

## An Interrogation of the Black Presence in the Queer Project

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*Are you Black first or are you queer? This question embodies a central conflict many African American lesbians, bisexuals, and gays (lesbigays) experience in dealing with two identities that are often at odds with each other. The answer to this question varies.*

-- Gregory Conerly (7)

*Personally speaking, I do not consider myself a "queer" activist or, for that matter, "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 (451)

There is a wonderful African proverb that reads, "A wanderer cannot know the full meaning of home." If "home" represents one's place of contented habitation – the riskless space wherein one can fully *be* and *become* – then all other temporary accommodations will, simply, never do. This is the contention that undergirds my response to Conerly's striking question above, namely, "Are you Black first or are you queer?" Although, Conerly's question seems to presume a false prioritizing of identities – in contrast to the more obliging notion of intersectionality that refutes the hierarchical "which-identity-comes-first" charades – it forced me to consider more than the mere discomfort that grips me, and other same-gender loving (SGL) African American women and men, regarding the use of the word "queer" to identify

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our sexuete identities.<sup>1</sup> It also prompted me to consider the following: Can African American SGL women and men really find solace – *be at home* – in the queer topography?

I personally experience discomfort when attempting to “settle down” during my ephemeral treks through literature within the queer studies/theory terrain.<sup>2</sup> Yet, I am not the first critic, African American or otherwise, who has attempted to interrogate the ethos – the starting place and presuppositions – and/or structure of queer studies/theory. Many scholars have turned to innovative approaches in response to the lack of attention given to matters of race, class, and transnationality within the queer studies project, while others have even called for a rehabilitated queer studies that “insists on a broadened consideration of the late twentieth-century global crises that have configured historical relations among political economies, the geopolitics of war and terror, and national manifestations of sexual, racial, and gendered hierarchies” (Eng, Halberstam and Perez 1). But as an African American SGL individual who subsists, along with many other SGL people of color, within an intersectional matrix wherein oppression(s) based on race, class, gender, and sexuete identity thrives, I am not totally convinced that queer studies/theory can generate and sustain analysis and action that aggressively counters technologies of power, like white racist ideology and white privilege, which buttress this repressive matrix. Thus, it seems fair to argue that queer studies/theory, if it is to be applicable to African Americans, should interrogate and deconstruct notions of whiteness and white privilege. As such, I wonder: Does queer studies/theory seek to aggressively raze the white xenophobic ideologies that are entrenched within the national, and

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<sup>1</sup> I will use the term “sexuete” identity, a term advanced by Drucilla Cornell, throughout this paper. Cornell uses the phrase “*sexuete being* to represent the sexed body of our human being when engaged with a framework by which we orient ourselves; because we are sexuete beings we have to orient ourselves sexually” (7). In this light, I take up the term sexuete identity to specifically speak to the ways in which we orient ourselves as “having sex” and “having a sex.” See *At the Heart of Freedom* 6-8.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the paper I will use either queer studies/theory or a use of the terms interchangeably as a means to characterize the enmeshment of queer studies and theory. Although queer studies can be likened to LGBT studies and queer theory as a specific methodological deployment of a postmodern intervention in sexuality theorizing, both, in some ways, can be characterized by the same ethos. In addition, I will use the term “queer studies project” throughout the paper as opposed to discipline as a means to illuminate the fluidity of the project as opposed to an understanding of “queer studies” as a fixed discipline. For more on the fluidity of “queer studies” see Judith Halberstam’s helpful essay “Queer Studies” 67-72.

transnational, racial imaginary of the *othered* black body? Moreover, is queer studies/theory grounded in a provincial ideological system that seemingly restricts interrogations of sexual discourses, which are always already racialized?

It seems that within queer studies/theory there remains a problematic principle, a theoretical presupposition, which creates barriers that prevent those who need to establish, celebrate, criticize and/or reconstruct boundaries and senses of identities from doing so. As a result, I reason that African Americans are wanderers in the queer trajectory because our racial, ethnic, class, and social locations are, ostensibly, too quickly disregarded. It is almost as if our racial and other identities are *queerantined*, that is, it seems that SGL people of color are often subjected to an unequivocal demand to “contain” our racial, and other, identities as the result of the enforced injunction on “identity politics” within the queer project. Thus, one can reason that some SGL African Americans are resistant to settling down within queer studies/theory because the present injunction on identity politics does not facilitate what I will label in this paper “Black struggle.”

And while it is risky to refer to “Black Struggle” because it seemingly conflates the diverse experiences and essences of identities of African Americans into a singular label, “Black Struggle” is deployed as a trope in this paper: a counter-hegemonic tussle against white racist structures, technologies, and discourses that seek to short-circuit the emancipatory potential, that is, the daily move towards the full disruption of white power and white privilege, in the macro and micro spheres of the human experience of black people. Thus, this paper will attempt to illuminate why some African-American SGL women and men may be reluctant to participate in the queer project. In doing so, it will provide a brief overview of the queer project illuminating its problematic ethos and name the distinctive markers that characterize “Black struggle,” intending to demonstrate how the ethos of queer studies/theory violates this struggle.

### **Traversing the “Queer studies” Project**

“Queer studies” is a term that is often used loosely to describe the study of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or questioning (LGBTQ). However, it can also be characterized as a fluid or interdisciplinary mode of theorizing sexuality that traverses across varied disciplines. It is an area of study which is still in flux. It has shown up in literary studies, cultural studies, musicology, art history, law, communication studies, theology, and elsewhere. Queer studies/theory is grounded in the

proposition that “sexuality is not restricted to heterosexuality or homosexuality, a binary system reinforced by hegemonic patriarchal societies, but is a more complex array of gender and sexual possibilities” and it interrogates the normalizing “mechanisms of state power” that “name its sexual subjects: male or female, married or single, heterosexual and homosexual, natural or perverse” (Eng, Halberstam and Perez, 1). Thus, the queer project can be characterized as having both academic and political aims in that it seeks to resist classifications of norms and opposes structures of social and cultural hegemony. Indeed, the radical spirit of intellectual and political resistance that energizes queer studies finds its roots in the “queer” movements that emerged in the early 1990s in America.

William R. Dynes dates the start of today’s “queeritude” to June 1990 when the word “queer” appeared on anonymous “I hate straights” leaflets distributed at gay pride marches in New York and other cities.<sup>3</sup> The written invocation began with the words “Listen queers,” an aggressive term – imbued with rage – that was intended as a sign of resistance to “straights.” The formation of Queer Nation chapters in America and Canada followed. However, by the spring of 1995, Queer Nation was disbanded in US cities. An offshoot of the AIDS activist organization ACT-UP, Queer Nation functioned as a radical “queer” activist group that has been criticized for imagining itself to be primarily white and male. Thus, in the early 1990s, it seems that the term “queer” functioned as an exclusive term *en vogue* among queer activists who were white and male.

“Queer activism” would soon develop into “queer theory.” Queer theory developed as a combination of ideas grounded in poststructuralism, postmodernism, and Social Construction theory (Dynes). As a result, foundational texts in the queer studies project emerged beginning with, *Fear of the Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (1993), a collection edited by Michael Warner that featured essays by Eve Sedgwick, Henry Louis Gates, and Warner himself. The title carried forth the same political spirit that was used to galvanize queer activists who were active prior to publication. It is a play on the title of a popular and politically radical African American rap group, Public Enemy, whose third album, *Fear of a Black Planet* was released

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<sup>3</sup> For a cogent historical perspective on the emergence of queer studies, see Wayne R. Dynes helpful article, “Queer Studies: In Search of a Discipline,” 34-52.

three years earlier.<sup>4</sup> By naming the book *Fear of a Queer Planet*, Warner made a daring move, connecting the radical political plight of “queers” with that of “blacks” in America. Although Warner’s move seems to indicate that the inequitable treatment of queers and blacks are analogous, this move too easily conflates the two struggles and the identities that characterize them. Nonetheless, Warner offers a politicized view of queer, when he states:

The preference for “queer” represents, among other things, an aggressive impulse 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 form and for which academics write, dress, and perform.  
(xxvi)

Hence, Warner sets the stage for scholarship and political activism to intersect as part of a “queer movement”.

Furthermore, Dynes dates the event, “InQueery, InTheory, InDeed,” the “Sixth North American Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Conference,” held at the University of Iowa in November 1994, as one of the first moves in conference planning in which programs centered on lesbian and gay studies were converted into “queer theory” and “queer studies.” The “queer movement,” then, shaped by its activist roots, continued to be cultivated within elite universities on the two coasts and within, what Dynes labels, the “heartland” of America as well (34). In light of the fact that the “queer movement” has its roots in America, it can be argued that what has emerged is an Americanized queer studies project. To be sure, Scott Gunther, writing on the reception of “queer theory” in France, states that “queer theory” is essentially considered to be “American queer theory.” Gunther notes that in 1997, an organization in France calling itself *Le Zoo* “organized a series of seminars to address the question of how one might go about importing American queer theory into the French context” (24). Thus, the American interpretation of the word, “queer,” and its academic appendage, “queer theory,” can be differentiated from its use in other contexts like France. In fact, as Gunther suggests, one of the most important criticisms of “queer theory” stems from the very fact that it originated in the United States. Indeed, scholars and activists within the French context have noted that

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<sup>4</sup> It should also be noted that Tricia Rose’s article, “Fear of a Black Planet: Rap Music and Black Cultural Politics” appeared in the *Journal of Negro Education* 60.3 (1991) around the same time as Warner’s *Fear of a Queer Planet*.

“resistance to ‘queer’ represents for some resistance to American imperialism” (24).

It is no surprise, then, that some scholars within the “queer studies” trajectory have moved away from the normalized “queer eye” that focused specifically on issues pertaining to sexuality *vis a vis* the experience of the white American gay male and have turned to other aspects like racialization, transnationalism, post-colonialism and globalization within their projects. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson have correctly pointed out that certain groups can not afford “single-variable politics” (5). As a result, the queer studies trajectory has been broadened by the emergence of such projects as queer ethnic studies, queer postcolonial studies, and transgender studies to name a few. As stated previously, one example of the evolving projects is Black Queer Studies, which materialized out of the “Black Queer Studies in the Millennium Conference,” and sees itself as a “critical intervention in the discourse of Black studies and queer studies” (Johnson and Henderson 1). Such projects attempt to ameliorate the queer studies project by correcting the myopic gaze (i.e. white American gay male bourgeoisie intellectual perspective) that seemingly characterizes this still growing area of study. Judith Halberstam sees this intrusion of new perspectives as the most obliging form of correction. She states,

The future of queer studies, I claim, depends absolutely on moving away from White gay male identity politics and learning from the radical critiques offered by a younger generation of queer scholars who draw their intellectual inspiration from feminism and ethnic studies rather than white queer studies. (“Shame and White Gay Masculinity” 220)

Halberstam is correct in asserting that the myopic perspective that characterizes queer studies ought to be corrected if the project is to be further developed. However, I would contend that there remains within queer studies principles that impede the activist-laden projects of SGL African American women and men who seek to counter white racism while simultaneously combating homophobia and heteronormativity, sexism and androcentrism, neocolonialism, and neoliberal capitalism. This ethos specifically obstructs the need of SGL people of color to name identities – and to un-blur the boundaries – such that the root causes of the intersectional oppression based on race, gender, class and other identities experienced by SGL women and men of color can be effectively identified, interrogated and eventually demolished.

### Exploring the Ethos in the Queer studies/theory Project

To this end, I offer an interrogation of the utility of the queer project (both queer studies and theory) and the ways that it may obstruct “Black Struggle”. Some of the characteristics that are identified hereafter may, indeed, have constructive uses; however, as illuminated below, such qualities impede that which is essential to “Black Struggle,” namely: 1. its universalizing impulse, 2. its appeal to anti-identitarian politics, 3. the failure, on the part of some, to disavow white privilege, and 4. its focus on theoretical critiques that are grounded in the discursive.

Patrick Johnson argues that the queer studies project “homogenizes notions of self-hood, agency, and experience” (“‘Quare’ Studies” 3). The move to universalize central aspects of one’s identity is seemingly the result of a debate over essentialism and constructionism that is central to the queer project. Essentialism moves to name sexuate identities as transhistorical, that is, it forwards the notion that fixed sexuate identities can be traced back in history; social constructionism maintains that sexuate identities are the “product of cultural conditioning, rather than of biological and constitutional factors” (Dynes 37-38). Queer studies, which Dynes labels the “successor to Social Constructionism,” is greatly influenced by the revolutionary work of Michel Foucault (40). As such, queer theory seeks to explore “how power operates with sexuality in contemporary society” and as a result, it seeks to defy rigid categorizations associated with sexuate identities (Avilla-Saavedra 3). This inclination is characteristic of the postmodern impulse that drives Queer studies as well. Dynes, expounding on this notion, states, “...the strand of postmodernism that is perhaps most applicable is its asserted capacity to efface limits, whether they apply to gender categories, academic disciplines, high and low culture, or architectural styles” (49). This “universalizing impulse,” then can be seen as a move towards anti-essentialism and inclusivity that is grounded in constructionist and postmodern theory. It is a move towards the production of *queer*, a seemingly amorphous identity construct that seeks to dispose of territorial labels and the subsequent in- and out-groups that are created around such labels (Puar 64). Yet, the perfunctory move towards the blurring of boundaries between racial, gender, class, and sexuate identities in queer studies – without attending to the needs of the self to freely establish or celebrate such boundaries prior to this move – is detrimental to African American women and men. In this regard, queer studies seeks, via its universalizing impulse, to

police agency and the self's freedom to name and witness rather than to provide the space needed for such an important move.<sup>5</sup>

It is clear, then, why queer studies can be characterized as a project governed by a politics of anti-identity. If queer theory seeks to efface labels and constructs that further the hierarchal structuring of subjects, and if it seeks to unsettle the oppressive knots that are forged by state sanctioned labels, then one can understand why a move to resist identification may indeed be useful. Some have suggested that the playfulness and inclusivity of the term "queer" itself "opens up rather than fixes identity" (Johnson, "'Quare' Studies" 4). Thus, this move towards anti-identity can be seen as a political and polemical act of resistance that muddles heteronormative identity constructs; however, it can also pose serious problems for those people – like African Americans – who seek to isolate and problematize sexualized and racialized identity constructs and who perceive the insurgent and liberatory potentiality present in racial and ethnic community and solidarity.<sup>6</sup>

The queer studies project seems to be guided by a particular standard that fosters, as opposed to countering, white privilege. Thus, if "part of the privilege of whiteness is the freedom not to think about race," then the resistance to engage in a dialogue on racial identities – including whiteness – only reinforces one of the primary privileges maintained by whites, that is, the privilege to discount race (Grillo and Wildman 653). Perez argues that queer theory's own stake in anti-identitarian politics does not preclude an injunction on whiteness (174). He goes on to contend that "Queer theorizing, as it has been institutionalized, is proper to – and property to – white bodies" (Perez 174). Similarly, Johnson asserts, "most white queer theorists fail to acknowledge and address racial privilege" (5). Thus, the ethos of queer theory perpetuates an injunction on identity politics. As a result, barriers that prevent SGL people of color from naming and witnessing against white racism or skin privilege and exploring racial identities are fortified. As such, it is clear why Avilla-Saavedra, quoting Nikki Sullivan, has characterized the queer studies project as a "white, privileged, collective

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<sup>5</sup> I wish to thank Larry D. Lyons for challenging me to carefully distinguish between "naming" and "witnessing." In this regard, naming is to be construed as the act of the self to verbally delineate one's identit(ies); whereas witnessing can be understood as the process of the self to testify freely, to bear witness, or to narrativize the self's experience in the world, shaped by identit(ies).

<sup>6</sup> I wish to thank LaMarr Jurelle Bruce for drawing my attention to this very important detail.

intellectual effort that, because of its circumstance, could see race or class as secondary to sexuality” (6). Such blindness to white privilege and racism within Black Struggle is anathema and therefore problematic for SGL women and men of color if it informs the theoretical interventions of queer studies/theory.

Finally, Johnson has noted that queer theorists tend to ground critiques in the realm of discourse (7). As stated previously, queer studies is influenced by the work of Foucault; therefore, it is governed by the imperative to counter the power relations that seek to construct discourses. The discursive realm, then, takes center stage in queer studies/theory for it is within the realm of discourse where power is transmitted, produced, and reinforced (Foucault 101). As such, it seems that this Foucauldian notion drives the queer studies project. Gunther has argued that the goal to defy the “social and historical construction of categories of sexuality and gender” is central to the project of American queers specifically (23). Thus, the ethos of queer studies is one that is characterized by its attention to discourse, theorizing, and intellectualizing, and not to the material, on-the-ground activism that once propelled the queer movement. Historian Allan Berube made a similar charge when he stated that some queer scholarship is “so abstract, text-based, career-oriented, concerned with developing insider jargon that it just doesn’t hold my attention.” As a result, Berube goes on to assert that he feels like an “outsider” because of this seeming disconnect between theory and practice (qtd. in Maynard 58).

Johnson also questions the effectiveness of queer theory if, in fact, it is limited to the realm of discourse. He asks:

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? (5)

Johnson’s query illuminates an aspect of the queer project that is problematic within; namely, its tendency to focus on the dismantling of power through discourse. Simply, what is dismissed is the attentiveness to materiality and the body, as well as, the radical modes of resistance that formally characterized the queer movement in the past. If the present ethos of queer studies/theory

is that which is characterized by intellectualizing and theorizing alone as opposed to the propagation of an “in-your-face” praxis, then it will limit the potentiality of liberation for those SGL women and men engaged in “Black Struggle.”

### On “Black Struggle”

“Black struggle” scrutinizes the particularities – the mundane and extraordinary – that shape the experiences of African American peoples. It interrogates America’s past, and contemporary, racial and sexual imaginary as destructive constructions that must be named, protested, and reconstructed. Moreover, Black Struggle takes serious the place of the black body, in historical and social contexts, as a site of abjection and offense as well as triumph and beauty. Indeed, Black Struggle is characterized by the following qualities: 1. the space provided for agency and the self to name and perform identities despite specific boundaries (i.e. race, class, gender, and sexuate identities), 2. its appeal to the centrality of race, 3. its insistence on the naming and disavowal of white privilege, and 4. its focus on a liberative praxis grounded in radical action.

First, Black Struggle seeks to provide the space for agency and the self-naming of identities despite specific boundaries (i.e. race, class, gender, and sexuate identities). In fact, Black Struggle, by the very nature of its designation, *requires* specificity. Thus, it exposes and interrogates boundaries, and, in some instances seeks to celebrate boundaries and provide witness to lived experiences within these boundaries. Francisco Valdes rightly argues that:

Neither sex, race, nor sexual orientation can “come first” in the configuration of human identities, politics, and communities. I reject this notion of fixed or unitary identity politics because the sense of primacy that it protects belies human experience...In fact, this notion of fixed identity primacies is not only conceptually unsound, but politically naïve. Imputed primacies regarding these (and other) identity constructs are, and ought to be, at most a very situation-specific calculation. (336)

Incorporated in Black Struggle then, is an interrogation of the specific; those who participate in this project refuse, to use Fanon’s descriptive phrasing, to amputate their identities (Fanon 140). Even more, Black Struggle is a performance that allows the subject to name his or her own identity as he or she sees fit. Valdes states in this regard, “When I am asked which ‘comes first’ for me, color or sexuality, I respond ‘it depends.’” Thus, in order for

Black Struggle to be furthered, the project must be driven by a charge which acknowledges that identities cannot be ignored or universalized, considering that such moves stifle the creative expression of narratives which are formed *via* the experiences of identities or of the subject. Patricia J. Williams asserts that one can find “freedom through the establishment of identity, the *formation* of an autonomous social self” (84).

Moreover, Black Struggle can be characterized as a move in which all identities that are affected by white racism – namely, class, gender, sexuate, and class identities – are interrogated. For example, the naming of one’s class identity, a specific site of interrogation, is an important characteristic of Black Struggle. As a result of the effects of white racism on the establishment and perpetuation of class, one of the goals of Black Struggle is to bring about the end of classism. Richard Delgado argues that:

Racism injures the career prospects, social mobility, and interracial contracts of minority group members. This, in turn, impedes assimilation into the economic, social, and political mainstream of society and ensures that victims of racism are seen and see themselves as outsiders. Indeed, racism can be seen as a force used by the majority to preserve an economically advantageous position for themselves. (134)

Accordingly, class distinctions and class divisions are particularities that Black Struggle focuses on in order to name the white racist roots of such class constructions and to exonerate, subsequently, such harmful distinctions and divisions.

Furthermore, Black Struggle seeks to identify the effects of what Ian F. Haney Lopez, labels “gender racialization” (170). For example, Lopez describes the identification of Native Americans in the Southwest during the era of frontier expansion as “indolent, slothful, cruel, cowardly Mexicans,” while the women were described as “fair, virtuous, and lonely Spanish maidens” (170). Similarly, Michael Eric Dyson, commenting on the imaging of black bodies under the racist gaze of white people, states, “black women were thought to be hot and ready to be bothered. Black men were believed to have big sexual desires and even bigger organs to realize their lust” (84). Roderick Ferguson contends that African Americans were viewed in the 1940s as “culturally pathological because African-American culture did not conform to the gender and sexual ideals of whites” (420). Moreover, Joane Nagel contends that “In the twentieth century black sexuality remained a preoccupation of white America with lynchings and castrations of black men

and the arrests of both black men and women for sexual misdeeds” (123). As such, it is imperative to note that in order for gender racialization to be thwarted, the self must be free to interrogate, name, and witness against the skewed conceptualizations of gender that dehumanize women – especially women of color – and African American men as well. Self-naming is important because it allows one to exercise control over the production of images such that one is empowered. In that regard, the liberative project of Black Struggle takes seriously its commitment to allow the self to name freely. Indeed, Black Struggle is grounded in the understanding that in the lives of “the disenfranchised, the recognition, construction and maintenance of self-image...functions to sustain, even when social systems fail to do so” (Johnson 11). As such, rather than attempting to police the self so as to propagate universalism, Black Struggle seeks to foster agency so that the self can freely name specific identities and boundaries.

Second, the Black Struggle for liberation also highlights the centrality of race. As Dyson contends, African Americans should be able to “acknowledge the *centrality* of race while denying the *exclusivity* of race” (190). Because of this appeal to the centralization of race, it is important that I make a few clarifications about race so as to expel any detrimental assertions that could be made regarding Black Struggle. First, race is a social construction and not a biological (genetic) characteristic. In this regard, the black struggle for liberation resists historical claims by white racists that rely on counterfeit “scientific” claims of the intellectual, moral, and physiological inferiority of black people. It is also important to highlight the social functioning of racial constructions as they are “constructed relationally, against one another, rather than in isolation” (Lopez 168). Races can be seen as constructions developed by humans; as such, this evidences the ways in which power can be leveraged when one group decides to oppress another.

Because of this, it is necessary that we ask, why then, would the Black Struggle centralize the project of race? Is not that move counterproductive? If we understand racial constructions (i.e. black/white) to function not as essentializations, but as what Edward Said calls “contrapuntal ensembles,” then the case can be made for centralizing racial identity (52). Said argues that “no identity can ever exist by itself without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions” as in the ensembles black/white, female/male, or East/West (52). Thus, a careful analysis of such contrapuntal ensembles can illuminate one’s understanding of the particular knowledges and attitudes that are entrenched within. When looking at the dependent relationships of these ensembles, one can clearly distinguish how one identity (i.e. black) can be used to define another (i.e. white) and vice versa. Entangled within the

ensembles are powerful assumptions that must be brought to the fore. For example, Nagel, when speaking of the contrapuntal ensemble women/men, states:

[Judith] Butler and others ask what danger might lie in assuming women's existence? They conclude that women bring men into being by their "otherness," and that women's abject (marginal, invisible) status affirms men's dominance and normalcy. The view of women as 'not men' leads to a focus on women's lack of rights, women's troubles, women's marginality, and thus can be seen to be an affirmation, a reinforcement and even a constitution of hegemonic manhood-men's dominance, men's privilege, men's centrality. (115)

In the same way, the "attempt to racially define the conquered, subjugated, or enslaved is at the same time an attempt to racially define the conqueror, the subjugator, or the enslaver" (Lopez 171). Thus, the black struggle for liberation works to name "blackness" so as to illuminate the problematics of "whiteness." Because of this move, it is avidly identitarian in nature.

Third, Black Struggle is insistent upon the naming and disavowal of whiteness and White privilege. Mason Stokes, author of *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fiction of White Supremacy* (2001), contends that central to the project of women of color feminists in the 1970s was the naming of whiteness as the site "of narcissistic and exclusionary privilege" (181). Thus, women of color feminists criticized their white feminist counterparts for engendering projects that made them – and their particular experiences and identities – invisible. For example, Audre Lorde posed the following critique to White feminist Mary Daly: "Beyond sisterhood is still racism" (70). Black Struggle insists on the naming and interrogation of white racism and the disavowal of white privilege. White privilege must be jettisoned because it furthers systems of social and economic oppression. Derrick A. Bell, Jr. contends, "the continuing resistance to affirmative action plans, set-asides, and other meaningful relief for discrimination-caused harm is based on substantial part on the perception that black gains threaten the main component of status for many whites: the sense that, as whites, they are entitled to priority and preference over blacks" (77). Even though some have called for African Americans to have "white freedom," I contend that the black struggle for liberation seeks to deconstruct whiteness as the norm *par*

*excellence* and names and counters white privilege such that it no longer operates oppressively.<sup>7</sup>

Fourth, Black Struggle is characterized by a liberative praxis that is action oriented. It is quickened by a spirit of radical action and resistance that mobilizes the oppressed to correct the many societal ills that affect African Americans and other peoples of color. Simply put, Black Struggle cannot exist as a theoretical concept only, but it must be performed so that social change can be actualized. When examining the social realities that are plaguing the black community, it is clear to see why revolutionary action is a necessity. For example, according to the United States Census Bureau report (2005), the median income of households rose by 1.1 percent between 2004 and 2005 from \$45,817 USD to \$46,326 USD. Yet non-Hispanic black households had the lowest median income of all racial groups in 2005 averaging \$30,858 USD. In addition, while the poverty rate for “non-Hispanic whites” decreased from 8.7 percent in 2004 to 8.3 percent in 2005, the poverty rate for non-Hispanic blacks alarmingly remained at 24.9 percent and Hispanics at 21.8 percent in 2005. These statistics signal the need for a theorizing that engenders action. This call to action is one that the theorist – who is responsible for mapping out a “topological and geological survey of the battlefield” – and the activist – who relies on the battle plan of the intellectual to perform – can both answer so as to bring about social transformation (Foucault 62). With this in mind, the “Black struggle” for liberation functions by way of the acknowledgment that “queer theory and its focus on sexual identity are not sufficient to explain how individuals experience their everyday lives” and that “liberation from sexual oppression alone does not promote significant social change” (Avilla-Savedra 17).

### Conclusion

This paper intended to illustrate how the ethos of queer studies/theory violates the Black Struggle for liberation. In this regard, attempts were made to draw attention to the discontinuities that frustrate the move towards integration of the two projects. First, queer studies/theory is characterized by a universalizing impulse that blurs boundaries and polices agency and the ability of the self to name identities, while Black Struggle seeks to open up space for agency, self-naming of specific identities and boundaries, and witnessing. Second, queer studies/theory appeals to anti-identitarian politics, while Black Struggle specifically highlights the centrality of identity,

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Rodriguez comments, “What I want for African Americans is white freedom. The same as I want for myself...” in *Brown* (142).

particularly of race. Third, the queer studies/theory project fails to disavow white privilege, while the black struggle for liberation is insistent on the naming and disavowal of white privilege. Lastly, queer studies/theory ostensibly focuses on theoretical critiques that are grounded in the discursive, while Black Struggle focuses on materiality and a liberative praxis that spurs action. Because of this discontinuity, I contend that some African American SGL women and men do not embrace – and *cannot* embrace – queer studies/theory.

Yet, while I have attempted to critically interrogate and reject certain aspects of the queer project throughout this paper, I would also like to acknowledge that some participants in Black Struggle similarly apply bounded norms that deny the absolutizing, liberative features of this crucial project. It is not uncommon for the experiences of SGL people, women, and the working class (or, alternately, the middle and upper classes) to be ignored or effaced by some contingencies within Black Struggle. Thus, present in the queer project and Black Struggle is the potential to contravene, by way of a skewed theoretical grounding, the radical political aims of obliterating state sanctioned norms and actuating the agential emancipation of the abjectified other. Nonetheless, Black Struggle seems to take into account the need to survey the social/racial/gender/class scenes of the subject and attend to the needs of the self to name his or her identities and bear witness from these varied subjective locations. These vital preliminary steps, I argue, must occur before such boundaries are queerantined completely.

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