or have turned into platonic friends." Kiana describes one such situation wherein a romantic connection transformed into a close platonic relationship:

> One of my closest friends, Julia, who's also a queer woman of color, we met up on Tinder. We went on a date in Pilsen. It was some sort of taco fest over the summer. And she's Mexican, so we talked a lot about her culture. I had my first tamale. We were enjoying the time. Then, we just rode around in her car and got high after. At the end of the day, we were both like, "I feel like this is more of a friendship." We're also both very femme, and she was like, "Yeah, I'm usually into more masc folks." And I was like, "Got you." So, she's become like one of my closest friends in Chicago.

In another situation, Kiana explains how her platonic friendship with Nick, a Latinx queer, non-binary and poly person, evolved into a sexual friendship: "Nick and I make out and have sex, but we're like friends at the core."

To be sure, Kiana embraces an expansive understanding of queer friendship that makes room for romance, sex, and platonic connections: "Queer friendships have a lot of dimensions that can be romantic, sexual, and platonic. But even when it's a platonic friendship, it just feels like all of these friends are my partners, like my life partners, if that makes sense." In addition to her own

romantic, sexual, and platonic pursuits, Kiana also describes herself as a "matchmaker" who helps to facilitate those same connections for others: "I'm a matchmaker. I'm just introducing people, everybody's having sex. Some of them started dating, some of them are friends, some of them see each other when I'm there. I would say I built my own community of people." For Kiana, these queer encounters are conduits for queer community.

Despite the number of connections that Kiana has made with queer women and non-binary people of color, she has "gotten to a place" where she "would love to just date Black women." However, this is a desire that Kiana has struggled to manifest, partly due to the fact that she mostly attracts white women on dating apps: "If we're talking about who mostly reaches out to me, it's usually white women, and I don't always trust their intentions." Just as Kiana mostly attracts white women, she explains how many of her friends "who are queer women of color, and Black queer women, mostly date white people." Based on her observations and experiences, Kiana speculates how overriding desires for community among Black queer women obviate romantic and sexual encounters:

> I feel like it's harder to connect with other Black queer women, and honestly—so I have an anecdote. I have a friend, my friend Alex, who's Black. Alex and I met up not for a date but just to be friends. At one point, we did talk about—we were like, "Oh, should we have sex?" And we were like, "Eh, no." Sometimes I wonder if there's this thing where you just long for community so much with other Black queer women that you're afraid of bringing love or sex into the middle of it. Because what if you lose it altogether? If we're talking about Black community—which I try to be very intentional about making, especially living in this white area—I have like three Black friends. I feel like all of my other friends are actually exclusively people of color and women of color. But you know, it's this thing of like, "I need you, and I can't lose you at the end of the day."

Kiana's narrative reveals the radical use of intimate infrastructures in the pursuit of myriad queer intimacies, wherein romance, sex, and friendship are constitutive elements of queer sociality. Still, for Kiana, her romantic and sexual desires for Black queer women rest uneasily alongside her desires for kinship; "bringing love and sex into the middle of it" is a risky proposition. To be sure, Kiana's excerpt points to the complexities of pursuing intimacy and community within the context of intersectional placelessness; just as Black queer women's spaces are seen as precarious and scarce, so too are Black queer women. Indeed, the perceived scarcity of connections between Black queer women render them precious and invaluable to one another in more ways than one.

5. CONCLUSION

Through the lens of desiring technologies, this chapter demonstrates the various desires and digitally mediated pathways that lead toward queer sociality. Rather than distinct and mutually exclusive desires and pathways, Michelle, Heather, Imani, and Kiana's stories reveal the multitude of desires—for queer romance, collectivity, and encounters—that infuse and emerge within digital intimacy practices. Indeed, desires for romance, collectivity, and encounters permeate each of the stories. Recall how Michelle and Heather formed a romantic connection through their participation in a social media group for Black lesbians. Their romantic connection emerged within a digital social context not specifically geared toward facilitating romantic relationships but for connecting with an imagined community of Black queer women. By contrast, Imani's narrative reveals the ways in which dating apps are used to cultivate platonic friendships and community. And, in Kiana's narrative, desires for romantic, sexual, and platonic encounters exist simultaneously and manifest through the use of various dating apps and social media platforms.

Whereas extant sociological research examines inequality (i.e., racial preferences and sexual racism) as an outcome of digital intimacy and online dating practices, this chapter illuminates how inequality (i.e., spatial marginalization and intersectional placelessness) frames and propels Black queer women's use of intimate infrastructures. To be sure, Black queer women's desires for sociality are embedded in a sociospatial context where alternative pathways and spaces to meet such desires are perceived as scarce, precarious, and nonexistent. Michelle and Heather articulate the marginalization of Black lesbians within Chicago's Black gay nightlife scene, the precarity of lesbian spaces, as well as the limitations of the club scene in facilitating Black lesbian romance. Similarly, given the perceived insularity and exclusivity of Chicago's Black and queer spaces, Imani is "always searching for community," including spaces and people in which her various identities are legible and affirmed. While Kiana recently moved to Chicago with the intention of finding community, she speculates that such a community may not actually exist. Indeed, these narratives demonstrate how spatial marginalization and intersectional placelessness impinge upon and frame Black queer women's intimacies.

Critically, Black queer women's stories capture the *entrenchment* of intimate infrastructures in facilitating and mediating romantic, platonic, and sexual relationships and friendships. Intimate infrastructures are positioned as a kind of lifeline upon which Black queer women's intimacies depend. Recall Michelle's comment: "What other way would we meet? What other way?" To be sure, the Black queer women interviewed in this study almost exclusively use intimate infrastructures for their intimate pursuits. In addition to mediating intimacies, Imani's story also reveals how Black queer women use intimate infrastructures to articulate their identities, desires, and political and personal values. Relatedly, Kiana's narrative illustrates how intimate

infrastructures mediate processes of "coming into the life," in which one learns to be queer among other queer women of color. Thus, in addition to mediating intimacies, dating apps and other digital platforms mediate sexual selfhood projects in ways that deepen the entrenchment of and affective attachments to intimate infrastructures.

Of course, there are potential pitfalls to using intimate infrastructures for collective purposes. For example, Michelle and Imani use dating apps in ways that arguably undermine pursuits toward queer sociality. Specifically, the practices of "weeding through" and "cutting off" echo the logics of efficiency and disposability for which dating apps have been critiqued (David & Cambre, 2016). Returning to the literature reviewed at the start of the chapter, these practices often perform exclusions and violence in ways that sustain and reproduce racialized and gendered sexual hierarchies. Thus, in navigating intimate infrastructures, Black queer women may unwittingly reproduce the kinds of exclusion that thwart queer sociality. Additionally, while less common among the individuals interviewed for this study, a couple of Black queer women spoke to the fetishization they encountered on dating apps, including from other Black queer women. As Jess, a self-described "racially ambiguous" Black femme lesbian, puts it, "The closer you are to whiteness, the more kind of value you have. And I think there's been a lot of internalizing of that even in the Black queer community." Kiana's narrative, on the other hand, offers a glimpse into the radical possibilities of digitally mediated queer sociality; "failed" romantic matches are transformed into sexual and platonic bonds. As such, romantic, sexual, and platonic intimacies overlap and emerge as unstable, malleable, and fluid forms of kinship that meaningfully respond to desires for community and belonging *and* challenge normative kinship practices.

The narratives centered in this chapter demonstrate how desires for community, and queer sociality more broadly, animate Black queer women's use of intimate infrastructures. That is, Black queer women use highly *individualized* technologies and practices to pursue *collective* intimacies. Importantly, these findings contradict the "decline theory" within gay dating app literature, which posits that the "prevalence of the Internet and digital devices [is making] gay community attachment less necessary for gay men to socialize with each other" (Wu & Ward, 2018, p.6; Renninger, 2018). Among the respondents interviewed in this study, community is positioned as an elusive and abstract concept, a utopic longing toward which Black queer women strive. Thus, rather than a hindrance, dating apps and social media platforms are vital conduits through which Black queer women actively attempt to find and build community. As Rodríguez (2011) reminds us, this is the nature of queer sociality: "an *attempt* at recognition… a utopian space that both performs a critique of existing social relations of difference and enacts a commitment to the creative critical work of imagining collective possibilities" (2011, p.332, emphasis added). Intimate infrastructures, then, represent real and symbolic pathways toward partnership, pleasure, recognition, and belonging for and among Black queer women.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mapping Chicago's Black Femme Pleasurescapes

1. INTRODUCTION

Dominique: How did you learn about these Black queer parties? Did someone introduce you to them?

Vivian: So, I went on Facebook and I just joined a local queer group. Then, I started joining groups specifically for queer people of color. And then, I made a friend who told me about some parties, like Party Noire, Slo 'Mo, and other parties. I feel like once you find something, you see everything else. I remember struggling because I wanted to go to these events, but I didn't want to go by myself. Sometimes, I did go alone. When I first moved here, I didn't have that many friends who were people of color and queer. The Black friends that I had were all straight. So, if it wasn't specifically a queer party, I'd ask a Black friend to go with me. And that was fun, but it was hard to find queer people of color to go to those parties with me.

Similar to Imani from Chapter 3, Vivian, a Black queer femme woman in her mid-twenties, moved to Chicago two years ago to pursue her graduate studies. Additionally, her excerpt echoes the experiences of Imani and other untethered storytellers who use digital technologies in the pursuit of queer sociality. Indeed, like the majority of the storytellers that I interviewed, Vivian's introduction to Black queer life happened online. However, this chapter departs from the individual intimacy practices (i.e., queer romance, collectivity, and encounter) examined in Chapter 3 to explore the party spaces that Vivian alludes to in the above excerpt. Our intimacy mapping journey leads us to Chicago's *Black femme pleasurescapes,* or ephemeral erotic scene-spaces that center

and privilege Black queer women as desiring and desirable subjects. In this chapter, I focus on the urban and digital placemaking strategies that give rise to Black femme pleasurescapes.

Drawing on urban and digital ethnographic methods, I argue that Black femme pleasurescapes are cultivated through the culmination of urban and digital placemaking practices that creatively respond to the conditions of spatial marginalization and intersectional placelessness. Moreover, this chapter reveals how Black femme pleasurescapes "take up space" within Chicago's urban landscape by *queering* Black space. That is, Black femme pleasurescapes emerge within, and temporarily transform, Black spaces into sites of celebration, play, and resistance that prioritize Black queer women's safety and pleasure (Hunter et al., 2016). Critically, in elevating and celebrating Black queer women, Black femme pleasurescapes provide an alternative story of queer placemaking that decenters the whiteness and phallocentrism of normative gay placemaking. Indeed, an analysis of Black femme pleasurescapes contributes to an understanding of how racial and gender sexual minorities cultivate erotic lifeworlds outside of institutionalized gay spaces in ways that transform normative racialized and gendered sexual geographies.

In the next section, I begin with the narratives of Nia and Jade, a Black lesbian couple, to provide a glimpse into how Black queer women find their way into Black femme pleasurescapes. I then situate Black femme pleasurescapes within a larger constellation of Black and Latinx queer placemaking that emerges outside of the Boystown scene. Subsequently, I provide an analysis of the placemaking practices that contribute to the digital and urban life of Black femme pleasurescapes. I end the chapter by discussing the past and future life of Black femme pleasurescapes to illuminate the significance of ephemeral placemaking among Black queer women.

2. BLACK FEMME PLEASURSCAPES: A FIRST ENCOUNTER

Nia and Jade, a Black lesbian couple in their early twenties, moved to Chicago several years ago to attend college and decided to stay in the city to kickstart their careers. After graduating from college, the couple moved into a one-bedroom apartment on the North Side neighborhood of Rogers Park to live close to college friends who were also drawn to the neighborhood for its affordability, access to public transportation, and racial and sexual diversity. "Even though it's still predominantly white," Nia describes Rogers Park as a "racially diverse neighborhood" that gives her "pretty queer friendly vibes." Jade echoes Nia's observations, explaining how she regularly sees "a lot of queer people walking down the street," as well as people from different racial and class backgrounds, all of which make her "feel safe and comfortable in the neighborhood." While they do most of their shopping and socializing in Rogers Park, Nia and Jade occasionally spend time in Boystown. Their introduction to the gayborhood happened years ago while in college. Nia, a Black femme lesbian in her early twenties, explains:

> We used to go to Boystown quite a bit for clubbing and to go out with friends. We still go sometimes, but we also enjoy going for dates, to get a smoothie, to get tea. There's this thrift shop there that Jade in particular likes. So, we'll go there to shop. Even though it's not a Black space or like a POC space, it's a space where we can just—like no one's going to bat an eyelash seeing two women holding hands.

Jade, a Black masculine-presenting lesbian, affirms Nia's statement, adding, "Boystown isn't a Black space or POC space, but it is definitely a place where our queer identities are affirmed. Just seeing other gay people, other same-sex couples." Like the storytellers from the previous chapters, Nia and Jade characterize Boystown as a place that affirms their queerness but also note how the neighborhood's racial and gender dynamics influence their experiences there: "We've gone there

just to have fun, like not necessarily to meet people or anything like that." Then, Nia clarifies, "We wouldn't really go to Boystown to meet people at all. We don't go to Boystown to meet people literally at all."

Unlike the "vicarious citizenship" that Greene (2014) theorizes in his ethnographic study of non-residential belonging within gayborhoods, Nia and Jade express a tenuous relationship to Boystown in which feelings of belonging, ownership, and community are noticeably absent. I was curious if Nia and Jade's experiences of Chicago's queer community extended beyond Boystown to include spaces for Black queer women:

Dominique: What are your perceptions of Chicago's Black queer woman community? Is there a community you can point to?

Nia: I know that there's Black queer women in the city that do things together. I know there are communities here. I don't know if there's one community. I don't know if I would say like, "Oh, this is Chicago's Black queer women community." I definitely feel like there are communities in the city, some of which are as small as friend groups and others that are pretty strong and create spaces, like SmallWORLD Collective or Party Noire. So, I only really know about these collectives. But I don't know if I would say that I am connected to Chicago's Black queer communities.

Jade: Yeah, I don't know much about the community. I feel like there's smaller groups who come together to throw parties. But, outside of that, it feels like it's just friend groups or collectives like Swoon and Peach that throw larger parties.

The above dialogue reveals Nia and Jade's struggle to locate Chicago's Black queer women community. Intersectional placelessness, then, surfaces not only in feelings of ambiguous

belonging within existing spaces but also as a sense of disorientation. Importantly, their dialogue also points to the salience of party spaces in fostering a sense of community among Black queer women. After years of only going to Boystown, Nia and Jade's friends introduced them to two party spaces that center Black queer women—SmallWORLD Collective and Party Noire—leading them to frequent the gayborhood less often. Party Noire was founded in 2015 by three Black queer women: Nick Adler, Rae Chardonnay Taylor (also known as DJ Rae Chardonnay), and Lauren Ash. SmallWORLD Collective was founded in 2017 by Jae Rice, a Black queer DJ and wardrobe consultant known as DJ Dapper.

As a masculine-presenting lesbian, Jade describes how "comfortable" she feels attending the parties, emphasizing the significance of sharing space with other Black queer women:

> It's just comfortable for me. Just seeing a lot of other women who look like me is important. They identify in similar ways as me. I mean, I grew up around Black people but not queer Black people. I feel like I finally have that mix with SmallWORLD and like other events. It just feels really nice for me to be able to identify with other people—we listen to the same music, we like the same things. It's just that nice community vibe.

Jade identifies Black queer parties as salient spaces for recognition and community that encompass and reflect her subjectivity as a Black queer woman. Nia and Jade continue to frequent Boystown for brunch or shopping, but as Nia explains, "Boystown was good, but I think once we found Black and POC spaces, we definitely don't go there as often." Nevertheless, Jade contends that the Black queer parties don't happen as frequently as she would like: "It doesn't feel like it's like an ongoing community where there's like weekly events or like a space that we would all frequent often." Jade's note about the *ephemeral* quality of Black femme pleasurescapes is the focus of this chapter, revealing how Black queer women cultivate erotic scene-spaces in Chicago's urban-digital sphere.

3. SITUATING BLACK FEMME PLEASURESCAPES

In June 2019, Chicago's Black queer and trans community organized the inaugural Pride South Side, an alternative Pride celebration to the official Pride parade and festivities of the Boystown gayborhood. Adrienne Irmer, organizer of Pride South Side, explains:

> We recognized there was a dearth of opportunities for large numbers of queer-identified folks of color to be able to celebrate Pride Week. The North Side is geographically and logistically far for a lot of Southland folks . . . And if you're not close to public transit, it's also inaccessible from a cost standpoint, so we wanted to create programming to broaden the reach of Pride celebration activities so that anyone of any income, of any color, and any identity could come and enjoy with family and friends (*Block Club Chicago,*2019).

As Irmer notes, Boystown's location on the North Side is both geographically and financially inaccessible to queers of color. However, beyond these practical considerations, the move away from the North Side also marked a symbolic shift toward centering identities and life experiences less valued in Boystown: Chicago's Black queer community. Specifically, Irmer's phrase, "*anyone of any income, of any color, and any identity,"* is a discursive disavowal of the whiteness, affluence, and gayness that characterizes Boystown, Chicago Pride, and the city's archetypal queer imaginary.

In March 2018, one year prior to the launch of Pride South Side, the *Chicago Tribune* published an article titled "Queer black Chicagoans talk about isolation, lack of safe spaces where they can explore identity," describing the lack of "pro-black" queer spaces in Chicago's gayborhood: "Boystown is more of a white area—they have urban or Latino nights at different clubs, but really no pro-black area. The few that there are are kind of tucked away on the South Side." Rather than being seen as "pro-black," the presence of "urban and Latino nights" in

Boystown is regarded as half-hearted attempts at racial inclusion. The invocation of "pro-black" is used to index spaces that structurally and culturally affirm and privilege Black queer patrons.

Contrary to being seen as "pro-black," Boystown is often regarded as an anti-Black space. For example, Progress Bar, a gay dance club in Boystown, faced criticism from Chicago's Black queer community after implementing a ban on rap music (*Advocate*, 2019). As evidenced in a since-leaked email correspondence from the club owner, the ban specified that,

> "Anything vulgar, aggressive or considered mumble rap (including certain Cardi B tracks and newer Nikki Minaj) is off limits. If you are unsure if a song qualifies, assume it does and choose something else…. If someone is pressuring you for a song just let them know it's the new rule. There will be added security there to help with this transition and one specifically posted next to the DJ booth" (*Advocate*, 2019).

Despite the bar's claim to the contrary, the rap ban was viewed as a racist act meant to exclude and police their Black patrons. For example, a former patron of the club tweeted, "I already don't go to Boystown as it is because of how it caters to the white gays, but Progress Bar was one of the few places that most of us [people of color] could hang out at…. It's sad that even in a neighborhood designated [for] all gays, they try and push the black ones out" (*Block Club Chicago*, 2019). In response to the ban, Chicago's Black queer community leaders argued that "banning an entire genre of music often made by and for people of color and adding security next to the DJ booth to enforce this, communicated that Progress Bar no longer valued, respected, or provided a safe environment for our Black and Brown bodies" (*Windy City Times*, 2019).

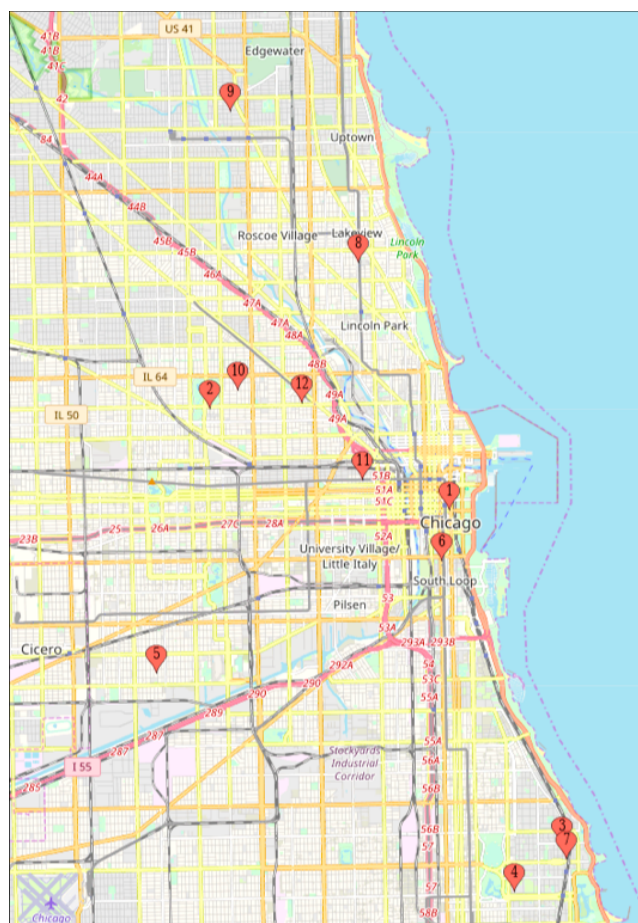
The Progress Bar incident mirrors existing empirical accounts of racism in Boystown, which demonstrate how the gayborhood is not only a white space but an anti-Black space that actively polices and discriminates against Black queer patrons (Blair, 2016; Ghaziani, 2014; Orne,

2017; Rosenberg, 2017). Progress Bar's rap ban, including its use of security to enforce the ban, echoes the anti-Black community policing practices that Blair (2016) captured in his ethnography of Boystown. According to Blair, as part of the "Take Back Boystown" movement, Boystown residents "supported problematic efforts to curtail crime, like video surveillance, community walks, and even efforts to shut down youth services provided by local lgbt organizations" to "criminalize [and exclude] the unwanted population of people of color" (2016, p.298). Similarly, in his autoethnography of Boystown, Rosenberg (2017) argues that nonprofit organizations located in the gayborhood have "adopted policing strategies toward the queer and trans youth of color they serve….to further defend and maintain an exclusive gay urban space informed by whiteness, which marks and regulates young, Black masculinities and trans femininities as deviant, untrustworthy, and criminal" (2017, p.137).

In a city of intense residential segregation and a gayborhood equally marked by the color line, Chicago's Black queer community has historically struggled to cultivate and sustain spaces of its own. In contrast to the relative stability and robustness of Boystown's infrastructure—which includes the Center on Halsted, the city's LGBTQ community center; seventeen bars and clubs; and numerous eateries and commercial businesses—Chicago's Black queer institutional infrastructure is limited in size and clustered on the South Side (Northalsted Business Alliance). Located between the South Side neighborhoods of Hyde Park and South Shore, the city's Black queer institutions include two Black gay bars, Jeffery Pub and Club Escape; two social justice organizations, Affinity Community Services and Brave Space Alliance; and one religious organization, Lighthouse Church of Chicago. Similarly, in 2019, Chicago's Black and Latinx Pride events were scattered across the city's landscape, materializing on a much smaller scale and

reflecting the efforts of small community organizations and everyday placemakers. The red pins on the map (see Figure 1 below) represent twelve such events in June 2019, including a Pride kick-off party in downtown Chicago; the inaugural Pride South Side in Hyde Park; the Chicago Dyke March in Little Village; a picnic in Humboldt Park; a music event in Hyde Park; a potluck in Lincoln Square; and six Pride-themed parties clustering mostly on the West and South Sides of the city.

Figure 1. Map of Chicago's Black and Latinx Pride Events



The Black and Latinx Pride events stood in stark contrast to the grandiosity of the official Pride line-up with its "colorful floats, decorated vehicles, marching bands and walking contingents

representing community businesses, organizations, elected governmental officials and individuals" (*Chicago Pride*). Significantly smaller than Chicago Pride, Pride South Side exemplified the efforts of community organizers and placemakers to *queer* Black space. However, more than simply hosting an alternative Pride celebration on the South Side, Pride South Side was envisioned as a community health project centered on Black queer health and wellness:

> One, to create an evergreen flagship event for queer people of color living on the South and West sides; two, to work with local businesses and organizations to provide diversity and inclusion training in communities where rates of HIV/AIDS are the highest; and three, to develop career/educational/health and wellness development pipelines in support of queer POC youth. (*Block Club Chicago*, 2019)

When I attended the inaugural Pride South Side event in Hyde Park's DuSable Museum of African American History, I was struck by the age, gender, and sexual diversity of the organizers, performers, and attendees. Nefertiti, a young Black trans woman who has since passed away, served as the festival's emcee, effortlessly ushering the slate of young Black queer performers onto the main stage. At one point, a Black girls' dancing troupe performed, eliciting cheers from attendees that effectively defined the space as family-friendly. And, in line with Pride South Side's mission, Black health care providers and other community organizations were positioned off of the main stage throughout the duration of the festival, offering information and resources targeted toward Black queer youth.

While Pride month serves as a galvanizing focal point for queer placemaking, community organizers and placemakers curate various events and gatherings throughout the year. Indeed, Pride South Side is only one illustration of recent attempts among Black and Latinx placemakers to carve out queer spaces in Chicago's Black and Latinx neighborhoods. The pins on the map

(Figure 1) largely correspond to the efforts taken by Black and Latinx queer collectives that emerged onto Chicago's queer scene within the last few years. The collectives are comprised of DJs, event planners, photographers, and artists that organize Chicago's alternative queer and trans nightlife scene. Some of the collectives center Chicago's larger Black and Latinx queer and trans community, while others, like SmallWORLD Collective and Party Noire, explicitly create spaces for Black and Latinx queer women and femmes. Together, the groups comprise Chicago's field of queer collectives, which see themselves as part of a growing community of alternative queer spaces. In June 2019, the collectives organized a Pride kick-off party at the Chicago Athletic Association Hotel, an upscale hotel and event space in Downtown Chicago:

> 2019 PRIDE MONTH KICK-OFF PARTY:
>
> CommuniTEA
> ONE NIGHT ONLY all of your favorites...Spill the Tea!
> All of your favorite queer collectives have joined forces to give you one unforgettable night!
> All of your favorite queer collectives have joined forces to give you one unforgettable night! Join us for a night of curated cocktails, amazing DJs, and pop-up performances at the beautiful Game Room in the Chicago Athletic Association hotel.
>
> And guess what? It's FREE.99!!! Only RSVP is required for entry!
>
> This event is a celebration of our community and all the amazing collectives that work so hard to program for Chicago. While we love to party, each and every collective is dedicated to creating a safe and inclusive space. This means that any homophobic, racist, sexist, transphobic, ableist or fat shaming behavior or hurtful words will be taken very seriously. Additionally, unwanted sexual conduct will not be tolerated. You will be asked to leave.

My fieldwork began at this event, orienting me to the shape and texture of Chicago's queer scene outside of Boystown. At the CommuniTEA party, DJs from each collective took turns spinning tracks while queer and trans partygoers, including many queer and trans people of color, drank, danced, and played games to usher in the start of Pride month. As shown in the above promotional

post, the collectives constructed a mission statement, discursively disavowing and condemning racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism. Mission statements like these, which invoke an intersectional political ethos, are used by the collectives to set the parameters and expectations for queer placemaking outside of the gayborhood. The next section explores how Party Noire and SmallWORLD Collective cultivate ephemeral erotic scene-spaces— Black femme pleasurescapes—within Chicago's urban-digital sphere.

4. BLACK FEMME PLEASURESCAPES AS EPHEMERAL PLACEMAKING

Black femme pleasurescapes are cultivated intentionally to center Black queer women's joy in a city where Black queer women are structurally and symbolically excluded from dominant queer spaces. In an interview with the *Columbia Chronicle,* DJ Dapper explains that SmallWORLD Collective emerged as a response to Boystown's racial and gender exclusivity:

> My wife and I . . . got back to Chicago maybe three and a half years ago . . . and it was hard for us to find anywhere to go . . . There were some spaces that were queer adjacent . . . that queers went [to] because there were no other options. And then there was Boystown. Like, 'Oh, yeah, we go to Boystown.' We go to Boystown, and it's super white, it's super male-heavy. We're not welcome there. (DJ Dapper, co-founder of SmallWORLD Collective, *Columbia Chronicle*, 2019)

Unlike the exclusion that DJ Dapper recounts, in an interview with the *Chicago Reader*, Nick Adler and Rae Taylor, the founders of Party Noire, express their indifference to Chicago's dominant queer scene:

> Alder and Taylor, both 31, are queer-identifying women, but neither had much if any experience with Chicago Pride celebrations prior to Party Noire. Taylor didn't even go to one until 2013. "I hadn't been until a friend of mine visiting from Florida asked to go," she says. "After I went I was like, 'OK, cool, I don't have to do this again.' I just wasn't thrilled

> or moved to continue to go. (Nick Adler and Rae Chardonnay Taylor, co-founders of Party Noire, *Chicago Reader*, 2019)

The above excerpts point to two important motivations that animate the creation of Black femme pleasurescapes: the symbolic exclusion of Black queer women in Boystown *and* the symbolic boundaries that render Boystown undesirable to Black queer women. As such, Black femme pleasurescapes emerge as ephemeral scene spaces that intentionally operate outside of Chicago's dominant queer spaces.

Importantly, Black femme pleasurescapes are oriented around the erotic. The clearest articulations of the erotic can be found on the collectives' public Facebook pages in which Party Noire and SmallWORLD Collective independently describe their respective projects:

> The #PartyNoire community is an inclusive cultural hub celebrating Black femmes, QWOC, + Black womynhood along the gender spectrum + holds spaces especially for queer, trans + gender non-conforming Black people. We create experiences + intentional space for uplifting + affirming the lives of Black womyn. When in this intersectional orbit of #BlackJoy, our space, love, uplift and make SPACE for ALL Black Joy. Co-Founders Nick and Rae are divinely connected in their mission to affirm, uplift and celebrate Black womanhood along the gender spectrum. Welcome home.

Excerpted from their public Facebook page, Party Noire articulates their identity as "an inclusive cultural hub" committed to Black queer women and those who inhabit linked social positionalities. Party Noire's statement not only invokes their own sense of identity as Black queer women placemakers but articulates their connection and commitment to a larger community of Black sexual and gender minorities vis-à-vis their linked structural positions. In this way, the collective forwards a coalitional Black political stance that is rooted in a Black queer femme standpoint.

Contrasting Party Noire's clear articulation of blackness and #BlackJoy as their organizing principle, SmallWORLD Collective ambiguously establishes itself as "a celebration of community and solidarity" that "brings queer women of color [and] their buddies to the front":

> SmallWORLD Collective is a celebration of community and solidarity in the form of electrifying pop up parties around the city of Chicago.
>
> SmallWORLD Collective curates a unique and purposeful space every Sunday called E N E R G Y. All energies are welcome, but this is a space that brings queer women of color + their buddies to the front.

In other places on their Facebook page, SmallWORLD positions itself more clearly as a curator of "spaces that celebrate queer women of color, particularly Black and Brown women." Thus, while the founders of Party Noire center "*Black womanhood* along the gender spectrum," SmallWORLD Collective explicitly centers queerness in the context of Black and Brown womanhood (emphasis added).

Despite the apparent differences in how they articulate their missions, Party Noire and SmallWORLD Collective intentionally curate spaces foregrounding a commitment to celebration, joy, love, uplift, and solidarity that mirrors Black lesbian feminist conceptualizations of the erotic. Specifically, the language of community, solidarity, affirmation, uplift, and celebration invoked by the collectives positions Black queer women's placemaking as intimately tied to Audre Lorde's definition of the erotic. In "Uses of the Erotic," Lorde (1978) defines the erotic as "the lifeforce of women":

> The very word erotic comes from the Greek word eros, the personification of love in all its aspects—born of Chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony. When I speak of the erotic, then, I speak of it as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives. (1978, p.89)

The erotic provides an instructive lens for understanding the various desires that undergird Black femme pleasurescapes and inform the collectives' placemaking practices. As argued by Garcia-Rojas (2017), Lorde theorizes the erotic as "a politics of erotic autonomy, joy, and relationality" (2017, p.257) that stands in direct opposition to the pornographic (Lorde, 1978, p.89). For Lorde, the erotic and the pornographic represent "two diametrically opposed uses of the sexual" (1978, p.89). While the pornographic "emphasizes sensation without feeling" (1978, p.88), the erotic "opens up different affective possibilities" and institutes "new pathways of survival, being, feeling, and power that counter-mobilize against White hegemonic apparatuses" (Garcia-Rojas, 2017, p.261). Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 3, the affective possibilities and pathways of the erotic include intimacies and desires marked by the "sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual" (Lorde, 1978, p.89).

On the ground, Black femme pleasurescapes are *pop-up parties*, and as the term suggests, pop-up parties are geographically diffuse and episodic events that are spatially and temporally ephemeral. Pop-up parties have a tenuous relationship to the physical environment, "popping" into and fading away from urban landscapes (Harris, 2015). Rather than isolated events unique to Chicago, pop-up parties represent a new cultural phenomenon in modern urban life (Glover, 2015; Harris, 2020; Stillwagon and Ghaziani, 2019). Pop-up parties are driven by individual and collaborative efforts, as well as partnerships with various venues (i.e., local bar and lounge spaces) and social networks (i.e., larger community of placemakers) (Harris, 2015; 2020). As argued by Stillwagon and Ghaziani (2019), pop-up parties are significant because they offer a glimpse into queer placemaking outside of mainstream, institutionalized gay spaces, marking a significant break from gayborhood studies. Indeed, an analysis of Black femme pleasurescapes contributes to an

understanding of how racial and gender sexual minorities carve out spaces outside of institutionalized gay spaces and in ways that transform normative racialized and gendered sexual geographies. Importantly, I build on Stillwagon and Ghaziani's work to analyze an unexplored dimension of their analysis of queer pop-ups: the *digital* and *urban* life of ephemeral placemaking.

The Digital Life of Black Femme Pleasurescapes

More than ever, individuals engage with digital technologies and social media platforms to enable and sustain various forms of placemaking. That information and communication technologies mobilize people and groups into action is a well-understood and taken-for-granted social fact (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011). Indeed, contemporary social movements research increasingly examines how digital technologies mediate activist projects (Brown, Ray, Summers & Fraistat, 2017; Carney, 2016; Ince, Rojas & Davis, 2017). Mediation refers to "the processes through which communication media produce and circulate symbolic content," and, as Dumitrica and Felt (2019) explain, digital mediation is most commonly framed as an opportunity structure, logic, and ecology (p.1823). From an opportunity structure perspective, social media platforms open up new pathways for (1) self-representation outside of traditional media structures (Lievrouw, 2011; Treré, 2015); (2) the capacity to self-organize or to "organize without organizations" (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012; Shirky, 2008); and (3) action (Karpf, 2016; Van Laer and Van Aelst, 2010). While operating outside of the context of formal activism, queer collectives like Party Noire and SmallWORLD Collective use digital technologies in parallel ways. Through their engagement with social media platforms, the collectives (1) articulate their mission, (2) grow their networks, and (3) promote their parties, all of which are crucial to launching and sustaining ephemeral placemaking.

The technological affordances of social media platforms lend themselves to various forms of identity work, providing a space for collectives to narrate the scope, aims, and mission of their work (Khazraee & Novak, 2018; Snow & McAdam, 2000). The design features of Facebook, in particular, invite placemakers to engage in explicit forms of visual and discursive identity work. Take, for example, an excerpt from Party Noire's Facebook page describing the history and mission of the collective:

> A collective of womyn here for #BlackJoy, femmes + queer/trans folks. Always. All ways.
> Voted Best Dance Party 2016 in the Chicago Reader.
>
> When three of Chicago's leading curators of culture and cool got together in spring of 2015 Party Noire originated as a simple yet profound idea to bring together Black creative millennials in a positive, joyful atmosphere. Nick Alder, Lauren Ash, and DJ Rae Chardonnay, each have impressive individual projects and loyal followers and have beautifully merged together their collective passion for Black culture, creativity, and joy to curate what is now recognized as Chicago's Best Dance Party of 2016 in the Chicago Reader and hub of one of Chicago's most interesting subcultures. #PartyNoire #PartyNoireChicago #BlackJoy
>
> The #PartyNoire community is [a] very intentional space uplifting and affirming the lives of Black women. This space of #BlackJoy celebrates Black womanhood along the gender spectrum and holds space especially for queer, trans and gender non-confirming Black people. When in [our] intersectional space, love, uplift and make space for ALL Black Joy. We are here for Black Joy. Always. All ways.

Party Noire roots their work discursively in a larger Black political project that centers Black sexual and gender minorities. Critically, in defining themselves as an "intersectional space" that uplifts and affirms the lives of Black women, the collective invokes intersectionality, thereby grounding their work in a Black feminist tradition. In addition to articulating the political roots of the collective, Party Noire also engages in reputational strategies ("Voted Best Dance Party 2016 in the Chicago Reader") that legitimate their work and status as "Chicago's leading curators of culture and cool."

Table 1. Social Media Followers

Social Media Platforms	Party Noire	SmallWORLD Collective
Facebook	5,113	1,382
Instagram	15,700	7,365
Twitter	2,316	89

In addition to articulating a mission, social media platforms are instrumental in growing localized networks of followers and potential partygoers (Mundt, Ross & Burnett, 2018). To be sure, the success of pop-up parties is contingent upon the collectives' digital reach and their ability to engage with and disseminate information to their social media followers. In amassing followers, the collectives can more easily achieve a critical density of partygoers for their pop-up parties. The table above (Table 1) captures the number of followers that Party Noire and SmallWORLD Collective have on their three main social media accounts, with Facebook and Instagram as the most popular platforms.

By engaging social media, followers are able to interact with the collectives in various ways, including reacting to their posts, sending them private messages, and posting reviews of their parties. One such follower posted the following review to SmallWORLD Collectives' Facebook page: "My wife and I went for the first time last night and had a great experience. Beautiful lounge, beautiful and friendly women, dope bartender, good music and a great vibe." Therefore, the significance of social media platforms lies not only in the capacity to grow networks but to consistently engage them (Mundt, Ross & Burnett, 2018).

In addition to articulating their mission and growing their networks, social media platforms are used instrumentally to advertise and promote Black femme pleasurescapes. In line with Party Noire's commitment to centering Black queer women, the collective organizes and promotes

events suffused with contemporary Black femme culture. Early in my fieldwork, Party Noire hosted a "Hot Girl Summer" day party, the theme of which references rapper Megan Thee Stallion's song of the same name:

> The official "Hot Girl Summer" is coming to an end so it's only right we close it out real hot girl style. This szn [season] has us all feeling like some real baddies and we're ready for one last Party Noire day party! Everything from accomplishing goals, supporting ya sis, fam + bae, slaying the lqqk [look] + gettin to the bag, has us feeling like Coach Meg been in our corner. This is an ode to the hotties who took charge of their summer. Pull up ready to twerk sumn [something] hot gyals + bois.

The accompanying visual of the post featured a Black femme gazing seductively at the lens while laying on a red and yellow checkered dance floor. Cultural references at the intersection of Black, queer, and femmeness permeated the event description, inviting partygoers to partake in what Lane (2019) terms the "Black queer work of ratchet": "a compelling means of acting outside of the confines of those mandates on middle-class behavior" (2019, p.67). According to Lane, *ratchet* grants Black women "the power to evoke a particular kind of sexuality—one that is unabashed, unbothered, tempting, bacchanalian" (Lane, 2019, p.108). At the same time, with the inclusion of *bois*, Party Noire explicitly queered "hot girl summer" to be inclusive of masculine-of-center Black queer women. In this way, the event description, functions as a critical locale for visually and discursively articulating the racialized and gendered sexual politics of Black femme pleasurescapes as spaces that intentionally push against "the boundaries of acceptable, appropriate, morally pure Black womanhood" (Lane, 2019, p.108).

Similar to Party Noire, SmallWORLD collective promotes and hosts parties that center Black queer women's culture, most evident in their monthly Femme ENERGY and Boi ENERGY parties, where they intentionally celebrate feminine (femme) and masculine (boi) queer women of color, evident in the following event descriptions:

> Femmes to the absolute front this week! All energies are welcome, but this is a space that brings queer woman of color + their buddies to the front.

> This week is for the Bois, the MOC's [masculine of center], the androgynous, & the in between. We are celebrating YOU because so often you are left out of the conversation or lost in translation.

The explicit celebration of femmes and bois taps into an important cultural touchstone within the larger Black lesbian community, where "physical presentations of gender [act] as an organizing mechanism for their relationships and for lesbian community life" (Moore, 2006, p.115). Moore (2006) argues that transgressive (i.e., masculine) and femme gender performances "are not mere sexual play [but also help] structure interactions and expectations in gay social settings" (p.115). The invocation of femme and bois imbues the scene-space with racialized and gendered sexual meanings that coalesce around Black lesbian culture.

In promoting their events on social media, the collectives augment and reinforce their identity work, as they discursively articulate the norms, expectations, and values of Black femme pleasurescapes. In the absence of physical space, the digital life of Black femme pleasurescapes is paramount to defining, growing, and mobilizing networks of partygoers who will, in turn, help to transform urban spaces into Black femme pleasurescapes.

Critically, the placemaking practices described thus far echo the visibility tactics of various Black, queer, and feminist political projects. Indeed, visibility tactics have been strategically used within identity-based social movement activism to engage the public sphere in mobilizing for social change (Milan; 2015; Whittier, 2017). However, the aim of such strategies is not to become visible and legible to the state but to Chicago's Black queer community. Thus, even outside of the activist context, visibility tactics are necessary tools for sustaining queer life within contexts of spatial precarity. As Hunter and Winder (2019) poignantly argue, "visibility is survival" in

contexts where "places long established within communities come to close, and what the geography had looked like for generations of Black gay men rapidly becomes the past" (p.136). In engaging in visibility tactics, the collectives set the scene for the emergence of Black femme pleasurescapes in Chicago's landscape.

The Urban Life of Black Femme Pleasurescapes

> *It's Femme ENERGY night at SmallWORLD Collective, one of two recurring gender-themed parties—the other being Boi ENERGY—that the collective hosts each month. As I walk into the club, a cozy bar and lounge space located in South Loop, the television screens, which typically air nightly sports games, display the raunchy, but muted, music videos of contemporary Black femme icons like R&B singer Teyana Taylor. The energy in the room switches from easy conversation between friends and lovers to a full out dance party as DJ Dapper plays Megan Thee Stallion's "Big Ole Freak" and Shawna's "Gettin' Some (Head)." The nasty songs always set things off. At 12:30 am, nearly three hours into the party, DJ Dapper puts on house music classics like Crystal Water's "100% Pure Love," catalyzing the formation of a dance circle where Black femmes take turns voguing and serving their fiercest moves. Left of the dance circle, a Black femme woman, donning a white lace top and skin-tight white pants, conspicuously grinds on her masculine partner, manifesting her full femme energy—a scene I later see posted on the Collective's Instagram account. By the time I think of heading out, the lounge is still packed, and the party is in full swing. At 1:30 in the morning, I decide to make my way home to Evanston.* (Field Notes, July 2019, SmallWORLD Collective)

As illustrated in the above scene, Black femme pleasurescapes make room for Black femme desirability. Each month, SmallWORLD Collective hosts a "Femme Energy" party that brings Black femme desirability to the front. Contemporary and old-school hip-hop, R&B, dancehall, and house music set the tone for the night. The party gets started midway through the

night after folks have been drinking, talking, and laughing for hours. Almost by magic, DJ Dapper puts on the crowd favorite, Khia's "My Neck, My Back," and Black femmes in the crowd take their cue, embodying aesthetics and movements that fall outside of the constraints of respectability and capture the gaze of everyone in the room. Non-femmes and femmes alike respond to such performances by explicitly and conspicuously taking pleasure in erotic displays of Black femmeness. During one field visit to a SmallWORLD Collective party, two Black femme women began grinding on each other, eliciting the attention of the crowd. I began to look in the opposite direction when a Black masculine-presenting queer woman, caught in my line of sight, very loudly and playfully gasped, "Damn! Why are you looking over here? You should be looking over there." At once, I took my cue, turned to look at the dancing femmes, and affirmatively yelled, "You're right!" She quipped back, "I know! I was waiting on you!" Scenes like these reflect the co-performative dimensions of Black femme pleasurescapes that work to position Black queer women as both desiring and desirable subjects.

At other times, Black femme pleasurescapes carve out spaces of leisure in which Black queer women quietly gather, contrasting the vibrant party scene from SmallWORLD Collective's Femme Energy party. Take, for example, the following scene from Party Noire's day party:

> *It's 4:30 in the afternoon. My wife and I, along with our friend, make our way to Party Noire's day party, "Fever, an Ode to the Hot Gyals." It's "Hot Girl Summer" in Chi-Town, a reference to rapper Megan Thee Stallion's hit song of the same name. Unlike their other parties, which are typically in Hyde Park, today's party is at a lounge in downtown Chicago. The lounge is a cavernous warehouse-style space with exposed beams, cement floors, and glitzy chandeliers. This is my first day party. The summer sunshine peeks through red sheer drapes casting a warm hue across the room. The DJ booth is positioned to the back of the lounge, the music floating into the room but not dominating the airwaves.*

> *The bar is to the left of the space, a gathering spot where folks are casually conversing while waiting for their drinks. The energy of the room is quiet, subdued even. Leather couches border the perimeter of the room, providing ample space for friends, lovers, and singles to chill, vibe, and dance in their own spots. Everyone is in their own worlds; chatter is limited to folks who already know each other. Couples embrace each other and snuggle closely to take selfies; small friend groups playfully dance in intimate circles, and singles awkwardly scroll through their smartphones, occasionally looking up to survey the room. This feels so ordinary and extraordinary: a room full of Black queer women sharing space with no real goal except to be in each other's presence.* (Field Notes, August 2019, Party Noire)

In addition to curating erotically charged spaces that center Black queer sexualities in explicit ways, Black femme pleasurescapes also provide opportunities for respite and connection, embodying what Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) call "third places." Third places exist outside of the home and workplace and are places "where people gather *primarily* to enjoy each other's company" (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982, p.269; emphasis original). Indeed, Black femme pleasurescapes produce diverse scenes of sociality that induce and evoke the spectacular and mundane dimensions of Black queer women's placemaking. The significance of Black femme pleasurescapes is the mutual recognition that such spaces engender through the physical co-presence of Black queer women. Returning to Jade's quote at the start of the chapter, scenes like these are meaningful for Black queer women who desire to see themselves reflected in others: "Just seeing a lot of other women who look like me is important."

For Party Noire and SmallWORLD Collective, creating Black femme pleasurescapes is inextricably bound to cultivating safe spaces for Black queer women, and this is done by *queering* Black space. Similar to Bailey's (2014) work on Detroit's ballroom scene, Black femme

pleasurescapes "transform normative geographies" into ephemeral scene spaces that center the erotic life of Black queer women (Bailey, 2014, p.490). Indeed, Party Noire frequently invokes the notion of "taking up space," which speaks to their political commitment to curate Black queer spaces across the city and within Chicago's Black community. In addition to their pop-up parties, which typically take place on the South Side, they host events in women's spaces, public park spaces, and historically white spaces. Mostly, however, Party Noire has a recurring partnership with a restaurant and bar space in Hyde Park, a historically Black middle-class neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. SmallWORLD Collective hosts their weekly dance parties in a bar and lounge space located in the South Loop, which largely caters to Black patrons. They also collaborate with other collectives to host parties on the West Side neighborhood of Logan Square. The locations of these venues are significant because of their proximity to Chicago's Black and Latinx communities in the South and West Sides of the city. Moreover, these decisions align with their desire to carve out queer spaces within communities of color and especially within Black spaces.

At the same time, brokering relationships with venues comes with its challenges. In an interview with *The Columbia Chronicle,* DJ Dapper notes the discrimination they encountered in securing a standing location for their parties:

> It's politics…As we're finding out, it's hard to maneuver as queer women of color. It is hard to maneuver as queer women in general. It is hard to maneuver as queer women in general. It's hard to get a liquor license; it's hard to get these loans; it's hard to find these spaces; it's hard for me to even get these people to call me back for a space. Even saying [I] have the money doesn't matter, they won't call back. And then there's a big stigma [of]

> 'I don't want a dyke bar in my neighborhood; I don't want this.' (DJ Dapper, interview with *Columbia Chronicle*, 2019)

DJ Dapper highlights how the racialized and gendered sexual politics of the city impinge upon their placemaking practices, placing them in a precarious position at the mercy of venue owners.

The transformation of urban space into Black femme pleasurescapes happens on the symbolic front as well, through metaphors like *church* and *home* that orient the collectives' placemaking practices. SmallWORLD Collective hosts weekly "ENERGY" parties on Sunday nights. Once the party warms up, DJ Dapper gets on the microphone to proclaim that we are all in *queer church*. Elevated four feet off the ground, DJ Dapper becomes our pastor and the DJ booth the pulpit. The lounge space is transformed into a sacred space for intimacy, community, and fellowship. In an interview with *DapperQ*, a digital queer style magazine, DJ Dapper describes the the collective's "ENERGY" parties as "basically queer church":

> Our main goal at smallWORLD Collective is to perpetuate community by creating necessary spaces. ENERGY, which is a party for women and their buddies, does just that. It's basically queer church! It's every Sunday night, there's no cover in order to maintain accessibility, there are live musical performances, or a guest DJ, there's food, vendors, comfortable seating, and most importantly community. All are welcomed at ENERGY, but it is obvious that QWOC are centered in this space. There are individuals who don't necessarily belong to the communities that are centered, but they come, enjoy themselves and are engulfed in a space that is completely facilitated by QWOC; that's an important part of ENERGY to me.

Black queer studies scholars have drawn parallels between the ritualistic performances of Black church services and the Black queer club scene (Bailey, 2014; Johnson, 1998; Lane, 2019). For example, Lane (2019), drawing on Johnson's (1998) ethnography of a Black gay nightclub,

describes how "Black cultural and discursive practices congeal with same-sex eroticism, marking [the club scene as] a site where being African American, homosexual, and Christian is not only possible, but an acceptable interpretative framework for understanding one's place in the world (Lane, 2019, p.154). In her own ethnography of D.C.'s Black queer women scene, Lane (2019) argues that Black queer women draw on the discursive practices of the Black church to create spaces "where they can get caught up in the rapturous nature of performing same-sex desire. They revel in the experience of being unlady like, and watching other women do the same" (p.154). Moreover, DJ Dapper's invocation of *queer church* is not only about carving out a space for "rapturous" performances of same-sex desire, but is also tied to creating an accessible and inclusive space where "all are welcomed."

Aligned with these symbolics of queer church, Party Noire explicitly strives to curate "home spaces." In a panel interview, Nick, the co-founder of Party Noire, said they "started this space because it didn't feel like any spaces were like home to us. So, if you have read our mission or you know anything about us, we are really about making home spaces for Black queer women, Black queer folk, and people of color." As DJ Rae explained in an interview, creating home spaces is not only about intimacy and community but creating a space that ensures that Black women feel safe. Explaining this further, she states:

> We started our function and our space out of a pure desire for a safe space to see ourselves as black queer women in a social space where we were not harassed, where we were not questioned about our identity, where we were not questioned about what we had on and how we presented ourselves.

Together, the invocation of church and home evokes a sense of intimacy and belonging, which communicates to partygoers that they are in a sacred and safe space.

Critical to cultivating “queer church” and “home spaces” is a commitment to economic accessibility. Party Noire and SmallWORLD Collective challenge the capitalist logics of mainstream bars and clubs by making the majority of their events free of charge. SmallWORLD Collective’s hosts free weekly dance parties, usually with the understanding that partygoers will purchase cheap drinks at the bar. In practice, this means that attendance is not contingent upon having disposable income. Instead, partygoers are encouraged to support local vendors that collectives bring into their spaces. At their holiday party, SmallWORLD Collective invited a local Black businesswoman to sell inexpensive earrings, pins, and other adornments at the back of the lounge. In this way, Black femme pleasurescapes eschew the capitalist logics of the nightlife industry to create spaces that are accessible to Black queer women across the socioeconomic spectrum.

Despite their efforts to curate safe spaces, one of the challenges that Party Noire and SmallWORLD Collective face is safeguarding the integrity of events as spaces for Black queer women. This is particularly the case when “guests” disrupt or threaten to disrupt the space. During one Party Noire event, DJ Rae hopped on her microphone to proclaim that Party Noire is “a safe space for Black women across the gender spectrum” and warned partygoers that non-consensual touch is strictly forbidden. The room fell silent as she initiated the following dialogue:

DJ Rae: “I said, ‘We are a safe space for Black women across the gender spectrum’ If you are a Black woman and you see yourself across the gender spectrum, say ‘Hello!’”

Crowd: “Hello!”

DJ Rae: “Hey girl, hey! Lean to the right and say, ‘What up, sis?’ Hey! That’s what I’m talking about. Welcome to Party Noire. We are Chicago’s premier location for Black queer women. So, if you about that life be about it. If

> you really about it, don't touch nobody without consent. And, that goes for everybody in here."

For SmallWORLD Collective, disruptions like these sometimes happen in collaboration with other collectives and in venues that attract a more racially diverse mix of queer and trans partygoers. For example, during their 2020 New Year's Eve collaboration, a seemingly intoxicated white femme partygoer crashed into and ripped SmallWORLD Collective's photo tapestry and was subsequently asked to leave the party. The interaction was both fleeting and intense; the frustration of the collective was palpable to everyone who witnessed the incident. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, this incident reveals a breach of "collaborative commitment" on the part of the partygoer (Fine and Corte, 2017). At the same time, the incident also captured the racial dynamics and tensions that arise when white partygoers occupy Black queer spaces. In these instances, it has been even more necessary for the collectives to verbally assert their commitment to Black queer women's pleasure and safety.

These scenes reveal the challenge of creating safe spaces for Black queer women when a central goal of these collectives is to "take up space." Indeed, taking up space is not only about occupying urban spaces but about taking up space in Chicago's queer imaginary. That is, 'taking up space' is about bringing Black femme queerness onto the center stage. Far from being underground, Party Noire and SmallWORLD Collective frequently promote their work in local and national media outlets, garnering attention at home in Chicago and across the country. After being featured in the *Chicago Tribune,* Party Noire saw an influx of white partygoers at their events: "After we had that piece in the *Tribune*, we definitely saw an increase in white people at a few of our events" (Nick Adler, *Chicago Reader*, 2019). Similarly, I have seen a notable presence of white queer and trans folks at SmallWORLD Collective's parties, particularly when they

collaborate with other collectives and outside of their usual venue. Visibility, as Hunter and Winder (2018) remind us, is important to the survival of Black queer placemaking. Nevertheless, the visibility that is necessary for Black femme pleasurescapes to survive also leaves the door open for "guests" and others for whom the space does not center.

By elevating and celebrating Black queer women, Black femme pleasurescapes provide an alternative story of queer placemaking that decenters the whiteness and phallocentrism of normative gay placemaking. Using digital and urban placemaking practices, Black queer women actively construct spaces of eroticism that invite intimacy, celebration, and play that articulate a political commitment to Black queer women's safety and pleasure. Black femme pleasurescapes are powerful because of their ability to pop-up and transform the urban landscape, thereby creatively responding to the problem of spatial precarity and intersectional placelessness. At the same time, Black femme pleasurescapes are inherently precarious. Because these spaces are not institutionalized, the longevity and durability of Black femme pleasurescapes are largely dependent on the efforts of individual placemakers to sustain them.

4. BLACK FEMME PLEASURESCAPES: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Thus far, I have situated Black femme pleasurescapes as an emergent form of queer placemaking, echoing Stillwagon and Ghaziani's (2019) argument that queer pop-ups are "a cultural innovation in urban life." In many ways, this is true not only for the individual collectives who organize Black femme pleasurescapes but for the Black queer women, like Vivian, Nia, and Jade, who engage these spaces. However, such an argument would overlook the longer genealogy of Black queer placemakers, in and out of Chicago, who have creatively responded to intersectional placelessness by "making spaces where there was none to claim" (Giesking, 2020, p.230). Indeed,

we can situate past and present Black femme pleasurescapes alongside other forms of placemaking that Black queer women have historically employed to "take up space" in Black community life. Recall, for example, Lorde's (1983) vivid description of the Black lesbian bar scene of the 1950s and the Black gay and lesbian rent parties and drag balls of 1920s Harlem that Battle and Bennett (2005) describe. To be sure, as Moore (2015) and Brooks (2016) remind us, Black sexual minority women have always been a part of the social fabric of Black communities in visible and invisible ways. In the remaining sections, I link Black femme pleasurescapes to a history of ephemeral placemaking among Black queer women in Chicago; consider Black femme pleasurescapes beyond Chicago; *and* briefly gesture to the future of Black femme pleasurescapes in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Past Life of Chicago's Black Femme Pleasurescapes

For decades, Pat McCombs, "a mover and shaker in the city's LGBTQ community as a social-justice activist," organized Black lesbian parties in response to the discrimination she and other Black lesbians experienced in the North Side bars (*Windy City Times*, 2019). When McCombs realized that Black lesbian bar patrons were being double and triple carded at the bars or were blatantly denied entry, she partnered with her friend, Harriet Robinson, and other Black lesbians to form the Black Lesbian Discrimination Investigation Committee. As McCombs recounts, "I was trying to think of a name for our organization. We were sitting around drinking cocktails, and an idea popped into my mind: Black Lesbian Discrimination Investigative Committee. [Laughs] That sounded real important" (*Time Out*, 2018). In 1974, the group protested in front of the since-closed Augie and CK's Bar, the most popular lesbian bar in Chicago at the time, because of the harassment they experienced by the bar staff:

> I guess they had their quota: They wanted to let only a certain number of women of color in, especially the black women. If you were to come to the bar with four of your friends, maybe two of you would get in because they asked black women for certain IDs. So, I got with a lawyer by the name of Renee Hanover, who was a popular activist lawyer during that time. She was a personal friend of mine, and I spoke with her and some other white women that I knew. (Pat McCombs, 2018, interview with *Time Out*)

According to McCombs, "[the group] got together and decided to picket the bar" because she was "so enraged [and] wanted to do something" (*Time Out*, 2018).

Beginning in the late 1980s, McCombs and her business partner, Vera Washington, joined a Black lesbian group called Executive Sweet, which organized parties and other events for lesbians of color. McCombs and Washington wrote and disseminated a newsletter called "Sweets" to more than 1,500 women in Chicago, in which they advertised their parties. Like Party Noire and SmallWORLD Collective, Executive Sweets "prioritized safety when they were choosing the locations of various parties" (*Windy City Times*, 2019). As McCombs explains,

> My parties were usually in a central location. Most of the time, I tried to have them downtown, where the North Side and South Side girls would feel comfortable, in a safe, lit-up, secure area…Well, it had to be close to transportation and parking, so women didn't have to walk too far. I [hired] my own security. I'd let the management know who was coming—that it was mostly women. Most of the time, I'd tell them that we were a sorority. [Laughs] As time went on, I'd let them know we were lesbians. I needed to know that the bartenders were comfortable with that and that our women weren't going to be verbally abused or threatened. So, I requested female bartenders whenever possible (*Time Out*, 2018)

McCombs's excerpt strikingly mirrors the placemaking practices and tactics of today's Black femme pleasurescapes, demonstrating how erotic placemaking necessarily threads the needle

between safety and pleasure. Moreover, Executive Sweet, like Party Noire and SmallWORLD Collective, deftly brokered relationships with individual venue owners to "take up space" and to temporarily transform heterosexual establishments into Black lesbian erotic scene spaces. In 1999, Executive Sweet received a historic achievement award from the Chicago Area LGBT Chamber of Commerce in honor of their work.

Black Femme Pleasurescapes Beyond Chicago

More than an isolated phenomenon that is unique to Chicago, Black femme pleasurescapes are emerging in similar ways across other U.S. metropolitan cities. In Detroit, Candice Williams and Keri Roberts founded Queer Untitled, a monthly pop-up event series that centers Black lesbians and queer women of color. In an interview with a local Detroit media outlet, Williams explained, "There was no space for me. I've seen what was out there, and I didn't identify with those things. I want to identify fully with that I do, and I want others to as well" (*The Neighborhoods,* 2018). Williams's quote mirrors the experiences that Chicago queer women of color expressed in Chapter 2, revealing how the conditions of spatial marginalization and intersectional placelessness are translocal experiences. Nevertheless, Black queer women placemakers, like the co-founders of Queer Untitled, carve out ephemeral scene-spaces in response to the local spatial politics that engender spatial marginalization. For example, while Detroit lacks the robust gayborhood of Chicago's Boystown, Williams situates her placemaking practices against the small and exclusive gay scene of Ferndale: "The scene [in Ferndale], I couldn't identify with" (*The Neighborhoods*, 2018). Queer Untitled, along with Lesbian Social Detroit, HER Detroit, and FireHouse Music Series, comprise "a cohesive Sapphic network" to organize

distinctly Black lesbian spaces in contrast to the city's predominantly white gay scene (*The Neighborhoods*, 2018).

Beyond the local expression of ephemeral placemaking, Black femme pleasurescapes also emerge as erotic scene-spaces that attract partygoers from across the country. Take, for example, SweetHeat Miami, a Black queer women-centered Pride weekend founded by Myah Mustafa, also known as DJ Dimples, in 2008. As DJ Dimples explains, SweetHeat was envisioned as "the ultimate party getaway…a Utopia on Earth if you will" (SweetHeatMiami.com). During its first year, SweetHeat Miami "welcomed more than 1,000 ladies from across the United States," and in 2015, the party collective "welcomed over 40,000 women from across the world" (SweetHeatMiami.com). SweetHeat Miami's Pride events include yacht parties, galas, pool parties, and dance parties where Black queer women "can get caught up in the rapturous nature of performing same-sex desire" (Lane, 2019, p.154). Indeed, like Party Noire and SmallWORLD Collective, SweetHeat Miami cultivates an atmosphere of "celebration, appreciation, and acceptance" in which Black queer women can revel in their erotic autonomy. Similar to SweetHeat Miami, Womxn of Color Weekend, a four-day Pride gathering in Provincetown, Massachusetts, was founded in 2007 by a group of Black queer women "to elevate, strengthen, educate and celebrate LGBTQ+ women of color, trans-, nonbinary and genderfluid people of color, and our accomplices" (wocw.org). The ephemeral placemaking at the center of SweetHeat Miami and Womxn of Color Weekend illuminates the efforts of Black queer women to cultivate intimate lifeworlds in ways that transcend local boundaries and creatively respond to intersectional placelessness.

The Party Goes On? The Future of Black Femme Pleasurescapes

Midway through my fieldwork, the COVID-19 pandemic effectively curtailed urban queer placemaking in Chicago and across the world, intensifying the spatial precarity of gayborhood establishments and other institutionalized gay leisure spaces (Anderson and Knee, 2020). As an article in the *Chicago Reader* aptly put it, "Gay bathhouses were barely surviving. And then came COVID-19" (2020). Indeed, numerous media outlets across the United States and globally issued a deluge of op-eds between May 2020 and February 2021 preemptively mourning the closure of gay bars, bathhouses, and other erotic spaces. Other bars, clubs, and lounges have faced similar threats of closure, including the venues in which queer pop-ups are hosted. In May 2020, SmallWORLD Collective announced that the lounge space of their weekly Sunday parties had shut its doors:

> We announced this on our live stream this past Sunday, but we wanted to formally let you all know. The news of the closing of E N E R G Y's home for almost 3 years, Tantrum, has definitely hit the sWC community hard! It saddens us greatly to know when the world opens back up, ENERGY will have to move to a new home. We transformed Tantrum on Sunday nights into a place of necessary healing and community. Thank you to all who celebrated a birthday there, met their new partners, got engaged there, grew there, shared your art there, shared your food there, and shared all of your love.
>
> We look forward to creating new memories at our new home. We will be remaining in South Loop! Details coming soon.

As ephemeral scene-spaces, Black femme pleasurescapes are precarious, but their digital infrastructure provides a level of resilience and flexibility to withstand debilitating spatial precarity. Despite the social distancing restrictions issued in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, SmallWORLD Collective adapted their parties to a strictly virtual format: Virtual ENERGY. Nearly a year into the pandemic, DJ Dapper and the SmallWORLD Collective team continue to

engage in digital placemaking practices, livestreaming their Virtual ENERGY parties that at times garner thousands of views. Moreover, they have expanded their programming to include weekly "Poly Chats," an interactive Zoom-based webinar in which DJ Dapper and the SmallWORLD Collective team facilitate discussions on "non-monogamy in the Black community." In reflecting on the "Poly Chats," the collective proclaimed the significance of creating "a necessary, safe and healing space. Folx shared their experiences and spoke of the challenges they face rooted in society's inability to make space for Black Womxn's pleasure." In this way, the collective has been able to engage and mobilize their same networks in forwarding their mission to cultivate a space of "community and solidarity," albeit in a strictly virtual format.

In the summer months of 2020, the culmination of the economic downturn, social distancing restrictions curtailing placemaking practices, the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Chicago's Black community, and the state-sanctioned assaults against Black lives placed heavy emotional, health, and economic burdens on Chicago's Black queer community. Like SmallWORLD Collective, Party Noire has continued to engage their digital networks. However, the collective has pivoted their work to address the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, months into the pandemic, Party Noire mobilized their networks to financially contribute to the "Femme Noire Microgrant Relief Fund," a grant "for all Black femmes, queer womyn along the gender spectrum, trans and non-binary folk ages 21+ in the creative + cultural production industries." As Party Noire explains, the collective adapted their annual "Femme Noire" grant to respond to the public health crisis:

> COVID-19 has created more (economic, health, reproductive, mental wellness, etc.) barriers for our queer and trans family. This year, we extended our annual grant to a community-wide relief fund: Unrestricted microgrants of $200-500. In this way, we hope

> to help as many people in our community as possible. Especially those financially impacted by COVID-19, anti-Blackness, and organizers/activists for Black Liberation (Party Noire).

Here, we see how the political ethos of Black femme pleasurescapes extends beyond the boundaries of the party scene to encapsulate placemaking practices invested in the health and wellbeing of Chicago's Black sexual and gender minority community.

To be sure, Black queer women placemakers employ an intersectional political ethos committed to Black queer women's lifeworlds in and out of erotic scene-spaces. In a recent interview with Anna DeShawn, a Chicago-based Black queer radio podcaster, Nick Adler and Rae Taylor reflected on the political motivations undergirding the Party Noire collective. Adler explains,

> So, in 2015, if you are trying to set the stage in terms of the cultural context, there was just a lot of Black death. So, I'm thinking about the death of Eric Garner, Mike Brown, Sandra Bland happened the year after. I think that we were really invested in creating a space for Black joy. We wanted it to live digitally but also be in an in-person space. So, we started in 2015 with a day party. And, for us, it was really about creating a counternarrative to all of the Black death we were seeing and finding space for us to rejuvenate (*E3 Radio*, 2020).

Indeed, Black femme pleasurescapes are counternarrative projects that simultaneously center the erotic lifeworlds of Black queer femme subjects and offer an alternative story to mainstream queer placemaking that actively marginalizes, polices, and excludes Black queer subjects. In carving out spaces for themselves, Black queer women challenge dominant narratives around Black women's sexualities, representing "discursive and material terrains where there exists the possibly for the active production of speech, desire, and agency" (Hammonds, 1997, p.102). In being oriented

around the erotic, Black femme pleasurescapes explicitly confront sexual regimes that render Black queer women structurally and symbolically placeless, invisible, and silent.

Importantly, this chapter reveals how Black queer placemakers use social media platforms to represent, organize, and mobilize ephemeral scene-spaces that allow them to continuously curate Black femme pleasurescapes in the absence brick-and-mortar places *and* in the face of a public health crisis that has effectively shut the doors of the bars, clubs, and lounges. Indeed, attending to the digital life of ephemeral placemaking offers insight into the resilience of Black femme pleasurescapes when urban placemaking is prohibited. For example, while Black femme pleasurescapes "take up space" within urban geographies, the visual and sonic dimensions of Black queer women's erotic lifeworlds are digitally captured and documented to comprise a living archive (Chidgey, 2020; Kitch, 2017). The archives offer a photographic account of Black queer women embracing each other, laughing, smiling, dancing, and grinding, all of which showcase Black queer women's placemaking in action. The photographs reveal Black queer women's erotic placemaking in action, reifying Party Noire's commitment to #BlackJoy and SmallWORLD Collective's celebration of queer women of color. Thus, the irony of ephemeral placemaking is that while pop-up parties emerge in and disappear from the urban landscape, the digital life of ephemeral placemaking offers a measure of stability and longevity that allows Black queer women to "take up space" in the absence of urban placemaking.

CHAPTER FIVE

Vulnerability Acts: How Black Queer Women Cultivate Intimate Publics Online

1. INTRODUCTION

Me: Can you tell me about the Black lesbian groups that you're in?

Donna: I've been in a bunch of lesbian groups. I'm in a private Facebook group now. There's some pretty amazing women in that group. I've made friends with some people in the group. There's this one woman named Lynn and she has these crazy stories. Her mother was thirteen when she had her and put her in a garbage can. She didn't get the wonderful adoptive parents, either. She was in foster care. The lady eventually adopted her, but they didn't treat her right. So, she has all kinds of issues. But, she has this beautiful smile, and you would never think that was her story. And when I talk to her, she's always putting herself down. So, I said to her, I was like, "If you don't love you, if don't love yourself, how is anyone gonna love you? Stop being so hard on yourself."

Donna, a Black masculine-presenting lesbian in her early fifties, lives with her wife in Chatham, a cluster of South Side neighborhoods four miles from Lake Michigan. Donna belongs to the cohort of Black queer women whose lives are tethered to and embedded in Chicago's Black geography *and* whose connections to Black lesbian community manifest online. While Donna and her wife, Renee, do not have children, her everyday life is centered around her marriage and professional life as a college admissions advisor. According to Donna, she and Renee are not "party people," so you will not find them in the burgeoning nightlife scene that we visited in Chapter 4. Instead, Donna and Renee enjoy spending quality time with each other: "We have

fireside chats—that's what I call them—at night while we lay in the bed. We just talk about random stuff." Occasionally, they will get together with their local friends or travel out of state to visit their extended families.

From a strictly urban perspective, Donna's everyday placemaking practices are circumscribed within a relatively tight geographic radius that rarely extends beyond the South Side. Furthermore, an approach to intimacy that only privileges face-to-face interactions would show that Donna and her wife have a relatively small network mostly consisting of work colleagues and a handful of Black lesbian friends. To be sure, these perspectives elide the kind of intimacy that Donna describes in the opening excerpt: a friendship that she cultivated with a networked stranger in a Facebook group for Black lesbians. This chapter centers such intimacies.

Utilizing digital ethnographic methods, I offer an analysis of a Facebook group wherein Black lesbian intimacy is central to capture the digital lifeworlds in which Donna and other storytellers engage. I draw on Berlant's (2008) concept of intimate publics and Black feminist theorizing on intimacy and vulnerability to consider how, why, and to what effect digital spaces, such as QWOC Love, are taken up as affective sites of attachment and identification among Black queer women. Specifically, I ask the following questions: What are the key mechanisms through which QWOC Love emerges as a digital intimate public? How do we situate these practices in a larger sociohistorical genealogy that recognizes the racialized and gendered dimensions of Black queer women's intimacy projects? Based on this inquiry, I argue that Black queer women collectively engage in *vulnerability acts* in ways that reframe vulnerability as a constitutive element of intimate publics.

In focusing on Black queer women's digital intimate publics, this chapter pushes the bounds of intimacy mapping beyond Chicago's urban-digital sphere to investigate collective intimacies that emerge in and are anchored to the digital sphere. Here, the digital seemingly suspends the problem of space and acts as a respite from intersectional placelessness by circumventing urban geographies that work to contain, split, segregate, decenter, and marginalize Black queer women. In this sense, there is a lowered dependency on "the local," with all of its constraints, in favor of a more geographically dispersed, but nevertheless, intimate space for Black queer women. In the following sections, I situate QWOC Love as an intimate public that centers Black lesbians; theorize the vulnerability acts that animate QWOC Love as an intimate public; and discuss the subversive potential of Black queer women's intimate publics to reimagine intimate citizenship.

2. SITUATING QWOC LOVE AS AN INTIMATE PUBLIC

The concept of *intimate publics* forwarded by Berlant (2008) refers to "a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that premises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an *x*" (2008, p.viii). Unlike a counterpublic, which Berlant argues "organizes its sense of belonging in a conventionally political register" (2008, p.8), the concept of intimate publics "carries the fortitude of common sense or vernacular sense of belonging to a community, with all the undefinedness that implies" (2008, p.10). While intimate publics are politically consequential, their raison d'être are less explicitly political (i.e., less explicitly directed toward the state). As Berlant reminds us, "Politics requires active antagonism, which threatens the *sense* in consensus: this is why, in an intimate public, the political sphere is more often seen as a field of threat, chaos,

degradation, or retraumatization than a condition of possibility" (2008, p.11). Thus, the concept of intimate publics indexes alternative motivations and longings, specifically desires for recognition and belonging, upon which QWOC Love is premised and for which all intimate publics promise.

Founded in 2013, QWOC Love occupies a liminal space in which the lines between private and public are explicitly blurred. As a publicly accessible private Facebook group to more than 15,000 members, QWOC Love is a simultaneously bounded and growing public that continues to accept members on the basis of a presumably shared identity. QWOC Love is one of several Facebook groups that facilitate and mediate interactions within an expanded network of queer women of color. The Facebook group feature exemplifies how unacquainted individuals collectively create intimate publics and participate in what Koch and Miles (2020) calls "stranger intimacies" (Dobson, Robards & Carah, 2018; Koch & Miles, 2020). Initially envisioned as a platform to communicate with existing social networks, Facebook allows strangers to collectively build affective assemblages organized around shared identities, beliefs, and interests.

To join QWOC Love, prospective members must submit a simple questionnaire to the six Black and Afro-Latina queer women administrators of the group, affirming their identity as queer women of color *and* their commitment to the group's rules of engagement. These rules explicate the group's norms and expectations, performing the kind of boundary work that transforms a large group of networked strangers into a relatively stable digital community:

1. Freedom of speech is a thing, however the QWOC Love team has the right to remove you, your posts, and your comments as we see fit when they do not align with the group vision.
2. You don't have to agree but be respectful. Use this as an opportunity to learn about something that could possibly change your point of view.

3. Participation. What's a group without its members? No one can say something every day, if you don't participate the group doesn't exist. Group numbers mean nothing if you are not active. Participate when you can.
4. No advertising unless approved. You agreed to this when you asked to join the group. Go through the proper channels or it will be deleted, and you will be muted.
5. Scroll past. If you cannot add something of value to a topic, please scroll past. Everything isn't meant for you. This includes some topics in this group. It is ok to not be included in a conversation.
6. Sensitive posts must use trigger warnings. Please be mindful that this group offers support, and all topics are welcomed, but any post that could possibly cause distress must be properly labeled in the first line.
7. This is not a dating group. You will probably meet someone and hit it off, but this group was not designed for that. "Looking for" posts will be deleted.

The above rules set norms and expectations around leadership ("the QWOC Love team has the right to remove you, your posts, and your comments"); engagement ("be respectful," "participate when you can," "scroll past," and "use trigger warnings"); and violations ("no advertising," and "this is not a dating group"). Moreover, the rules draw on language consistent with notions of safety, demarcating QWOC Love as a safe space that strives to generate dialogue ("all topics are welcome") in ways that offer support and minimize distress.

QWOC Love and Black Lesbianism

Interestingly, the description of QWOC Love, which delineates the scope and purpose of the group, elides any mention of race, gender, and sexuality. In a less explicit sense, membership in QWOC Love is inextricably bound to a more abstract notion of what it means to identify and live as a *queer woman of color*. That is, to join QWOC Love means to recognize oneself as a particular racialized and gendered sexual citizen and, therefore, to see oneself as part of a larger

collective of queer women of color. However, to say that QWOC Love centers *queer women of color* is a bit misleading. While the group uses the racially and ethnically ambiguous term "of color" and uses the sexually ambiguous term "queer," in practice, the group implicitly centers Black lesbians. To be sure, members reflexively discuss the racial, sexual, gender boundaries of the group.

Rather than explicitly affirming blackness, QWOC Love's racial boundaries ("of color") are used to exclude white queer women. Indeed, members are encouraged to enforce the racial boundaries of the group by alerting the administrators to the presence of white members who "slip into" the group. Regarding gender and sexuality, members differently interpret QWOC Love as a group for queer women, lesbians, and other sexual and gender minorities. For example, some members embrace a fluid definition of queerness in the context of a QWOC identity: "I expect everyone who is part of the sapphic spectrum to be in the group: hardcore cis lesbians, trans lesbians, bisexual women, and pansexual women." Other members interpret QWOC Love as an "exclusive space" for lesbians. In commenting on a Facebook thread initiated by one of the group's administrators, a Black femme lesbian put it this way:

> Any exclusivity will have someone somewhere feeling left out. The LGBTQ is a large umbrella of a community and for the most part we all get along and have similar stories. But gay men can't relate to bumping coochies. Lesbian women can't relate to being attracted to men. Trans men and women deal with things cis men and women will never experience. So, having an exclusive space and or gatekeeping in this context is not a bad thing.

In the above excerpt, exclusivity and gatekeeping are positioned as necessary for creating a space that privileges the shared sexual desires and experiences of cis women. Indeed, the gender and

sexual boundaries of the group support the notion that lesbianism and queer womanhood are distinctly cis woman experiences. As one such member articulated, "Sometimes we want to be among women who only center women."

Nevertheless, non-cis members offer alternative arguments, demonstrating how lesbianism exists beyond the boundaries of cis womanhood: "I'm gender non-conforming along with many MOC [masculine of center] folks and others. The term lesbian may or may not feel right for me. I joined this group because I'm queer and sometimes identify as a lesbian. It's not always simple for many of us." While the sexual and gender boundaries of the group are constructed as less flexible, queer womanhood is expressed as a fluid experience in practice. Members' gender expression exists on a spectrum between masculinity and femininity; members often refer to themselves and others as studs and MOCs (masculine of center) and femmes, which are racialized and gendered sexual categories within Black lesbian culture.[20] When taken together, these discourses reveal the instability and incoherence of racial, gender, and sexual boundaries, even as some members strive to situate *queer women of color* as a stable and coherent identity formation.

When I first joined the group, QWOC Love was envisioned as "an outlet to proclaim your love, give each other advice, share pictures, speak on current events impacting your lifestyle, promote events in your city and share literature that contributes to a healthy and happy relationship." Months later, the group's founders and administrators offered a more elaborate description:

> [QWOC Love] is an outlet to proclaim your love, vent, talk about uncomfortable subjects, give each other advice, share pictures, speak on current events impacting our lifestyle, or

[20] In her study on Black lesbian families, Moore (2011) identifies three categories of gender display that range from masculine to feminine, which she terms transgressive, gender-blender, and femme (p.67).

> share literature that contributes to a healthy and happy relationship. Please note that while this is a group for support, you should take any advice given with a grain of salt. [QWOC Love] is a community of varying ideas and beliefs and once you post you are at the mercy of another person's system of ideals. Please make use of the "anonymous post button" for posts in which you need to or should remain anonymous.

What this description begins to reveal, and what this chapter seeks to clarify, are the ways in which QWOC Love is constructed as a dialogic space in which a very large group of queer women of color engage in vulnerability acts that congeal around Black lesbian intimacy. Indeed, QWOC Love is a space in which discourses of intimacy—specifically those centered on Black lesbian love, sex, and relationships—are explicitly foregrounded. In the next section, I theorize and explore the vulnerability acts that frame QWOC Love as an intimate public.

3. VULNERABILITY ACTS: DARING TO TELL, LONGING TO KNOW

My analysis of QWOC Love demonstrates how vulnerability acts give rise to Black queer women's digital intimate publics. Vulnerability acts, as I define them, refer to Black queer women's agentic deployment of vulnerability through two discursive practices: 'daring to tell' and 'longing to know.' Vulnerability acts operate in two distinct but interrelated ways: first, as an *invitation into* the interior ('daring to tell'), and second, as a *solicitation of* the interior ('longing to know'). The 'daring to tell' and 'longing to know' paradigm draws inspiration from Tricia Rose's (2003) oral history anthology, *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality And Intimacy*, which asks the question: "How has the history of race, class, and gender inequality in this country affected the way that black women talk about their sexual lives?" In the eighteen years since the book's publication, Black women, and Black queer women in particular, have found novel pathways to tell and to inquire in ways that cultivate intimate discourse within an expanded

network of Black women. Rather than "longing" to tell, which connotes desires to tell that have not yet materialized, 'daring to tell' indexes the courage and temerity that Black queer women embody as they engage in vulnerable acts. By contrast, 'longing to know' flags the curiosities and desires to know that motivate Black queer women to engage in bold and transgressive acts of inquiry.

The concept of vulnerability acts builds on my earlier research on Black queer women's digital coming-out stories (Adams-Santos, 2020). In analyzing Black queer women's coming-out stories on YouTube, the goal of the study was to consider how Black queer women negotiate vulnerability and risk in the context of a hypervisible and widely accessible digital platform. In addressing imagined audiences comprised of what Berlant (2008) terms "a vaguely defined set of like others," I found that Black queer women employed two distinct narrative strategies, including strategies of respectability and *intimate candor*, in crafting their coming-out stories (2008, p.7). Positioned as a foil to strategies of respectability, I defined intimate candor as "the performative and discursive strategy of publicly revealing interior, often sexually explicit, aspects of the self" (Adams-Santos, 2020, p.2). Strategies of intimate candor allowed Black queer women to craft coming-out stories that centered their queer sexualities and desires, thereby articulating a vision of queer Black womanhood untethered from the normative underpinnings of the coming-out genre. At the risk of reinforcing pathological stereotypes of Black sexual excess, Black queer women's use of intimate candor resists the historically entrenched respectability politics with which Black women contend, as well as the enduring assimilationist politics of modern-day queer subject-making.

The concept of vulnerability acts builds on my earlier theorization of intimate candor to index Black queer women's agentic deployment of vulnerability. As I discuss in the next sections, in 'daring to tell' and 'longing to know,' Black queer women engage in acts of vulnerability that congeal around Black lesbian love, sex, and relationships.

'Daring to Tell'

'Daring to tell' is an iteration of intimate candor, which I previously defined as the performative and discursive strategy of publicly revealing interior, often sexually explicit, aspects of the self. Rather than an individual narrative strategy, 'daring to tell' indexes how acts of telling build on and precipitate other vulnerability acts. That is, the act of telling not only elicits response but invites others to tell, as well. 'Daring to tell' represents moments in which Black queer women invite each other into their intimate lifeworlds. These acts of candor materialize as declarations, testimonials, and anecdotes in which members willfully share interior aspects of their lives. 'Daring to tell' captures the mundane and spectacular moments, experiences, and reflections of living and loving as Black queer women (Rodríguez, 2014). Members document the significant flashpoints and milestones of their relationships, such as celebratory posts announcing new relationships ("I found my soulmate"), anniversaries ("Today makes one year with my love"), marriage proposals ("She said yes!"), engagements ("I'm so excited to announce my engagement to the love of my life!"), and weddings ("Yesterday, I married my best friend"). The following post is one such example, in which a member shares news of her proposal:

Visual snapshots like these are strewn throughout the digital landscape of QWOC Love, inviting members to partake in celebrations of unions between Black women. In turn, members offer congratulatory remarks ("Congratulations to the both of you!"), performative gestures that affirm and recognize the symbolic and material significance of marriage in a Black lesbian context.

To be sure, in 'daring to tell,' representations of Black lesbian intimacy, like the above post, seemingly affirm notions of *intimate citizenship* (i.e., monogamy and marriage) that are tightly bound to homonormative logics (Plummer, 2003). However, as argued by Brooks (2017), representations of Black lesbian marriage cannot be accurately understood through the lens of homonormativity. Analyzing the symbolic meanings that Black lesbian and bisexual women attach to marriage, Brooks argues that "gay marriage does not represent state-sponsored benefits, but rather recognition in Black civil society" (2017, p.33). Thus, further extending Brooks's argument,

representations of Black lesbian intimacy are symbolically meaningful because they signal racial belonging as much as they signal lesbian sexuality.

In 'daring to tell,' members also reveal their everyday desires ("I want a dominant woman in and out of the bedroom"), pleasures ("I have to strap my woman in order to get off"), frustrations ("I'm struggling with putting myself out there to date again"), and sorrows ("I never thought loving could hurt so much"). These moments of candor temporarily shift the tenor of QWOC Love, offering glimpses into the affective life of Black lesbian intimacy beyond moments of celebration. The following post from Brittany juxtaposes love and marriage against feelings of confusion, loss, and longing:

Brittany:	So, my wife and I have been married for a little over 3 years now. We've had our ups and downs of course, but overall, I thought things were great. Now, my wife has told me that she is leaving me, she doesn't want to be together anymore and there is nothing I can do to make her change her mind. Oh, and she's also moving. To me, this came out of nowhere, but she says it has been a long time coming. She says she needs to find herself and that being with me she feels smothered and like she has lost herself. I suggested that we go to therapy but she says that it's too late and that I should've had that energy months ago when she wanted to. She said being with me has changed her personality and I have not been supportive of her dreams. With all that being said, does anyone have some advice on how I can get her to come home? Should I keep fighting for my marriage or should I respect her decision and let her go? She's talked about leaving before, but it was always after an argument or something and it never felt real. This time feels like she really wants things to end. The only bit of hope I have is that she has still been communicating with me. Although she is still adamant that she's not changing her mind. I just want my wife back.

In 'daring to tell' about her wife's decision to end their marriage, Brittany reveals the other side of intimacy's affective life. Indeed, Brittany provides a glimpse into her wife's negative affective state ("she feels smothered and like she has lost herself") and exposes her own feelings of loss, confusion ("this came out of nowhere"), and longing ("I just want my wife back"). Critically, in

sharing her heartbreak, Brittany's revelation momentarily impacts the affective life of QWOC Love, evident in the following responses to her post:

Taylor:	I've been in this position before and there's only so much YOU can do when the other one isn't willing to fight. Unfortunately, it seems like her mind is pretty made up. Although, she might need space, are you willing to wait for her? I say let things be, even if it's hard. Your happiness plays part in this as well. Give her what she wants, you may discover some new things about yourself as well being a part. Good luck to you both on your forward decision.
Rebecca:	Let her go. I feel it was disrespectful to go about it the way she did. It was very sneaky and manipulative. She says she needs space and you should oblige. You should not have to convince her to be with you. It is not "fighting for the marriage" if the other party has abandoned the situation.
Marlene:	Let her ass go...this isn't something that just happened over night. She's found interest in someone or something else. And by the time she figures it out…it will be too late. Don't allow urself to be put on the back burner while someone "finds herself." She should've did that before her ass got married. If she wants to go…LET HER GO! Yeah, it may hurt some, but it will hurt more being in a meaningless marriage.

The affective life of Brittany's troubled marriage finds new ground in QWOC Love. Members, hailed by Brittany's plea for advice ("Does anyone have some advice on how I can get her to come home?"), offer alternative points of view that invite Brittany to shift her affective state from feelings of loss, confusion, and longing to acceptance ("I say let things be, even if it's hard") and indignation ("Let her ass go"). Marlene's comment, in particular, is emotionally charged in a way that is reminiscent of the kind of advice a close friend might offer. Indeed, Brittany's post poignantly illustrates how vulnerability acts transform the affective life of Black lesbian love from a private experience shared between two women into a collective experience shared by thousands of Black queer women.

When members respond to acts of telling, they engage in acts of reciprocity that communicate their acknowledgment and recognition of the inquirer. As argued by Seikkula and Trimble (2005), "Answering does not mean giving an explanation or interpretation, but rather, demonstrating in one's response that one has noticed what has been said, and when possible,

opening a new point of view on what has been said" (p.466). Indeed, Seikkula and Trimble understand dialogue as an embodiment of love and necessary condition for understanding:

> An utterance derives its meaning as much from the listener as the speaker; for words to have meaning, they require response. This dependence on response for meaning contributes to what Bakhtin calls the "unfinalizability" of dialogue (Holquist, 1981). Meaning is constantly generated and transformed by the intrinsically unpredictable process of response, response to response, followed by further response, in a process that may be interrupted but can never be concluded. The more voices incorporated into a "polyphonic" (Bakhtin, 1984) dialogue, the richer the possibilities for emergent understanding. (Seikkula and Trimble, 2005, p.465).

'Daring to tell,' and the dialogue it engenders, transforms QWOC Love into a dialogic space that produces "emergent understandings" of Black lesbian intimacy. The next section demonstrates how acts of inquiry (i.e., 'longing to know') also elicit acts of telling that congeal around Black lesbian intimacy.

'Longing to Know'

Vulnerability acts also materialize as a *solicitation* of the interior, in which members engage in interrogative practices that invite or "dare" other group members to share intimate knowledge about themselves. 'Longing to know' builds on the concept of 'intimate inquiry,' a methodological approach that Laura (2016) defines as the act of witnessing, engaging, and laboring in love.[21] However, while Laura frames intimate inquiry as a "love-based approach to qualitative research," 'longing to know' underscores how acts of inquiry, or interrogative practices, are animated by love. Drawing on hooks's (2000) concept of "a love ethic," Laura (2016) defines love

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[21] In line with my definition of intimate candor, Laura's use of "intimate" refers to "the personal and emotional aspects of life on the 'inside'" (2016, p.216).

as “the material and conceptual pursuit of our own or someone else’s humanity” (p.215). ‘Longing to know’ is premised on the mutual recognition of group members as dialogic partners, thus instantiating Black queer women as subjects whose opinions, reflections, and experiences merit discursive engagement. In other words, ‘longing to know’ is an act of love and an invitation into openness (Ahmed, 2004). ‘Longing to know’ emerges as acts of inquiry that invite Black queer women to meditate and share opinions, reflections, and experiences connected to love (“What are ways your partner shows her love for you?”), sex (“If your partner is into something sexually that you aren’t, how would you deal with that?”), and relationships (“Anyone in an interfaith relationship?”).

In ‘longing to know,’ members are invited into acts of candor that reveal the mundane and spectacular aspects of Black queer womanhood, collectively mapping the landscape of Black lesbian intimacy. For example, the following post invites group members to highlight the dimensions of Black lesbian relationships that they regard as most salient to their experiences:

Nikki:	I am a Queer Identified Therapist and I have been offered the opportunity to train other therapists on working with the LGBTQ+ community. This agency has had an increase of lesbian couples. What would you like therapists to know about lesbian relationships? If you have been in couples therapy or individual therapy, please let me know what was beneficial and what you wanted to improve.

Nikki, a Black cis-gender woman and queer-identified therapist, asked members to share insights into lesbian relationships that they would consider as pertinent to therapists who work with lesbian couples:

Eve: We went to therapy, and we couldn't find a Black therapist with LGBTQ experience. Thanks for taking that on.

Gina: The benefits of having an lgbtq experienced provider of color is not having to explain dynamics of the lesbian community and also the black experience

Keisha: The fact that we don't operate within the Hetero world. However, we are constantly battling heteronormativity in our relationships especially if one is femme presenting and one is MOC

> **Nikki:** Thank you. Yes, I was going to talk about the latter. Can you say more about not operating within the hetero world and what that looks like for you?
>
> > **Keisha:** So, we get to define what our relationships look like to us both romantic and sexual in the sense of gender roles and gender expression. We operate in the "other," which is anything that isn't cis hetero. However, because there is no other kinda "blueprint" for how our relationships work there tends to be a need to enforce or follow the gender roles, which causes harm to relationships. Oftentimes you hear, "Who's the man and the woman in the relationship?" Also, there's a lot of misogyny in lesbian relationships especially from MOC women who perpetrate the same heteronormative roles we don't subscribe to.

Kristina: For me I think the biggest thing I've had to explain to my therapist was lesbian relationship dynamics and standards. How we as a community tend to follow the invisible lesbian handbook.

> **Nikki:** I personally date queer identified women. I'm aware of the different cultures within those identities, and I know I'm not in it. Just because I'm a cis woman dating a cis woman doesn't necessarily make it the same, although we may share similar experiences. And, as I live in an area with a much larger queer population, I haven't had any lesbian-identified clients.
>
> > **Kristina:** I feel lesbians tend to follow heteronormative gender roles. We place these labels on ourselves and our partners which comes with roles and expectations that may not fit the person's character. Every stud isn't dominant, and every fem isn't submissive, but we are expected to play our position. It's bad enough that heterosexuals have the image that every stud is trying to be a man. We have studs who are playing into that stereotype. I think any therapist who has lesbian couples for clients needs to be aware of those roles and standards.

In the comments section of the thread (see above), Nikki clarifies that while she is a queer-identified cis-woman who dates other queer-identified cis-women, she understands that her experiences and perspectives may not capture those held by lesbian-identified women. In this way, Nikki draws a distinction between queerness and lesbianism, articulating how sexual desires and practices can produce multiple forms of identification outside of the social categories to which they are frequently assigned.

The above responses to Nikki's inquiry range from affirmative comments ("We went to therapy, and we couldn't find a Black therapist with LGBTQ experience. Thanks for taking that on.") to comments illuminating how Black lesbians themselves understand and articulate their relationships. In a curt response that could be interpreted as a quip, Gina asserts that "the benefits of having an lgbtq experienced provider of color is not having to explain [the] dynamics of the lesbian community and also the black experience." Despite positioning the "lesbian community" and the "black experience" as singular and static entities, Gina broadens the scope of Nikki's initial inquiry by positioning race, and "the black experience" in particular, as an important lens through which to understand lesbian relationships. Gina's response also privileges the embodied knowledge of LGBTQ-experienced providers of color who, because of their proximity to blackness and lesbianism, are more apt to understand Black lesbian relationships.

By contrast, Keisha and Kristina's comments directly respond to Nikki's inquiry, elucidating the particular challenges of charting relationships without a "blueprint." Keisha articulates how Black lesbians occupy and "operate" in the status of "other," which means they are "to define what [their] relationships look like" outside of normative "gender roles and gender expression." As such, existing outside of "cis hetero" configurations affords Black lesbians a level of self-determination to shape relationships in potentially liberatory ways. In practice, however, Keisha recognizes that, in the absence of an alternative 'blueprint,' there "tends to be a need [among Black lesbians] to enforce or follow [heteronormative] gender roles." Kristina makes the same observation, stating, "I feel lesbians tend to follow heteronormative gender roles." Indeed, Keisha and Kristina articulate how heteronormativity is a source of harm within lesbian relationships, in which adherence to normative gender roles leads to misogynistic relationship

arrangements. Interestingly, in situating heteronormativity as the most problematic aspect of Black lesbian relationships, Keisha and Kristina's comments subtly imply that Black lesbian relationships, when unencumbered by heteronormativity, are sites of liberatory potential. Yet how one goes about charting such relationships is less clear, evident in Keisha's claims that Black lesbians lack a "blueprint" for their relationships and Kristina's assertion that relationships are guided by an "invisible lesbian handbook." The irony of these statements lies in the fact that QWOC Love functions as a kind of hypervisible blueprint to which Black lesbians—through vulnerability acts and the circulation of embodied knowledge—collectively contribute.

Critically, acts of inquiry invite Black queer women to map the emotional landscape of love between Black women. Indeed, QWOC Love is a space in which the affective dimensions of Black lesbian love are frequently expressed, marking the space between joy, pleasure, heartbreak, and pain. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is a tendency to express love in mostly positive terms. In 'longing to know,' a member posed the following question to the group: "Tell me, what are a few things you love about being in love?" The question itself was crafted with the intent to elicit positive responses, and members complied by extolling love as "the inner joy when I'm around her," "the excited feeling to see her," "the vulnerability that feels safe," "the comfort and how my body relaxes when I hear her voice," and "that feeling when you know she has your back." Love, here, is expressed in exclusively affective terms, exuding feelings of excitement, safety, comfort, relaxation, and protection.

In many instances, members are invited to reveal the affective currents of their erotic lifeworlds. In one such inquiry, Danielle, a Black femme lesbian, asks, "What did you think after your first lesbian sexual experience?" Danielle's question elicits myriad responses (77 total

comments) that work to uncover the various meanings that Black queer women attach to their first lesbian sexual experiences:

Danielle: What did you think after your first lesbian sexual experience?

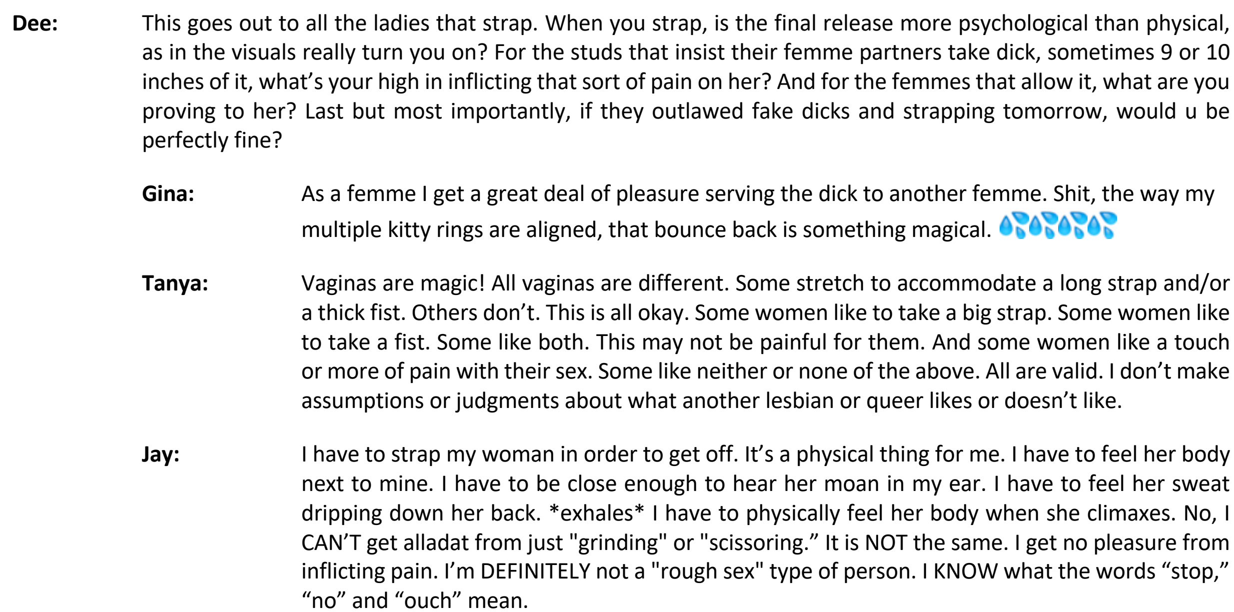
> **Denise:** Yep! I'm a lesbian.
>
> **Adrian:** It was the most sensual taboo thing I ever enjoyed! It blew the lid off everything. Every touch and lick awakened my mind, body, and soul! Since that day I never looked back. I was mad at myself for being afraid to take that step! Oh my gawd, I still shiver when I think of my first!
>
> > **Valerie:** Adrian, I also never looked back! I've been prosecuted, talked about, and all of that, but I stand by what I believe. Love this group!!!
>
> **Candy:** I felt like I was coming home. Effortless and passionately enjoyable.
>
> **Lee:** I wasn't super impressed sexually and that hasn't changed but I was TOTALLY in love and/or obsessed with the girl.
>
> **Layla:** Sex is sex with any gender, clearly. I'll do it again, just like dick. Nothing to lose my mind over.
>
> **Angela:** My thoughts were: Biiiitch, I'll eat pussy forever.

In 'longing to know,' Danielle's question opens a space for members to recount, relive, and re-feel moments of intense pleasure in ways that directly resist respectability politics ("Biiiitch, I'll eat pussy forever"). When Adrian proclaims that "Every touch and lick awakened [her] mind, body, and soul!" she is transported back to a moment of ecstasy that she is invited to feel again: "Oh my gawd, I still shiver when I think of my first!" Moreover, Adrian's response invites others to not only recount their own sexual experiences but to vicariously experience sensations of being touched and licked. Other members affirm and echo Adrian's sentiments, extolling lesbian sex as a transformative experience ("I also never looked back!") and situating it as a kind of homecoming ("I felt like I was coming home").

At the same time, Danielle's question also opens a space for members to contribute contradictory affective interpretations of their sexual experiences. This is especially evident in Layla's assertion that "Sex is sex with any gender, clearly. I'll do it again, just like dick. Nothing

to lose my mind over." Critically, Layla's comment disrupts the dialogic interaction set in motion by Danielle's question by resisting the prevailing discourse that lesbian sex is fundamentally different from and better than heterosexual sex. Layla also "outs" herself in a way that suggests she is not lesbian, or at least not a lesbian in ways congruent with normative constructions of lesbianism. As such, her comment reveals how the communal fabric of QWOC Love stretches beyond lesbian membership to include other sexualities.

While some questions are posed with a discernible level of emotional detachment ("What did you think after your first lesbian sexual experience?"), other questions betray an inquirer's affective state. The latter is especially evident when inquirers preface questions with their own opinions, reflections, and experiences, thereby influencing the shape and tenor of the dialogue. Indeed, by revealing their affective state, inquirers set expectations for how their questions will be received and responded to. The following post captures one such instance, wherein a transgressive and arguably combative question about "strapping" incites sexually candid and fiery responses:



Dee: This goes out to all the ladies that strap. When you strap, is the final release more psychological than physical, as in the visuals really turn you on? For the studs that insist their femme partners take dick, sometimes 9 or 10 inches of it, what's your high in inflicting that sort of pain on her? And for the femmes that allow it, what are you proving to her? Last but most importantly, if they outlawed fake dicks and strapping tomorrow, would u be perfectly fine?

Gina: As a femme I get a great deal of pleasure serving the dick to another femme. Shit, the way my multiple kitty rings are aligned, that bounce back is something magical. 💦💦💦💦

Tanya: Vaginas are magic! All vaginas are different. Some stretch to accommodate a long strap and/or a thick fist. Others don't. This is all okay. Some women like to take a big strap. Some women like to take a fist. Some like both. This may not be painful for them. And some women like a touch or more of pain with their sex. Some like neither or none of the above. All are valid. I don't make assumptions or judgments about what another lesbian or queer likes or doesn't like.

Jay: I have to strap my woman in order to get off. It's a physical thing for me. I have to feel her body next to mine. I have to be close enough to hear her moan in my ear. I have to feel her sweat dripping down her back. *exhales* I have to physically feel her body when she climaxes. No, I CAN'T get alladat from just "grinding" or "scissoring." It is NOT the same. I get no pleasure from inflicting pain. I'm DEFINITELY not a "rough sex" type of person. I KNOW what the words "stop," "no" and "ouch" mean.

Dee’s question is stricken with assumptions and judgments, which work to position strapping as an intentionally painful, and therefore problematic, sexual act. Strapping is situated as a sexual act that is exclusively performed in the context of a stud-femme relationship, where femmes are passive and disempowered sexual partners who are subjected to pain to pleasure their stud partners. Dee’s question wholly dismisses the pleasure that femme partners derive from being strapped and also renders strapping as an inauthentically pleasurable act for studs. The question implies that in using “fake dicks,” studs can only derive psychological (rather than physical) pleasure from strapping. In doing so, Dee instantiates an artificial duality between physical and psychological pleasure. Following Dee’s logic, if a stud receives psychological pleasure from “inflicting that sort of pain” on a femme partner, strapping must therefore be an especially nefarious sexual act akin to sexual violence.

With all of these assumptions in place, Dee’s inquiry elicits responses that work to dispel, reject, and, in some cases, affirm her stance. As evidenced in the above dialogue, Dee’s question opens a space for emergent understandings of strapping that push against the strident assumptions of her post. Members engage in acts of telling that offer alternative interpretations of strapping that contest (1) the assumption that only studs use straps (“As a femme I get a great deal of pleasure serving the dick to another femme”); (2) the notion that pain cannot be pleasurable (“some women like a touch or more of pain with their sex”); (3) the belief that studs do not derive physical pleasure from strapping (“It’s a physical thing for me”); and (4) the idea that strapping is inherently violent (“I KNOW what the words ‘stop,’ ‘no’ and ‘ouch’ mean”). In contesting Dee’s assumptions, members simultaneously divulge their sexual desires, pleasures, and practices, revealing the various ways that they “get off.”

'Daring to tell' and 'longing to know'—acts of candor and inquiry—open pathways for cultivating emergent understandings of Black lesbian intimacy. Vulnerability acts accumulate into a seemingly endless stream of intimacy talk that coalesces around Black lesbian love, sex, and relationships. In doing so, Black queer women collectively explore, question, and articulate Black lesbian intimacy in ways that bring the interior aspects of their lives into the public domain.

Recasting Vulnerability

In analyzing QWOC Love, I situate and define vulnerability acts as the *agentic* deployment of vulnerability in the service of Black queer women's collective intimacies. Indeed, intimate publics emerge when networks of like strangers willfully engage in acts of disclosure that bring their intimate lives into public discourse. However, within the context of historically inscribed racialized and gendered sexual hierarchies, acts of disclosure carry differential levels of risk and significance for the subjects who engage in these practices. That Black queer women engage in *vulnerability acts* is significant because they do so within a sociohistorical context in which Black women's sexualities have been systematically problematized and rendered vulnerable or proximate to injury. Indeed, as Quashie (2012) astutely argues, "Conceptually, victimization and vulnerability are nearly synonymous…. rather than being seen as a quality of an inner life and a necessary human capacity, vulnerability becomes defined as a liability to black survival" (2012, p.76). The concept of vulnerability act, then, recasts and reimagines vulnerability as facilitative of Black queer women's collective intimacies.

Vulnerability, as a theoretical concept and social condition, looms large within Black and queer of color feminist scholarship. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed argues that "vulnerability involves a particular kind of bodily relation to the world, in which openness itself

is read as a site of potential danger, and as demanding evasive action" (2004, p.69). Vulnerability indexes how certain bodies—racialized, feminine, and queer bodies—are not only proximate to harm and threats of violence but are made to be fearful in ways that "shrink the body in anticipation of injury" (p.69). Indeed, Ahmed contends that "vulnerability is not an inherent characteristic of women's bodies; rather, it is an effect that works to secure femininity as a delimitation of movement in the public, and over-inhabitance in the private" (p.70). In this way, vulnerability consigns women, and other vulnerable bodies, to the private sphere and away from public life.

The racialized and gendered contours of vulnerability, specifically regarding Black women's sexuality, have been long theorized by practitioners of Black feminism (Higginbotham, 1993; Hine, 1989; King, 2008). To be sure, the symbolic and material reality of Black women's historical experiences of sexual trauma and violence has been such that Black women's sexuality is often approached through the lens of vulnerability, where vulnerability indexes one's propensity to harm and injury (Wilkinson, 2009; Nash, 2016; Quashie, 2012). The concepts of silence, dissemblance, and respectability are emblematic of traditional Black feminist scholarship on vulnerability, which elucidate Black women's historical responses to the problem of sexual violence. The "politics of silence" that Higginbotham (1993) describes, and what Hine (1989) terms the "culture of dissemblance," illuminates how Black women have historically "reacted to the repressive force of the hegemonic discourses on race and sex . . . with silence, secrecy, and a partially self-chosen invisibility" (Hammonds, 1999, p.94). Strategies of silence are part and parcel of respectability politics, which employ racialized gender, class, and religious scripts to de-pathologize Black women's sexuality.

Such strategies were employed as protective measures taken in response to what Jenkins (2007) has called Black women's "doubled vulnerability." Similar to "double jeopardy," a concept coined by Frances Beale (1969) to analyze "the situation of black women in America," Jenkins's concept of doubled vulnerability refers to how the realm of intimacy (e.g., sexuality, family, and motherhood) renders Black subjects, and Black women in particular, "additionally vulnerable around the topic of race" (Moorti, 2007). In response to this vulnerability, Jenkins (2007) argues that Black women have been summoned by the ideology of the "salvific wish," or "the desire to rescue the black community from racist accusations of sexual and domestic pathology through the embrace of bourgeois propriety" (Moorti, 2007).

Silence, dissemblance, and respectability represent the everyday strategies, discourses, and meaning-making practices that Black women have historically employed in response to material and symbolic forms of sexual violence. However, as Hammonds (1999) argues, early Black feminist scholarship on sexuality has almost exclusively focused on the sexual trauma and violence endured by Black women, even as this work obscures, and at times even silences, the full scope of Black women's sexualities. The effect of this epistemological trend is that Black women's sexuality "has been constructed in a binary opposition to that of white women: it is rendered simultaneously invisible, visible (exposed), hypervisible, and pathologized in dominant discourses" (Hammonds, 1997, p.93). To be sure, the intense focus on Black women's trauma and violence, sexually and otherwise, continues to flourish in social scientific and humanist discourse, reifying Black women as wounded subjects. Indeed, dominant analytical approaches to Black women's sexuality are animated by the "twin logics" of injury and recovery that Nash (2014) so poignantly describes.

The concept of vulnerability acts, then, represents an important departure from scholarly discourses that position vulnerability as antithetical to Black women's intimacy and pleasure. In recasting vulnerability as generative of intimacy, I build on a growing body of literature by scholars working in the tradition of Black queer and feminist thought who have lovingly and steadfastly pushed for the expansion of critical inquiry into sexuality that is inclusive of Black women's pleasure and erotic lifeworlds (Hammonds, 1999; Morgan, 2015; Nash, 2012). Concepts like *illicit eroticism* (Glover & Glover, 2018; Miller-Young, 2010), the *Black ratchet imagination* (Horton Stallings, 2013), and *(anti)respectability politics* (Lane, 2019) expand the theoretical and empirical scope of Black women's sexuality, offering an alternative grammar attuned to but not solely steeped in trauma, violence, and injury. The theoretical power and analytical force of these concepts is their ability to sift through the complexities of Black women's sexuality, reckoning with the push and pull of respectability politics and the simultaneous desire among Black women to create and express alternative ways of being that evade, tempt, and exist in direct confrontation to normative racialized gender and sexual configurations.

By engaging in vulnerability acts—that is, in 'daring to tell' and 'long to know'—Black queer women eschew silence, dissemblance, and respectability in favor of alternative discursive practices that render Black women's sexualities visible and legible beyond the private sphere. To be sure, QWOC Love represents an important case in which to explore vulnerability precisely because, rather than foreclosing openness and consigning Black queer women to the private sphere, vulnerability acts bring Black queer women's private lives squarely into the public with the promise of recognition, affirmation, and belonging.

4. CONCLUSION: REIMAGINING INTIMATE CITIZENSHIP

Returning to the anecdote at the start of this chapter, my analysis of QWOC Love elucidates how vulnerability acts give rise to the intimate publics to which Donna and other storytellers are connected. It is important to emphasize that my analysis centers *one* digital space in which Black queer women, and queer women of color more broadly, cultivate intimate publics. Indeed, Black queer women are continuing to cultivate intimate publics within mainstream and emergent social media platforms and apps, further expanding the bounds of their digital lifeworlds. In the last fifteen years, we have seen the proliferation of digital cultural production, including web-based television (Day & Christian, 2017; Christian, 2018); user-generated pornography (Bronstein, 2020; Jacobs, 2007; McGlotten, 2013, 2015; Miller-Young, 2010; Paasonen, 2010; Wilkinson, 2017); blogs (Cavalcante, 2018; Steele, 2017); video blogs (Adams-Santos, 2020; Neil & Mblilishaka, 2018); podcasts (Monk-Payton, 2017); and other digital media content (Bailey, 2016) that build digital lifeworlds at the intersection of Black/queer/women. Indeed, ordinary Black queer women, as well as content creators, social media influencers, activists, and artists, collectively use digital platforms and technologies to instantiate Black queer womanhood as a visible, legible, and ever-expanding intimate public that transcends local and national boundaries.

What should we make of this proliferation and expansion of Black queer women's intimate publics and the increasing visibility of Black queer women's intimacies in the digital public sphere? That is, what is the political significance of Black queer women's intimate publics, especially given how, as Berlant (1998) argues, the raison d'être of intimate publics is decidedly apolitical? Returning to Berlant's discussion of intimate publics, I argue that the political significance of intimate publics like QWOC Love lies in their ability to subvert the normative

underpinnings of intimate citizenship by reimagining Black queer women as *intimate citizens* (Plummer, 2003). In theorizing intimate citizenship, Plummer (2003) argues,

> Applied to intimacies, citizenship implies the rights and obligations surrounding different *intimate life styles*, the participation of different *intimate groupings*, and the recognition of people's different *intimate identities*. Ideas around intimate citizenship have been increasingly placed on the political agenda. In much of the Western literature on this, great emphasis has been placed on citizenship as *the right to choose*: to choose your partner, your sexual activities, whether you have a child or not, or what you do to your body. Often couched in the language of "sexual citizenship", "sexual rights", or "intimate rights", it is a citizenship of choices (Plummer, 2005, p.78-79; emphases original).

As Plummer explains, intimate citizenship indexes the state's role in regulating intimacies through bestowing the right to choose onto certain bodies over others.

Sexually subordinate groups, namely those groups existing outside of Rubin's (1984) charmed circle, have appealed to the state to revise the terms upon which intimate citizenship is granted.[22] The contemporary gay and lesbian movement, encapsulated by the battle for marriage equality, appealed to the state for legal recognition and to thus be seen as intimate (or sexual) citizens (Croce, 2015). Scholarly debates have questioned the efficacy of such appeals (Bell, 1995; Richardson, 1998). Richardson (1998), for example, argued that gays and lesbians are *partial citizens*: "Lesbians and gay are entitled to certain rights of existence, but these are extremely circumscribed, being constructed largely on the condition that they remain in the private sphere and do not seek public recognition or membership in the political community" (p.89). Similarly, Bell (1995) uses the term *citizen-pervert* to index the queer subject who "lives out a paradoxical

[22] In "Thinking Sex," Rubin (1984) used the "charmed circle" to illustrate the value system that society attributes to sexuality, which renders some behaviors as good/natural and others as bad/unnatural.

geography which destabilizes the surrounding hegemonic discourse on both sexualities and citizenship" (p.139). In the decades since Richardson (1995) and Bell's (1998) writing, scholars have theorized "queer liberalism," "homonormativity," and "homonationalism" to foreground how gay and lesbian subjects have increasingly become "normative citizen subjects" whose citizenship is predicated on "privatization, consumption, and self-governance" (Volpp, 2017, p.167; see also Duggan, 2004; Eng, 2010; Franke, 2015; Puar, 2007). Yet, there are limits to intimate citizenship, as such projects rely upon the reification of racialized, gendered, and classed boundaries that perpetually exclude groups that stand outside of the category of human—i.e., groups rendered too unruly, deviant, and disposable "to make themselves belong" (Volpp, 2017, p.171). Indeed, appeals for intimate citizenship are appeals to be recognized as fully human. As argued by Butler (2005), fights for sexual rights are not simply a matter of struggling for rights that attach to any one person "*but to be conceived of as persons*" (Butler, 2004, p.32; emphasis original).

In a social world and political order that renders them "existential outsiders," subjects at the intersection of Black/queer/woman have historically confronted the limits of the juridical in granting personhood (Relph, 1976). Black queer women subvert and reimagine intimate citizenship not through legal channels and apparatuses but through the circulation of intimate public discourse. Discourses of love, sex, desire, marriage, motherhood, and relationships—experiences and practices that, for Black queer subjects, have been and continue to be institutionally regulated—privilege the interiority, or inner life, of Black queer women's subjectivities. These quotidian performative and discursive practices, such as the vulnerability acts highlighted in this chapter, contribute to a growing counterhegemonic discourse built on Black queer women "*quietly* claiming recognition of their very ordinariness" (Weeks, 2015, p.54;

emphasis added). While Black queer women's intimacies materialize in the realm of public discourse, these discursive acts are "quiet" in the sense that they do not rise to the level of political protest and resistance aimed at a white supremacist heteropatriarchal political order (Quashie, 2012). To be sure, vulnerability acts depart from "the expectations of resistance [that] have shaped how we think of black people" (Quashie, 2012, p.97). Instead, vulnerability acts index "articulations of the everyday, actions [seemingly] unmarked by political significance" (Quashie, 2012, p.97). We might argue, then, that the political significance of Black queer women's intimate publics is the ability to reimagine intimate citizenship as a project not solely tethered to or animated by the juridical. As "affective scene[s] of identification" that foreground Black queer women's inner lives, intimate publics like QWOC Love are subject-making projects that reimagine Black queer women as intimate citizens, or as subjects who, in the fullest expression of their humanity, make everyday choices about how to live and love together in the world.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion: Intimacy Mapping: Contributions and Future Directions

1. REVISITING PLACELESSNESS

"I think it's always hard for Black queer women to find their spot."—Jess (Black gay/queer woman, mid-thirties)

"[T]he observer outside of the [black] hole sees it as a void, an empty place in space. However, it is not empty; it is a dense and full place in space." —Evelynn Hammonds (1994, p.310)

My inquiries into the "place" of Black queer women in Chicago were met by storytellers with resoundingly with quiet contemplation and befuddlement, mirroring Jess's assertion that "it's always hard for Black queer women to find their spot." Like Jess, other Black queer women struggled to locate—both physically and symbolically—their place in Chicago. Therefore, the task before me was not simply a quest to locate the "spot" of Black queer women's intimate lifeworlds but to trace the affective contours undergirding Jess's words. Further expounding on her statement, Jess said, "It's not necessarily hard for us to find each other, but it's definitely hard to feel comfortable in all places that we go. It just feels like we're relegated to certain areas of the city." Jess is referring specifically to the racialized and sexual spatial arrangements of the city, which position the South Side as a Black heteronormative place and the North Side, including Boystown and Andersonville, as a white queer place. Thus, what Jess and others articulate is the tension of being *in* place while simultaneously experiencing a sense of placelessness.

At the start of this research, I set out to move *beyond* invisibility to explore the "black hole" of Black queer women's intimate lifeworlds. Like many urban ethnographers who center invisible

populations, I began this project with the desire to make visible the experiences of a group of people who have been systematically excluded from empirical accounts of urban life (Moore, 2015). As argued by Moore, "most ethnographic approaches to the study of city life are biased toward the experiences of people who claim heterosexuality" (2015, p.245). Moreover, analytical consideration of sexuality, much less the experiences of LGBTQ people, is rare within empirical accounts of Black urban life, even though Black sexual minorities "congregate on the same street corners and building stoops as other residents" (Moore, 2015, p.245). As discussed in Chapter 1, existing empirical accounts of Black sexual minority women demonstrate their strategies to negotiate multiple identity statuses within the sociocultural fabric of Black community life (Brooks, 2015; 2016; Moore, 2010; 2011). This literature mostly centers the experiences of working- and middle-class Black lesbian, gay, and bisexual women whose ties to Black community life are strong and salient. By contrast, I focus on Black queer women struggling to find their place within Chicago's Black *and* queer communities.

Additionally, extant literature on queer placemaking renders Black queer women completely absent from mainstream gay urban life, even though most storytellers I interviewed reported spending time in the gayborhood. While this scholarship adeptly captures the structural and cultural shifts in gayborhoods, this research enacts the same racialized and gendered exclusions for which gayborhoods have been critiqued persistently. In doing so, this research provides empirical accounts of the white phallocentric character of gayborhoods without centering the voices of those most excluded from these spaces. The assumption undergirding this elision is that Black queer women, and other racial and gender sexual minority women, simply do not go to the gayborhood. While some Black queer women avoid mainstream queer spaces, my study reveals

that Black queer women do, in fact, go to Boystown and quickly learn they are unwelcome. Recall Tiffany's experience of clubbing in Boystown: "[T]here's a lot of bars that don't want girls to be in there. They only want guys, and you feel like you stand out. Like, 'One of these things don't fit, and it's you, girl!'" Narratives like Tiffany's often escape the empirical gaze of queer urban placemaking. When taken together, extant accounts either wholly negate the presence of Black queer women or position them as peripheral or invisible figures within these landscapes.

Despite the affective register shared between notions of absence, invisibility, and placelessness, the concept of placelessness more thoroughly captures the particular situation of Black queer women's everyday experiences in Chicago. Rather than negate the presence of Black queer women in queer spaces or position them as seemingly invisible in Black spaces, intersectional placelessness indexes the sense of ambiguous and contingent belonging that Black queer women experience in both Black *and* queer spaces. In embracing an asset-based framework toward Black queer women's placemaking (see Hunter & Robinson, 2018), this dissertation theorized intersectional placelessness to contextualize the individual and collective practices that Black queer women engage in cultivating intimate lifeworlds, or what Hammonds (1994) calls "alternative sexual universes" (p.312). To that end, I employed *intimacy mapping* to explore how Black queer women creatively respond to and navigate conditions of spatial marginalization and intersectional placelessness in their pursuit of intimacy.

2. INTIMACY MAPPING: MOVEMENT, INTERPLAY & INNOVATION

This dissertation forwards intimacy mapping as a methodological framework that maps Black queer women's intimacy projects in Chicago. By drawing on psychological, sociological, feminist, and queer theories, this study approached Black queer women's intimacies as

intersubjective affective experiences enacted through a constellation of individual and collective practices that are politically implicated and potentially subversive. Intimacy mapping diverges from conventional approaches to urban ethnography by expanding the theoretical and empirical scope of placemaking to include digitally mediated intimacies. As such, intimacy mapping uses a digital urbanist approach to capture three key dimensions salient to Black queer women's placemaking: movement, interplay, and innovation.

Movement

At the individual level, Black queer women occupy and traverse multiple sociospatial contexts in their everyday lives, including their neighborhoods, their educational and workplace settings, and the various places they navigate for leisure. As a collective, Black queer women's residential patterns are scattered across the city and the greater Chicago area, including urban and suburban neighborhoods that vary by racial and class demographics. While the storytellers vary by socioeconomic status, the vast majority are college-educated and upwardly mobile, affording them a level of residential choice (see Appendix A). While less pronounced in this study, Black queer women's educational and workplace settings are also scattered across the urban and suburban landscape, the locations of which often dictate or inform where they choose to reside. Some storytellers make residential decisions independent from where they work, choosing to live in areas that prioritize their safety and comfort as Black queer women. For example, in Chapter 3, Imani made the conscious decision to live in Oak Park, work in Naperville, and spend her free time in the city.

Important to the scope of this study, Black queer women also make decisions about where to seek leisure and find community. They frequent the mainstream queer spaces of Boystown and

Andersonville, as well as neighborhoods, events, and gatherings that cater more specifically to Chicago's Black community. Storytellers like Tiffany (Chapter 2), Kiana (Chapter 3), and Nia and Jade (Chapter 4) describe their experiences of eating, shopping, and partying in Boystown, despite the racialized and gendered exclusivity of the gayborhood. Likewise, storytellers detail socializing in predominantly Black spaces that are often heteronormative by default. In their search for community and connection, Black queer women move within and across Black heteronormative and white queer spaces, despite the feeling of "hav[ing] to split up [their identities] to find community" (see Chapter 2). On the other hand, as shown in Chapter 4, Black queer women collectively "take up space" to create erotic scene-spaces on the South Side and in venues largely catering to Black patrons. They transform Black geographies into spaces of celebration and play, mirroring the strategies that Hunter (2010), Bailey (2014), and Lane (2019) elucidate in their ethnographies of Black LGBT urban placemaking.

Interplay

In addition to capturing Black queer women's movements within Chicago's landscape, this study has focused on the interplay of the urban and the digital in mediating individual and collective intimacies. Chapter 3 focused on storytellers' use of intimate infrastructures (i.e., dating apps and social media platforms) for various intimacy projects, including romantic partnerships, friendships, and ambiguous encounters that blend sex, romance, and friendship. Indeed, intimate infrastructures were positioned as essential to facilitating queer sociality. Beyond individual intimacy projects, Chapter 4 examined the digital and urban life of Black queer women's ephemeral erotic-scene spaces, demonstrating the central role that social media platforms play in the identity, promotional, and mobilizing work of urban placemaking. Lastly, Chapter 5 captured

the performative and discursive acts that give rise to Black queer women's intimate publics. Specifically, my analysis of QWOC Love shows how acts of inquiry and disclosure centered on various kinds of intimacy talk necessarily transgress boundaries between the private and public, inviting mutual recognition and a sense of community among a large network of Black queer women.

Importantly, the aforementioned chapters demonstrate how the urban and the digital are inextricably bound together in concomitantly shaping and mediating Black queer women's individual and collective intimacies. Indeed, this study reveals the ubiquity and entrenchment of digital technologies and platforms in facilitating intimate connections ranging from dyadic relationships and in-person communal events and gatherings to large-scale, amorphous digital communities among strangers. In many ways, the interplay of the urban and the digital in mediating intimacies is often assumed, supporting Wilson's (2016) assertion that intimate infrastructures are the static and invisible background upon which intimate lifeworlds unfold. At the same time, Black queer women are acutely aware of the constraints that the urban landscape poses to intimacy projects; the lack of designated physical space means fewer opportunities for Black queer women to find community and connection consistently. Thus, Black queer women position digital technologies and platforms as foundational to building and sustaining their intimate lifeworlds.

Innovation

The digital urbanist approach regards Black queer women's placemaking as a necessarily innovative practice, in which Black queer women generate "novel solutions that simultaneously exploit knowledge and resources that are both available to [them] and in the [their] environment"

(Dahlin, 2014, p.671). The concept of innovation aligns with the asset-based approach to Black placemaking theorized by Hunter, Pattillo, Robinson, and Taylor (2016), attentive to both the structural constraints that impinge upon Black urban life and the social agency that Black residents exercise to "find meaning in hostile places" (2016, p.33). My interviews reveal that Black queer women simultaneously experience spatial marginalization, evident in the paucity and precarity of distinctly BQW spaces and a sense of placelessness and exclusion within Black and queer spaces. Nevertheless, Black queer women cultivate intimate lifeworlds that transform and reimagine the boundaries of Chicago's urban landscape. Indeed, this study gleaned three distinct intimacy practices that demonstrate how Black queer women: (1) use intimate infrastructures (i.e., dating apps and social media platforms) as pathways toward queer sociality; (2) collectively engage in urban and digital placemaking practices to cultivate erotic scene-spaces in Chicago's Black community; and (3) use social media to create intimate publics that transcend local boundaries.

The innovation of these practices lies not only in how they cumulatively respond to spatial marginalization and intersectional placelessness but also in the individual effects and implications emerging from each practice. That Black queer women use intimate infrastructures agentically to fulfill various desires and intimate pursuits (i.e., romantic, sexual, and platonic) counters the prevailing tendency in sociology of treating dating apps and platforms as sites of inequality that are corrosive to "real" intimacy. Moreover, in decentering heterosexuality and centering Black queer women as desiring subjects, these findings challenge colloquial and social scientific narratives of online dating and digital intimacy that position Black women as undesirable, desireless, and proximate to danger. Instead, Black queer women use digital technologies to situate themselves and other Black queer women as desiring and desirable subjects. The Black femme

pleasurescapes at the center of Chapter 4 usurp and transform Black heteronormative spaces into ephemeral erotic scene-spaces that center and privilege Black queer women's pleasure and safety. Black femme pleasurescapes are undergirded by an intersectional political ethos that is committed to the survival and celebration of Chicago's Black gender and sexual minority community. Moreover, Black femme pleasurescapes fit into a larger movement of Black and Latinx placemakers intentionally creating an alternative queer scene outside the white queer spaces of Boystown. Lastly, Black queer women participate in digital spaces like QWOC Love, collectively engaging in *vulnerability acts*—acts of intimate inquiry and telling—that center Black lesbian sex, love, and relationships. Vulnerability acts invite Black queer women's intimate lives into the digital public sphere to showcase the mundane and spectacular aspects of Black queer womanhood. Thus, Black queer women recast vulnerability as a generative rather than destructive force that confers recognition and belonging. Moreover, Black queer women's intimate publics are potentially subversive in that they reimagine Black queer women as intimate citizens and intimate citizenship as a project not solely tied to legal recognition.

3. KEY ANALYTICS & CONTRIBUTIONS

In this dissertation, I have presented four key analytics related to Black queer women, intimacy, and urban placemaking: intersectional placelessness, desiring technologies, Black femme pleasurescapes, and vulnerability acts.

Intersectional Placelessness

The concept of *intersectional placelessness* (Chapter 2) emphasizes how Chicago's urban landscape materially and symbolically renders Black queer women placeless, not simply as a

function of spatial marginalization or the lack of brick-and-mortar spaces for Black queer women, but also through their symbolic exclusion within existing spaces. Intersectional placelessness builds on Relph's (1976) early theorizing of placelessness, which describes the social phenomenon of being separated and alienated from place. Specifically, the concept that I forward names and describes the sense of ambiguous and contingent belonging that Black queer women experience in spaces that seemingly mark their inclusion. In Chicago, such spaces include mainstream queer spaces, emblematized by Boystown and Andersonville on the North Side, and predominantly Black neighborhoods, spaces, and events on the South and West Sides. Within these spaces, Black queer women report feeling conflicted and split, as dimensions of their identity are rendered illegible or as grounds for precluding full belonging. While intersectional placelessness captures the affective dimensions of being "out of place," I argue that this placelessness corresponds directly to the normative spatial arrangements undergirding Black and queer spaces. In doing so, this argument supports existing empirical accounts that highlight how marginalized or nondominant spaces, like gayborhoods, also operate as sites of exclusion.

Crucially, intersectional placelessness brings Black feminist epistemologies more squarely into sociological theorizing of space and place. Specifically, intersectional placelessness builds on theories and concepts within the Black feminist epistemological tradition, including Collins's (1990) theorizing of the *matrix of domination*; Crenshaw's (1991) theory of *intersectionality*; Cohen's (1999) concept of *secondary marginalization*; Purdie-Vaughn and Eibach's (2008) concept of *intersectional invisibility*; and Story's (2017) description of the *existential conundrum* of Black femme identity. As I explicated in Chapter 2, Cohen's (1999) concept of secondary marginalization and Purdie-Vaughn and Eibach's (2008) concept of intersectional invisibility

describe how communities, including marginalized ones, exclude nondominant, or non-prototypical, group members. Moreover, Story's (2017) autoethnographic account speaks to the *existential conundrum* of embodying a Black queer femme identity in spaces that arguably mark her inclusion.

I theorize the dialectic of tethered and untethered alongside intersectional placelessness to account for the two dominant approaches to placemaking that animate Black queer women's responses to placelessness. The concept of tethered, or tetheredness, captures experiences of contingent belonging and embeddedness, while the concept of untethered, and untetheredness, hinges on experiences of unbelonging and disembeddedness. Drawing on interview data, I argue that tethered storytellers strategically embed themselves within Chicago's Black communities and have limited interactions within mainstream queer spaces. This group tends to be older and partnered or married with children. Importantly, the experiences of tethered storytellers mirror the Black lesbian, gay, and bisexual women in Moore's (2011) and Brooks's (2017) works, delineating how women negotiate their multiple identity statuses to blend into the sociocultural fabric of Black community life. By contrast, the younger cohort of untethered storytellers persistently searches for intimacy and community across different spaces in ways that accentuate the limits of inclusion and belonging within Black and queer spaces. Without further data, I can only speculate as to why some Black queer women are tethered or untethered. However, I suspect that a life-course perspective could help explain why partnered/married Black queer women, especially those with children, strategically embed themselves within communities they perceive to be more conducive to Black family life. Regardless, the dialectic of tethered and untethered captures Black queer

women's diverse experiences of navigating intersectional placelessness within multiple sociospatial contexts.

Desiring Technologies

In Chapter 3, I introduce *desiring technologies* as a conceptual lens for analyzing Black queer women's use of intimate infrastructures—such as dating apps and social media platforms—for their individual intimacy pursuits. Desiring technologies has the twofold purpose of (1) expanding conceptualizations of desire to be inclusive of various forms of queer sociality and (2) indexing the ubiquity, entrenchment, and generative aspects of intimate infrastructures. In tackling the former, desiring technologies embraces a definition of desire bound to the erotic, encompassing sexual, as well as "physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual," desires and intimacies (Lorde, 1984, p.55). Thus, desiring technologies breaks away from the tendency to approach online dating and digital intimacy as social practices only oriented toward two outcomes: serious romantic relationships and casual sexual encounters. This binary approach leaves little room to explore the various desires—for romance, collectivity, and encounter—that motivate and animate Black queer women's digital intimacy practices. Regarding the second point, desiring technologies approaches dating apps and social media platforms as intimate infrastructures to counteract the analytical trend of narrowly examining Black women's relationship to digital intimacy through the lens of inequality. Instead, I find that Black queer women use intimate infrastructures as digital pathways toward queer sociality in ways that position them as desiring and desirable subjects.

As an alternative conceptual lens, desiring technologies builds on existing scholarship on queer digital intimacy, specifically Race's (2015) theorization of intimate infrastructures within gay men's online hook-up practices and McGlotten's (2013) ethnographic study of gay men's

virtual intimacies. Through the lens of intimate infrastructures, defined as "the material technologies, objects and environments that facilitate erotic encounters" (2015, p.253), Race (2015) demonstrates how gay sexual practices are "taking new forms, assuming new genres and proceeding through new avenues in their encounter with digital media" (p.255). Similarly, McGlotten (2013) explores how gay men, including himself, use digital technologies, platforms, and apps for intimate connection, including public sex, DIY porn, and online gaming. While Race (2015) explicitly focuses on gay men's sexual encounters, McGlotten (2013) argues for a more expansive understanding of intimacy that encompasses various kinds of queer sociality. Importantly, my analysis significantly departs from both studies by (1) centering the experiences of Black queer women and (2) situating digital intimacy practices within everyday life contexts. However, like Race (2015) and McGlotten (2013), this study brings an empirical analysis to bear on intimacies that operate outside of a white heterosexual matrix and within novel contexts to challenge normative assumptions about what counts as intimacy, connection, and belonging.

Black Femme Pleasurescapes

In Chapter 4, I use urban and digital ethnographic methods to explore Black queer women's party scene and theorize *Black femme pleasurescapes* as ephemeral erotic scene-spaces that center and privilege Black queer women as desiring and desirable subjects. Black femme pleasurescapes materialize at the intersection of digital and urban placemaking. Black queer party collectives use social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram to articulate the mission of their party spaces, promote their events, and grow and mobilize a network of potential partygoers. Indeed, in the absence of permanent brick-and-mortar spaces, the digital life of Black femme pleasurescapes becomes essential for their survival. Moreover, the digitality of Black femme pleasurescapes

means they are mobile and resilient, allowing them to "pop up" in diverse urban spaces. Importantly, Chicago's Black femme pleasurescapes "take up space" in predominantly Black neighborhoods and in venues catering to Black patrons, thereby *queering* Black spaces into scene-spaces that celebrate and affirm Black queer women.

The concept of Black femme pleasurescapes mirrors existing ethnographic research on Black queer placemaking (Bailey, 2014; Hunter, 2010; Lane, 2019), which collectively explicates how urban Black queers usurp and temporarily transform normative geographies into spaces conducive to Black queer sociality. Nevertheless, my analysis of Black femme pleasurescapes departs from this literature to explicitly highlight the interplay of the urban and digital in mediating Black queer spaces in the twenty-first century. I reveal how Black femme pleasurescapes live well beyond the fleeting moments in which they emerge onto the urban landscape. Therefore, despite ongoing spatial precarity, the digitality of Black femme pleasurescapes provides a level of permanency and stability to Black queer placemaking. Importantly, Black femme pleasurescapes also contributes to a growing body of scholarship in geography studies and urban sociology that embraces the "ephemeral turn" in queer and non-queer placemaking (Greene, 2021; Harris, 2020; Stillwagon & Ghaziani, 2019). However, as I argue in Chapter 4, it would be a mistake to position ephemeral placemaking as a novel cultural innovation. Indeed, as argued by Greene (2021), "Private parties, nightclubs, cookouts, and drag balls have always represented integral spaces for developing and maintaining queer Black communities" (p.146). In the face of spatial precarity driven by racism, homophobia, and wealth disparities, Black queer people have used their human capital and meager resources to curate spaces of connection, belonging, and survival.

Vulnerability Acts

In Chapter 5, I transcend the physical boundaries of Chicago to analyze how Black queer women cultivate intimate publics online. My analysis of QWOC Love, a large semi-public Facebook group, captures the *vulnerability acts* around love, sex, and relationships that Black queer women collectively engage in. Specifically, vulnerability acts index Black queer women's agentic deployment of vulnerability through two discursive practices: *daring to tell* and *longing to know*. The concept of vulnerability acts builds on the central analytic of vulnerability in Black feminist theorizing on sexuality (Higginbotham,1993; Hine, 1989; Jenkins, 2007; King, 2008). In these works, sexuality is theorized as a site of violence, wherein vulnerability indexes Black women's propensity to harm and injury. By contrast, vulnerability acts are the dialogic practices through which Black queer women's intimate publics, or affective scenes of identification and belonging, unfold (Berlant, 2008). Moreover, in showcasing the mundane and spectacular dimensions of Black queer womanhood, vulnerability acts contribute to a growing counterhegemonic discourse in which Black queer women are reimagined as intimate citizens.

Importantly, vulnerability acts also contributes to increasing research on digital intimate publics focused on the relationship between intimacy and digitality. Digital intimate publics like QWOC Love emblematize intimacy's full immersion into the digital. They remind us that "even when we are physically alone or isolated, affect travels through digital infrastructures: fibre and copper, satellites, wifi signals, laptops, smartphones, and fingertips" (Dobson et al., 2018, p.xix). That is, digital intimate publics reveal the extent to which our lives are mediated by digital technologies and underscores our affective attachments to the digital. Acts of intimate disclosure, such as the vulnerability acts I theorize, are the building blocks of intimate publics and represent

what Dobson, Robards, and Carath (2018) describe as "the 'excessive' publicisation of intimate relations and experiences" (p.6). This excessiveness is laden with subversive potential precisely because Black queer women are always already "coded as 'excessive' and pathological" (2018, p.6). Indeed, Black queer women's vulnerability acts bring to light ways of being, loving, and connecting that push against normative boundaries of erotic subjectivity and intimate citizenship.

4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN INTIMACY MAPPING

In this last section, I discuss future areas of inquiry, including lingering empirical and theoretical questions stemming from my analysis of Black queer women's intimacy practices. Specifically, these areas of inquiry include (1) examining precarity and resilience at the intersection of queer placemaking and the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) exploring the recent efforts of Black queer placemakers to transform Boystown into a racially inclusive space; (3) critically interrogating the digitality of Black queer women's intimacy; and (4) applying intimacy mapping to other groups and contexts.

Analyzing Precarity and Resilience in the Era of COVID-19

Midway through conducting research for this study, Chicago, like the rest of the United States and the world, was thrown into disarray by the COVID-19 outbreak. Across the United States, city and statewide public health directives in the form of social distancing measures prohibited indoor gatherings and large outdoor events. The social distancing mandates sparked a new deluge of questions about the role of physical spaces and face-to-face interaction in all spheres of social life, including intimate relationships, leisure, education, and work. In the realm of queer placemaking, the COVID-19 public health crisis activated old anxieties and ignited new concerns

about the health and wellbeing of the LGBTQ community, the precarity of gayborhoods, and the fate of LGBTQ bars and venues. Indeed, scholars have drawn comparisons between the COVID-19 pandemic and the HIV/AIDS crisis (Miles et al., 2021); speculated on the devastation to and resilience of gayborhoods (Anderson & Knee, 2020; Grant, Gorman-Murray & Walker, 2021; Miles et al., 2021); and commented on the centrality of digital technologies and platforms in facilitating queer sociality in the absence of physical space (Cerezo et al., 2021; Fish et al., 2020).

In Chicago, the summer months of 2020 were markedly different from 2019, during which I attended Pride parties, festivals, and gatherings for my fieldwork. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic effectively curtailed and, in many instances, wholly restricted all face-to-face gatherings salient to queer placemaking, most notably Chicago Pride 2020. Instead, Chicago's Pride season was marked by great social, economic, and political upheaval arising from the confluence of the COVID-19 public health crisis, political turmoil from the Trump administration, widespread unemployment, the economic recession, and the state-sanctioned murders of Black people that sparked local and global protests in defense of Black lives. Results from the 2020 Healthy Chicago Survey found that city households experienced a loss of social connection (51%), loss of employment or reduction in pay (47%), and increased mental health and emotional problems (33%) in response to COVID-19 (Healthy Chicago Survey, 2020). Significantly, the survey results revealed that Black Chicagoans experienced housing insecurity (38%), food insecurity (27%), and losing someone to COVID-19 (21%) at rates higher than other racial/ethnic groups. As I discuss in Chapter 4, the culmination of COVID-19, the economic recession, and fights for racial justice have significantly impacted Chicago's Black community, including Black queer placemakers whose placemaking practices have necessarily shifted and pivoted in response to these crises.

My analysis of Black queer women's intimacy practices has gleaned important insights into both the precarity and resilience of Black queer placemaking. While considerable structural and cultural constraints limit Black queer women's urban placemaking, this study demonstrates the collective agency, strategies, and practices that Black queer women use to cultivate intimate lifeworlds in online and offline contexts. In the midst of a global pandemic, Black queer women continued to engage in individual and collective intimacy practices: they fostered romantic, sexual, platonic connections on dating apps, virtually curated Black femme pleasurescapes, and participated in translocal digital spaces like QWOC Love. Indeed, Black queer women's intimate lifeworlds continued to flourish in the face of hostile and unpredictable social conditions. Nevertheless, even as we look optimistically toward a post-pandemic future, questions centered on precarity and resilience will undoubtedly animate future scholarship on queer placemaking. Given the recent closings of LGBTQ spaces, including gay and lesbian bars, scholars of queer urban placemaking will need to train their empirical gaze on placemaking at the intersection of the urban and the digital. While the bulk of this scholarship will likely examine the impact of COVID-19 on gayborhoods, future research on queer placemaking would benefit from a sustained focus on groups for whom precarity and resilience have been defining features.

Examining Efforts to Transform Queer Space

This dissertation has demonstrated how Black queer women pursue individual and collective intimacy outside mainstream queer spaces. Specifically, Chapter 4 highlights how Black queer placemakers "take up space" within predominantly Black neighborhoods and venues to *queer* Black space. However, in addition to Black femme pleasurescapes, concerted efforts are being made by Black and Latinx queer placemakers and community leaders to decenter Boystown

and the North Side. Recall, for example, Pride South Side's mission to "create programming [on the South Side] to broaden the reach of Pride celebration activities so that anyone of any income, of any color, and any identity could come and enjoy with family and friends" (*Block Club Chicago*, 2019). The act of queering Black space invites Black Chicagoans to both safely and unselfconsciously express their queerness outside a white gaze. Nathan Petithomme (2019) makes a parallel argument in an autobiographical essay about his experience attending Pride South Side's 2019 festival:

> At this festival, I saw people who looked like me and who loved like me. I vogued with people like me in a dance circle. We weren't afraid to freely express ourselves and our bodies. I didn't have to codeswitch and, most importantly, I didn't have to calculate every step I made to avoid being racially profiled. While I was there, I felt proud to be myself and of the identities that come together to make me Nathan (Petithomme, *South Side Weekly*, 2019).

Indeed, Black queer community leaders and placemakers use their platforms to create queer-affirming safe spaces on the South Side and, in doing so, collectively curate an alternative (and distinctly Black) queer scene beyond the mainstream white queer spaces of the North Side.

Queering Black space represents only one strategy Black queer placemakers use to curate Black queer spaces. Another strategy includes Black queer placemakers' efforts to transform mainstream white queer spaces into spaces that are inclusive of Black LGBTQ people. In coalition with Brave Space Alliance, a South Side-based LGBTQ social service agency that serves Black trans and gender-nonconforming people, Chicago's Black Drag Council hosted a virtual town hall event in June 2020 to "to allow space for Black drag artists to voice their concerns about past transgressions by white leadership in the community" (YouTube.com). The town hall gave Black

drag performers an opportunity "to confront white leadership and hold them accountable for their past hurtful and problematic behavior" (YouTube.com). Still, such attempts to transform Boystown into a more racially inclusive space have been punctuated by incidents that betray the persistent racial fissures within Chicago's larger LGBTQ community. For example, a week after the town hall, Brave Space Alliance withdrew from a Black Trans Lives Matter protest march after learning that the sponsoring organization, Activate Chi, planned to collaborate with the Chicago Police Department and white-owned business sponsors that "have historically upheld anti-Blackness and transphobia in the queer and trans community" (Facebook.com). In direct response to the Black Trans Lives Matter march incident, Brave Space Alliance "took up space" in Boystown by organizing a "Pride Without Prejudice/Reclaim Pride" protest march alongside other Black queer and trans community leaders. In doing so, the protest march specifically mobilized against "racism, police violence, and the obscene amount of money spent on militarized police, and a military which polices the world" (Facebook.com).

These recent events shed light on key issues in transforming mainstream queer spaces into places that actively disavow antiblackness and affirm Black queer and trans lives. These events also inspire lines of inquiry salient to the place of Black queer women in mainstream queer spaces. To what extent are efforts to transform Boystown inclusive of the needs and voices of Black queer women? Are efforts at transformation central, or peripheral, to Black queer women's placemaking, and Black queer placemaking more generally? What strategies and resources can transform Boystown and other mainstream queer spaces into spaces that actively affirm Black queer women and mitigate intersectional placelessness? Do these strategies and resources differ from those utilized to queer Black space? Moreover, how do the recent efforts to "take up space" in Boystown

mirror or deviate from historical efforts to transform mainstream queer spaces into more racially just spaces? Answering such questions would mark an important step toward better understanding the place of Black queer women within mainstream queer spaces and the coalitional placemaking efforts of Chicago's Black LGBTQ community.

Interrogating the Disciplinary Role of the Digital

In this project, I have focused on the generative aspects of digital technologies, social media platforms, and dating apps in facilitating and mediating Black queer women's intimate lifeworlds. My narrative approach toward urban and digital ethnography revealed the centrality of the digital as pathways toward individual and collective intimacy projects. In Chapter 3, I flag the ubiquity and entrenchment of intimate infrastructures in mediating Black queer women's desires for queer sociality. Likewise, in Chapter 5, I explicate the vulnerability acts that Black queer women collectively enact to cultivate intimate publics online. Indeed, Black queer women engage in intimacy practices at the intersection of the urban and the digital in ways that circumvent the problem of spatial marginalization. At the same time, such a conclusion risks painting the digital in utopic terms that downplays or fails to address the problematic aspects of digital intimacy.

These chapters invite further inquiry into the structural arrangements that undergird digital technologies, social media platforms, and dating apps. Specifically, just as urban spaces enable, constrain, and regulate intimacies, future scholarship would benefit from interrogating the disciplinary role of the digital in regulating Black queer women's intimacies. For example, regarding Black queer women's vulnerability acts, critical media scholars have questioned the extent to which social actors *willfully* share their personal information on digital platforms (Barassi, 2019; Cavacas, 2019; Draper & Turow, 2019). As Giesking (2020) poignantly states,

"When we use 'free' sites and apps, we give away our data, and, in many ways, we give away our rights as that data is analyzed and patterned to manipulate our emotions, relationality, and sense of self—a process of 'digital dispossession'" (p.237). Indeed, scholars argue that acts of disclosure, and digital participation in general, must be understood within the context of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019).[23] For example, in theorizing the concept of datafied citizenship, Barassi (2019) argues that "surveillance capitalism depends on the systematic coercion of digital participation, which forces citizens to comply with data technologies and give up their personal data" (p.414). Scholars have theorized this coercion as *digital resignation* and point to the *privacy paradox* in digital participation: while individuals say they care about information privacy, they behave in ways that contradict this claim (Draper & Turow, 2019; Hargittai & Marwick, 2016).

In the realm of digital intimacy, issues of surveillance capitalism, datafied citizenship, and digital resignation are all the more complicated given how individuals approach social media platforms and dating apps with desires that necessarily involve intimate disclosure. Thus, in applying these concepts to the study of Black queer women's digital intimacy practices, future scholarship should explore the following lines of inquiry. To what extent are Black queer women *willfully* sharing intimate aspects of their lives on private, for-profit platforms? Do concerns over exploitation and surveillance figure into Black queer women's decisions to engage in digital intimacy practices? Moreover, how do Black queer women negotiate and balance concerns over privacy with their desires for intimacy? Attending to these questions is a critical step toward mapping the nuances of the digital as both a facilitative and regulatory force in the context of Black queer women's intimacy.

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[23] Zuboff (2019) defines surveillance capitalism as an economic system dependent upon the commodification of personal data with the core purpose of profit-making.

Applying Intimacy Mapping to Other Groups and Contexts

In my analysis of Black queer women's intimacy, I developed the intimacy mapping framework to explicitly address the theoretical and empirical gaps that render Black queer women absent and invisible within extant literature on queer urban placemaking. Nevertheless, intimacy mapping is a portable conceptual and methodological framework that can be applied to groups and contexts beyond Black queer women in Chicago. Indeed, while my analysis focuses on Black queer women, it is important to note that I conducted several interviews with non-Black queer women of color and non-binary people of color, specifically Latinx and Asian and Pacific Islander (API) respondents. Their interviews tell a similar story of placelessness, as they, too, experience ambiguous and contingent belonging within racialized spaces and mainstream queer spaces. For example, Elena (Mexican queer woman, early twenties) describes how she almost never encounters people of color in queer spaces: "I don't see a lot of POC in queer spaces, it's not that it doesn't exist, it's just that I don't see it as much." Latinx and API storytellers also expressed a strong desire to connect with other queer women and people of color and almost exclusively used social media platforms and dating apps to cultivate various intimate connections. Based on my fieldwork during Chicago Pride 2019, there is also evidence to suggest that Latinx and API queer placemakers are similarly cultivating ephemeral erotic scene-spaces outside of Boystown and, sometimes, in collaboration with Black queer placemakers. For example, the CommuniTEA Pride Kick-Off event mentioned in Chapter 4 was jointly organized by Black and Latinx queer party collectives and drew in a diverse crowd of queer people of color. Despite these findings, a more focused analysis of Latinx and API queer women's intimacy practices is necessary to capture

points of convergence and divergence between the experiences of Black queer women and other queer women of color in Chicago.

Future applications of intimacy mapping would benefit from analyses of LGBTQ people of color in Chicago and elsewhere. For example, we might ask about the extent to which queer men of color experience intersectional placelessness in racialized spaces and mainstream queer spaces. Existing studies suggest that rather than being completely absent from gayborhoods, queer men of color are (hyper)visible in these spaces. That is, rather than experiencing complete exclusion within gayborhoods, scholars have pointed to the sexual racism and fetishization that Black, Latinx, and API gay men endure in gay erotic spaces (Green, 2015; Han & Choi, 2018). Therefore, a comparative approach to intimacy mapping—specifically juxtaposing the experiences of queer women and men of color—would provide critical insight into the unique and shared experiences of cultivating intimate lifeworlds within urban-digital spheres.

Conclusion

In moving beyond invisibility to map Black queer women's intimacies within Chicago's urban-digital sphere, the scope and findings of this study address important theoretical and empirical gaps in extant research on queer geographies and intimacy in the digital era. Indeed, sociological literature on queer urban placemaking has focused primarily on gayborhoods and the experiences of white gay men in ways that render Black queer women completely absent. Although these analyses are crucial to understanding the changing landscape of mainstream queer spaces, this omission obscures how non-white queer subjects are systematically excluded from and marginalized within gayborhoods and how they cultivate intimate lifeworlds outside these spaces. In focusing on Black queer women's placemaking practices, the empirical scope of this study

moves us beyond the limits of Chicago's gayborhood to trace Black queer women's experiences in and across Black and queer spaces. This study also contributes to the extant literature on sexuality in the digital era by mapping the relationship and interplay between the urban and digital in facilitating Black queer women's intimacies. Finally, this study contributes to understandings of the increasingly important role that digital technologies play in mitigating the spatial marginalization that racialized and gendered queer subjects encounter in their pursuit of pleasure, intimacy, and community. Therefore, these findings speak to larger theoretical concerns regarding the ubiquity and entrenchment of digital technologies in mediating intimacy in the twenty-first century. Moreover, the stories shared in this study illuminate the creativity and resilience of Black queer women to adapt, usurp, and cultivate spaces for community, friendship, romance, and the erotic in otherwise hostile and exclusionary geographies.

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APPENDIX A: Descriptive Statistics of Storytellers

	N	% of Sample
Race		
Black	23	63.8
Biracial Black	6	16.6
Afro-Latinx	1	2.7
Latinx	4	11.1
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	5.5
Gender		
Cisgender Woman	29	80.5
Non-Binary	5	13.8
Gender Curious	2	5.5
Sexuality		
Queer	13	36.1
Lesbian	15	41.6
Gay	4	11.1
Bisexual	1	2.7
Pansexual	2	5.5
Questioning	1	2.7
Age		
20-25	5	13.8
26-30	9	25
31-35	6	16.6
36-40	3	8.3
41-45	4	11.1
46-50	4	11.1
51-55	2	5.5
55+	3	8.3

APPENDIX A: Descriptive Statistics of Storytellers

	N	% of Sample
Relationship Status		
Married	6	16.6
Partnered	16	44.4
Dating	8	22.2
Single	6	16.6
Residence		
South Side	5	13.8
West Side	3	8.3
North Side	11	30.5
Downtown Loop	3	8.3
South Suburbs	7	19.4
West Suburbs	5	13.8
Out of State	2	5.5
Education		
High School	2	5.5
Some College	7	19.4
Bachelor's Degree	16	44.4
Advanced Degree	11	30.5
Income		
10K-20K	3	8.3
20K-30K	10	27.7
30K-40K	4	11.1
40K-50K	8	22.2
50K-75K	7	19.4
75K+	4	11.1

APPENDIX B: Storyteller Interview Guide

1. Situating Life in Chicago

- What does a typical day look like for you?
- From what you described, what are the most important aspects of your life right now?
- Tell me about the people you interact the most with. How would you describe your relationships with them?
- How long have you been living in Chicago? If you moved here from someplace else, what brought you to the city?
- Tell me about your neighborhood. What do you like the most about it? Is there anything you dislike about your neighborhood? Have you lived anywhere else in the city?

2. Describing Identity & Subjectivity

- Thinking about the various aspects of your identity, how would you describe yourself?
- How do you describe yourself to the people in your life? (i.e., family, friends, intimate partners, colleagues, etc.)

3. Mapping Affirming Spaces

- Thinking about specific spaces in Chicago, where do you go to feel most affirmed in your identity? What makes this an affirming space? What does it feel like to be affirmed?
- Are there spaces that affirm some aspects of your identity but not all?

4. Mapping Less Affirming Spaces

- Are there any spaces that you maybe thought would be affirming but were in fact not? What about the space made you feel like it was not affirming? Who is affirmed in those spaces?

5. Describing Perceptions of Queer Spaces in Chicago

- Can you tell me about Chicago’s queer spaces? Can you describe how you learned about those spaces and your experiences in them?

- Do you spend much time in Boystown or Andersonville? If so, what brings you to those neighborhoods? If not, what keeps you away?

6. Mapping Connections to Black Queer Women

- In thinking about your identity, how important is it for you to connect with people like you?
- Where do you go when you want to connect with other Black queer women of color or queer women of color?
- Tell me about a time when you meaningfully connected with other Black queer women while living in the city.

7. Mapping Pathways to Intimacy

- Thinking about your intimate life, what opportunities have you had to cultivate relationships, friendships, or other kinds of connections?
- Where do Black queer women go to meaningfully express their sexualities?

We've talked a lot about the people and places you interact with in Chicago. Now, I want to transition into talking about how your experiences using digital apps and platforms like social media and dating apps. To get started, you mentioned that you use [name of digital apps and platforms].

8. Describing Perceptions and Experiences Using Social Media

- Tell me about when you first started using social media.
- What social media platforms are most meaningful to you? Why?
- How would you describe your interactions on [names of social media platforms]?

9. Describing Perceptions and Experiences Using Dating Apps

- What prompted you to start using mobile dating apps?

- Tell me about your experiences using [names of mobile dating apps] in Chicago.

10. Describing Digital Intimacy Practices

- Going back to your identity, are those platforms and apps affirming of your identity?
- Can you tell me about a time when you meaningfully connected with other Black queer women online?
- In addition to the platforms and apps that you mentioned, are there any other digital spaces that are meaningful to you? What kinds of activities or interactions do you have in those spaces?
- What do you like most about interacting in digital spaces? What do you like least about interacting online?

11. Mapping Subjective Relationship to Chicago

- To end our interview, can you describe to me what it feels like to be you in Chicago?

APPENDIX C: Recruitment Flyer

SEEKING QUEER WOMEN OF COLOR IN CHICAGO

Do you identify as a queer/ non-straight/ same-gender loving/ lesbian/ bisexual/ pansexual woman of color?

Do you live in the Greater Chicago area?

Are you between the ages of 18 and 50?

OUR TEAM IS CONDUCTING A PROJECT ON INTIMACY & COMMUNITY AMONG BLACK + BROWN QUEER WOMEN IN CHICAGO.

IF YOU'D LIKE TO PARTICIPATE IN A 1-HOUR INTERVIEW, PLEASE EMAIL DOMINIQUE AT CHICAGOQWOC@GMAIL.COM

Northwestern University

Principal Investigator:
Dr. Celeste Watkins-Hayes