

What is Passed?

It's the second week of class. We are going over a text that paints itself as a broad strokes overview of queer history and theory. It was the first one I had ever read, and now I'm reading it again for this class, with heavier eyes. A classmate critiques that it is terribly white; the book mentions Stonewall, but no Marsha P. Johnson or Silvia Rivera. Foucault gets four spreads; Audre Lorde shares an illustration with three other Black lesbian writers on one of the two pages covering "black feminism."

We take turns pointing out these omissions and issues, the class alight in shared criticism and annoyances. One person points out the use of the single way the artist draws generic "Black woman"—"When I see those features, I'm like, 'okay, a token person of color in this illustration.'"

Reining in the class, our professor says in discomfort and agreement, "Yeah, like I enjoy reading about Judith Butler, but I kept wondering, where's Muñoz?" As I flip through the pages, I think of the drag queens and kings Butler wrote of—where are they? Where are the butch queens in drag? The Black butch studs and the Latinx femme queens? Why does the Mattachine Society get to be named, but not STAR House? Where, in this history of the rainbow, is all the color? ||

When tracing the genealogies of queer and trans studies, one would be absurd to deny the importance of Black feminist thought. Audre Lorde's (1984) re-conceptualization of erotics continues to inspire new and queer(er) theoretical works (e.g. Ela Przybylo's 2019 book, *Asexual*

Erotics); Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) naming of *intersectionality* has become a rock stabilizing the earth of modern radical queer politics (though of course, one would be remiss not to cite the

2

Combahee River Collective (1977) or Barbara Smith (1978) for their earlier discussions of the importance of focusing on not *just* women or *just* Black people, but rather the unique experiences of *Black women*). Certainly, the queer liberation / gay rights movement both owe their political activist roots to the civil rights movement, to the language of identity-based politics born from discussions of race, and ongoing analyses about the impacts and necessitous solidarities between radical queer liberation and other social movements.

All of these genealogies are readily available and visible—Ellison et al. (2017) sample a wide array of queer and trans scholars discussing these histories. It would seem impossible to overlook these vast archives of Black queer scholarship and the influences of Black feminisms on queer and trans studies (and the ways in which they overlap; Lorde, Smith, the whole of the Combahee River Collective—all of these important scholars were/are Black *lesbian* feminist voices). There is little new to their ideas even if they remain plenty radical, nor to this idea that “their” Black feminist theories have impacted “our” queer and trans ones.

Yet, upon sampling queer and trans studies, it is remarkable how invisible or overlooked these genealogies appear to be. In their reflection on Black trans studies, Ellison et al. (2017) provokingly characterize this invisibility as repression, a willful abstraction and move away from the Black roots of transgender studies. “[T]he field of transgender studies,” they write, “seems to use this Black subject as a springboard to move toward other things, presumably white things” (162). The process of canonization has become entwined with the overlooking of race, and

moreover, trans studies “always already” requires this move (163)—despite, or perhaps in spite of, trans studies always-already invoking Blackness (165). Black feminism can be instrumental to the work of queer and trans scholars, but this instruction is always disavowed,

3

allowing for mis-appropriations which ignore the sociopolitical realities which Black feminism requires us attend to.

|| In office hours, I muse with our professor about how materiality is only mentioned at the very back of the book. This is a literary analysis seminar, so I approach it as a literary critic should. “What does it mean that reality and material consequences are relegated to the back, as simply an addendum to the story of queer studies?” What of the chosen visual dichotomy, between a stereotypical homeless person and the lighthearted academics within? Why are those concerned with realism portrayed as outsiders, as opposed to our fellow theorists and activists? ||

To illustrate this point, it is useful to reflect on the shared (if invisibly shared) theoretical arguments underpinning Sandy Stone’s “The *Empire Strikes Back*” (1992) and Cathy Cohen’s “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens” (1997). I pick these two for the similarity in base argument, but divergence in extent and integration of Black feminist thought. Both argue against assimilationist tendencies, instead advocating for radical queer/trans politics that rely on a divergence from current understandings of identity categories. For Cohen, this comes from a noted recreation of binaries in queer politics, with a desire to rethink queer people’s investment in and notions of identity. Meanwhile, Stone reaches such a conclusion from dissecting myths perpetuated about trans people, and how those myths’ tie to capitalistic modes of recognition.

Stone specifically critiques a tendency in trans narratives to acquiesce to normative gender constructs for the purposes of “passing,” which reinforces the gender binary (166–168). As a publicly “out” trans woman, Sandy Stone acknowledges that she “could not ask...for anything more inconceivable than to forgo passing” (168), but she nonetheless argues that this

4

“silence” should be re-envisioned: that her trans fellows and sisters *should* consider taking on that task, to explore the potentials of living in mixture (*see* 168), of living outside the “safety” of invisibility. Though she does not describe such a move as “anti-assimilationist,” it is in form: what is the writing of oneself into difference and mixture if not a rebuke of all which says that difference must be eliminated or hidden? If “passing” is an act by which one (re-)joins a binaristic system, then it is a form of assimilation, and thus deliberate non-passing is anti-assimilationist.

Similarly, Cohen questions the queer/heterosexual binary, arguing that we should not foreclose the possibility of certain hetero sexualities being outside of power just as much as non hetero sexualities. In particular, Cohen highlights how Black people are barred from “normality,” and how an intersectional (“left”) framework for queer politics highlights the necessity of going beyond identity categories and identity-category-based politics that simply focus on “the sexual arena” (440–444). Assimilation and asking for simple acceptance is textually the enemy (*see* 445); *furthermore*, the very categories which allow for assimilation are problematic, and one must diverge from “a monolithic understanding of heterosexuality” (452) in order “to build a... broader coalition” (453). This *furthermore* is critical, as the heart of Cohen’s theory and analysis, synthesizing the lived histories and academic contributions of Black people into an incisive (and

still today, radical) queer politic.

Cohen's radical reimagining of a queer coalition which reaches across to alienated (read: racialized) heterosexualities is one of many texts in queer (and trans) studies that relies on Black feminist thought. Cohen quotes extended passages from the Combahee River Collective (*see* 441) and Barbara Smith (*see* 451); in fact, she cites Black theorists (both queer and non-queer)

5

with such frequency that Cohen's text is functionally a liaison between "black left intellectuals" and queer studies (and a liaison with Black queer studies as well). Certainly, the article is proof of Black feminism's importance to queer studies—after all, Cohen's article, a vibrantly queer text, wouldn't exist without Black feminism.

|| A white professor suggests I define intersectionality in a creative nonfiction essay in which I engage regularly with nuanced and in-depth theoretical ideas. My essay is aimed at queer folk. "Your audience may not be familiar with the term," she says. After many days, I decide against it, for the same reason I do not define 'desexualization' or 'heteronormative.' I wonder, fruitlessly, if a reader of color would have suggested the insertion. ||

Yet, it is necessary to write cautiously. The aforementioned *furthermore* goes past (goes *further*, does *more* than) many queer rhetorics; and despairingly, this *furthermore* is what is gone past in many queer rhetorics. If not in name, Stone's suggestion to forgo passing has become common, particularly with the visibilization of non-binary identities and new generations of more-visibly genderqueer people. Even the breaking down of categories which Cohen argued for has propagated in trans communities, fueled by an endless parodying and questioning of any

singular or constrictive notions of gender.

Such cannot be said for much of Cohen's critiques, nor for the concepts from Black feminism from which she builds. Intersectionality? The marginalization of Black heterosexualities? The falsity of a strict queer/heterosexual dichotomy? These are conversations happening, but rarely breaking into the queer mainstream, and seem to fare no better in the queer academia mainstream.

6

|| Within my own writing, I am self-conscious to the politics of citation. To whom am I turning for wisdom? Why? Whose words am I attributing? Whose am I using, and am forgetting to give their due? I am careful to save articles and papers now, PDF copy and note them, but who will catch me if I err? Gazing upon the page, I wrack my thoughts for whose insights echo in my head now. I will not rest until I find them again. But what about the ones gone completely from my mind? What of the knowledge I've never read, hidden by books and pedagogies and my own imperfect research un/intentionally shaped around and by the "norm"? ||

Black feminism continues to contribute to queer and trans studies, the work of Black feminists always pertinent to queer politics and frameworks. As said at the outset, that is undeniable. Unfortunately, there is a difference between what is contributed and what takes hold; these genealogies live on, but it seems as if there is an invisible division within the family. No matter how enmeshed queer studies is proven to be with Black feminist studies, no matter how many texts expressly connect and weave them together, no matter how many texts arise out of an explicit overlap and middle-space—In spite of all this, the roots are continually passed as

marginal, as if the thicket could have arisen and could survive without them.

Returning to Stone and Black trans studies: certain ideas have taken hold, but as Ellison et al. worried, it is unclear the extent to which race is recognized, the extent to which the impact of

Blackness and Black people's contributions are considered. Stone engages with the white supremacist need "to preserve 'pure' gender identity" in dominant narratives about trans people (see 158), but elided in her discussion is the root anxiety of miscegenation, the racial implications of such defenses of "purity." What is lost in this maneuver? How many other places

7

of absence are there in queer and trans rhetorics?

Of all the ideas which can be traced back to Black feminists' theories, maybe this is the most important aspect for queer theory: the necessity of reflecting back and asking, *what has been passed over?* And, from there: *How might we finally recognize what has already been here, but repressed?*

8

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