# Introduction

## "It Is a Part of Southern Life": Snapping Beans with SBQLWP Uncovers a Racialized Sexual Queer Geography

In the American South, the kitchen fed our bodies and souls, planting the seed for our Southernness. The kitchen acted as our first classroom, an intergenerational space for us to learn from grandma and 'em. We heard stories about our families, communities, and ancestors. Preparing food gave us a chance to bond with our families while acting as the medium for transmitting knowledge from one generation to the next. Similar to other methods of food preparation, snapping green beans (what Southern folks call snap beans) established dedicated time for granddaughters to sit with and learn from grandma and 'em as we prepared for an intimate family meal or family feast. Snapping green beans with grandma and 'em reconnect us to a Southern place and space, where we would engage in a Southern activity and hear grandma's narrative of the South.

As E. Patrick Johnson states, Southern Black queer folks are reared in the same country kitchens and on the same front porches as our heterosexual siblings, cousins, and extended family.[1] Black queer lesbians raised in the South, and even those who visited the South, are part of that Southern practice of snapping beans. We, too, are fixtures in these Southern kitchens and front porches. In those moments, we were not outsiders but integral parts of a process to feed our families. Discussions of snapping beans uncover this multifaceted Southern reality for SBQLWP. We always existed in grandma's kitchen, soaking up the same lessons as our heterosexual cousins. While we are snapping beans with grandma and 'em, we are snapping in silence, engaging in the Southern culture of silence, and hiding our truth. Discussions of snapping beans uncover the shame and condemnation rooted



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in the religiosity that permeates the South. The chore of snapping beans conjures up the trauma of being judged by the Southern Black community. Memories of snapping beans also became a space of acceptance and belonging, where the act of snapping beans reconnected us to a Southern practice that bypasses any level of difference. While snapping beans, we felt like we were a part of Southern life, culture, and community. In this communal practice, we have a chance to be Southern and reconnect our Southern roots. Snapping beans reminds us that the South provides a sense of nostalgia and peace while also reminding us of the trauma experienced in the region. This act affirms our regional identity, invoking narratives of affirmation and reclamation. Ultimately, we can take the lessons learned while snapping beans and apply them to our Black queer communities.

There were only a few moments that I recall snapping beans with my paternal grandmother. But the moments I did so, we were sitting on her screened-in back porch, which protected us from the bugs and other outside elements. She passed away before I officially came out as a queer lesbian woman, but I always felt like she would still embrace me and maybe even have me snap beans with her to talk about it. I believe she would use the snapping beans as an opportunity for me to feel safe and heard as a queer lesbian woman. That is what snapping beans is about for us Southern Black queer lesbian women—an opportunity to feel like we belonged in the South and our existence validated. While my paternal grandma was a church-going woman, heavily involved in our family church in Sumter, South Carolina, her love for her family surpassed any form of phobia. She had a way of validating her daughters and granddaughters while also making sure we kept God and family first in our lives. She encouraged all of us to be independent, whether through thought or action. She encouraged us to pave our path. I believe that would have been true even in terms of one's sexuality.

While I conceptualized snapping beans in a theoretical way, I asked interlocutors to recall their memories and experiences of snapping beans. The practice became the entryway to discuss the South and all its complexities. Snapping beans may seem like a simple chore, but it consists of so much more for us: the actual growing and picking of the green bean, cooking the green bean, and canning the green bean. These responses prove that snapping beans was a systemic process, including practices before and after the beans were snapped. Additional discussions focused on the ways snapping beans established a significant racial and gendered practice of trust, intimacy, and vulnerability. Through this process, I recognized how snapping beans has always acted as an oral history method to capture the experiences of Southern Black women and SBQLWP. With that in mind,

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the practice of snapping beans relates to SBQLWP in three ways. The activity of snapping green beans (1) reconnects us to the South itself, (2) uncovers the significance of establishing a safe space for us to connect with other Southern Black women, and (3) represents a qualitative method of collecting oral narratives from SBQLWP.

## Snapping Beans Reconnects SBQLWP to the South

Snapping beans is as simple as it is intricate. It helps us understand the complex backdrop of the South. Discussions of snapping beans became an entry point to discuss the South and lead to conversations about how SBQLWP define the South. Even if the interlocutor did not snap beans or have memories of doing so, they agreed that the practice represented the various dimensions of Southern life. The act of snapping beans is wrapped up in the fabric of the South, representing a Southern way of living. As Maezah mentioned, it is part of life in the South. The green bean itself is more than a vegetable in the South. It connects to the agriculture and rurality of the South and represents a sense of belonging for Southern Black persons. Ultimately, it connects us to the root of who we are, reminding us of a historical and cultural continuum that exists in this region. Snapping beans cultivates Southern identity and exemplifies the best of Southern life. It returns us to our Southern selves and reminds us of Southern life.

Snapping beans is part of a Southern practice and tradition that no one truly questions as Southern. It becomes part of a Southern tradition that connects everyone to the South, regardless of race, gender, class, or sexuality. No matter whom I spoke to about snapping beans, persons in or from the South would tell me stories of the times they snapped, cooked, and stored green beans with a maternal figure. Memories of snapping beans brings up fond memories of the South that extend beyond the narrative of hurt and trauma based on difference. In typical conversations with Southern Black folks about the South, there are usually narratives of slavery, lynching, Jim and Jane Crow, and other methods of dehumanization exclusive to the South. But snapping beans transforms us into a Southern space that connects us to a Southern life that is not connected to that regional racialized trauma. The memories of snapping beans reconnect us to our Southern identities and connect Southern folks to a sense of homeplace and belonging, regardless of difference.

One of the liveliest conversations I had was with Cassie, an interlocutor from Birmingham, Alabama. While all the conversations with my interlocutors were powerful, Cassie kept me laughing. She had the charm

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and wit of a Southern Black woman, with a strong Southern accent that made all her words pour slow and steady like honey. Although she did not recall snapping beans with anyone, she recognized it as a unique Southern cultural practice. As Cassie stated during our conversation, "I don't hear folks up North talkin' about snapping beans!" Whether or not interlocutors participated in the activity of snapping beans, it is the consensus that snapping green beans and the method of cooking the beans are uniquely Southern. While green beans are not distinct to the South, we cultivate and cook them differently. In other American regions, green beans may be microwaved or sautéed, but Southern folks incorporate additional steps to make green beans a savory side dish with variations of pork and chicken stock that creates a stew-like flavoring that espouses comfort. And it tastes amazing with homemade skillet cornbread.

SBQLWP agree that snapping beans neither starts nor ends at the colander of green beans. Cooking or preparing any meal in the South consists of a process that occurs well before they get in the bowl and long after they have been snapped, beginning with the growth of the green bean and ending with them either canned, frozen, or cooked. Similar to making homemade biscuits or pound cake, there are lengthy steps to snapping beans. Even though SBQLWP mentioned picking the green bean or knowing where to find it, a process precedes the picking of the bean. Many stories of snapping beans transport us to the rural South. Sticking true to Southern tradition, the process of snapping green beans includes a brief discussion of how the green beans are grown. Green beans (or snap beans) can grow from a bush or a pole that has longer, more mature beans with a vine in the middle that comes out at the top. SBQLWP discussed picking green beans from both a pole and a bush. Pole green beans "climb" as they grow, becoming a vine and requiring support in the form of a wooden pole. Pole beans require more attention and maintenance than bush beans. Pole beans should be set up either by trellises or cattle panels to allow the beans to climb as they grow,[2] which provides stability, making the beans easier to pick. In contrast, bush green beans are more compact, grow closer to the ground, and do not require support. Unlike other pole beans such as navy bean, pinto, or kidney beans, green beans continue producing even after picking them. Farmers would encourage people to remove the green bean once it has matured to allow other beans to grow. Once the bean is removed, that stem creates the energy to produce more pods.[3] This vine is the part that connects the bean to the host pole or bush from which it grew.

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The practice of snapping beans reminded SBQLWP of a rural Southern landscape attached to our families and communities. Cayce discussed a family friend who had a garden where they would pick the green beans. Angel's father grew green beans in Port Royal, Virginia. Later in her life when she moved to this rural Virginia town to take care of her elderly family, she mentioned how her grandfather had a farm in Maryland where they would pick the green beans to prepare to cook or store for future use. Janessa connected the snapping of green beans to her grandmother's community in rural Georgia. She traced the growing of green beans to her grandmother's garden in Meriweather, Georgia, where they grew on a bush in her yard. While she grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, an urban Southern location, she recalled memories of her grandmother also getting green beans from her uncle's farm in Monticello, Georgia, about fifty miles southeast of Atlanta. She mentioned how her family in Atlanta got many of their vegetables from the family farmland in Monticello. Alice Walker would be pleased to hear of how these interlocutors connected snapping beans—and their Southern identities—to their family's garden.

Subsequently, there is a process of how a person snaps the green bean. When snapping beans, we are removing a vine that connects the bean to the pole or bush and snapping the beans in half for faster cooking. The name "snap beans" was derived from the snap sound the bean makes when removing the tip and snapping it in half. The strength and maturity of the green bean is determined by the distinctiveness of the snap. The snap typically indicates the freshness of the bean—I know I have a fresh, strong bean based on how loud the snap is. The rhythm of snapping the green beans becomes a spiritual meditation. We let the snap of the beans speak to us. Once snapped, the beans are cooked in a stew-like side dish with certain essential ingredients, such as chicken stock, pork, and onions. Southern Black folks know that green beans must have some meat to be a legitimate side dish. Pork adds flavor to the green beans, whether it is in the form of ham hocks, bacon, fatback, ham bone, or streak o' lean.[4] The addition of meat to green beans has deep historical significance, stemming from the scarce access Blacks had to certain parts of meat during enslavement. Because of the legacy of enslavement, we learned how to create beauty from the scraps. We always created so much out of a little.

Perhaps the most shocking part of my conversation with interlocutors was discussing the process of canning and storing green beans. I remember pressing more about it when Angel mentioned it. While visiting her father's

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family in Port Royal, Virginia, during the summer, she recalled the process of canning beans outside. After that conversation, I made sure to ask interlocutors about the canning process. Cayce mentioned the process of storing the green beans after cooking them, whether freezing them in a freezer bag or canning them for future use. Sunshine discussed canning the beans with smoked pork to maintain the flavor. The salt from the pork also functions as a natural preservative. My mouth watered just thinking of that. When I originally envisioned the notion of snapping beans as a project, I limited it to the process of growing and snapping the bean for the purposes of cooking only. I did not consider the methods for preserving the green bean. But when interlocutors mentioned it, I realized that finding methods of storing or canning vegetables is essential to Southern life and needs to be discussed in the context of snapping green beans.

In discussions of snapping beans, SBQLWP brought up the complexities of defining the South, uncovering the ways snapping beans connect us to both a rural and urban South. Memories of snapping beans helps us diversify the Southern landscape. It introduces a multifaceted Southern landscape and identity that sits within this juxtaposition of an rural and urban South. Many SBQLWP discussed their connection to snapping beans as part of their realities when visiting rural Southern areas. SBQLWP who knew about snapping beans would speak of it in the context of rural or agricultural spaces. In visiting these rural Southern spaces, we learn that our Southern identity has both urban and rural components. Southern Black folks in urban areas or towns would return to rural spaces as a reminder of our Southern and Southern Black roots. Thinking of this project, I was transported to the rural landscape of South Carolina, where life was slower than where my family lived. But my understanding of the South was shaped by both these landscapes. Snapping beans connects us to a racialized rurality that may get lost in Southern metropolitan spaces. Snapping beans uncovers our complex Southern and Southern Black identities that are not limited to a single landscape. SBQLWP made it clear that the green bean connects us to our multifaceted identities and homeplace.

As some explained, snapping beans was what "country folks" did. Some SBQLWP referred to themselves as "city girls," which seems like the opposite of what is considered Southern. This statement of perceived Southern rurality, interlocutors made it clear that the South represents myriad landscapes outside of what is considered rural or "country." This discussion reminds others, namely those who do not live in the South, that the South is more than a landscape of rurality and backwardness. These comments align with Christo-

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pher Stapel's concept of "metropolitan imaginaries,"[5] where we often juxtapose a seemingly normal landscape based on the presence of urbanization and modernization as "normal," while the rural spaces are considered "backward." This perceived backwardness exists in the cultural norms and the method of economic production. Geographic locations are considered normal based on how close they are to a modernized, urban society. In this case, urban spaces are equated to industrialization and thought of as a better location to live than rural, agricultural societies. In our discussion of snapping beans, SBQLWP reiterate metropolitan imaginaries, exposing the South as a multidimensional place and space. They contend that the South is more than just a landscape of backwardness and rurality. Discussions of snapping beans dispelled the myth that rurality is representative of all Southern life.

This comment about snapping beans being a "country thing" makes it clear that the South represents both urban and rural spaces. Metrocentrism dispels the myth that the South is a monolith. In the discussion of snapping beans, SBQLWP uncover how the South is a complex space outside of rurality. The SBQLWP I spoke to also made sure I understood that simply because they were Southern did not mean they were "backward." After all, there are rural, agricultural, country areas throughout America. The South does not necessarily have a monopoly on rurality. However, based on this metropolitan imagination, the South is typically perceived as synonymous with rurality and backwardness, disregarding the fact that the region has several urban spaces. SBQLWP spoke of an urban South, such as Atlanta, Georgia; Richmond, Virginia; Orlando, Florida; Charlotte, North Carolina; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and New Orleans, Louisiana. These urban spaces are uniquely situated in the South and provide distinctive affirming spaces for Southern Black queer folks. There is a level of freedom provided to us in these urban spaces. SBQLWP dispelled this metropolitan imagination that the South is backward, sharing that the South contains queer and Black queer-affirming spaces. This does not mean that SBQLWP do not bring this practice into their Southern urban spaces or that they no longer snap beans once they leave the South. I know I still snap beans in my Southern urban location. Snapping beans reminds us of the multifaced landscape that encompasses the South.

## Snapping Beans Creates a Safe Space for SBQLWP

During my conversations with interlocutors, I would ask where they would snap green beans in the house. SBQLWP mentioned snapping beans in the

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kitchen, porch (front and back porches), carports, and living rooms. Endesha mentioned how the women sat in a semi-circle, snapping beans in the carport. All of these spaces are intimate for Southern Black women, away from the watchful eyes of others. While not luxurious (Endesha mentions with the hot carport), these locations are private, culturally designated for Southern Black women. These physical spaces in the Southern home offer intimacy—and therefore a sense of vulnerability—for Southern Black women. Yet this memory of safety becomes complex for SBQLWP. In the context of our race and gender, these spaces provided the freedom for us to be our authentic selves. There was a racialized safety, where we were safe as Southern Black women. Although these spaces were not perceived as queer affirming, SBQLWP were introduced to the importance of establishing safe spaces in the South. When actualizing our queer lesbian identities, we attempt to emulate this model of safety in the South.

The practice of snapping beans represents this feminine power disguised in a seemingly mundane chore. Snapping beans represent a feminine, spiritual Southern practice for Southern Black women, creating a safe space for vulnerability and intimacy. We often connect intimacy in the context of romantic relationships. But for Southern Black women, it is more than that. Intimacy is a vulnerability in practice. Our first lessons of intimacy took place with grandma and 'em. The act of snapping beans establishes this intimacy with other women. Even if done in silence, this practice establishes a safe space to be vulnerable. Intimacy is not always derived from vulnerability in conversation but also from moments of stillness and quiet, an opportunity for reflection and pause. Janessa recalls the silence as a form of this intimacy. She remembered snapping beans on her grandma's porch, with no music or talking, simply the sound of street noise and the beans snapping. Even though no conversation took place, the intimacy with her grandma on that porch still resonates with her. When Southern Black women gathered to complete the chore of snapping beans, there is a feminine communal power that is intergenerational and shifts our consciousness. The activity of snapping beans ignites this power when Southern Black women congregate over a bowl of green beans. Southern Black women create that space to share their stories and opinions, establishing this trust circle and feminine communal power. This vulnerability shows a level of trust we have with other Southern Black women. SBQLWP incorporate this reality when we actualize and conceptualize our sexualities in the South. SBQLWP adopt the trust and feminine communal power gained while snapping beans to create safe spaces for us to articulate our stories of harm and reconciliation.

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The act of snapping beans introduced SBQLWP to a safe space where we can be intimate, articulate, and actualize our queer lesbian identities.

These moments snapping beans gave SBQLWP our first lesson of authenticity. Because snapping beans is a slow, time-consuming process, we hear church and neighborhood gossip, family secrets, and other personal accounts from our maternal figures. Some discussions are trivial, but they expose how our maternal figures conceptualized the world around them. In this space, grandma and ’em were free to express themselves, we witnessed them share their authentic selves. SBQLWP desire to go back to this authentic Southern space, where we felt safe, even if we were silent about our sexual identities. Creating and establishing a safe, authentic space is significant for SBQLWP. For us, coming out as queer is an exercise of authenticity that we recognized as significant during our snapping beans sessions with grandma and ’em. Existing in spaces where our presence is not considered a problem, the process of building and maintaining safe, authentic spaces ensure the protection of queer persons. In some cases, having these safe spaces to be authentic is the difference between life and death. Snapping beans with grandma and ’em introduced us to the potential of creating these safe authentic spaces for SBQLWP to be intimate and vulnerable and a chance for us to share our lives and exist. Whether grandma and ’em realized it or not, they were ultimately engaged in the Black feminist and womanist practice of life sharing and the vernacular.

Black feminist and womanist scholars recognize the importance of sharing intimate stories about our lives as the epitome of identity politics, the idea that the personal was deeply and undeniably political. They highlight that their intersectional identities—namely, being Black and woman—fueled their desire to place these personal experiences into public discord. Snapping beans is connected to the identity politics of Southern Black women, fitting in the context of the Combahee River Collective process of “life sharing,”[6] and Layli Phillips’s notion of the “vernacular.”[7] These Black feminist and womanist frameworks describe what happens when Southern Black women and SBQLWP are snapping beans. Both life sharing and the vernacular were intended to represent one’s identity consciousness and reveal larger systems of oppression that affect their daily lives. Discussions of snapping beans with grandma and ’em transport us to moments of life sharing and engaging in the vernacular, discovering how their daily lives uncover the patriarchy, sexism, and heterosexism in the South. Sharing these seemingly personal, daily experiences while snapping beans represents a Black feminist and womanist process.

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The Combahee River Collective (CRC) theory of life sharing is the epitome of Black women's identity politics, a conscious-building exercise introduced by Black lesbian socialist women. The CRC's life-sharing practice integrates a consciousness-raising activity rooted in the seemingly personal life experiences of Black women: "In the process of consciousness-raising, actually life sharing, we began to recognize the commonality of our experiences, and, from the sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression."[8] In sharing these experiences, Black women found themselves in the stories of others. While they had these experiences dealing with interlocking systems of oppressions, they claimed they had "no way of conceptualizing what was so apparent to us, what we knew was really happening."[9] They recognized the significance of Black women sharing their experiences with sexual, racial, and gender marginalization to raise individual and collective consciousness and uncover how these experiences represent racial, gender, class, and sexual oppressive realities. The practice of snapping beans engages in what the CRC defines as life sharing and, in turn, a level of consciousness raising for SBQLWP. In addition, this life sharing aided us in gaining a deeper understanding of what it means to be a Black queer lesbian in the South. The processes of life sharing and consciousness raising were ultimately at work during my conversations with interlocutors, we were metaphorically snapping beans together.

Phillips uses several tenets in defining womanism, which she identifies as the "everyday—everyday people and everyday life."[10] She discusses how the soul of womanism focuses on the masses and the betterment of all humanity. In this context, she contends that this relates to the "unifying reality that all people have 'everyday' lives and that elite status is something that cloaks this reality more than supplants it."[11] Incorporating the vernacular was an essential component to womanism because it evaluates the seemingly personal experiences of the layperson, regardless of education or societal status. It focuses less on a consciousness-raising effort of the elite and formally educated and unveils the daily struggles of the masses. In the vernacular, we center the experiences of grandma and 'em, who may not have the academic or professional vernacular, but understand how systemic oppressions affect their lives. The vernacular of the masses may sound like the Southern grandma with a fourth-grade education or the Southern Black auntie who could not attend college. The language may be grammatically broken with a thick Southern drawl. They may not have had the educational language to articulate their experiences, but they are able to speak

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about their racial and gendered experiences with the South in the Southern vernacular of the masses.

The process of life sharing and adopting a vernacular framing is not just a personal experience shared while snapping beans but a chance to create a safe space for SBQLWP. Life sharing and vernacular allow SBQLWP the opportunity to name the significance of these personal experiences. Interlocutors in this work spoke of their lives, in a vernacular of the masses, to address this intraracial conflict, where their daily experiences shed light on the tension that exists between themselves and Southern Black heterosexual persons. The act of snapping beans helps us make sense of and articulate our Southern experiences.

## Snapping Beans Establishes an Oral History Method and an African/Black Feminist Epistemology

Initially, when thinking of the method I would use to capture these stories, I entertained the idea of actually sitting down and snapping beans with interlocutors. However, during the time I planned to interview interlocutors, the realities of COVID-19 suddenly halted all human interactions. The pandemic hindered me from physically snapping beans with interlocutors. But when I started talking about snapping beans with interlocutors, our conversations acted as that communal moment. I was able to retrieve oral histories from them. We were engaging in the same practice of transmitting and obtaining oral histories without the actual bowl of green beans to snap. With that in mind, I realized that the act of snapping beans became a qualitative research method to gain oral narratives from Southern individuals. Snapping beans is a Southern qualitative method because the practice is essential for transmitting oral histories. Southerners know that when green beans are being snapped, oral histories are being shared. Discussions of snapping beans often triggered vulnerable and intimate conversations, providing authentic oral histories. Using this method does not require real green beans but an opportunity to obtain oral histories using memories of a Southern practice. With that in mind, this method does require interlocutors to connect to a specific place and space. After all, these narratives are provided while metaphorically snapping beans, a deeply Southern practice. Snapping beans became a research method to expose the lived experiences of SBQLWP.

Grandma and 'em could have easily trimmed the green beans with a knife. But grabbing the basket and sitting at the kitchen table or back

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porch provides an opportunity to transmit knowledge to the next generation. This transmission of knowledge acts as a Southern Black epistemology, where Southern persons learn lessons of resistance and resilience. In this epistemology, we gain ways of knowing of how to navigate in the South. The process of snapping beans is a chance for us to gain an understanding of how grandma and 'em fought against the intersectional oppressions they experienced in the South. From these oral narratives, SBQLWP also obtain methods of resilience that they can employ as they find ways to exist and thrive in the South. These lessons provided SBQLWP the methods and lessons of resistance to combat sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia in the South. SBQLWP learned how the oral narratives of resistance from grandma and 'em laid the foundation for us to find ways to exist and thrive in what we would later call the Black queer lesbian South.

With that in mind, the process of snapping beans establishes that learning space where we learn about oppressions in the South as well as methods of resistance and resilience our maternal figures used. SBQLWP take these lessons as we negotiate our queer and lesbian actuality. For many of us, these oral narratives provided the footprint for how to exist and even thrive in a contentious region. We gain lessons about resilience and the importance of establishing a community. The act of snapping beans helped me appreciate the lessons from my maternal figures. I assumed that appreciation came from growing older, but it was a result of actualizing my queer lesbian identity. While snapping beans, these maternal figures used this Southern Black epistemology to teach resilience and strength. While they may not have provided lessons on how to survive as a Southern Black queer lesbian woman, their oral histories allowed the opportunity for us to find methods of resistance and resilience that can be applied as we actualize our queerness in the South. If my fraternal grandma can raise six children in the rural, segregated South, then surely I can survive as a Black queer lesbian woman in the South. I could adopt the lessons of resilience from my maternal grandma, who found a way to raise five children after leaving an abusive, alcoholic husband. The oral narratives from my maternal figures taught me lessons of authenticity, tenacity, and fortitude that helped me actualize my queerness in the South. While grandma and 'em may not be able to provide much information about how to navigate sexual differences in the South, snapping beans creates an opportunity for transmitting knowledge of resistance and liberation. The oral tradition of passing down information about resilience and resistance for future generations is essential to our survival.

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In this context, snapping beans and the oral history method that exist in this Southern kitchen represent what Patricia Hill Collins calls the African/Black feminist epistemology. Because Black women exist within a racial and gender standpoint, they have a unique epistemological standard that reflects their African/Black selves and their gender identities. One of these practices of the African/Black feminist epistemology includes wisdom from maternal figures, who are viewed as epistemological agents, not simply persons with anecdotal information. African/Black feminist epistemology understands the ways that oral transmission of knowledge has epistemological value. This epistemology relies on lived experiences and acts as a criterion of meaning, the use of dialogue, the ethic of personal accountability, and the ethic of care.[12] These elements are employed while snapping beans. When snapping beans with grandma and 'em, we are engaging in dialogue, establishing community through accountability and care. Ultimately, this dialogue has epistemological elements that SBQLWP employ as we navigate our lives.

Snapping beans represent a practice of knowledge formation rooted in the experiences of Southern Black women. It reiterates the ways Southern Black women act as epistemological agents, a manifestation of an African/Black feminist epistemology. Epistemology is traditionally viewed as the process of creating and disseminating new knowledge. The Afrocentric approach places the history of African persons throughout the diaspora at the center of analysis. The feminist approach places women/gender construction at the center of all analysis. In this context, Southern Black women are those knowledge creators, as they center both a diasporic/Black and gender perspective to their understanding of Southern life. As Collins discussed, this knowledge from grandma and 'em is frequently taken for granted, often dismissed as solely anecdotal with no real foundation in epistemological practices. In traditional academic epistemology, what Collins notes as the Eurocentric knowledge validation process, knowledge must be evaluated by a group of subjective experts and must have some level of academic credibility to be epistemological agents. In the South, however, Southerners know that grandma's wisdom is knowledge. Southern Black women do not disregard those small moments with grandma and 'em in the kitchen, on the back porch, or in family communal spaces because these individuals shift our lives somehow, even in subtle ways. For Southern Black women, the kitchen and snapping beans is a Black feminist epistemological space. Snapping beans establishes this epistemology and a Southern gender politic used to transmit knowledge to Southern Black women and SBQLWP.

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According to Collins, this African/Black feminist epistemology makes Black women agents of knowledge formation through truth telling. She notes, "The existence of a self-defined Black women's standpoint using Black feminist epistemology calls into question the content of what currently passes as truth and simultaneously challenges the process of arriving at that truth."[13] This truth telling is a representation of this Black feminist epistemology. Snapping beans uses this African/Black feminist epistemology to engage in truth telling. This truth telling does not mean that grandma and 'em were always telling us the truth, but she questioned what is considered truth. Although we may have not considered the gossip while snapping beans to be a process of inquiry, grandma and 'em questioned the validity of certain statements, questions, and realities in their worlds. They may ask, "How do we know . . ." or "What makes you think . . ." as an opportunity to arrive at some level of truth and challenge traditional assumptions. Ironically, that is what queerness is all about. While queerness represents the embodiment of gender and sexual fluidity, it also challenges individuals to question the world around them. Snapping beans was an opportunity for grandma and 'em to question Southern life. This process of inquiry laid the foundation for Southern Black queerness that we carry with us as we reconcile with our truths. Even when coming out, SBQLWP do not use the terminology "coming out" but say phrases such as "I'm living in my truth," or "Standing in my truth." Snapping beans was an opportunity for grandma and 'em to both prepare a meal and speak their truth. SBQLWP carry on this tradition as we actualize our queer identities. We continue the practice of speaking our truth, applying it to our queer lesbian selves.

While SBQLWP recollect snapping beans, we see a process of sharing intimate stories and witness the power of vulnerability. This intimacy allows for us to be vulnerable in sharing experiences often hidden and untold. The goal of snapping beans is to break that silence like we break that bean. This vulnerability from SBQLWP allows other Southerners to have a better understanding of the South. Each snap of a bean invokes a memory of hurt and a shift in consciousness. Each snap provides additional context to the Church hurt. Each snap unlocks another level of vulnerability, uncovering a new Southern narrative. By the time we get to the end of the basket of beans, we learn more about the South as a sociocultural space and discover a new geography rooted in racialized, sexual, and queer realities. In employing the African/Black feminist epistemology, we gain a new truth. This is why we snap beans—to uncover our experiences in this racialized sexual queer geography.

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## Uncovering Southern Complexities and a Racialized Sexual Queer Geography

When discussing the role that the South plays in our lives, several questions arise about how I conceptualize the South. At the beginning of this research work, I made certain assumptions when defining the American South. Originally, I rigidly defined the American South in conjunction with the US Census.[14] While I attempted to give a basic definition of the American South based on parameters from US Census data, I recognized that defining the region has some intricate components. What is considered Southern has some distinct social, economic, and political realities. Over time, I learned to narrow down what "South" I was referring to in this work. Reta Ugena Whitlock deconstructs the South as a complex space of identity formation that cannot be explained by census data alone: "The South is a place with multiple, variable, and interlocking stratifications. It is a site where race, class, gender, religion, and sexuality interact continually and comprehensively, having implications that play out in a range of public arenas—politics, media, organized religion, social activism, and arts."[15] This discussion fits in a body of literature that focuses on the South as a sociocultural space.

Making Southern and South a proper noun signifies a certain type of American experience related to a specific cultural reality. Unlike phrases like the "US South," the "American South" represents a specific cultural geographic experience that fits in the context of what we broadly define as American. The US South is political, referring to a restrictive boundary, established and reinforced by enslavement, the American Civil War, political representation, and methods of economic production. Shifting from the US South to the American South compels Southern scholars to rethink the sociocultural context in defining the location. Defining the South as a cultural space is timeless and not restricted by rigid geographic boundaries. Including "America" helps Southern scholars and researchers alike reconsider what it means to be American and who has the authority to dictate what is—and what is not—American. Although framing the American South as a sociocultural discussion can be subjective—rooted in the individual experiences that people have in the region—it is also defined by what individuals consider American and how the South differs from and aligns with their version of America. The American South is framed in the context to which Southerners reconcile with our version(s) of America, which, according to James T. Sears, is a defined history and culture.[16] Or, as W. Fitzhugh Brundage articulates, this memory and history provide Southern

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folks, regardless of race and gender, a sense of self and articulation for the region they call home.[17] For Sears and Brundage, the American South contains several complex histories that influences the region's social and cultural realities. This perspective also dictates how Southerners conceptualize their versions of America.

In addition, Southern history becomes "woven into Southern life and institutions."[18] Even in a sociocultural context, the South represents *several* histories, cultures, cuisines, and moralities related to what is American while uncovering the sociocultural realities of what it means to be Southern. The more I explored the social context, the more I realized that defining the South raises more questions than answers. The central question is how those individuals historically marginalized by race, gender, and sexuality conceptualize the South. What does this South mean for those who exist in multiple margins in the South? How do our stories help us understand what is considered American and Southern? Moreover, I questioned how growing up or living in the South directly affects how SBQLWP actualize our queer lesbian selves. Simply put, in what ways does one's location influence their queer actualization? To gain answers to these questions, this work centers the American South as a central character. To do that, I must define the South in a sociocultural place and space.

This work uses Katherine McKittrick's framework of Black and Black women's geography, which signals an alternative pattern that works alongside and across traditional geographies.[19] McKittrick notes that traditional geography is often rooted in a white, patriarchal, Eurocentric, heterosexual, and classed vantage point.[20] She argues that this traditional framework is limited by physical landscapes, infrastructures, and imaginations. The traditional geography does not signal a cultural reality or the ways historically marginalized persons find space to exist in a location. This traditional geography aligns precisely with what the US Census would define as the US South, using sterile, nonimaginative markers for determining variations in location. In this context, the US South is a result of this traditional geography, which also focuses on the physicality of the South, adopting a white, patriarchal, Eurocentric, heteronormative framework in defining the American South. In this traditional geography, the South nods to the memory and legacy of the Confederacy as the primary basis for defining the South, rooted in the capitalist framework of (re)claiming land. The capitalist nature of this traditional Southern geography disregards the cultural context of the South, silencing those who do not benefit from this capitalist geography.

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Consequently, incorporating historical racial realities challenges the traditional Southern geography. McKittrick contends that Black people in the diaspora represent a "geographic story that is, at least in part, a story of material and conceptual placements and displacements, segregations, and integrations, margins and centers, migrations and settlements."[21] Studying the experiences of Black folks in a specific location means exposing particular racial histories and realities there. Challenging this traditional geography makes Black folks "geographic beings who have a stake in the production of space."[22] The legacy of enslavement challenges this traditional Southern geography, as Southern Black folks historically did not directly benefit from Southern capitalism. For Southern Black persons, this means uncovering how they are Southern cultural agents, even with the oppressive legacies of enslavement. Southern Black folks recognize the South as a racially situated space and how they found tools needed to survive and even thrive amid the backdrop of Southern capitalism in this Southern traditional geography. These methods of survival uncover a Southern narrative that directly challenges this limited Southern geography. These methods of resistance are evident in how Southern Black folks found ways to navigate in sundown towns,[23] created a sense of unity and community through establishing kinships, and used the Southern Christian Black Church as a spiritual and communal space to incorporate their African practices. SBQLWP are descendants of this historic memory, also existing in this racialized geographic space. By including a Black queer lesbian perspective of this Southern traditional landscape, we must extend this Southern traditional geography to include the roles gender and sexuality play in this racially situated space.

McKittrick's geographic framework extends to Black women, specifically the ways overlapping realities of gender and race manifest themselves differently based on location and space. According to McKittrick, the history of Black women in transatlantic slavery history illustrates how Black women are both shaped by and challenge traditional geographic arrangements. She states that the classification of Black women aligns with historically present racial-sexual categories. The historical realities that Southern Black women experienced with sexual violence is a result of their placement in the domestic sphere—during and after enslavement. This reality provide new ways for us to understand the racialized sexual realities in the South. Tera W. Hunter nods to these experiences as well, establishing how Southern Black women's labor is often tied to certain assumptions rooted in gender and sexual exploitation. Hunter's piece exposes this racialized sexual historical reality rooted in both

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urban and rural Southern spaces after the antebellum South that ultimately "set the stage for renegotiations of labor and social relations for many years to come."[24] Because of these racialized sexual realities, Black women in the South have their own historical geographies. Centering the experiences of Black women in this region can create visibility and alternative modes of understanding geographic phenomena.[25] According to LaToya Eaves, Black women are necessary for creating productive knowledge in support of Black geographies.[26]

How does queerness show up in this racialized sexualized geography? Black queerness and queer embodiment expands this racialized sexual history of the South. Because of our Black queer identities, SBQLWP create historical geographies in the South that may align with and vary from these racialized sexual historical geographies. In these discussions about differences in the South, SBQLWP expose a new cultural landscape that does not rely on a heteronormative narrative. We exist in myriad Southern experiences with distinct racial, queer, and sexual components. Because of these overlapping identities, we define the South from various vantage points rooted in a queer, racialized, gendered, and sexualized geography.

SBQLWP expands on this Southern traditional geography to include a potentially new cultural geographic landscape, a racialized sexual queer geography that is inclusive of sexuality and queerness. The racialized sexual queer geography (1) represents the ways queerness and queer embodiment manifests in a specific geography and (2) provides an intersectional framework that directly challenges this Southern traditional geography. Discussions of a racialized sexual queer geography uses an intersectional lens to the South and uncovers how queerness and sexual fluidity exists in this racialized sexual geography. This geography creates a new way to discuss the South, exploring the ways queerness and lesbianism exist in the Southern sociocultural landscape. Using this framework demonstrates how the South shapes Black female sexuality, queerness, and gender fluidity. This framework dares to uncover how the South has queer and sexual dimensions. Regardless of racial, sexual, and gender identities, this racialized sexual queer geography allows all Southerners to make sense of their heteronormative gender and sexual identities. Although this discussion focuses on the South, this geography can be used in various locations to determine how certain sociocultural realities affect how one's intersectional identities are actualized.

The racialized sexual queer geography directly challenges the heteronormative and heterosexual foundation of traditional geography. It explores the heteronormativity that exists in the Southern traditional geography and its

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disregard for sexual and gender fluidity. Regardless of race, this traditional geography amplifies the voices of heterosexual Southern folks and silences those who do not exist in this traditional heteronormative geography. In the South, the Christian Church reiterates and further justifies the heteronormative sexual hegemonies. This racialized sexual queer geography also uncovers the glaring ways homophobia and queerphobia exist in this region. This racialized sexual queer geography also reveals how these dimensions of heteronormativity can exist in Southern Black spaces as well, perpetuated in the ways Southern Black heterosexual persons maintain this Southern sexual hegemony and heteronormative traditional geography, using the Christian Black Church as justification for this marginalization. The Southern sexual hegemony and heteronormativity in this traditional geography are evident in this collective narrative. Discussion with SBQLWP helped me further conceptualize the South as complex racialized sexual queer geography. Before long, we start muddling into some complex geographic analysis. As geographic scholars mentioned earlier, physical place (geography) and culture (space) are inevitably connected. The responses from SBQLWP shed light on how the South acts as a physical place and sociocultural space. For example, SBQLWP born in other regions of America and currently residing in the South define themselves as Southern. How can someone born outside the South define themselves as Southern? SBQLWP born outside of the South understood that their Southern identity had little to do with where they were born. They connected to the sociocultural landscape of the South, where the South acts as a place and space of ancestral comfort. In some instances, interlocutors had family members who were from the South, bridging their connections to the South. The South connected SBQLWP to their ancestral lineage, where they honored the homeplace of their African/Black ancestry. Regardless of whether SBQLWP were born in the South, the South acts as that homeplace for them.

The majority of SBQLWP in this study distinguished themselves as Southern, but 37 percent of SBQLWP did not. These individuals were either born and raised in the South or born and raised in other American regions. How can someone be from the South and not consider themselves Southern? Their responses challenge traditional notions of geographic location and space. Defining oneself as Southern is not limited to being born in the South but uncovers a sociocultural connection to the region, namely, the infamous Southern and/or slave mentality. When these particular SBQLWP framed what is considered the South or Southern, they were considering whether they were products of this Southern and/or slave mentality. Many

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interlocutors used the key terms when describing the Southern mentality or slave mentality: oppressive, slow, conservative, racist, rural, agricultural, and, of course, slavery. More discussions of the Southern or slave mentalities will appear later. However, those interlocutors who did not define themselves as Southern applied these key terms to how they conceptualize what they consider Southern. Their connection to the South is not tied to a specific location but a perceived cultural reality, mentality, and way of living. While they do not identify as Southern, they were able to provide an accurate picture of the South. These SBQLWP recognize the sociocultural dimensions of the South.

## Racialized Sexual Geography and Notions of Homeplace

Fitting in this racialized sexual geography SBQLWP view the South as a Southern Black woman and/or a Southern Black mother. This metaphor of the South as a Southern Black mother exposes how we define the complexities of the South. The South becomes the personification of "she" or "her" who raised, nurtured, and provided a safe space for us. She gave us the tools needed to survive and established a legacy for us to be grounded in. She has church hats in every color, cooks homemade food, and is the embodiment of Southern hospitality. When anyone walks into her home, it is filled with pictures of Black Jesus, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and various family members both alive and deceased. They would also see a large red and brown well-worn Bible with several obituaries tucked inside. She may have gospel music playing in the background. While she is my homeplace, I admit that at one point in my life, I was embarrassed by her. She appeared backward, less progressive, too churchy, too Black, too Southern. She reminded me of all the things that I tried to minimize to fit into white-centered spaces. It was not until my queer lesbian journey, with all its complexities, that I reunited with her and found the beauty in who she was. I am no longer embarrassed by her. However, like my interlocutors, I am also critical of her.

Like any mother–daughter relationship, SBQLWP have a beautiful and distinct relationship to the South. The South reminds us of the pain and healing that can only occur between a Black mother and her daughter. Like that Southern Black mother, they birthed us, molded us, and shaped our worldview. These Southern Black grandmas and mothers taught us Southern ways, gave us a coded language, and a thick Southern dialect. Grandma and 'em educated us about the values, morals, and practices

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