

## Openings and Retrospectives



### ONE VIEW FROM A DETERRITORIALIZED REALM: How Black/Queer Renarrativizes Anthropological Analysis

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In a previous contribution to *Cultural Anthropology*, I suggested that “to take articulations of race and sex seriously, is to realize that there is no ‘colorblind’ sexual desire, and no neutral race/sex project” (Allen 2013, 552). In this short provocation toward collectively troubling and projecting various queer anthropological futures with a host of brilliant colleagues, I want to refocus this question of a race/sex project. Here, I attempt to raise a few critical questions about the prospect for reciprocation in queer anthropology, and in the discipline more broadly, through a brief reflection on the emergence of Black/queer anthropology.

#### WHOSE DADDY?

While the exuberance represented by the titles *Fear of a Queer Planet* (Warner 1993), *Global Sex* (Altman 2001), and *The World We Have Won* (Weeks 2007) is seductive, as anthropologists we know that between their covers there is not much to learn about the world outside of a small, privileged, phallus-shaped sliver of the North. And as scholars writing on lesbian and gay studies and, later, queer

studies “in the house of anthropology” (Weston 1993; Boellstorff 2007a) have shown, anthropological contributions to what came to be known as queer studies predates the emergence of *queer* as a term of art. In contrast to equally important ways of doing queer studies, the anthropology of LGBTQ subjects has attempted, as Tom Boellstorff (2007b, 24) has averred, to anthropologize queer studies. That is, it has set out not only to provide empirical grounding and humanistic context for what is *over there*, but more fundamentally, to advance an understanding of “the foundationally social character of human being” (Boellstorff 2007b, 2). Still, I contend that we cannot understand the dimensions and dynamism of the social character of human being without thinking gender, sexuality, race, class, and nation as they are lived—simultaneously. This critical supplement is, of course, the signal contribution of Black feminism. And this seems to be something that anthropologists, concerned with social actors and social structures, would find essential. In his discussion of the (dis)articulation of anthropology and queer studies, Boellstorff (2007a, 25) argued that an impasse had been reached in anthropology apropos of a proper relationship between sexuality (studies), race (studies), and gender (studies). To this point, I want to offer a friendly critical amendment.

An impasse connotes a relation of mutuality, or at least mutual recognition and engagement. But what has developed in the wake of recent increased scholarly recognition of notions of mutual constitution of identity is a cosmetic, evacuated reflex chant of “race-gender-class” (sexuality has not yet even achieved enough status to be feigned), with little real engagement with this scholarship and its politics. One unacknowledged route of this intransigence is a broad and studied ignorance of Black intellectual traditions within academe. More specifically in the guild of anthropology, resistance to seeing “native” cultural production as *theory* constitutes a disabling contradiction (evidencing that we have not come as far from “the savage slot” named by Michel-Rolph Trouillot [1991]). Given this, to read Black feminist scholarship as *anthropology* of course seems anathema—which makes for dreadful missed opportunities and cross-purposes.

### QUEER’S RADICAL PROMISE

On its own (that is, outside of the reworking it continues to undergo in the hands of critical race, decolonial, indigenous, and disability theorists in the arts and activism, as well as in academe) *queer* may never do what some defenders claim it was meant to do—include a more capacious coarticulation of a number of embodied and embodying categories of normativity, like nationality, gender, region, class, and ability, as well as sexuality. Still, despite often important cri-

tiques of its provenance and the ways it can be used as no more than an inaccurate or sloppy shorthand, queer thinking and queer seeing (still) uniquely facilitates pushing past normative assumptions of sexuality. While emerging from a very particular place and time, the use of *queer* in scholarly work not only describes a sense of the nonnormative status of men and women who identify with or are identified as homosexual or those whose gender self-identification is not resonant with the sex assigned to them at birth. More pointedly, to borrow José Muñoz's (2009, 1) brilliant Brown lens, "queerness is essentially about . . . an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world." At its best, therefore, *queer* (still) offers a glance at the gleaming, aspirational horizon of utopia, from an important vantage. It is therefore worthy of revision and supplement. As my teacher Sherry Ortner reminded me many years ago, "we (ethnographers) are the people who do people." The people do not, however, have to *be* or to identify as queer for queerness to be a useful, disruptive, and prospectively capacious hermeneutic.

Continuing to vociferously argue that (some) so-called natives do not use the word *queer* to describe themselves, while overlooking the ways that other words we use to describe folks—like *individual*, *women*, *men*, and *children*, for example—are also socially, culturally, and historically contextual, seems less significant than the volume and persistence of this charge. In any event, while we have certainly been guilty of using *queer* imprecisely and too much, I hope that this tired argument for its abolition in anthropology soon finds its final rest.

Still, please do not mark me or my fellow travelers in the queer camp. Black/queer does not do camping; it is *unsettled* by choice and necessity. The articulation I have offered—the stroke connecting Black to queer—signals at least a critical repositioning, if not also a novel take altogether. It is an attempt to at once register some political uneasiness (by now probably closer to boredom) with the overused, overwrought yet not easily replaced *queer*, and at the same time to reassert the concept and experience of Blackness complexly and even contingently, but not apologetically or in lowercase. The nomadic, destabilizing interrogative stance of Black/queer scholars, artists, and activists has formulated a response to what Audre Lorde (2009a, 98) has named global "racism, destruction, and a borrowed sameness" with respect to the state's disposition toward Black and Brown folks, both *here* and *there*. As Lorde (2009b, 80) wrote elsewhere, "the battlefields shift: the war is the same. It stretches from the brothels of Southeast Asia to the blood-ridden alleys of Capetown to the incinerated lesbians in Berlin to Michael Stewart's purloined eyes and grandmother Eleanor Bumpers,

shot dead in the projects of New York.” Honestly, perhaps we were *just never that into* queer theory—even Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler, and Eve Sedgwick, from whose singular contributions I have learned a great deal, but who I do not hear daily in my head as I do Essex Hemphill and Audre Lorde, Joseph Beam and Sylvester. For myself, and for a number of emerging anthropologists of Black LGBTQ experience, stellar queer theorists arrived on our bookshelves only after we had already imbibed the political and poetic nectars of intellectual activism and intersectional politics offered by Black lesbian and gay poets, essayists, and scholars. Thus, this author does not feel partisanship or ownership in *Queer Incorporated* (and like most Black/queer scholars, I have not been offered a share in the ongoing concern).

I am instead an interested observer of the *Game of Thrones* [Jack Halberstam \(2013\)](#) reimagines. With tongue in cheek—and, typically, with no small amount of keen, smart provocation and shade—Halberstam likens the various streams of current queer studies to the great houses of the popular HBO drama. Of course, the material well-being and rights of real people in real places and the scholarly framing of their lives are nothing to play with, as Halberstam certainly knows. In any event, allow me to project backward—reimagining the *Game of Thrones* ficto-historical medieval moment through Africentric historiography: I imagine my people having already circumnavigated the globe, building foundations of art and architecture in Africa, the Americas, and Oceania. After inventing higher mathematics and charting the stars, beating their faces with galena and kohl, and sailing strategically around the foolishness of the Seven Kingdoms, they would not be vying for a throne of swords dripping with blood. If I could, I would warn them about the disastrous consequences of doing business in any Kingdom of the North.

### **ECCE BLACK/QUEER**

The ethnography of Black/queer is constituted by the conjuncture of scholarly literatures, theoretical frameworks, and sites of struggle and cultural production. Primary among these is a commitment to the quotidian serious games of Black folks, here and there. Another is a reworking of anthropological traditions, and of queer theory. For our purposes in this discussion, the articulation Black/queer is most profitably thought of as a *habitus of mind*—a way of seeing and saying as much as a mode of thinking or doing. As outside children of Black studies and queer studies, we claim new ways to queerly trace our emergences beyond the patronymic reconstruction of theoritism and narrow disciplinarity.

Black/queer ethnographic work draws its understanding of Black subjects as agents centered in their own globally situated political-economic dramas, and of the anthropologist as an observant full participant, coauthoring witness, and chronicler—aligned and in on the joke, the groove, and the affect—from the decolonizing stream of anthropology, which has yet to be fully critically assessed, much less socialized in graduate training (see [Allen and Jobson 2016](#)). This radical and decolonizing intellectual tradition is currently being extended to contemporary forms of Black/queer life by the anthropologists Shaka McGlotten, Vanessa Agard-Jones, Serena Dankwa, Lyndon Gill, Alix Chapman, Andrea Allen, Kwame Edwin Otu, and others, working, for example, on pleasure, resistance, endurance, violence, statecraft, media, displacement, belonging, advocacy, and spirituality, and making important methodological, theoretical, and writerly innovations. Each of their projects is unique, but also resonant as Black/queer.

It is now clear that standard or traditional academic frameworks and optics do not allow us to see anyone or anything fully enough, or clearly enough. The recent emergence of Black/queer and queer of color work alongside current crises in queer theory/queer studies and anthropological theory brings intellectual kinship into relief, but it also shows the current limits of our disciplinary *kens*. The Dutch-Surinamese anthropologist Gloria Wekker stands as the premier exemplar of this radical Black feminist decolonizing intellectual tradition in the anthropology of sex and sexuality. In her remarkable book *The Politics of Passion*, [Wekker \(2006\)](#) closely examines translocal experiences of age, class, color, gender, and spirituality among Black and Creole working-class women in Suriname and the Netherlands. One of many important ethnographic insights of Wekker's book is that what we would call sexuality is not a stable, discrete ontological category but a complex of multiply constituted, integrated, and contingent *desires*. And rather than weave theoretical webs centering the Western intellectual traditions, she finds theorization on the ground, in the translocal networks and local religious, ethical, historical, and political-economic conditions of her respondents. I, too, have tried to illumine these dimensions of experience in my own work.

Today we must attend to what folks are reading, listening, and dancing to, and who their people are: their political, economic, and historical sources of “exposure, entanglement, and endurance” (to borrow the title of a recent symposium at Yale University<sup>1</sup>), at the same time and in relation to who they are (or wish they could be) fucking. Some of the most intractable or nettlesome political issues, as well as methodological and theoretical conundrums, can be illumined by careful attention to this understudied intersection of race/place(lessness),

movement, and sexuality, which a few of us have pursued in ethnographic monographs. Finally, and most important: real fists hit actual flesh. Material jails—those with physical bars—imprison living human beings guilty only of poverty and desire. And what is more, though writing a book will never un-punch or de-rap, will never reverse the court decision, people should know that they are free and that they deserve study, a record of some of the highlights of how this freedom is performed. Thus, out of political-economic and cultural crisis, and precisely to stage the inauguration of “a new and more possible meeting” (Lorde 1984, 123) of disciplines, commitments, aesthetics and geographies, Black/queer anthropology has emerged as *another way*—renarrativizing social-cultural analysis through an insistence on and/both, intersections and compounds, hyphens, strokes, parentheses, and messy interstices of real life and audacious imagination. This exceeds the current limits of anthropology, because those limits were set and are policed by those whose politics and reading practices do not allow Black subjects to stretch beyond the readymade savage slot.

This mode of work is new in academe, but it has a longer history in Black LGBTQ, queer of color, and Black feminist activist work, artistic practice, and art of living life. In the United States in the early 1980s, at the onset of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, Black same-gender-loving and gender-nonconforming forms of making sex, literatures, and other expressive practices emerged, thereby pushing notions of erotic experience beyond heterosexual sex and reproduction. That, for example, Black lesbians announced that they (like to) fuck, and Black gay men, who were assumed to be fucking unconsciously and unnaturally, added “now we think as we fuck” at what was the height of the AIDS epidemic, constituted a profound contribution to radical praxis. At a crucial moment in which it was clear that, as Phill Wilson, the founder of the Black AIDS Institute, commented, “they are going to let us die,” Black lesbians, bisexuals, transgender folks, and gay men created community out of crisis—in *Nepantla*, in life, *en el ambiente*—complex, troubled, and often riddled with *candela*. The radical promise of Black/queer work is located in scholarship, art, and activism that not only has cellular and psychic connections to resistance to enslavement—which tried but failed to dehumanize our ancestors—but also is “shaped by the burden of persistent colonialism and the euphoric promise of nationalism and self-determination” (Alexander and Mohanty 1997, xiii); by activist intellectual Black women who had analyzed the interlocking spheres of race, gender, sexuality, and class through the prism of antiviolence organizing (the Combahee River Collective); by writers who had, in nonacademic spheres and languages, poetically called for Black men

loving Black men as a revolutionary statement of self- and community preservations (Joseph Beam, Marlon Riggs, and Essex Hemphill); and by activists who participated in blocking the public arteries of London, Paris, Rome, Buenos Aires, and San Francisco with their “dead,” tracing bodies and leaving their haunting presence on the streets as a sharp indictment of the callous state (Queer Nation/ACT UP). But, what to do when anthropology colleagues—especially those senior anthropologists responsible for programming conferences, structuring curricula, supervising dissertations, and recommending hiring and tenure—are ignorant of or hostile to the work that grounds and animates one’s own original scholarship, or too possessively invested in their own narrow disciplinary or area-studies reading practices and methodologies to admit new ways of reading, seeing, and saying? How best to point out that the deficiency lies in their reading practices, archives, and repertoires, not ours?

Today, among the pressing challenges laid before the guild responsible for participating in, observing, and chronicling lived (and dying?) experience is the work of crafting a set of anthropologically informed responses apropos of the matter of Black/queer life (and death). As we come together across areas of experience, expertise, and affinity to do this work, we would be wise to note the recent provocation of the political scientist [Cathy Cohen \(2014\)](#), apropos of what I think of as a sort of “critical demeanor” (see [DuCille 1994](#)). In the wake of the state-sanctioned police executions of Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Mike Brown, and others,<sup>2</sup> and the domestic-terror assassination of Black churchgoers at the historic church of one of the nation’s most famous slave insurrectionists, and also in a moment in which there is at once unprecedented visibility of Black queer and trans people and record numbers of unsolved murders of Black and Brown trans women in the United States and elsewhere, Cohen draws out another dimension of what I called a “cosmetic, evacuated reflex chant.” In her Kessler Award lecture ([Cohen 2014](#)), she names the “performative solidarity” of LGBTQ groups (i.e., statements of support, and many times also unfortunate and inaccurate “parallels” “between” race and sexual identity that suggest one must choose one) that belies complicity with the selfsame neoliberal policies that support the fact that “in fact, Black lives do not matter.” That is, like the project of decolonizing anthropology, this work will demand that anthropologists begin a hard and even painful critical assessment of our politics—perhaps beginning, as [Trouillot \(1991, 17\)](#) suggested twenty-five years ago, with the “electoral politics” of discipline, which condition what (and whom) gets read and promoted.

For the small but increasing number of anthropologists working in Black feminist, Black/queer, and queer of color critique, ethnography brings us closer toward answering Hortense Spillers's (1984, 74) entreaty to *verb* Black erotic experience and Saidiya Hartman's (2008, 3) attempts at "redressing the violence" of the archive. This is an effort, as Hartman (2008, 2) offers apropos of the "impossibility" of her own historiographic project, pace Foucault, to "register [more than an] encounter with power . . . [but] a sketch of . . . existence." Who, if not anthropologists, would possess and deploy the most appropriate scholarly and methodological toolkit to probe the deep, inextricably intersectional, and embodied narrativization of "punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens" (Cohen 1997)? The sort of ethnographic renarrativization Black/queer work takes up is not merely about restructuring just-so stories, single-issue politics, or old-school analysis. Renarrativization holds a number of theories, methods, reading practices, disciplines, and writerly positions in tension—sometimes elegantly, at other times mirroring the mess and clumsiness of lived experience. The world we live in now calls for this sort of expansive engagement, rather than for refusals and the jealous guarding of theoretical, area-studies, or disciplinary borders. Moreover, to remain relevant in an academy in which our students are demanding more intersectionally explanatory and usable knowledges: this is a call for a redisciplining of the intellect, a widening of reading practices, and the political commitment to at once master particular methods and theoretical frameworks and at the same time loosen our possessive investment in narrow disciplinarity or theoretical chauvinism. Black/queer anthropologists are leading the way and have much to offer the discipline—if our colleagues will read and engage the work.

## NOTES

1. "Toxic: A Symposium on Exposure, Entanglement, and Endurance" was organized by Vanessa Agard-Jones and took place on March 3–4, 2016. For more information, see <http://www.toxicsymposium.org>.
2. I have chosen not to edit this passage to reflect the long list of murders since I originally drafted this essay. But, as I make my final edits, I would be remiss if I did not note that the killings are ongoing; there have been at least three over the past seven days. Readers can keep up with the death toll at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-police-killings-us-database>.

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