Performing Visibility
Freaknic and the Spatial Politics of Sexuality, Race, and Class in Atlanta

Krista A. Thompson

In the mid-1990s, black youth traveling by car to the city of Atlanta for the annual black college spring break party known as Freaknic were greeted by police in riot gear.¹ Every April, officers lined the city streets making their armed presence felt on every corner. Exits off Atlanta highways were blocked by police barricades, leaving many visitors attempting to enter the city stranded or lost on Georgia interstates. Law enforcers shut down local malls and cordoned off residential neighborhoods, making them inaccessible to vehicular traffic. Many local stores and restaurants closed their doors for the weekend. Hotels refused to rent rooms. The city of Atlanta, renowned for its “Southern hospitality,” practically shut itself down and assumed an openly confrontational stance against the students’ presence in the city.

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Why did this event, Freaknic, elicit such a militaristic response—a reaction which one writer in *The Atlanta Journal Constitution* (*AJC*) so aptly described as “Freaknikaphobia” (*AJC* 1994a: A18)? I argue that Freaknic generated such a response because the structure, or rather the perceived “disorder,” of the event agitated and transgressed the racial, gender, and class boundaries upon which the city of Atlanta is built. Freaknic, often referred to in the local media as a “takeover” or “invasion” of the city by African American youth, was perceived by city authorities, the mainstream media, and many local residents as a potential threat to the very foundations of Atlanta (McDonald and Coleman 1994:H1; Head 1995:9A; *AJC* 1996:18A). The discourse in the popular press on controlling, taming, and eradicating the event became synonymous with preserving social order in the city of Atlanta.

I will be concerned principally with looking at how Freaknic and its representation in the popular press shifted and changed over its 20-year history. Since the mid-1990s, the event increasingly centered on the streets. At this time, cruising the city streets in finely polished, luxury automobiles became a major Freaknic activity, much to the dismay of many local residents. Interestingly, as Freaknic moved to the streets, women emerged as central actors in the event. It was not uncommon to see women, many of whom were scantily clad, giving impromptu stripteaslike shows before cameras during Freaknic. How do we understand these bodily displays, which suddenly became the focus of the event? Are the performances and open displays of sexuality somehow related to the street-oriented form of Freaknic and to the city’s attempts to control the event? What do these interrelated developments reveal about race, gender, class, and space in Atlanta?

**Bodies and Cities**

Philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, in her essay “Bodies-Cities,” investigates how the body and the city (both the architectural space of the city, and the political, economic, and administrative networks of the city) affect and transform each other. She critiques two predominant models that have been used in the past to approach the relationship between bodies and cities and advances a third. The first model contends that humans make cities, laying an emphasis solely on human agency as the determining factor in the shape that cities take. The second view posits a kind of parallel development or isomorphism between bodies and cities: “the two are understood as analogues, congruent counterparts, in which the features, organization, and characteristics of one are reflected in each other” (1992:246). Grosz, however, advocates a new way of approaching the study of the body in city environments, which stresses the interaction or what she calls the “interface” between the body and the city. She argues, “The body and its environment, rather, produce each other as forms of the hyperreal, as modes of simulation which have overtaken and transformed whatever reality each may have had into the image of the other [...]” (242). In other words, Grosz stresses that cities and bodies are mutually defining.

Grosz’s arguments resonate in the case of the relationship between the city of Atlanta and Freaknic. Freaknic explicitly dramatizes the way in which the city and bodies produce, transform, and define each other. Building on Grosz’s insights, an investigation of Freaknic draws attention to how the city “interfaces” with particular constituents, in this instance, African American youth.

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1. Throughout the essay readers may encounter the word “Freaknik” (spelled with a “k”) when I am quoting popular news sources. The event was originally spelled “Freaknic.” For consistency in my text I will use the early spelling. In addition, although frequently referred to as a “spring break” event, Freaknic occurred during the third weekend of April, just before finals in many historically black colleges.

*Figure 1.* (Facing page) Claiming space in the city of Atlanta, a Freaknic 1998 participant dances for spectators and their cameras. In the middle of traffic, cars often became the stage from which women enacted their performances. (Photo by Nkosane Clark)
American youth. How does race inform these interactions? Freaknic elucidates how specific spatial divisions in the city based on race, gender, and class affect minority groups in particular ways and transform the city more broadly. The local government officials’ sustained attempts at controlling space and imposing order on the bodies of black youth within Atlanta were actually key factors in the performance-oriented manifestation of the event. In fact, authorities’ policies sparked these street performances by black women. Freaknic after the mid-1990s was precisely about the city (both the physical space of the city and city officials and police) and the right of African Americans to claim and possess space in the city environment. Significantly, the interfacing between Freaknic participants and the city was mapped specifically onto the black female body and mediated through the camera.

Black Bodies and Cities

Symbolic Inversion and the Street in African Diasporic Culture

The literature on the political significance of public space in African American urban history confirms that black Americans historically have redefined urban space through their unorthodox occupation of city environments. In this field scholars have explored the importance of African American public rituals in symbolically claiming control over civic space within cities. In “Mapping the Terrain of Black Richmond,” for example, Elsa Barkley Brown and Gregg D. Kimball document how the daily usage and movement of bodies in 19th-century Virginia governed gender, racial, and class interactions. Significantly, Brown and Kimball discovered that on one day of the year, the Fourth of July, a parade of black militia would traverse all the prescribed racial boundaries of the city, occupying spaces usually reserved for white citizens. A report published in the Richmond Dispatch complained that on this occasion black Richmonders took “complete possession of the day and of the city. The highways, byways, [and] Capitol Square, were black with moving masses of darkeys” (in Brown and Kimball 1996:73). Moreover, black working-class women, who also joined in the militia parades, similarly transgressed socially prescribed gender and class roles. Their public appearance, dressed in military uniforms, went against all conventions of appropriate female public decorum. The black militias, by deliberately going against the norms governing the everyday usage of public space, dramatically underscored the otherwise invisible codes, conventions, and spatial boundaries regulating the movement of bodies in the city. Although a public ritual of a different sort, the behavior of blacks in Atlanta city streets at Freaknic provides a similar opportunity to investigate the meanings and significance of public spaces in another more contemporary urban environment.

Scholarship on carnivals and other festivals in which participants occupy the streets is also applicable to Atlanta’s annual “street party.” Many scholars conceive of carnivals as events where socially marginalized groups use the street, or another public space, as a forum “to turn the world upside down,” to reverse and parody the social hierarchies that govern daily life. In Carnival in Romans, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie explored these theories of symbolic inversion through his study of a late 16th-century annual carnival that used to take place in the small French town of Romans, where people from the peasant classes on carnival day dressed and acted the part of kings ([1979] 1980). Le Roy Ladurie’s carnival in Romans, like Brown and Kimball’s interpretation of the Fourth of July parades, suggests that these ritualized annual events can simultaneously mirror, satirize, and transgress the most fundamental social norms of society.

Throughout the African diaspora many protests and rebellions began when participants in annual street masquerades seized the opportunity to do more than just parody the power

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2. See Bateson (1958, 1972), Gluckmann (1954), and Bakhitin (1968), for further considerations of “symbolic inversion.” For a critique of Bakhitin, see Mbembe (1992).
structure of society. As M. Nourbese Philip articulates in Race, Space and the Poetics of Moving, “For African Caribbean people Carnival is much more than a dance in the street, it represents our sense of collective freedom and right to be free” (1996:29). In many cases, immigrants from the Caribbean have brought the popular forms of street protest to North American urban centers. In “The Politics of the Streets,” Peter Jackson studies the political significance of one such Caribbean-derived parade, Caribana, in Toronto. He argues that the politics surrounding the usage of streets for the annual festival, evident in the continued rerouting of the parade, underscore the inherent contradictions in Canada’s multiculturalism policies. Freaknic can be located within this history and tradition of street-based protest rituals throughout the African diaspora. Although not a masquerade in the traditional sense, Freaknic affords the opportunity to expand conceptions of costume-based African diasporic performances to include more contemporary urban forms. If Freaknic is a kind of symbolic inversion, what does the event’s street and car-oriented form and the performances of women in Freaknic highlight about the normative use of space in the construction of social order in Atlanta? To investigate this question it is necessary to first outline a history of the event in order to document how the spaces of occupation, and types of bodily practices within these locations, have changed over time. In doing so I examine how black youth used and created alternative meanings of space in Atlanta through Freaknic at specific moments, as they responded to media surveillance and the city’s own various reactions to the event.

**Early History of Freaknic**

*Picnics in Local Parks*

In 1982, thousands of black college students from across the African diaspora (particularly from the US, Canada, and the Caribbean) converged on the city of Atlanta for the three-day weekend known as Freaknic, which was held toward the end of April. The first organized event to be called Freaknic involved a few dozen students who were members of the DC Metro Club at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges in Atlanta. The original event organizers were natives of Washington, DC, who were attending school in Atlanta. The first Freaknic occurred in John A. White Park in the southwest section of the city, located near the Atlanta University Center college campuses (which includes several historically black educational institutions, namely Spelman, Morehouse, and Morris Brown Colleges, and Clark Atlanta University). The name “Freaknic,” a contraction combining the words “freak” and “picnic,” was inspired by two popular 1970s songs, “The Freak” by the group Chic (1978), and the “Freak of the Week” by Funkadelic (1979). Event organizers adopted the theme “freak” to recapture the “feel-good” spirit of the 1970s (Toomer 1994:G7). In its first few years the picnic was “good clean fun,” and included such activities as “flag football, cookouts, pajama parties and Go-Go music” (Towns 1996:4H). Some of the student attendees used the event as a networking opportunity, exchanging business cards with other participants. Many young men and women also fraternized with the opposite sex. The majority of these exchanges were mediated through the camera and, later, camcorder. At Freaknic the most common pickup line for young men was, “Can I take your picture?” A photograph, taken in 1996, shows a group of young women obliging one such request (fig. 2). They pose in a pyramidal form before two men who capture the scene on camera. Local reporters deemed this predominant form of exchange “video flirting” or “technological socialization” (Hagans and Plummer 1995:7D). For the first few years Freaknic festivities occurred in different parks in southwest Atlanta, a predominantly African American area of Atlanta. These early park-centered activities went virtually unnoticed by Atlanta’s news media and by local authorities.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, the event grew in popularity and attendance. In 1989, the introduction of live go-go musicians as headliners in the event significantly increased Freaknic’s widespread appeal and visibility. The event was inadvertently promoted by the NBC sitcom *A Different World*, a spinoff of the popular *Cosby Show*. Several characters on the show, which was
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set on a fictional black college, discussed their plans to attend Freaknic. Seemingly overnight, Freaknic ballooned from an Atlanta happening to a national event drawing 20,000 people. As they had in the past, park sites, including Washington Park, attracted the largest crowds. In the early 1990s, the flow of students who came to Atlanta for the event continued to increase, exceeding 100,000 people. Piedmont Park, located in a white upper-class suburban community in Midtown Atlanta, in particular, became a focal point of festivities.

In the aftermath of Freaknic '93, residents surrounding Piedmont Park complained that Freaknic festivities had overwhelmed their communities. They charged in the local press that there were displays of public drunkenness and that some of the Freaknickers had urinated on their lawns (Reid 1993:D1). Some people also expressed concern with the traffic jams caused by the event. At this point both black and white residents who were directly affected by Freaknic called on the city’s black mayor, Bill Campbell, and Atlanta’s city administration to prevent a recurrence of the college party. This public outcry over Freaknic caused some serious consternation on the part of city officials and police.

1994 Freaknic

Students Take to the Streets

In 1994, Freaknic attendance reached its peak when an estimated 200,000 people participated in the event. Approximately 100,000 Freaknickers congregated in Piedmont Park alone. If the numbers of students had begun to alarm police in previous years, the hundreds of thousands of students in attendance at Freaknic '94 set off sirens. At first, as Police Chief Bell described it, “The officers maintained their positions and their cool and helped to calm citizens obviously afraid in that kind of crowd” (in Scruggs 1994:B4). Faced with hundreds of thousands of students in the city, the local police and state troopers moved into Piedmont Park to attempt to break up the gathering. Officials closed the park and other public spaces, including shopping malls such as Underground Atlanta and Greenbriar Mall.

The closure of these spaces drove students to occupy and congregate in the city streets. Parking lots also became popular hangouts after many stores were closed. With other public venues cordoned off, cruising the city’s streets (often in flashy, polished, luxury automobiles) became the central Freaknic activity. As a journalist reported, almost immediately following park closures: “The 14th Street exit off the Downtown Connector became one hangout Saturday afternoon [...] Those who missed the exits off the connector simply parked along the shoulder, turned on their hazard lights, and either danced along the freeway or walked down to impromptu parties” (Vickers and Scruggs 1994:A1). In the middle of traffic, Freaknickers turned up their car radios and sound systems and partied in the streets.

The police then attempted to clear the Freaknic participants from the streets and to restrict them from certain parts of the city. As a road map of the police’s “traffic control plan” published at the time in the AJC demonstrates, students were confined to a heavily policed and surveilled route, with many roads outside of this circular corridor closed off (Vickers and Scruggs 1994: A1). Predominantly white residential areas like Virginia Highlands and Midtown Atlanta (the area surrounding Piedmont Park) were “restricted access areas.” The streets leading to mainly

Figure 2. Women posing for a photograph at Freaknic, 1996. (Photo by Vincent Kegler)
black communities, especially surrounding the Atlanta University Center complex, however, became “major traffic routes.” Eventually, most of the students were rerouted to this area in southwest Atlanta. The selective partitioning of the city into “restricted access areas” and the herding of Freaknic participants into “African American areas” strongly suggests that assumptions about where blacks should and should not be within Atlanta’s urban landscape governed the authorities’ street closure plan. The city officials deemed only select Atlanta neighborhoods as appropriate spaces for blacks to occupy, to have a visible presence. Significantly, many of the black students coming from across the continent would not have been aware of the local racial fault lines they had unwittingly crossed in their ventures within Atlanta. Young people from across the African diaspora were swept up in the city’s racial geography.

Cameras and the Sexual Carnivalesque

Women as Street-Party Attractions

As Freaknic became subject to city control, sometime around 1994, the event entered into a new phase: black women’s bodies literally became the central focus of the street party. Many women turned the streets and highways into stages from which they gave impromptu dances. These performances ranged in content and context. Young women, wearing dress styles that revealed more than they concealed, frequently stalled their cars and danced in the middle of traffic (fig. 3). Blaring music from car sound systems provided the sound track. Typically the women traveled in groups of three or four, although more often than not only one woman performed at any given time. Each performer individually held court on the street-turned-dance floor. Women displayed many of the latest dance moves popular in clubs and popularized in music videos. In Atlanta in 1994, “booty shaking,” a kind of dance inspired by Booty Shake music (an up-tempoed southern US hip-hop variant) informed many women’s dance repertoires. As the name implies, booty shakers placed an emphasis on their buttocks and the quick-paced movement of their hips from side to side. The women performing at Freaknic frequently embodied what Henry Louis Gates describes, in reference to the sexual explicitness of the southern brand of hip-hop, as the “sexual carnivalesque” (1995:162)—donning articles of clothing that accentuated their bottoms and breasts and dancing in ways that frequently exaggerated the already overly sexualized content of the music.3

Some male observers took it upon themselves to become active participants in the women’s festivities. Most of the women were not perturbed by an uninvited male dance partner and indeed, without missing a beat, simply incorporated him (and sometimes them) into their dances.

Figure 3. Women dancing in the streets at Freaknic ’96 with male passersby. (Photo by Krista A. Thompson)

3. Popular articles of clothing included, but were not limited to, tight cutoff shorts, miniskirts, slip dresses, and halter tops, all of which accentuated and highlighted the breasts and buttocks of the female body.
as if they were props in a prerehearsed routine. As spontaneously as such performances started, the women would stop. In a demonstration of their ability to control and curtail the performance at any stage (a power that would be challenged in future Freaknics), at the drop of a hat women would return to their cars and cruise down the street. The crowds of men, who gathered to view the performance immediately dissipated, fanning out in search of the next show.

Women also engaged in other more sexually explicit types of striptease-like performances. Cars with sunroofs or convertibles—automobiles that facilitate the public display of their occupants—provided mobile platforms for these performances. A photograph taken at Freaknic pictures one such form of behavior: a woman holds, indeed proffers her breast, in the back of a vehicle (fig. 4). Women flashing their breasts in many instances signaled the beginning of a performance sequence, attracting a male audience to a parked car (sometimes drawing them away from other women). When a sufficient number of male spectators were focused on the female participant, the performance would unfold. Sometimes women, with the active encouragement of eager chants or tossed dollar bills, removed their bras, panties, or other articles of clothing. On occasion, when these performances assumed even more sexually graphic forms, women would slide back into their cars to masturbate for cheering male audiences.

The performances—whether a woman flashed a smile, a breast, or a thigh—were enacted to a large extent to be captured on male participants’ cameras and video cameras. The photograph of the woman holding her breast is revealing not only for its representation of the woman and her cohorts’ actions, but also because it reveals the centrality of the camera to Freaknic’s activities. The woman, who pulls out her breast, stares directly at the camera (being held by a young Trinidadian American male) and positions her bosom for the snapshot. Her behavior, like that of so many female performers at the event, seems driven by the desire to be seen and, perhaps more importantly, to be photographed and videotaped. Many men at the parade, the vast majority of whom had cameras in hand, traveled from performance to performance, from car to car, with video cameras poised to encourage and record such displays. Their cameras, as one reporter described, “transformed the mild mannered into the powerful. [...]” The women who were videotaped became stars, sometimes reluctantly, at least until the next subject caught the attention of the fickle and one-dimensional directors” (Hagans and Plummer 1995:7D). It was unusual to see other women congregated around these public stripteases and even less common to see them with video cameras. Indeed, during my research my presence on the streets as a woman with a video camera drew puzzled looks from female performers and male spectators alike, and elicited anger from men whom I attempted to interview on tape. At Freaknic, men were the photographic shooters on the hunt for female performers.

A photograph, taken against Atlanta’s skyline in 1998, provides a snapshot of the Freaknic performance frame (fig. 1). The image features a young woman taking center stage in a Jeep
surrounded by male spectators. She is the nexus of many a video camera lens. Indeed, as a subsequent photograph reveals, every male in the photograph trains a camera on the woman (fig. 5). Cameras poised, the men attempt to persuade the woman to begin her performance. One man to the right of the image holds out a determined hand in her direction with a dollar bill. The woman stands resolute in the middle of all this and talks back to male spectators, even appears to be yelling at someone—simultaneously responding to and challenging the desires of the spectators. The photograph captures the wider dynamics of Freaknic: each performance was engendered by the interaction between performer and audience, between the men behind the cameras and the woman out front, as well as between each participant and the urban landscape of Atlanta.

The transformation of Freaknic from a “good clean fun” picnic to an event centered on viewing and taping the black female body was reflected in a widespread change in the interpretation of the name of the event. By the mid-1990s, many people believed that the word “freak” in the nomenclature of the annual street party referred to these women. The performing women were the “freaks,” a slang term referring to someone who is sexually promiscuous, and the picnic was on their behalf. As a student quoted in the AJC bluntly put it, “Freaknik is about booty” (in Baker 1995:B1). Freaknic in the mid-1990s revolved around displays of the sexualized female body.

While Freaknic does bear resemblance on its surface to women “gone wild” at Mardi Gras festivities and “caught on tape,” performances at Freaknic must be contextualized within the specific imagined geography of the “dirty South,” as rappers proudly tout Atlanta in hip-hop. These musicians have actively promoted the region’s reputation for strip-clubs. The region’s bass music further contributed to the South’s erotic mythology, through sexually explicit lyrics and equally provocative music videos. Not only did bass music put Atlanta on the map for sex, but it also polished the city’s image as a mecca for cars and cruising culture. Indeed, bass music, deemed so because of its heavy sonic bass, was engineered precisely to be boomed from car stereo sound systems. Although cars and women have long been the powerful magnetic poles of heterosexual male advertising, in bass music, cars and the sexualized female body (especially the “booty”) were strategically put together as an even more powerful lure. Long before “pimping my ride” was a mainstream activity (the use of “pimping” pointing to the sexualization of the car), sex and cars provided the underlying imagery of bass music. Freaknic’s car-oriented

Figure 5. Male participants capture women’s impromptu dances on their camcorders, 1998. (Photo by Nkosane Clark)

4. For more on this aspect of Mardi Gras, see Vicki Mayer’s recently published article, “Letting It All Hang Out: Mardi Gras Performance Live and On Video” in TDR (2007).
5. For example, listen to Atlanta group Goodie Mob’s album titled Dirty South Classics (2003). “Dirty South” is frequently chimed in the hip-hop lyrics of Bubba Sparxxx, Lil’ Flip, and Ludacris, or in the R&B refrains of Aaliyah, featuring Timbaland.
6. Miami bass (booty bass, bass music) is a form of music known for deep, throbbing beats, hyperkinetic rhythms, and often sexually explicit lyrics. It gained popularity in the 1980s in the southern United States, including Miami, Orlando, Alabama, and Atlanta.
7. The cover of a compilation CD, Bass Music, volume one, makes this conflation explicit. The CD liner art features a woman in a barely visible G-string bending down, indeed disappearing, into a bed of car stereo speakers.
activities and sexualized performances, while contiguous with other spring break festivities, were unique to the “dirty South.”

Men attending Freaknic also engaged in a type of performance through their cars. Indeed, they performed their masculinity and upper-class status by cruising in “pimped” expensive sports, luxury, and classic cars. Rental car companies frequently sold out of the top of the line models when Freaknickers were in town. Classic car shows, where men could eye the frames of polished luxury automobiles (taking a reprieve from the women), also became main features at the event. Male displays, however, never morphed into the sexualized exhibitions enacted by female participants in the mid-1990s.

Freaknic “Caught on Tape”

Local Media and Residents Respond to Freaknic ’94

In 1994, Freaknic, which had long escaped media notice, gained new visibility in the local press. The media reported extensively on the activities of Freaknic participants and on the official response to the event. The television and print news media’s coverage of Freaknic contributed to what can only be described as a moral panic. The media—often through helicopter Skycam footage or on-the-ground eyewitness reports—aimed to “shine the light of public scrutiny” on Freaknic’s activities, to quote reporter Mark Winne’s statements made during Atlanta’s Channel 2 Action News’ series “Freaknic Caught on Tape” (Winne 1998).

In 1994, for the first time crime and violence marred the three-day weekend. According to a report released by the mayor’s office, three shootings and two attempted rapes took place that weekend. Although these figures reflect citywide statistics, local press headlines reading “Freaknik Tally Includes 3 Shootings and 2 Rape Tries” implied a direct correlation between the Freaknickers and criminal activity (Scruggs 1994:C8). Among the inventory of arrests published in the AJC, 20 persons (presumably women) were charged with “indecent exposure” because, as Chief Bell proclaimed at the time, “Nudity is a violation of the law” (McDonald and Vickers 1994:1C).

The media’s sensational coverage of Freaknic ’94 and the criminalization of black youth associated with the event fueled residents’ fears. While critics of Freaknic came from diverse groups, the event seemed to separate local Atlantans “across an invisible racial fault line” (Scruggs 1994:A15). An enraged white Atlantan expressed vehemently his contention that

8. I first saw a car show at Freaknic in 1995. The car show, organized by the Auburn Avenue Business and Improvement Association, took place at the Sweet Auburn festival. The free open-air festival with vendors was located on Auburn Avenue between Courtland and Jackson streets (all closed to vehicular traffic). The display of classic cars resembled a museum exhibition, with car hoods opened and text describing the car and its attributes posted on plastic panels next to the vehicles. The car exhibition occurred three blocks north of where women were stripping and men were cruising. Like most events at Freaknic, the car show audiences consisted of African American men and women.

9. For a consideration of “moral panic” as it relates to black populations, see Hall, et. al (1978).

10. Precise rape statistics for Freaknic are difficult to interpret, especially given that African American women are less likely to report incidents of rape (Meyers 2004:100). Marian Meyers, in her study of television reports of violence against women at Freaknic, posits a direct correlation between rape and Freaknic. She notes that “rape statistics gathered by the city’s rape crisis center from the Grady Memorial Hospital Emergency room in 1996” indicate that “the Friday through Monday prior to Freaknik, four rape victims were seen in Grady’s emergency room, and in the Friday through Monday following Freaknik, eight women were treated. In the four days during Freaknik, from April 19–22, the number skyrocketed to 20” (2004:100). It is difficult ascertain whether the increased number of people in Atlanta, an extra 200,000 people, contributes to the statistical rise in violent crimes against women. Regardless of the actual relationship between Freaknic and rape, since 1994 (when two to three incidents of rape were reported) the media has implied a relationship between the event and sexual assault.
Freaknic should be stopped: “Why should law-abiding taxpaying residents mindful of property and life have to sacrifice their lifestyle to enable criminals to keep their freedoms?” (in Stipling 1994:A10). Some black residents, Atlanta’s black press, and national black media pointed out what they believed to be the racist assertions underlying professed fears of Freaknic: “Freaknikaphobia.” They retorted that in other cities that endure spring break rituals—like Daytona Beach, Florida, or the Mardi Gras in New Orleans—white youth engaged in similar kinds of behavior were not criminalized as were the African American youth attending Freaknic in Atlanta (Winbush 1995:8). Other critics of the city’s handling of Freaknic pointed out that nudity was frequently part of the 300,000 strong annual gay pride parade in Atlanta, which terminates in Piedmont Park, but it did not generate a similar alarmist response (Campbell 2001:3F).

Even months after Freaknic ’94, shock waves were still registering in the local press. The city’s inability to control the event became an almost obsessive concern. Over 400 articles, editorials, and letters were devoted to Freaknic both in Atlanta and the national press over the next year. A short list of newspaper headlines alone can provide a good indication of the ongoing dialogue about the event: “Can the City Tame Freaknik?” (Watson 1994:R4); “Is the Party Untamable?” (McDonald and Vickers 1994:C1); and “Freaknik Gains ‘A Life of Its Own’ Free-For-All” (Vickers 1994a:B1). The predominant use of the word “tame” in reference to the event characterized Freaknic as wild and its participants as animals. In fact, Millard Woods, a member of the Piedmont Park Neighborhood Association referred to the event as a “beast that’s untamable” (in McDonald and Vickers 1994:C1). The assertion that Freaknic had gained a “life of its own” also suggested that the event’s participants were a living entity, free from outside control (i.e., law and order). The discourse framed the city and Freaknic as diametrical opposites: the city represented law, order, and civility, while Freaknic stood for criminality, disorder, and wildness.

Taming Freaknic ’95

Restoring Order in the Streets

In 1995, amid increased public pressure for city officials to respond to residents’ concerns over Freaknic, Mayor Bill Campbell decreed that the city of Atlanta would no longer welcome the event. He set forth on an active campaign to ensure that the crowds, traffic gridlock, and “disorder” experienced in 1994 would never be repeated. Although Campbell recognized that “we cannot erect a fence around our city,” his office took several preventive measures aimed at putting an end to the event (in Scruggs and Blackmon 1994:1A).

First, Campbell corresponded with the presidents of historically black colleges and leaders of black sororities and fraternities, imploring them to discourage their students from attending Freaknic. A second strategy involved revising the procedures governing the licensing approvals for Freaknic events held in Atlanta parks. Promoters wishing to hold Freaknic park events would have to obtain a one million dollar insurance policy and had to seek approval from a 15-member 11. One AJC columnist, Colin Campbell, maintained, “If getting naked in public is widely considered offensive and even illegal when black college kids do it at Freaknik, the same should apply to Gay Pride” (2001:3F). Many people sympathetic to the gay pride parade responded in published letters that nudity was acceptable. A representative reaction was that of Atlanta resident Michael Hagan: “I am gay, live in Midtown, walked to numerous Gay Pride weekend events, and what I saw did not shock gay me. To be sure, when I saw exposed lesbians’ breasts, I looked the other way. When some aging leather-clad males exposed their naked buttocks it was more pounds of flesh than I wanted to see. But no one forced anyone to gaze at these sights.” A similar argument that no one was forced to look was rarely made about Freaknic (in Campbell 2001:3F).
city-appointed board. Finally, an army of police and a wall of barricades would confront the students who failed to heed the Mayor’s warnings, when they arrived in the city.

In 1995, many areas inside of the city were also effectively cordoned off, especially in downtown Atlanta and in Midtown neighborhoods surrounding Piedmont. Traffic was again confined to a heavily policed “cruising route.” Many parts of Atlanta looked like ghost towns, as residents stayed in and Freaknickers were kept out. Persons living in Midtown, in particular, told local reporters that they were “stunned by [the] eerie silence.” Another resident remarked, “I have never seen so many police in my life” (in Cook 1995:D7).

A newspaper report from 1995, which provides a minute-by-minute account of the police confrontation with students, dramatically illustrates the militaristic force with which the students were met:

10:40 p.m.: Police march shoulder-to-shoulder down Peachtree Street to clear it. The sweeps continue about every 5 minutes.

11:00 p.m.: [...] Police shut down Underground. A total of 10 stores are looted; 11 [people] are arrested [...] 

11:15 p.m.: 14 mounted police head north on Peachtree, wearing riot helmets, their horses flank to flank. People scramble away but fill in behind, some throwing cans, pylons and bottles. A grape soda can hits an officer. (Bridges 1995:9D)

This small segment from the AJC recounts the beginning of the hostile encounter between the police and the students on the city’s streets in 1995. Throughout the weekend Freaknic participants clashed with police. Despite the greatest police presence ever deployed for the event, or perhaps because of it, the highest number of incidents involving looting and violence ever associated with Freaknic occurred that weekend.

Significantly, while reports from 1994 focused on controlling the event, in articles published after Freaknic ’95, the sexualized behavior of young women was the major Freaknic issue. Countless letters and essays in the popular press decried the behavior of women as “lewd,” “promiscuous,” and “exhibitionist.” One of the most vocal critics of the women’s public sexual displays was Atlanta’s newly appointed Police Chief Beverly Harvard. Harvard, herself an African American woman, publicly condemned the women’s behavior at a press conference following Freaknic ’95 and in magazines such as Jet that have an international black readership. In the Jet article entitled “Atlanta’s Top Cop decries Lewd Behavior by Women at Freaknik Spring Break Festival,” Harvard said she was “mad as hell [...] at the lascivious behavior exhibited by women who took off their clothes and allowed men to feel their bodies” (in Jet 1995:46).

The 1995 news stories again set up polar opposites between law and order, as symbolized by “Atlanta’s top cop,” who is pictured in official uniform in Jet (1995:46), and the disorderly behavior of women at Freaknic. Curiously, despite the focus on black women by black men and the media, there are no images of women in the article. Rather a young black man in the process of being arrested for “allegedly shouting obscenities at police,” as the caption explains, is the only photograph of the event that accompanies the text (46). The article demonstrates that some constituents of the city’s black population also vocally opposed the “lawless” antics of Freaknickers. It further suggests that the magazine editor’s deemed the women’s behavior so offensive that it could not be visually represented in the pages of the magazine.

Other reports in black popular magazines suggest that sexually provocative displays of the female body were more prevalent during Freaknic ’95 than ever before. Kenji Jasper, a Morehouse student writing for Essence magazine, observed that, “Although city officials had successfully stepped up traffic management, crowd control, and law enforcement, it seems that every sister I saw was wearing next to nothing and posing for pictures with her legs in the air like she didn’t care” (Jasper 1996:150). The highly sexualized behavior of women who wanted to be
recorded on camera during Freaknic '95 also surprised some Freaknic participants who had faithfully attended the event in the past. Local reporters contacted clinical psychologists seeking some explanation as to why women would engage in such unacceptable behavior. The “experts” responded that “sexual hijinks” were common in spring break-related activities (Harrison 1995:8C). What the “experts” did not address, however, was why in an event with a 13-year history did women choose to stage these sexually oriented performances at this particular moment. What was it about the contemporary form of Freaknic and the matrix of forces attempting to control it that gave birth to this spectacular sexually explicit behavior?

U – Can’t Stop the Cruising:
From Picnic to “Freedom Fest” (1997–2000)

The sexualized performances of women must be examined in light of the specific form that Freaknic took in the mid-to-late 1990s, taking into account changes in its location, demographics, and meaning. At this point, largely due to official efforts to end the event, Freaknic entered into another phase. By pushing the crowds out of the public space of parks, the police encouraged, even facilitated, the movement of participants into the city streets. Ironically, the paralyzing traffic gridlock associated with Freaknic may have been the direct result of the city’s early anti-Freaknic campaigns. Returning to Grosz, the city and Freaknic attendees had “produced each other” (1992:242) and the street-based form of Freaknic was a unique joint creation of their interactions.

The sustained street and highway closures that barred from the city many wary student drivers who had come from throughout North America in the end transformed the demographics of Freaknic attendees. Some students, leery of the wall of police officers that greeted them, eventually decided against making the yearly pilgrimage to Atlanta. While students from historically black colleges and black fraternities and sororities had dominated Freaknic in the 1980s and early 1990s, as early as 1996 newspaper reports noted the conspicuous absence of college students at the “Black College Spring Break.” They recognized that high school students and post-college-age persons from Atlanta were the first on the Freaknic scene (Loupe and Carter 1998:4C). In fact, some media reports blamed these “outsiders” as the culprits for the more recent “history of degeneracy and debauchery” in the event (Weems 1998:1). By the late 1990s, local black Atlantans from different classes, ages, and educational backgrounds increasingly populated the event, claiming Freaknic as their own. At this juncture, not only students from across the US, the Caribbean, and Canada crossed the city’s invisible racial fault lines, but also a wider local community with intimate ties to and knowledge of the racial politics of Atlanta.

Not only did Freaknic shift from park to streets and from black diasporic student participation to a more local one, but the very meaning of the event changed. After city officials made it clear that the students were not welcome in the city, the significance of the event shifted irreversibly: Freaknic became associated with the right to claim, possess, or take over city streets. The occupation of the streets and temporary control of urban public space in Atlanta became the precise reason many students were determined to participate in the event. It was an outright rejection of the city’s authoritarian controls. In 1995, students at the Atlanta University Center even suggested that Freaknic be renamed “Freedom Fest,” using an appellation associated with the civil rights movement (Rutheiser 1996:136). As an observer recognized, Freaknic ‘95 “turned out to be a massive student protest against what they termed ‘white citizen ambivalence’ [...as]

12. I have conducted several interviews with Freaknic participants who attended the event in the late 1980s and early 1990s and they recall no such public displays of sexuality by women. Or as Anita McCree, a former Freaknic attendee, commented, if such activities were taking place they were not happening in public places (McCree 1997).
allegedly defiant students [...] joined locals in an angry protest that led to 11 arrests” (Range 1995:3A). In the face of authoritarian controls, the rights of blacks to occupy the city’s streets at Freaknic became a central preoccupation of many student and local participants.

That Freaknic became an event about taking possession of urban space was reflected in popular T-shirts sold at Freaknic in the late 1990s. One T-shirt from Freaknic ’97 portrays male and female Freaknickers riding in a red convertible sports car (fig. 6). The image appears above the statement, “U Can’t Stop the Cruising...” words defiantly directed at the city’s authorities. A yellow banner below these words reiterates the point: “Freaknik beat goes on.” Interestingly, the shirt also includes a previous headline from the AJC (Vickers 1994b:A1): “Ready to party: Students start pouring into town,” literally incorporating the media’s anthropomorphic characterization of the students as an entity that “poured” into the city. It depicts the Freaknic frolicking as more than just partying; it is specifically framed as being about the flouncing of the city’s and the media’s efforts to stop the event. The shirt also renames Atlanta “Chocolate City,” further emphasizing the participants’ determined efforts to darken (and sweeten) Atlanta. Another version of the same shirt portrays two cars against a backdrop of the city’s “no cruising” signs (traffic signs that indicated where cruising was illegal during Freaknic). The T-shirts provide insight into how local designers imagined the event and how they believed that eventgoers conceived of Freaknic. They also became a part of Freaknic participants’ attire. One photograph taken in 1997 shows a festivalgoer wearing a Freaknic T-shirt about defying city officials next to a patrolling police car (fig. 7).

In addition to generally picturing defiance of Atlanta’s city authorities, numerous T-shirts specifically depict streets as sites of contestation in Freaknic. Many of the T-shirts portray named local streets or locations in Atlanta in their design and show Freaknickers fully in control of these spaces. One T-shirt from Freaknic ’97, for instance, shows a young woman, outfitted in designer clothes, jewelry, and sculpted nails, dancing with a man against the city’s skyline (fig. 8). Although in this instance there is no explicit reference to the city’s controls, the shirt’s designer situates the partiers within the primary space of the city’s control measures, the streets. The design conspicuously includes street signs throughout the image, referring to streets and neighborhoods in Atlanta’s traditionally black areas like Bankhead and white ones like Piedmont, suggesting that all these spaces belong to Freaknic participants. Another shirt depicts aliens behind the wheel of a car heading down a highway with the city of Atlanta in the background. The word “Atlienz” across the bottom of the image combines the words “Atlanta” with “alien,” satirizing the perception of the event as “an invasion.” “Atlienz” also calls attention to the

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13. Another popular slogan on T-shirts during this period read, “They told us not to come, but we came anyway!”
importance of music at Freaknic. It also refers to the title of Atlanta group Outkast's 1996 album, *ATLiens*. These popular depictions of the event dramatically illustrate that in the imagination of many Freaknic participants (and T-shirt designers) the presence of blacks on the streets during the event was seen as subversive. Indeed, the occupation of the streets had become the point of Freaknic.

The Bio-Politics of Gender at Freaknic

The T-shirts also represent black female bodies as central to Freaknickers’ possession of Atlanta’s urban landscape. On the U – Can’t Stop the Cruising T-shirt, three scantily clad women strike poses on the hood of the car, while another two dance standing on the seats of the open convertible. The most prominent male on the shirt actively videotapes the women. The shirt suggests a direct correlation between the female displays of sexuality and Freaknic’s mission to claim Atlanta’s city streets. The women’s bodily displays and performances of visibility are represented as intrinsic to the street party protest. The broader concentration on women in Freaknic and its popular representations seems to reiterate the historical development of the event as I’ve outlined it: when the police began clamping down on the Freaknic festivities and approaching the students with force, reports of women acting in a sexual manner and displaying their bodies first surfaced in large numbers. Women emerged as the main attraction in the event at the precise moment when authoritarian controls were most stringent.

George Lipsitz, in a discussion of African American hip-hop culture, hypothesizes that African American youth, to respond to dominant society’s “culture of surveillance,” have created a “counterculture of conspicuous display” in which their “bodies, ghetto walls, and city streets” become “sites of performance and play” (1994:20–21). An application of Lipsitz’s observations to Freaknic suggests that the public displays and performances involving the female body may have constituted, at least in part, a response to the ordinances and surveillance placed on the Freaknic participants. Similarly, Paul Gilroy argues that in the 1990s, black political struggles for freedom are increasingly made manifest through a sexualization and concentration on the body, a phenomenon he terms “bio-politics” (1994:25). He traces this development through an investigation of R&B music and music videos and looks at how the lyrics have changed from the 1970s to concentrate incessantly on sex, bodies, and pleasure. Gilroy posits that in bio-politics, gender...
(and I would add, women’s bodies) has become central “as an alternative articulation of freedom that associates autonomous agency with desire and promotes the symbolic exercise of power in the special domain that sexuality provides” (36). For Gilroy the domain of sexuality has become an alternative site for the articulation of political freedom. The transformation of Freaknic from an event based on “feel-good” go-go music from the 1970s to a street party in which women are the “freaks” seems to parallel the development that Gilroy outlines. In the face of the city’s attempts to maintain and impose order on Freaknic participants, women may have turned to the domain of sexuality as an alternative site of freedom. The blatant nakedness and visibility of their sexualized performances, which they staged anywhere they wished, mocked the city’s efforts to regulate, remove, and render them invisible. They were performances precisely about being seen and about being seen as being seen, as the centrality of the camera to the performance testifies, just as the city attempted to airbrush the “Chocolate City” of its black presence.

While Lipsitz and Gilroy are instructive in understanding the complicated transformation of the event, neither of their approaches deal in detail with how the specific gender of black youth can affect their responses to the dominant culture. The manifestation of Freaknic in the mid- and late 1990s cannot be viewed solely in terms of a countercultural response to a dominant culture of surveillance. For within Freaknic another culture of surveillance was created. The constant videotaping of women by male participants suggests that the authorities’ culture of surveillance surrounding Freaknic in general was reproduced or redirected, on a microlevel within the event, on the black female body. After 1995, as the culture of videotaping within Freaknic became an intrinsic part of the event, violence was increasingly meted out on female performers by other Freaknic attendees. Incidents of bodily assault, including sexual harassment and rape, on women became increasingly commonplace. As a writer for Essence detailed in 1996, some sexualized performances, over which women once exerted control, ended in sexual assault. He describes an incident that began like many performances:

I watched them run toward the voluptuous young sister who was standing on top of the Oldsmobile, motioning scores of young brothers in her direction. They came and surrounded the car, waving money and chanting “Take it off!” So she took it off—several bills for each article of clothing—until she was entirely naked. When there was nothing left to remove, she counted her money, put her clothes back on and tried to climb back into the car. But she didn’t make it: the mob bashed her. To be more specific, they smashed her windshield and grabbed and fondled her on the car’s roof. After this “show” was over, the crowd dispersed. (Jasper 1996:150)

This freak show had a violent ending, one that would be replayed with increasing frequency during Freaknic in the late 1990s. Even the structure of the car, which once offered a level of protection to women, was increasingly violated. It is unclear why the violent response to authorities was redirected within the event and against women. If Freaknic is, as I have argued, about claiming space and if the women’s performances are connected to this aim, what do these 14. I do not mean to imply that the women’s performances were solely in response to the city’s authoritarian approach. Many additional factors, including the “dirty South’s” strip culture, the images of women in hip-hop, and the license of spring break generally, undoubtedly also informed the activities.

15. For literature that considers the place of women in black youth culture, see McRobbie’s discussion of ragga girls in Britain (1994, 1995) and Tricia Rose’s analysis of women hip hop artists (1990, 1994). Both scholars contend that women use their sexuality to effectively retaliate against the “subjugated sexuality,” to quote McRobbie, imposed on women by the society at large (1994:184). While their findings are applicable to Freaknic, the violence women experience at the hands of black men at the event call into question the liberating potential of sexualized performances.
attacks on black women within the space of Freaknic suggest about the limits of black women’s freedom within the “domain of sexuality” in the black public sphere?

In 1997, city officials began to change their response to Freaknic and attempted to organize structured activities for the event. This new policy came in the midst of election campaigns, in which mayor Bill Campbell sought reelection. In an effort to appeal to black voters, Campbell’s political opponent, Marvin Arrington, wielded the Mayor’s prior attempts to stop Freaknic against him in the media. He cast Campbell’s anti-Freaknic stance not simply as an attempt by the mayor to appease white constituents in the racially polarized city but argued it was indicative of his wider (non–African American) political allegiances and loyalties. City Councilwoman Carolyn Long Banks also publicly criticized the cordonning off of certain public spaces during the event by Campbell’s administration as reminiscent of such infamous Jim Crow segregationists as George Wallace and Lester Maddox (Blackmon and Helton 1994:B6). In her estimation the anti-Freaknic policies recalled the antics of anti-black racist politicians in Georgia’s not-so-distant segregationist past. Likely in direct response to these accusations, starting in 1997, the Mayor’s office—without official explanation—embarked on several new strategies aimed at, as the Mayor put it, “get[ting] Freaknic back to where it once was,” reverting it back into an affair centered on organized events.

In 1997, the Mayor’s office appointed a 16-member committee to develop and approve structured Freaknic events. After screening promoters, the city published a pamphlet and website listing a number of city-sanctioned Freaknic events, including a step show, black film festival, basketball tournament, picnic in Grant Park, job fair, and concerts including rap acts such as Doug E. Fresh, with “expletive-free lyrics” (Fears 1997b:1B). The planned events aimed to get Freaknickers out of their cars and into pedestrian-centered activities.16

While city officials cautiously laid out the welcome mat, it was selectively placed in front of certain parts of Atlanta. Freaknic participants could attend the approved events—many located in the corridor of Martin Luther King Drive between Northside Drive and Ashby Street—but they still could not freely traverse the city. Indeed, three weeks before Freaknic ‘97 authorities placed “no cruising” signs around many parts of midtown Atlanta and the posh Buckhead area, essentially criminalizing cruising in parts of the city. Still, Freaknic participants were granted a partial access pass to the city. In 1998, authorities officially removed another set of barricades to the event, deciding not to block interstates into and surrounding the city.

Despite official city gestures towards a more welcoming reception of Freaknic participants, over the three-day weekend students steered clear of city-sanctioned events and preferred to remain in their cars on Atlanta roads. With the exception of the job fair, Freaknickers rejected the city’s efforts to tame Freaknic. The city’s failure to transform the event through structured activities stemmed from the fact that Freaknic had become a street-based festivity, centered almost exclusively on cars and occupying streets. This point was supported by a radio caller to V103’s “Ask the Mayor” broadcast (a segment on the Mike and Carol in the Morning radio show in which Campbell took calls on air) on 18 April 1997. She asked Mayor Campbell: “What gives the city the right to take over the event and call it something different and change the activities? [...] When we used to do it over at Washington Park we used to have all the students come in the park, but what happened was the police started running us off. So when we got ran off, we had no choice but to go to the street and that’s where it ended up going, on the streets.” In other words, the city could not take over the event because going to the streets, having a visible presence on the urban landscape in defiance of authorities, was the very point of Freaknic.

16. In 1998 and 1999 organizers persisted in their futile attempts to bring “respectability” back to Freaknic. The mayor’s office continued to sponsor events such as the job fair and to soften its militaristic affront against attendees.
“The Autopolis” Upside Down

_Carnivalizing Atlanta’s Spatial Order_

As previously argued, street-based public rituals highlight and underscore the normative functioning of space and may provide insight into how that physical environment reproduces racial, class, and gender distinctions. I now want to speculate on some of the socially prescribed racial, gender, and class boundaries in Atlanta that Freaknic makes visible and transgresses. What does the discourse surrounding the “disorder” of the event and the focus on “deviant” female behavior elucidate about racial, class, gender, spatial, and moral boundaries in urban Atlanta? If Freaknic represents “disorder,” what exactly is the presumed official order and structure of Atlanta? A history of the city will provide insight into these questions.

The history of Atlanta's urban development begins in 1837, when the city was founded on the proposed intersection of three converging Western Atlantic railway lines. Founding fathers, in recognition of the city’s geographic position at the terminating point of these railroads, called the new city Terminus. The laying of the rail lines and building of the city, according to Charles Rutheiser in _Imagineering Atlanta_, was often “rendered as a tale of triumph of civilization over savagery” (1996:18). Even the names of the first political parties, the Orderly Party and the Moral Party, reflect the widespread belief that Atlanta was to be a place of order and “moral” behavior. From the time of its founding, Atlanta was a city based on the principles of maintaining order and becoming a transportation center in the South.

Through various campaigns Atlanta promoted itself as a transportation hub in order to attract national and then international business and industry. After Union Forces in the American Civil War demolished the city in 1864, Atlanta was rebuilt and promoted as “The Gateway of the South.” In the early 1920s, the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce invested one million dollars in building hard surface roads in a “Forward Metro Atlanta” campaign, again in keeping with the imaging of the city as a transportation center. In the 1960s and 1970s Atlanta was reenvisioned as the “world's next great international city.” At this time street names in Atlanta changed to reflect the international orientation of the city; Cain Street, for instance, became “International Boulevard” (Rutheiser 1996:82). More recently, Rutheiser views the $150-million renovation of Atlanta’s Hartsfield International Airport as “but the latest incarnation of Atlanta’s infatuation with transportation in general” (1996:82). During the bid for the Olympics the city again portrayed itself as the international city.

Notably, although Atlanta welcomed the world to the Olympics in 1996, an open invitation to the city was never extended to Freaknic participants. Indeed, in preparation for the Olympics, the police had an added interest in controlling and managing Freaknic. Law enforcement and transportation department officials considered Freaknic a “dry run” for their newly installed traffic control and highway surveillance systems before the arrival of millions of visitors expected for the Olympics. Atlanta’s readiness as the Olympic host city would be judged on how well city officials could control Freaknic traffic and crowds. When Freaknic ’96 went on without any major incident, Mayor Campbell deemed the measures put in place for the Olympics a “great success” (Morris and Towns 1996:8E). This history of Atlanta’s international development and interest in controlling traffic emphasizes that promoting the city for well over a century has been associated with making Atlanta a more efficient transportation center.

In many ways Atlanta remains a metropolis devoted to transportation, even though modern highways have replaced the city’s rail lines. Like Terminus, Atlanta is strategically positioned at the nexus of three US interstates (one of only five American cities where this is the case). Atlanta has more miles of roads and highways than many larger US cities. In 1990, although Atlanta was the 12th most-populous metro area, it ranked 4th in the nation for total miles of roadway per 10,000 people. Atlantans drive more than motorists in any other city in North America (on a per capita basis), averaging 34 miles driven per person, per day (Goldberg 1996:6D). Rutheiser refers to Atlanta as an “autopolis” because of its dependence on streets, highways, and the use of automobiles (1996:82).
Freaknic, in which students incessantly cruise and congest city highways and women dance on cars, seems to reflect Atlanta’s own obsessions with both highways and automobiles. Freaknic participants, in the tradition of carnival, embody and exaggerate Atlanta’s own development and complete dependence on transportation. Freaknic is the autopolis turned upside down. Atlanta’s complete reliance on the streets to get anywhere in the city (versus the use of subway systems in other major cities), explains why the traffic gridlock during Freaknic was so vehemently despised. Ironically, Freaknic made Atlanta’s residents realize just how much their mobility depends on their cars, when suddenly during the “street party” they were no longer able to conduct their daily business.

Roads and highways also possess racial significance in the history of Atlanta’s city planning. In Race and the Shaping of Atlanta, Richard Bayor argues that racial segregation in Atlanta was facilitated and maintained through the strategic placement of roads and local highways (1996). He documents how, since early in the 20th century, streets were constructed to act as racial barriers between black and white communities. In 1940, for instance, white residents of Grove Park (northwest Atlanta) expressed concern over the expansion of a neighboring black community, Center Hill, toward their community. Mayor Hartsfield assured the white residents that a “proposed access road [would] be a boundary [...] to protect them as Negro citizens move farther out” (in Bayor 1996:63). Although racial segregation existed throughout the South, it appears that in Atlanta racial boundaries were especially delineated by streets and highways.17

The naming of streets in Atlanta was also influenced by the politics of racial segregation. Many white Atlantans up to the late 1960s petitioned the Atlanta-Fulton County Planning Board to change the name of their streets in order to differentiate themselves from black residents living on the same road. Hence, the many roads in Atlanta which even today change name in a seemingly arbitrary manner actually reflect the “racialization” of Atlanta’s streets. Ponce De Leon Avenue, in particular, became the unofficial dividing line separating black and white neighborhoods. Many of the street name changes—for example, Moreland into Briarcliff and Boulevard into Monroe—occurred precisely at the Ponce De Leon intersection. Thus, long before Freaknic, Atlanta streets were contested sites where claims on who had the right to occupy urban space were being fought. Freaknic disrupts the racial boundaries still evident in contemporary Atlanta.

Freaknic, since the mid-1990s, has also inverted class distinctions that abound in Atlanta as a whole and within the city’s black community. Many Freaknic participants display all the outward signs of wealth. This fascination with conspicuous consumption or “bling” may have its roots in the black bourgeoisie origins of the event. The first Freaknickers from Spelman and Morehouse Colleges, institutions supported and attended by the black middle classes for well over a century, flaunted their middle- and upper-class status within poor black areas surrounding the Atlanta University Center. In the late 1990s, regardless of actual financial wealth, many participants from different classes put on the trappings of great affluence and luxury, at least temporarily transcending class distinctions and boundaries by displaying all the accoutrements of wealth. At the same time, however, the behavior of some women at the event (the mooning of passersby, for example) seemed to mock and carnivalize conservative and respectable black middle-class values.

More generally, Freaknic upset class boundaries that remain drawn along racial lines in Atlanta. While the myth of Atlanta as a “Black Mecca” that affords economic opportunities for

17. Perhaps the most infamous incident illustrating the use of the streets as racial barriers occurred in the 1960s when a black doctor attempted to purchase a home in a white neighborhood on Peyton Road. White residents in the area mobilized and received permission from Mayor Ivan Allen to construct a steel and concrete barricade on both Peyton and Harlan Roads. The barrier, which became known nationally as “The Atlanta Wall,” denied access to the neighborhood from black communities to the north (Bayor 1996:63).
African Americans persists, the affluence and economic development in the city remains largely confined to white communities in northern parts of the city. Despite the continued racial and class segregation still prevalent in Atlanta, during Freaknic traditionally white areas like Buckhead or Piedmont become popular haunts for black participants. Freaknic disrupts all the orthodox class and racial spatial boundaries as African American participants from different classes display all the outwards signs of wealth that some white and black upper-class residents exhibit year round. The Freaknickers’ occupation of these spaces, which are otherwise playgrunds for rich Atlantans, upsets, disrupts, and transgresses certain expectations about race, class, and ownership of public space in Atlanta.

**Women and Controlling Disorder on Urban Streets**

In addition to encoding racial and class divisions, urban streets also historically hold a special significance for women. As Elizabeth Wilson argues in *Sphinx in The City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder and Women* (1991), the presence of women on city streets has long been perceived as a threat to the “masculinized” order of the city. An unaccompanied woman on the city streets in 19th-century Paris and London, for example, was often thought to be a prostitute or “streetwalker.” According to Wilson, licensing, identifying, and monitoring “streetwalkers” were all attempts to gain control of the female body and take away the freedoms she had gained in the city. Although Freaknic is a very different event than what Wilson describes, similar issues concerning the control and policing of the sexualized behavior of women in city streets are at stake in the contemporary urban landscape of Atlanta. In both cases sexualized women are conceived of as sites of disorder and moral chaos in the male ordered city environment. The city was created to house buildings of government administration, industry, and business, all of which have an investment in retaining control of society. Sexualized women in urban space represent bodily desire and “pleasurable anarchy,” deviating from “routinized order,” the rigid and rationalized organization of the city (Wilson 1991:8). As Wilson concludes following her investigation of several cities, “There is a fear of the city as a realm of uncontrolled and chaotic license, and the rigid control of women in cities has been felt necessary to avert this danger” (157). While Wilson shows that women historically have been viewed as symbols of disorder in the city environment, the black female body within the racially bifurcated landscape of Atlanta signaled a double assault on the moral order of the city. The sexualized performances of black women represented the presence of two elements of disorder in the heart of the city of Atlanta: the “lascivious” female and “untamable” black presence (to use terms commonly applied to the event in Atlanta’s popular press).

**Conclusion**

In *The Erotic Margin* Irvin Schick examines the complicated relationship between sexuality, racial otherness or alterity, and the social construction and differentiation of space (1999). He analyzes the ways in which Western discourses formulated notions of place and geographical difference through the trope of gender and sexuality. As he explains, “the sexuality of the ‘other’ was a technology of place; its function was the spatialization of difference, the differentiation of space” (232). In other words, sexuality was a central means through which constructions of otherness, the imaginative geography that constituted notions of here and there, were mapped onto the landscape (12).

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18. In 1990, for example, the average income in white households was $61,691, while African American households brought in a comparatively meager $22,372 (Rutheiser 1996:84). Certain areas in and surrounding Atlanta have become enclaves of white wealth, particularly majority white neighborhoods like Buckhead, where the average income is $130,000 a year.

19. For a detailed analysis of media representations of blacks and women in Atlanta and of Freaknic, see Meyers (2004).
Given the history of Atlanta's spatialization of difference based on race, class, and gender within the city, the incessant focus on taming the sexualized behavior of women at Freaknic in Atlanta's media may be reexamined in light of Schick's findings. Significantly, by the late 1990s, the press and authorities seized upon the sexualized activities of women at the event, and black men's “uncontrolled” responses to these performances, as the primary reasons for stopping Freaknic. In this way, recalling Schick, sexuality became the raison d'etre for spatial control. As Schick explains, “Creating a space of otherness characterized by a sexual threat, in that instance, logically calls for the creation of a space that is safe from any such threat” (233). City officials declared the “disorderly sexual displays” in Freaknic as the epitome of social indecency and used this to claim the moral authority to “tame” Freaknic participants and put them in “their place”—literally.

As the police attempted to tame sexuality by controlling space, women attending the event used the sexualized body in response in large degree to these controls and in their own claim to their right to occupy and have a visible presence in the city. This insistence on being seen was magnified through the use of the camera in the women's performances. The dynamic use of the realm of sexuality by different groups in Atlanta, especially officials and female participants, confirms Grosz's contention that bodies and cities “produce each other [...] as modes of simulation which have overtaken and transformed whatever reality each may have had into the image of the other” (1992:242; emphasis added). In Freaknic, “the reality” of the sexualized black female body became both the purported reason for eradicating the event and the primary tool in Freaknic's continuation, popularity, and the defiance of authoritarian controls.

Only in the late 1990s, when city officials showed less resistance to Freaknic participants (easing off police presence and approving Freaknic events), did the “street party” slow; first to a crawl and then a halt. At the end of Freaknic '99, following three years of a gentler approach to the black college spring break, the Atlanta Journal and Constitution happily started to prepare an obituary for Freaknic, describing the event that drew only a few thousand people as “Weaknik” (Good and Suggs 1999:1G). By 2000, Freaknic was pronounced dead (McCosh 2000:3E). Many papers eulogized that competing events in Daytona Beach, Florida, and Galveston, Texas (cities eager to attract the money of Freaknic attendees), had pulled would-be Freaknickers from the city. Some pointed to the steady police presence as the reason for Freaknic's demise. However, the city's most successful plot to “kill” the street-oriented protest form of Freaknic was ultimately to withdraw their opposition.

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