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# TEXT AND PERFORMANCE QUARTERLY

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## “Quare” Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother

E. Patrick Johnson

*Although queer studies has the potential to transform the way scholars theorize sexuality in conjunction with other identity formations, the paucity of attention given to race and class in queer studies represents a significant theoretical gap. Most current formulations of queer theory either ignore the categories of race and class altogether or theorize their effects in discursive rather than material terms. To suture that gap, this essay proposes “quare” studies as a vernacular rearticulation and deployment of queer theory to accommodate racialized sexual knowledge.* **Keywords:** queer studies, performance, performativity, race, class.

I love queer. Queer is a homosexual of either sex. It’s more convenient than saying “gays” which has to be qualified, or “lesbians and gay men.” It’s an extremely useful polemic term because it is who we say we are, which is, “Fuck You.”

—Spike Pittsberg (qtd. in C. Smith 280)

I use queer to describe my particular brand of lesbian feminism, which has much to do with the radical feminism I was involved with in the early ’80s. I also use it externally to describe a political inclusivity—a new move toward a celebration of difference across sexualities, across genders, across sexual preference and across object choice. The two link.

—Linda Semple (qtd. in C. Smith 280)

I’m more inclined to use the words “black lesbian,” because when I hear the word queer I think of white, gay men.

—Isling Mack-Nataf (qtd. in C. Smith 280)

I define myself as gay mostly. I will not use queer because it is not part of my vernacular—but I have nothing against its use. The same debates around naming occur in the “black community.” Naming is powerful. Black people and gay people constantly renaming ourselves is a way to shift power from whites and hets respectively.

—Inge Blackman (qtd. in C. Smith 280)

Personally speaking, I do not consider myself a “queer” activist or, for that matter, a “queer” anything. This is not because I do not consider myself an activist; in fact, I hold my political work to be one of my most important contributions to all of my communities. But like other lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered activists of color, I find the label “queer” fraught with unspoken assumptions which inhibit the radical political potential of this category.

—Cathy Cohen (“Punks” 451)

“Quare” Etymology  
(with apologies to Alice Walker)

Quare (Kwâr), *n.* 1. meaning *queer*; also, opp. of *straight*; odd or slightly off kilter; from the African American vernacular for queer; sometimes homophobic in usage, but always denotes excess incapable of being contained within conventional categories of *being*; curiously equivalent to the Anglo-Irish (and sometimes “Black” Irish) variant of queer, as in Brendan Behan’s famous play, *The Quare Fellow*.

–*adj.* 2. a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered person of color who loves other men or women, sexually or nonsexually, and appreciates black culture and community.

–*n.* 3. one who *thinks* and *feels* and *acts* (and, sometimes, “acts up”); committed to struggle against all forms of oppression—racial, sexual, gender, class, religious, etc.

–*n.* 4. one for whom sexual and gender identities always already intersect with racial subjectivity.

5. quare is to queer as “reading” is to “throwing shade.”<sup>1</sup>

I AM going out on a limb. This is a precarious position, but the stakes are high enough to warrant risky business. The business to which I refer is reconceptualizing the still incubating discipline called queer studies. Now, what’s in a name? This is an important question when, as James Baldwin proclaims in the titles of two of his works, I have “no name in the street” or, worse still, “nobody *knows* my name” (emphasis added). I used to answer to “queer,” but when I was hailed by that naming, interpellated in that moment, I felt as if I was being called “out of my name.” I needed something with more “soul,” more “bang,” something closer to “home.” It is my name after all!

Then I remembered how “queer” is used in my family. My grandmother, for example, used it often when I was a child and still uses it today. When she says the word, she does so in a thick, black, southern dialect: “That sho’ll is a quare chile.” Her use of “queer” is almost always nuanced. Still, one might wonder, what, if anything, could a poor, black, eighty-something, southern, homophobic woman teach her educated, middle-class, thirty-something, gay grandson about queer studies? Everything. Or *almost* everything. On the one hand, my grandmother uses “quare” to denote something or someone who is odd, irregular, or slightly off kilter—definitions in keeping with traditional understandings and uses of “queer.” On the other hand, she also deploys “quare” to connote something excessive—something that might philosophically translate into an excess of discursive and epistemological meanings grounded in African American cultural rituals and lived experience. Her knowing or not knowing vis-à-vis “quare” is predicated on her own “multiple and complex social, historical, and cultural positionality” (Henderson 147). It is this culture-specific positionality that I find absent from the dominant and more conventional usage of “queer,” particularly in its most recent theoretical reappropriation in the academy.

I knew there was something to “quare,” that its implications reached far beyond my grandmother’s front porch. Little did I know, however, that its use extended

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across the Atlantic. Then, I found “quare” in Ireland.<sup>2</sup> In *Quare Joyce*, Joseph Valente writes,

[...] I have elected to use the Anglo-Irish epithet *quare* in the title as a kind of transnational/transidiomatic pun. *Quare*, meaning odd or strange, as in Brendan Behan’s famous play, *The Quare Fellow*, has lately been appropriated as a distinctively Irish variant of *queer*, as in the recent prose collection *Quare Fellas*, whose editor, Brian Finnegan, reinterprets Behan’s own usage of the term as having “covertly alluded to his own sexuality.” (4, emphasis in original)

Valente’s appropriation of the Irish epithet “quare” to “queerly” read James Joyce establishes a connection between race and ethnicity in relation to queer identity. Indeed, Valente’s “quare” reading of Joyce, when conjoined with my grandmother’s “quare” reading of those who are slightly off kilter, provides a strategy for reading racial and ethnic sexuality. Where the two uses of “quare” diverge is in their deployment. Valente deploys quare to devise a queer literary exegesis of Joyce. Rather than drawing on “quare” as a *literary* mode of reading/theorizing, however, I draw upon the *vernacular* roots implicit in my grandmother’s use of the word to devise a strategy for theorizing racialized sexuality.

Because much of queer theory critically interrogates notions of selfhood, agency, and experience, it is often unable to accommodate the issues faced by gays and lesbians of color who come from “raced” communities. Gloria Anzaldúa explicitly addresses this limitation when she warns that “queer is used as a false unifying umbrella which all ‘queers’ of all races, ethnicities and classes are shored under” (250). While acknowledging that “at times we need this umbrella to solidify our ranks against outsiders,” Anzaldúa nevertheless urges that “even when we seek shelter under it [“queer”], we must not forget that it homogenizes, erases our differences” (250).

“Quare,” on the other hand, not only speaks across identities, it *articulates* identities as well. “Quare” offers a way to critique stable notions of identity and, at the same time, to locate racialized and class knowledges. My project is one of recapitulation and recuperation. I want to maintain the inclusivity and playful spirit of “queer” that animates much of queer theory, but I also want to jettison its homogenizing tendencies. As a disciplinary expansion, then, I wish to “quare” “queer” such that ways of knowing are viewed both as discursively mediated and as historically situated and materially conditioned. This reconceptualization foregrounds the ways in which lesbians, bisexuals, gays, and transgendered people of color come to sexual and racial knowledge. Moreover, quare studies acknowledges the different “standpoints” found among lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgendered people of color—differences that are also conditioned by class and gender.<sup>3</sup>

Quare studies is a theory of and for gays and lesbians of color. Thus, I acknowledge that in my attempt to advance quare studies, I run the risk of advancing another version of identity politics. Despite this, I find it necessary to traverse this political mine field in order to illuminate the ways in which some strands of queer theory fail to incorporate racialized sexuality. The theory that I advance is a “theory in the flesh” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 23). Theories in the flesh emphasize the diversity within and among gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgendered people of color while simultaneously accounting for how racism and classism affect how we experience and theorize the world. Theories in the flesh also conjoin theory and practice

through an embodied politics of resistance. This politics of resistance is manifest in vernacular traditions such as performance, folklore, literature, and verbal art.

This essay offers an extended meditation on and intervention in queer theory and practice. I begin by mapping out a general history of queer theory's deployment in contemporary academic discourse, focusing on the lack of discourse on race and class within the queer theoretical paradigm. Following this, I offer an analysis of one queer theorist's (mis)reading of two black gay performances. Next, I propose an intervention in queer theory by outlining the components of quare theory, a theory that incorporates race and class as categories of analysis in the study of sexuality. Quare theory is then operationalized in the following section where I offer a quare reading of Marlon Riggs' film *Black Is . . . Black Ain't*. The final section calls for a conjoining of academic and political praxis.

### "Race Trouble": Queer Studies or the Study of White Queers

At a moment when queer studies has gained momentum in the academy and forged a space as a legitimate disciplinary subject, much of the scholarship produced in its name elides issues of race and class. While the epigraphs that open this essay suggest that the label "queer" sometimes speaks across (homo)sexualities, they also suggest that the term is not necessarily embraced by gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgendered people of color. Indeed, the statements of Mack-Nataf, Blackman, and Cohen reflect a general suspicion that the label often displaces and rarely addresses their concerns.<sup>4</sup>

Some queer theorists have argued that their use of "queer" is more than just a reappropriation of an offensive term. Cherry Smith, for example, maintains that the term entails a "radical questioning of social and cultural norms, notions of gender, reproductive sexuality and the family" (280). Others underscore the playfulness and inclusivity of the term, arguing that it opens up rather than fixes identities. According to Eve Sedgwick, "What it takes—all it takes—to make the description 'queer' a true one is the impulsion to use it in the first person" (9). Indeed, Sedgwick suggests, it may refer to

pushy femmes, radical faeries, fantasists, drags, clones, leatherfolk, ladies in tuxedos, feminist women or feminist men, masturbators, bulldaggers, divas, Snap! queens, butch bottoms, storytellers, transsexuals, aunties, wannabes, lesbian-identified men or lesbians who sleep with men, or [. . .] people able to relish, learn from, or identify with such. (8)

For Sedgwick, then, it would appear that "queer" is a catchall term not bound to any particular identity, a notion that moves us away from binaries such as homosexual/heterosexual and gay/lesbian. Micheal Warner offers an even more politicized and polemical view:

The preference for "queer" represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization; it rejects a minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favor of a more thorough resistance to regimes of the normal. For academics, being interested in Queer theory is a way to mess up the desexualized spaces of the academy, exude some rut, reimagine the public from and for which academic intellectuals write, dress, and perform. (xxvi)

The foregoing theorists identify "queer" as a site of indeterminate possibility, a site

where sexual practice does not necessarily determine one's status as queer. Indeed, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner argue that queer is "more a matter of aspiration than it is the expression of an identity or a history" (344). Accordingly, straight-identified critic Calvin Thomas appropriates Judith Butler's notion of "critical queerness" to suggest that "just as there is more than one way to be 'critical', there may be more than one (or two or three) to be 'queer'" (83).

Some critics have applied Butler's theory of gender to identity formation more generally. Butler calls into question the notion of the "self" as distinct from discursive cultural fields. That is, like gender, there is no independent or pure "self" or agent that stands outside socially and culturally mediated discursive systems. Any move toward identification, then, is, in her view, to be hoodwinked into believing that identities are discourse free and capable of existing outside the systems those identity formations seek to critique. Even when identity is contextualized and qualified, Butler still insists that theories of identity "invariably close with an embarrassed 'etc.'" (*Gender* 143). Butler's emphasis on gender and sex as "performative" would seem to undergird a progressive, forward-facing theory of sexuality. In fact, some theorists have made the theoretical leap from the gender performative to the racial performative, thereby demonstrating the potential of her theory for understanding the ontology of race.<sup>5</sup>

But to riff off of the now popular phrase "gender trouble," *there is some race trouble here with queer theory*. More particularly, in its "race for theory" (Christian), queer theory has often failed to address the material realities of gays and lesbians of color. As black British activist Helen (Charles) asks, "What happens to the definition of 'queer' when you're washing up or having a wank? When you're aware of misplacement or displacement in your colour, gender, identity? Do they get subsumed [. . .] into a homogeneous category, where class and other things that make up a cultural identity are ignored?" (101–102). What, for example, are the ethical and material implications of queer theory if its project is to dismantle all notions of identity and agency? The deconstructive turn in queer theory highlights the ways in which ideology functions to oppress and to proscribe ways of knowing, but what is the utility of queer theory on the front lines, in the trenches, on the street, or anyplace where the racialized and sexualized body is beaten, starved, fired, cursed—indeed, where the body is the site of trauma?<sup>6</sup>

Beyond queer theory's failure to focus on materiality, it also has failed to acknowledge consistently and critically the intellectual, aesthetic, and political contributions of nonwhite and non-middle-class gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgendered people in the struggle against homophobia and oppression. Moreover, even when white queer theorists acknowledge these contributions, rarely do they self-consciously and overtly reflect on the ways in which their whiteness informs their critical queer position, and this is occurring at a time when naming one's positionality has become almost standard protocol in other areas of scholarship. Although there are exceptions, most often white queer theorists fail to acknowledge and address racial privilege.<sup>7</sup>

Because transgendered people, lesbians, gays, and bisexuals of color often ground their theorizing in a politics of identity, they frequently fall prey to accusations of "essentialism" or "anti-intellectualism." Galvanizing around identity, however, is not always an unintentional "essentialist" move. Many times, it is an intentional

strategic choice.<sup>8</sup> Cathy Cohen, for example, suggests that “queer theorizing which calls for the elimination of fixed categories seems to ignore the ways in which some traditional social identities and communal ties can, in fact, be important to one’s survival” (“Punks” 450). The “communal ties” to which Cohen refers are those which exist in communities of color across boundaries of sexuality. For example, my grandmother, who is homophobic, nonetheless must be included in the struggle against oppression in spite of her bigotry. While her homophobia must be critiqued, her feminist and race struggles over the course of her life have enabled me and others in my family to enact strategies of resistance against a number of oppressions, including homophobia. Some queer activists groups, however, have argued fervently for the disavowal of any alliance with heterosexuals, a disavowal that those of us who belong to communities of color cannot necessarily afford to make.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, while offering a progressive and sometimes transgressive politics of sexuality, the seams of queer theory become exposed when that theory is applied to identities around which sexuality may pivot, such as race and class.

As a counter to this myopia and in an attempt to close the gap between theory and practice, self and Other, Audre Lorde proclaims:

Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist. [. . .] *I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch the terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices.* (112–13, emphasis in original)

For Lorde, a theory that dissolves the communal identity—in all of its difference—around which the marginalized can politically organize is not a progressive one. Nor is it one that gays, bisexuals, transgendered people, and lesbians of color can afford to adopt, for to do so would be to foreclose possibilities of change.

#### “Your Blues Ain’t Like Mine”: The Invalidation of “Experience”

As a specific example of how some queer theorists (mis)read or minimize the work, lives, and cultural production of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people of color and to lay the groundwork for a return to a focus on embodied performance as a critical praxis, I offer an analysis of one queer theorist’s reading of two black gay performances. In *The Ethics of Marginality*, for example, queer theorist John Champagne uses black gay theorists’ objections to the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe to call attention to the trouble with deploying “experience” as evidentiary.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, Champagne focuses on a speech delivered by Essex Hemphill, a black gay writer and activist, at the 1990 OUTWRITE conference of gay and lesbian writers. In his speech, Hemphill critiqued Mapplethorpe’s photographs of black men.<sup>11</sup> Champagne takes exception to Hemphill’s critique, arguing that Hemphill’s reading is “monolithic” and bespeaks “a largely untheorized relation between desire, representation, and the political” (59). What I wish to interrogate, however, is Champagne’s reading of Hemphill’s apparent “emotional-ity” during the speech.

In Champagne’s account, Hemphill began to cry during his speech, to which there were two responses: one of sympathy/empathy and one of protest. Commenting on

an overheard conversation between two whites in the audience, Champagne writes, “Although I agreed with much of the substance of this person’s comments concerning race relations in the gay and lesbian community, I was suspicious of the almost masochistic pleasure released in and through this public declaration of white culpability” (58). I find it surprising that Champagne would characterize what appears to be white self-reflexivity about racial and class privilege as “masochistic” given how rare such self-reflexivity is in the academy and elsewhere. After characterizing as masochistic the two whites who sympathetically align themselves with Hemphill, Champagne aligns himself with the one person who displayed vocal disapproval by booing Hemphill’s speech:

I have to admit that I admired the bravura of the lone booper. I disagreed with Hemphill’s readings of the photographs and felt that his tears were an attempt to shame the audience into refusing to interrogate the terms of his address. If, as Gayatri Spivak has suggested, we might term the politics of an explanation the means by which it secures its particular mode of being in the world, the politics of Hemphill’s reading of Mapplethorpe might be described as the politics of tears, a politics that assures the validity of its produced explanation by appealing to some kind of “authentic,” universal, and (thus) uninterrogated “human” emotion of experience. (58–59)

Champagne’s own “bravura” in *his* reading of Hemphill’s tears illuminates the ways in which many queer theorists, in their quest to move beyond the body, ground their critique in the discursive rather than the corporeal. I suggest that the two terrains are not mutually exclusive, but rather stand in a dialogical/dialectical relationship to one another. What about the authenticity of pain, for example, that may supercede the cognitive and emerges from the heart—not *for* display but *despite* display? What is the significance of a black *man* crying in public? We must grant each other time and space not only to talk *of* the body but *through* it as well.<sup>12</sup> In Champagne’s formulation however, bodily experience is anti-intellectual, and Hemphill’s black bodily experience is manipulative. This seems to be an unself-reflexive, if not unfair, assumption to make when, for the most part, white bodies are discursively and corporeally naturalized as universal. Historically, white bodies have not been trafficked, violated, burned, and dragged behind trucks because they embody racialized identities. In Champagne’s analysis, bodily whiteness goes uninterrogated.<sup>13</sup>

In order to posit an alternative reading of Hemphill’s tears, I turn to bell hooks’ insights regarding the ways in which whites often misread emotionality elicited through black cultural aesthetics. “In the context of white institutions, particularly universities,” hooks writes, “that mode of address is questionable precisely because it moves people. Style is equated in such a setting with a lack of substance” (21). hooks believes that this transformation of cultural space requires an “audience [to] shift [ . . . ] paradigms,” and, in that way, “a marginal aspect of black cultural identity [is] centralized” (22). Unlike Champagne’s own diminution of the “subversive powers [and politics] of style” (127–28), hooks affirms the transgressive and transformative potential of style, citing it as “one example of counter-hegemonic cultural practice,” as well as “an insertion of radical black subjectivity” (22). Despite Champagne’s statements to the contrary, his reading of Hemphill constitutes himself as a “sovereign subject” within his theory of anti-subjectivity, a positionality that renders him “overseer” of black cultural practices and discourse. On the other hand,

Hemphill's tears, as a performance of black style that draws upon emotionality, may be read as more than simply a willful act of manipulation to substantiate the black gay "experience" of subjugation and objectification. More complexly, it may be read as a "confrontation with difference which takes place on new ground, in that counter-hegemonic marginal space where radical black subjectivity is *seen*, not overseen by an authoritative Other claiming to know us better than we know ourselves" (hooks 22). In his reading of Hemphill, Champagne positions himself as "authoritative Other," assuming, as he does, the motivation behind Hemphill's tears.<sup>14</sup>

Champagne also devotes an entire chapter to *Tongues Untied*, a film by black gay film maker, Marlon Riggs. Once again critiquing what he sees as the films problematic reliance on "experience" as evidentiary, Champagne offers a queer reading of Riggs' film to call into question the filmic representation of blackness and class:

In *Tongues Untied*, one of the consequences of failing to dis-articulate, in one's reading, the hybrid weave of discursive practices deployed by the film might be the erasure of what I would term certain discontinuities of class, race, and imperialism as they might interweave with the necessarily inadequate nominations "Black" and "gay." For example, much of the film seems to employ a set of discursive practices historically familiar to a middle-class audience, Black and non-Black alike. The film tends to privilege the (discursive) "experience" of middle-class Black gay men, and is largely articulated from that position. The film privileges poetry, and in particular, a poetry that seems to owe as much historically to Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams as to Langston Hughes or Countee Cullen; moreover, the film's more overtly political rhetoric seems culled from organized urban struggles in the gay as well as Black communities, struggles often headed by largely middle-class people.

Another moment in the film that suggests a certain middle-class position is arguably one of the central images of the film, a series of documentary style shots of what appears to be a Gay Pride Day march in Manhattan. A group of Black gay men carry a banner that reads "Black Men Loving Black Men Is a Revolutionary Act," apparently echoing the rhetoric of early middle-class feminism. Furthermore, the men who carry this banner are arguably marked as middle-class, their bodies sculpted into the bulging, muscular style so prominent in the gay ghettos of San Francisco and New York. (68–69)

Champagne's critique is problematic in several ways. First, it is based on the premise that *Tongues Untied* elides the issue of class in its focus on race and homosexuality. However, Champagne then goes on to demonstrate the ways in which the film speaks to a middle-class sensibility. What is missing here is an explanation as to why black middle-class status precludes one from socially and politically engaging issues of race and sexuality. Because Champagne does not provide such an explanation, the reader is left to assume that a black middle-class subject position, as Valerie Smith has suggested, "is a space of pure compromise and capitulation, from which all autonomy disappears once it encounters hegemonic power" (67). Second, in his class-based analysis, Champagne reads literary selections, material goods, and clothing aesthetics as "evidence" of the film's middle-class leanings. However, he fails to recognize that the *appearance* of belonging to a particular class does not always reflect one's actual class status. In the black community, for instance, middle-class status is often performed—what is referred to in the vernacular as acting "boojee" (bourgeois). The way a black person adorns herself or publicly displays his material possessions may not necessarily reflect his or her economic status. Put another way, one might *live* in the projects but not necessarily *appear* to.<sup>15</sup> Champagne however,

misreads signs of class in the film in order to support his thesis that middle-class status in the film is symptomatic of deeply rooted sexual conservatism and homophobia. Incredibly, he links this conservatism not only to that of anti-porn feminists, but also to political bigots like Jesse Helms.<sup>16</sup>

I am perplexed as to why the film cannot privilege black, middle-class gay experience. Is *Tongues Untied* a red herring of black gay representation because it does not do the discursive work that Champagne wishes it to do? Is it *The Cosby Show* in “gay face” because it portrays black middle-class life, (and I’m not so sure that it does)? Positioning the film in such a light seems to bespeak just the kind of essentialism that Champagne so adamantly argues against. That is, he links class and epistemology to serve the purpose of his critique, yet dismisses race-based ways of knowing. Why is class privileged epistemologically while “raced” ways of knowing are dismissed? Champagne states that “to point out that Riggs’ film seems to privilege the (discursive) experience of largely middle-class urban Black gay men and to employ conventions of filmmaking familiar to a middle-class audience is not, in and of itself, a criticism of the video” (69). This disclaimer notwithstanding, Champagne goes on to do a close (mis)reading of various moments and aesthetics of the film—from specific scenes to what he argues is the film’s “experimental documentary” style—to substantiate his class critique.

Unlike Champagne’s deployment of queer theory, the model of quare studies that I propose would not only critique the concept of “race” as historically contingent and socially and culturally constructed/performed, it would also address the material effects of race in a white supremacist society. Quare studies requires an acknowledgement by the critic of her position within an oppressive system. To fail to do so would, as Ruth Goldman argues, “[leave] the burden of dealing with difference on the people who are themselves different, while simultaneously allowing white academics to construct a discourse of silence around race and other queer perspectives” (173). One’s “experience” within that system, however discursively mediated, is also materially conditioned. A critic cannot ethically and responsibly speak from a privileged place, as Champagne does, and not own up to that privilege. To do so is to maintain the force of hegemonic whiteness, which, until very recently, has gone uninterrogated.<sup>17</sup>

### “Quaring” the Queer: Troping the Trope

Queer studies has rightfully problematized identity politics by elaborating on the processes by which agents and subjects come into being; however, there is a critical gap in queer studies between theory and practice, performance and performativity. Quare studies can narrow that gap to the extent that it pursues an epistemology rooted in the body. As a “theory in the flesh” quare necessarily engenders a kind of identity politics, one that acknowledges difference within and between particular groups. Thus, identity politics does not necessarily mean the reduction of multiple identities into a monolithic identity or narrow cultural nationalism. Rather, quare studies moves beyond simply theorizing subjectivity and agency as discursively mediated to theorizing how that mediation may propel material bodies into action. As Shane Phelan reminds us, the maintenance of a progressive identity politics asks “not whether we share a given position but whether we share a commitment to

improve it, and whether we can commit to the pain of embarrassment and confrontation as we disagree” (156).

Quare studies would reinstate the subject and the identity around which the subject circulates that queer theory so easily dismisses. By refocusing our attention on the racialized bodies, experiences, and knowledges of transgendered people, lesbians, gays, and bisexuals of color, quare studies grounds the discursive process of mediated identification and subjectivity in a political praxis that speaks to the material existence of “colored” bodies. While strategically galvanized around identity, quare studies should be committed to interrogating identity claims that exclude rather than include. I am thinking here of black nationalist claims of “black authenticity” that exclude, categorically, homosexual identities. Blind allegiance to “isms” of any kind is one of the fears of queer theorists who critique identity politics. Cognizant of that risk, quare studies must not deploy a totalizing and homogeneous formulation of identity. Rather, it must foster contingent, fragile coalitions as it struggles against common oppressive forms.

A number of queer theorists have proposed potential strategies (albeit limited ones) that may be deployed in the service of dismantling oppressive systems. Most significantly, Judith Butler’s formulation of performativity has had an important impact not only on gender and sexuality studies, but on queer studies as well. While I am swayed by Butler’s formulation of gender performativity, I am disturbed by her theory’s failure to articulate a meatier politics of resistance. For example, what are the implications of dismantling subjectivity and social will to ground zero within oppressive regimes? Does an emphasis on the discursive constitution of subjects propel us beyond a state of quietism to address the very real injustices in the world? The body, I believe, has to be theorized in ways that not only describe the ways in which it is brought into being, but what it *does* once it *is* constituted and the relationship between it and the other bodies around it. In other words, I desire a rejoinder to performativity that allows a space for subjectivity, for agency (however momentary and discursively fraught), and, ultimately, for change.

Therefore, to complement notions of performativity, quare studies also deploys theories of performance. Performance theory not only highlights the discursive effects of acts, it also points to how these acts are historically situated. Butler herself acknowledges that the conflation of “performativity to performance would be a mistake” (*Bodies* 234). Indeed, the focus on performativity alone may problematically reduce performativity and performance to one interpretative frame to theorize human experience. On the other hand, focusing on both may bring together two interpretative frames whose relationship is more dialogical and dialectical.

In her introduction to *Performance and Cultural Politics*, Elin Diamond proposes such a relationship between performance and performativity:

When being is de-essentialized, when gender and even race are understood as fictional ontologies, modes of expression without true substance, the idea of performance comes to the fore. But performance both affirms and denies this evacuation of substance. In the sense that the “I” has no interior secure ego or core identity, “I” must always enunciate itself: there is only performance of a self, not an external representation of an interior truth. But in the sense that I do my performance in public, for spectators who are interpreting and/or performing with me, there are real effects, meanings solicited or imposed that produce relations in the real. Can performance make a difference? A performance, whether it inspires love or loathing, often consolidates cultural or subcultural affiliations, and these

affiliations, might be as regressive as they are progressive. The point is, as soon as performativity comes to rest on *a* performance, questions of embodiment and political effects, all become discussible.

Performance [. . .] is precisely the site in which concealed or dissimulated conventions might be investigated. When performativity materializes as performance in that risky and dangerous negotiation between doing (a reiteration of norms) and a thing done (discursive conventions that frame our interpretations), between somebody's body and the conventions of embodiment, we have access to cultural meanings and critique. Performativity [. . .] must be rooted in the materiality and historical density of performance. (5, emphasis in original)

I quote Diamond at length here because of the implications her construals of performance and performativity have for reinstating subjectivity and agency through the performance of identity. Although fleeting and ephemeral, these performances may activate a politics of subjectivity.

The performance of self is not only a performance/construction of identity for/toward an "out there" or merely an attachment or "taking up" (Butler, *Gender* 145) of a predetermined, discursively contingent identity. It is also a performance of self for the self in a moment of self-reflexivity that has the potential to transform one's view of self in relation to the world. People have a need to exercise control over the production of their images so that they feel empowered. For the disenfranchised, the recognition, construction and maintenance of self-image and cultural identity function to sustain, even when social systems fail to do so. Granted, formations/performances of identity may simply reify oppressive systems, but they may also contest and subvert dominant meaning systems. When gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color "talk back," whether using the "tools of the master" (Lorde 110) or the vernacular on the street, their voices, singularly or collectively, do not exist in some vacuous wasteland of discursivity. As symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner suggests, their performances

are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture or even of changing culture but may themselves be active *agencies* of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting "designs for living." [. . .] Performative reflexivity is a condition in which a sociocultural group, or its most perceptive members, acting representatively, turn, bend, or reflect back upon themselves, upon the relations, actions, symbols, meanings, codes, roles, statuses, social structures, ethical and legal rules, and other sociocultural components which make up their public selves. (24, my emphasis)

Turner's theory of performative cultural reflexivity suggests a transgressive aspect of performative identity that neither dissolves identity into a fixed "I" nor presumes a monolithic "we." Rather, Turner's assertions suggest that social beings "look back" and "look forward" in a manner that wrestles with the ways in which that community exists in the world and theorizes that existence. As Cindy Patton warns, not everyone who claims an identity does so in the ways critics of essentialist identity claim they do (181).

Theories of performance, as opposed to theories of performativity, also take into account the context and historical moment of performance (Strine 7). We need to account for the temporal and spatial specificity of performance not only to frame its existence, but also to name the ways in which it signifies. Such an analysis would acknowledge the discursivity of subjects, but it would also "unfix" the discursively

constituted subject as always already a pawn of power. Although many queer theorists appropriate Foucault to substantiate the imperialism of power, Foucault himself acknowledges that discourse has the potential to disrupt power:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, *but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.* (100–101, my emphasis)

Although people of color may not have theorized our lives in Foucault's terms, we have used discourse in subversive ways because it was necessary for our survival. Failure to ground discourse in materiality is to privilege the position of those whose subjectivity and agency, outside the realm of gender and sexuality, have never been subjugated. The tendency of many lesbians, bisexuals, gays, and transgendered people of color is to unite around a racial identity at a moment when their subjectivity is already under erasure.

Elaborating more extensively on the notion of performance as a site of agency for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people of color, Latino performance theorist José Muñoz proposes a theory of “disidentification” whereby queers of color work within and against dominant ideology to effect change:

Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this “working on and against” is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local and everyday struggles of resistance. (11–12)

Muñoz's concept of “disidentification” reflects the process through which people of color have always managed to survive in a white supremacist society: by “working on and against” oppressive institutional structures.

The performance strategies of African Americans who labored and struggled under human bondage exemplify this disidentificatory practice. For instance, vernacular traditions that emerged among enslaved Africans—including folktales, spirituals, and the blues—provided the foundation for social and political empowerment. These discursively mediated forms, spoken and filtered through black bodies, enabled survival. The point here is that the inheritance of hegemonic discourses does not preclude one from “disidentifying,” from putting those discourses in the service of resistance. Although they had no institutional power, enslaved blacks refused to become helpless victims and instead enacted their agency by cultivating discursive weapons based on an identity as oppressed people. The result was the creation of folktales about the “bottom rail becoming the top riser” (i.e., a metaphor for the slave rising out of slavery) or spirituals that called folks to “Gather At the River” (i.e., to plan an escape).

These resistant vernacular performances did not disappear with slavery. Gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color continued to enact performative agency to work on and against oppressive systems. Quare singers such as Bessie

Smith and Ma Rainey, for instance, used the blues to challenge the notion of inferior black female subjectivity and covertly brought the image of the black lesbian into the American imaginary.<sup>18</sup> Later, through his flamboyant style and campy costumes, Little Richard not only fashioned himself as the “emancipator” and “originator” of rock-n-roll, he also offered a critique of hegemonic black and white masculinity in the music industry. Later still, the black transgendered singer Sylvester transformed disco with his high soaring falsetto voice and gospel riffs. Indeed, Sylvester’s music transcended the boundary drawn between the church and the world, between the sacred and profane, creating a space for other quare singers, like Blackberri, who would come after him. Even RuPaul’s drag of many flavors demonstrates the resourcefulness of quares of color to reinvent themselves in ways that transform their material conditions. Quare vernacular tools operate outside the realm of musical and theatrical performance as well. Performance practices such as voguing, snapping, “throwing shade,” and “reading” attest to the ways in which gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color devise technologies of self-assertion and summon the agency to resist.<sup>19</sup>

Taken together, performance and quare theories alert us to the ways in which these disidentificatory performances serve material ends, and they do this work by accounting for the context in which these performances occur. The stage, for instance, is not confined solely to the theater, the dance club, or the concert hall. Streets, social services lines, picket lines, loan offices, and emergency rooms, among others, may also serve as useful staging grounds for disidentificatory performances. Theorizing the social context of performance sutures the gap between discourse and lived experience by examining how quares use performance as a strategy of survival in their day-to-day experiences. Such an analysis requires that we, like Robin Kelley, reconceptualize “play” (performance) as “work.” Moreover, quare theory focuses attention on the social consequences of those performances. It is one thing to do drag on the club stage but quite another to embody a drag queen identity on the street. Bodies are sites of discursive effects, but they are sites of social ones as well.

I do not wish to suggest that quare vernacular performances do not, at times, collude with sexist, misogynist, racist, and even homophobic ideologies. Lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgendered people of color must always realize that we cannot transgress for transgression’s sake lest our work end up romanticizing and prolonging our state of struggle and that of others. In other words, while we may occasionally enjoy the pleasures of transgressive performance, we must transgress responsibly or run the risk of creating and sustaining representations of ourselves that are anti-gay, anti-woman, anti-transgender, anti-working class, and anti-black. Despite this risk, we must not retreat to the position that changes within the system are impossible. The social movements of the past century are testament that change is possible.

Ultimately, quare studies offers a more utilitarian theory of identity politics, focusing not just on performers and effects, but also on contexts and historical situatedness. It does not, as bell hooks warns, separate the “politics of difference from the politics of racism” (26). Quare studies grants space for marginalized individuals to enact “radical black subjectivity” (hooks 26) by adopting the both/and posture of “disidentification.” Quare studies proposes a theory grounded in a critique of naïve essentialism and an enactment of political praxis. Such theorizing may *strategically* embrace identity politics while also acknowledging the contingency

of identity, a double move that Angelia Wilson adroitly describes as “politically necessary and politically dangerous” (107).

### Seeing Through Quare Eyes: Marlon Riggs’ *Black Is . . . Black Ain’t*

In Riggs’ documentary, *Black Is . . . Black Ain’t*, we find an example of quare theory operationalized. Thus, in order to demonstrate the possibilities of quare, I turn now to an analysis of this film. Completed after Riggs’ death in 1994, this documentary chronicles the filmmaker’s battle with AIDS and also serves as a meditation on the embattled status of black identity. *Black Is . . . Black Ain’t* “quares” “queer” by suggesting that identity, although highly contested, manifests itself in the flesh and, therefore, has social and political consequences for those who live in that flesh. Further “quaring” queer, the film also allows for agency and authority by visually privileging Riggs’ AIDS experience narrative. Indeed, the film’s documentation of Riggs’ declining health suggests an identity and a body in the process of *being* and *becoming*. Quare theory elucidates the mechanics of this both/and identity formation, and, in so doing, it challenges a static reading of identity as only performativity or only performance.

Initially, I focus on how the film engages performativity, focusing as it does on problematizing notions of essential blackness. One of the ways in which the film engages this critique is by pointing out how, at the very least, gender, class, sexuality and region all impact the construction of blackness. Indeed, the title of the film points to the ways in which race defines, as well as confines, African Americans. The recurrent trope used by Riggs to illuminate the multiplicity of blackness is gumbo, a dish that consists of whatever the cook wishes. It has, Riggs remarks, “everything you can imagine in it.” This trope also underscores the multiplicity of blackness insofar as gumbo is a dish associated with New Orleans, a city confounded by its mixed race progeny and the identity politics that mixing creates. The gumbo trope is apropos because, like “blackness,” gumbo is a site of possibilities. The film argues that when African Americans attempt to define what it means to be black, they delimit the possibilities of what blackness can be. But Riggs’ film does more than just stir things up. In many ways it reduces the heat of the pot, allowing everything in the gumbo to mix and mesh, yet maintain its own distinct flavor. Chicken is distinct from andouille, rice from peas, bay leaves from thyme, cayenne from paprika. Thus, Riggs’ film suggests that African Americans cannot begin to ask dominant culture to accept their difference as “others” until African Americans accept the differences that exist among themselves.

Class represents one significant axis of difference and divisiveness within black communities. As Martin Favor persuasively argues, “authentic” blackness is most often associated with the “folk” or working class blacks. Moreover, art forms such as the blues and folklore that are associated with the black working class are also viewed as more genuinely black. This association of the folk with black authenticity necessarily renders the black middle class as inauthentic and apolitical. In *Black Is . . . Black Ain’t*, Riggs intervenes in this construction of the black middle class as “less black,” by featuring a potpourri of blacks from various backgrounds. Importantly, those who might be considered a part of the “folk” questionably offer some of the most anti-black sentiments, while those black figures most celebrated in the film—Angela Davis, Barbara Smith, Michele Wallace, and Cornel West—are middle-class

members of the baby boomer generation. Riggs undermines the idea that “authentic” blackness belongs to the black working class by prominently displaying interviews with Angela Davis, Michelle Wallace and Barbara Smith. While ostracized for attending integrated schools and speaking Standard English or another language altogether, these women deny that their blackness was ever compromised. The film critiques hegemonic notions of blackness based on class status by locating the founding moment of black pride and radical black activism within black middle-class communities in the ’60s, thereby reminding us that “middle class” is also an ideological construct as contingently constituted as other positionalities.

Riggs also unhinges the link between hegemonic masculinity and authentic blackness. By excerpting misogynist speeches by Louis Farrakhan, a southern black preacher, and the leader of an “African” village located in South Carolina and by juxtaposing them with the personal narratives of bell hooks and Angela Davis, Riggs undermines the historical equation of “real” blackness with black masculinity. The narrative that hooks relates regarding her mother’s spousal abuse is intercut with and undercuts Farrakhan’s sexist and misogynist justification of Mike Tyson’s sexual advances that eventually led to his being convicted for raping Desiree Washington. The narrative set forth by hooks also brackets the sexism inherent in the black preacher’s and African leader’s justification of the subjugation of women based on biblical and African mythology. Musically framing this montage of narratives is rap artist Queen Latifah’s performance of “U-N-I-T-Y,” a song that urges black women to “let black men know you ain’t a bitch or a ’ho.” Riggs’ decision to use Queen Latifah’s song to administer this critique is interesting on a number of levels. Namely, Queen Latifah’s own public persona, as well as her television and motion picture roles, embody a highly masculinized femininity or, alternatively what Judith Halberstam might call “female masculinity” (1–42). Riggs uses Latifah’s song and the invocation of her persona, then, to disrupt hegemonic constructions of black masculinity and to illuminate the sexism found within the black community.

While I find the film’s critique of essentialized blackness persuasive, I find its critique of homophobia in the black community and its demand for a space for homosexual identity within constructions of blackness even more compelling. As a rhetorical strategy, Riggs first points to those signifiers of blackness that build community (e.g., language, music, food, and religion). Indeed, the opening of the film with the chant-like call and response of black folk preaching references a communal cultural site instantly recognizable to many African Americans. But just as the black church has been a political and social force in the struggle for the racial freedom of its constituents, it has also, to a large extent, occluded sexual freedom for many of its practitioners, namely gays and lesbians. Thus, in those opening scenes, Riggs calls attention to the double standard found within the black church by exemplifying how blackness can “build you up, or bring you down,” hold you in high esteem or hold you in contempt. Riggs not only calls attention to the racism of whites; he also calls attention to homophobia in the black community and particularly in the black church. Throughout the film, however, Riggs challenges the traditional construction of the black church by featuring a black gay and lesbian church service. Given the black church’s typical stance on homosexuality, some might view this avowal of Christianity as an instance of false consciousness. I argue, however, that these black gay and lesbians are employing disidentification insofar as

they value the cultural rituals of the black worship service yet resist the fundamentalism of its message. In the end, the film intervenes in the construction of black homosexuality as anti-black by propagating gay Christianity as a legitimate signifier of blackness.

Riggs' film implicitly employs performativity to suggest that we dismantle hierarchies that privilege particular black positionalities at the expense of others, that we recognize that darker hue does not give us any more cultural capital or claim to blackness than does a dashiki, braids, or a southern accent. Masculinity is no more a signifier of blackness than femininity; heterosexuality is no blacker than homosexuality; and living in the projects makes you no more authentically black than owning a house in the suburbs. Indeed, Riggs suggests that we move beyond these categories that define and confine in order to realize that, depending on where you are from and where you are going, black is and black ain't.

While the film critically interrogates cleavages among blacks, it also exposes the social, political, economic and psychological effects of racism, and the role it has played in defining blackness. By adopting this dual focus, Riggs offers a perspective that is decidedly quare. He calls attention to differences among blacks and between blacks and their "others";<sup>20</sup> he grounds blackness in lived experience; and he calls attention to the consequences of embodied blackness. The montage of footage from the LA riots and interviews with young black men who characterize themselves as "gang bangers" bring into clear focus the material reality of black America and how the black body has historically been the site of violence and trauma.

Nowhere in the film is a black body historicized more pointedly and powerfully, however, than in the scenes where Riggs is featured walking through the forest naked or narrating from his hospital bed from which his t-cell count is constantly announced. According to Riggs, these scenes are important because he wants to make the point that not until we expose ourselves to one another will we be able to communicate effectively across our differences. Riggs' intentions notwithstanding, his naked black body serves another important function within the film. It is simultaneously in a state of being *and* becoming. I intend here to disrupt both these terms by refusing to privilege identity as either solely performance or solely performativity and by demonstrating the dialogical/dialectical relationship of these two tropes.

Paul Gilroy's theory of diaspora is useful in clarifying the difference between being and becoming. According to Gilroy, "Diaspora accentuates *becoming* rather than *being* and identity conceived diasporically, along these lines, resists reification" (24, emphasis in original). Here, Gilroy associates "being" with the transhistorical and transcendental subject and "becoming" with historical situatedness and contingency. In what follows, I supplement Gilroy's use of both terms by suggesting that "being" and "becoming" are sites of performance *and* performativity. I construe "being" as a site of infinite signification *as well as* bodily and material presence. "Being" calls the viewer's attention not only to "blackness" as discourse, but also to embodied blackness in that moment where discourse and flesh conjoin in performance. If we look beyond Riggs' intent to "expose" himself in order to encourage cross-difference communication, we find that his nakedness in the woods functions ideologically in ways that he may not wish. For example, his nakedness may conjure up the racist stereotype of the lurking, bestial, and virile black male that became

popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century American imaginary. On the other hand, his embodied blackness in the woods and in his hospital bed also indicate a diseased body that is fragile, vulnerable, and a site of trauma, a site that grounds black discursivity materially in the flesh. At the literal level, Riggs' black male body is exposed as fragile and vulnerable, but it also synecdochically stands in for a larger body of racist discourse on the black male body in motion. This trope of black bodily kinesthetics is manifest in a variety of forms (e.g., the vernacular expression "keep the nigger running," the image of the fugitive slave, and contemporary hypermasculinized images of black athletes). Racist readings of Riggs' black male body are made possible by the context in which Riggs' body appears, the woods. Within this setting, blackness becomes problematically aligned with nature, reinscribing the black body as bestial and primal. This imagery works against Riggs' intentions—namely, running naked in the woods as a way to work through the tangled and knotty web that is identity. Indeed, the images of Riggs running naked through the woods signify in multiple and troubling ways that, once let loose, cannot be contained by either Riggs' authorial intentions or the viewer's gaze. The beauty of *being*, however, is that where it crumbles under the weight of deconstruction, it reemerges in all its bodily facticity. Although Riggs' body may signify in ways that constrain his agency, his embodied blackness also enlivens a discussion of a "fleshy" nature. Whatever his body signifies, the viewer cannot escape its material presence.

Riggs' body is also a site of *becoming*. He dies before the film is completed. Riggs' body physically "fades away," but its phantom is reconstituted in our current discourse on AIDS, race, gender, class, and sexuality. Thus, Riggs' body discursively rematerializes and intervenes in hegemonic formulations of blackness, homosexuality, and the HIV-infected person. As a filmic performance, *Black Is . . . Black Ain't* resurrects Riggs' body such that when the film is screened at universities, shown to health care providers, viewed in black communities or rebroadcast on PBS, the terms and the stakes for how we think about identity and its relation to HIV/AIDS are altered. Like Toni Morrison's character Sula, Riggs dreams of water carrying him over that liminal threshold where the water "would envelop [him], carry [him], and wash [his] tired flesh always" (149). After her death, Sula promises to tell her best friend, Nel, that death did not hurt, ironically announcing her physical death alongside her spiritual rebirthing. Her rebirthing is symbolized by her assuming a fetal position and traveling "over and down the tunnels, just missing the dark walls, down, down until she met a rain scent and would know the water was near" (149). Riggs dreams of a similar journey through water. In his dream, Harriet Tubman serves as a midwife who cradles his head at the tunnel's opening and helps him make the journey. Once on the other side, Riggs, like Sula, lives on and also makes good on his promise to return through his living spirit captured in the film. The residual traces of Riggs' body become embedded in the ideological battle over identity claims and the discourse surrounding the disproportionate number of AIDS-infected people of color. His becoming, then, belies our being.

Ultimately, *Black Is . . . Black Ain't* performs what its title announces: the simultaneity of bodily presence and absence, being and becoming. Although Riggs offers his own gumbo recipe that stands in for blackness, he does so only to demonstrate that, like blackness, the recipe can be altered, expanded, reduced, watered down. At the same time, Riggs also asks that we not forget that the gumbo (blackness) is contained

within a sturdy pot (the body) that has weathered abuse, that has been scorched, scoured, and scraped, a pot/body that is in the process of becoming but nonetheless *is*.

Unlike queer theory, quare theory fixes our attention on the discursive constitution of the recipe even as it celebrates the improvisational aspects of the gumbo and the materiality of the pot. While queer theory has opened up new possibilities for theorizing gender and sexuality, like a pot of gumbo cooked too quickly, it has failed to live up to its full critical potential by refusing to accommodate *all* the queer ingredients contained inside its theoretical pot. Quare theory, on the other hand, promises to reduce the spillage, allowing the various and multiple flavors to co-exist—those different flavors that make it spicy, hot, unique and sumptuously brown.

### Bringin' It On "Home": Quare Studies on the Back Porch

Thus far, I have canvassed the trajectory for quare studies inside the academy, focusing necessarily on the intellectual work that needs to be done to advance specific disciplinary goals. While there is intellectual work to be done inside the academy—what one might call “academic praxis”—there is also political praxis outside the academy.<sup>21</sup> If social change is to occur, gays, bisexuals, transgendered people, and lesbians of color cannot afford to be armchair theorists. Some of us need to be in the streets, in the trenches, enacting the quare theories that we construct in the “safety” of the academy. While keeping in mind that political theory and political action are not necessarily mutually exclusive, quare theorists must make theory work for its constituency. Although we share with our white queer peers sexual oppression, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color also share racial oppression with other members of our community. We cannot afford to abandon them simply because they are heterosexual. Cohen writes that “although engaged in heterosexual behavior,” straight African Americans “have often found themselves outside the norms and values of dominant society. This position has most often resulted in the suppression or negation of their legal, social, and physical relationships and rights” (454). Quare studies must encourage strategic coalition building around laws and policies that have the potential to affect us across racial, sexual, and class divides. Quare studies must incorporate under its rubric a praxis related to the sites of public policy, family, church, and community. Therefore, in the tradition of radical black feminist critic Barbara Smith (“Toward”), I offer a manifesto that aligns black quare academic theory with political praxis.

We can do more in the realm of public policy. As Cohen so cogently argues in her groundbreaking book, *The Boundaries of Blackness*, we must intervene in the failure of the conservative black leadership to respond to the HIV/AIDS epidemic ravishing African American communities. Due to the growing number of African Americans infected with and contracting HIV, quare theorists must aid in the education and prevention of the spread of HIV as well as care for those who are suffering. This means more than engaging in volunteer work and participating in fund raising. It also means using our training as academics to deconstruct the way HIV/AIDS is discussed in the academy and in the medical profession. We must continue to do the important work of physically helping our brothers and sisters who are living with HIV and AIDS through outreach services and fundraising events, but we must also

use our scholarly talents to combat racist and homophobic discourse that circulates in white as well as black communities. Ron Simmons, a black gay photographer and media critic who left academia to commit his life to those suffering with AIDS by forming the organization US Helping US, remains an important role model for how we can use both our academic credentials and our political praxis in the service of social change.

The goal of quare studies is to be specific and intentional in the dissemination and praxis of quare theory, committed to communicating and translating its political potentiality. Indeed, quare theory is “bi”-directional: it theorizes from bottom to top and top to bottom (pun intended!). This dialogical/dialectical relationship between theory and practice, the lettered and unlettered, ivory tower and front porch is crucial to a joint and sustained critique of hegemonic systems of oppression.

Given the relationship between the academy and the community, quare theorists must value and speak from what hooks refers to as “homeplace.” According to hooks, homeplace “[is] the one site where one [can] freely confront the issue of humanization, where one [can] resist” (42). It is from homeplace that people of color live out the contradictions of our lives. Cutting across the lines of class and gender, homeplace provides a place from which to critique oppression. I do not wish to romanticize this site by dismissing the homophobia that circulates within homeplace or the contempt that some of us (of all sexual orientations) have for “home.”<sup>22</sup> I am suggesting, rather, that in spite of these contradictions, homeplace is that site that first gave us the “equipment for living” (Burke 293) in a racist society, particularly since we, in all of our diversity, have always been a part of this homeplace: housekeepers, lawyers, seamstresses, hairdressers, activists, choir directors, professors, doctors, preachers, mill workers, mayors, nurses, truck drivers, delivery people, nouse neighbors, and (an embarrassed?) “etc.” SNAP!

Homeplace is also a site which quare praxis must critique. That is, we may seek refuge in homeplace as a marginally safe place to critique oppression outside its confines, but we must also deploy quare theory to address oppression within homeplace itself. One might begin, for instance, with the black church, which remains for some gays and lesbians, a sustaining site of spiritual affirmation, comfort, and artistic outlet. Quare studies cannot afford to dismiss, cavalierly, the role of the black church in quare lives. However, it must never fail to critique the black church’s continual denial of gay and lesbian subjectivity. Our role within the black church is an important one. Those in the pulpit and those in the congregation should be challenged whenever they hide behind Romans and Leviticus to justify their homophobia. We must force the black church to name us and claim us if we are to obtain any liberation within our own communities.<sup>23</sup>

Regarding ideological and political conflicts in gay, lesbian, and transgendered communities of color, quare praxis must interrogate and negotiate the differences among our differences, including our political strategies for dealing with oppression and our politics of life choice and maintenance. Consequently, quare studies must also focus on interracial dating and the identity politics such couplings invoke. Writer Darieck Scott has courageously addressed this issue, but we need to continue to explore our own inner conflicts around our choices of sexual partners across racial lines. Additionally, quare studies should interrogate another contested area of identity politics: relations between “out” and “closeted” members of our commu-

nity. Much of this work must be done not in the academy, but in our communities, in our churches, in our homes.

Unconvinced that queer studies is soon to change, I summon quare studies as an interventionist disciplinary project. Quare studies addresses the concerns and needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people across issues of race, gender, class, and other subject positions. While attending to the discursive constitution of subjects, quare studies is also committed to theorizing the practice of everyday life. Because we exist in material bodies, we need a theory that speaks to that reality. Indeed, quare studies may breathe new life into our “dead” (or deadly) stratagems of survival.

### Coda

*Because I credit my grandmother for passing on to me the little bit of common sense I still have, I conclude this essay with a story about her use of “gaydar,”<sup>24</sup> a story that speaks to how black folk use “motherwit” as a “reading” strategy, as well as a way to “forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget” (Hurston 1).*

*My grandmother lives in western North Carolina. When I went to live with her to collect her oral history for my dissertation, she spent a considerable amount of time catching me up on all of the new residents who had moved into her senior citizens’ community. Dressed in her customary polyester cut-off shorts and cotton makeshift blouse, loosely tied sheer scarf draped around her dyed, jet black hair, legs crossed and head cocked to the side, my grandmother described for me, one by one, each of the new residents. She detailed, among other things, their medical histories and conditions, the number of children they had, their marital status and, perhaps most importantly, whether they were “pickles” or not. She uses the term euphemistically to describe people she believes are “not quite right in the head.”*

*There was one resident, David, about whom my grandmother had a particular interest. I soon learned that David was a seventy-four year-old white man who had to walk with the support of a walker and who had moved to my grandmother’s community from across town, but that was not the most important thing about David. My grandmother revealed to me what that was one day: “Well, you know we got one of them ‘homosexuals’ living down here,” she said, dryly. Not quite sure I had heard her correctly but also afraid that I had, I responded, “A what?” “You know, one of them ‘homosexuals,’” she said again just as dryly. This time, however, her voice was tinged with impatience and annoyance. Curious, a bit anxious about the turn the conversation was taking (I am not “out” to my grandmother), I pursued the issue further: “Well, how do you know the man’s a homosexual, Grandmama?” She paused, rubbed her leg, narrowed her eyes and responded, “Well, he gardens, bakes pies, and keeps a clean house.” Like a moth to the flame, I opened the door to my own closet for her to walk in and said, “Well, I cook and keep my apartment clean.” Then, after a brief pause, “But I don’t like gardening. I don’t like getting my hands dirty.” As soon as the words “came out” of my mouth, I realized what I had done. My grandmother said nothing. She simply folded her arms and began to rock as if in church. The question she dare not ask sat behind her averted eyes: “You ain’t quare are you, Pat?” Yes, Grandmama, quare indeed.*

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Johnson, “SNAP! Culture” 125–128.

<sup>2</sup>I have long known about the connection between African Americans and the Irish. As noted in the film *The Commitments*, “The Irish are the blacks of Europe.” The connection is there—that is, at least until the Irish became “white.” For a sustained discussion of how Irish emigrants obtained “white” racial privilege, see Ignatiev.

<sup>3</sup>For more on “standpoint” theory, see Collins.

<sup>4</sup>In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler anticipates the contestability of “queer,” noting that it excludes as much as it includes but that such a contested term may energize a new kind of political activism. She proposes that “[. . .] it may be that the critique of the term will initiate a resurgence of both feminist and anti-racist mobilization within lesbian and gay politics or open up new possibilities for coalitional alliances that do not presume that these constituencies are radically distinct from one another. The term will be revised, dispelled, rendered obsolete to the extent that it yields to the demands which resist the term precisely because of the exclusions by which it is mobilized” (228–29). To be sure, there are gay, bisexual, lesbian and transgendered people of color who embrace “queer.” In my experience, however, those who embrace the term represent a small minority. At the “Black Queer Studies at the Millennium Conference” held at the University of North Carolina on April 7–9, 2000, for example, many of the conference attendees were disturbed by the organizers’ choice of “queer” for the title of a conference on black sexuality. So ardent was their disapproval that it became a subject of debate during one of the panels.

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Hall and Gilroy, “‘Race.’”

<sup>6</sup>I thank Michelé Barale for this insight.

<sup>7</sup>While it is true that some white queer theorists are self-reflexive about their privilege and incorporate the works and experiences of gays, bisexuals, lesbians and transgendered people of color into their scholarship, this is not the norm. Paula Moya calls attention to how the theorizing of women of color is appropriated by postmodernist theorists: “[Judith] Butler extracts one sentence from [Cherrie] Moraga, buries it in a footnote, and then misreads it in order to justify her own inability to account for the complex interrelations that structure various forms of human identity” (133). David Bergman also offers a problematic reading of black gay fiction when he reads James Baldwin through the homophobic rhetoric of Eldridge Cleaver and theorizes that black communities are more homophobic than white ones (163–87). For other critiques of simplistic or dismissive readings of the works of gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgendered people of color see Ng, (Charles), and Namaste. One notable exception is Ruth Goldman’s “Who is That *Queer* Queer,” in which she, a white bisexual, calls other white queer theorists to task for their failure to theorize their whiteness: “[. . .] those of us who are white tend not to dwell on our race, perhaps because this would only serve to normalize us—reduce our queerness, if you will” (173).

<sup>8</sup>For more on “strategic” essentialism, see: Case 1–12; de Lauretis; and Fuss 1–21.

<sup>9</sup>For a sustained discussion of queer activists’ disavowal of heterosexual political alliances, see Cohen, “Punks” 440–52.

<sup>10</sup>Champagne draws from Joan Scott’s “The Evidence of Experience,” where she argues that “experience” is discursively constituted, mediated by and through linguistic systems and embedded in ideology. Like all discursive terrains, the ground upon which “experience” moves is turbulent and supple, quickly disrupting the foothold we think we might have on history and the “evidentiary.” Scott writes, “Experience is at once always already an interpretation and is in need of interpretation. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always therefore political. The study of experience, therefore, must call into question its originary status in historical explanation. This will happen when historians take as their project not the reproduction and transmission of knowledge said to be arrived at through experience, but the analysis of the production of that knowledge itself” (37, emphasis in original). Scott is particularly concerned here with histories that draw on “experience” as evidentiary in order to historicize difference. “By remaining within the epistemological frame of orthodox history,” Scott argues, “these studies lose the possibility of examining those assumptions and practices that excluded considerations of difference in the first place” (24–25).

<sup>11</sup>Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of black gay men continue to be a source of controversy in the black gay community. Reactions to the photos range from outrage to ambivalence to appreciation. I believe the most complex reading of Mapplethorpe is found in Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer’s “True Confessions: A Discourse on Images of Black Male Sexuality.” They write: “While we recognize the oppressive dimension of these images of black men as Other, we are also attracted: We want to look but don’t always find the images we want to see. This ambivalent mixture of attraction and repulsion goes for images of black gay men in porn generally, but the inscribed or preferred meanings of these images are not fixed; they can at times, be pried apart into alternative readings when different experiences are brought to bear on their interpretation” (170).

<sup>12</sup>I thank Soyini Madison for raising this issue.

<sup>13</sup>I do not mean to deny that white gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people have been emotionally, psychologically, and physically harmed. The recent murder of Matthew Shepard is a sad testament to this fact. Indeed, given how his attackers killed him, there are ways in which we may read Shepard’s murder through a racial lens. What I am suggesting, however, is that racial violence (or the threat of it) is enacted upon black bodies in different ways and for different reasons than it is on white bodies.

<sup>14</sup>Emotionality as manipulative or putatively repugnant may also be read through the lens of gender. Generally understood as a “weak” (read “feminine”) gender performance, emotional display among men of any race or sexual orientation represents a threat to heteronormativity and, therefore, is often met with disapproval.

<sup>15</sup>I do not wish to suggest that the appearance of poverty or wealth never reflects that one is actually poor or wealthy. What I am suggesting, however, is that in many African American communities, style figures more substantively than some might imagine. Accordingly, there exists a politics of taste among African Americans that is performed so as to dislodge fixed perceptions about who one is or where one is from. In many instances, for example, performing a certain middle-class style has enabled African Americans to “pass” in various and strategically savvy ways. For more

on the performance of style in African American communities see B. Smith's "Home" and Beam's "Leaving." For a theoretical perspective on the politics of taste, see Bourdieu.

<sup>16</sup>Champagne writes that, "like the white antiporn feminists whose rhetoric they sometimes share, intellectuals like Riggs and Hemphill may in fact be expressing in *Tongues Untied* a (middle-) class-inflected sense of disgust related to sexuality—obviously, not related to all sexuality, but to a particularly culturally problematic kind. It is perhaps thus not a coincidence at all that the rhetoric deployed by Hemphill in his reading of Mapplethorpe should be so similar to that of Dworkin, Stoltenberg, and even Jesse Helms" (79).

<sup>17</sup>For examples of white critics who interrogate "whiteness," see Frankenberg, Hill, and Roediger.

<sup>18</sup>For an analysis of Bessie Smith's explicitly lesbian blues songs, see Harrison 103–104.

<sup>19</sup>See Riggs "Black Macho" and Johnson "SNAP!" and "Feeling."

<sup>20</sup>Paul Gilroy's insights regarding the theoretical utility of the concept "diaspora" are similar to what I mean here insofar as he posits that diaspora "allows for a complex conception of sameness and an idea of solidarity that does not repress the differences within in order to maximize the differences between one 'essential' community and others" ("... to be real," 24).

<sup>21</sup>I do not wish to suggest that the academy is not always already a politicized site. Rather, I only mean to suggest that the ways in which it is politicized are, in many instances, different from the ways in which nonacademic communities are politicized.

<sup>22</sup>For a critique of the notion of "home" in the African American community vis-à-vis homophobia and sexism, see Clarke, Crenshaw, hooks, and Simmons.

<sup>23</sup>For a sustained critique of homophobia in the black church, see Dyson 77–108.

<sup>24</sup>"Gaydar" is a term some gays and lesbians use to signal their ability to determine whether or not someone is gay.

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