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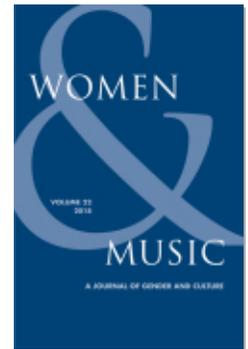
The New "Queer" and the Old Racism

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The New “Queer” and the Old Racism

Elías Krell

“Trans” or transgender topics have exploded in the last ten to fifteen years, as even those scholars of music who actively avoid culturally critical work would be hard-pressed to ignore. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle’s *Transgender Studies Reader* launched a field in which “trans” was theorized as an identity, positionality, and analytic.¹ Unsettling aspects of embodiment, identity, and politics that even “queer” could not account for, “trans” became the new queer, in a sense. The tectonic plate-shifting idea that morphology and gender are not coterminous fundamentally cha(lle)nged queer and feminist scholarship, a challenge that was both produced by and productive of a certain “radicality” that was then attributed to “trans” as a modifier. In this discussion, I suggest that the implicit radicality of terms like “queer” and “trans” produces the very elision of race, class, ability, and other vectors of power that those terms presumably meant to include. Radical modifiers often reproduce the very structural elisions they are supposed to critique.

The first section of my argument examines the performative effect of a term that is taken to be transgressive. The second section traces several genealogies of queer and feminist scholarship and provides context for race-ing queer music scholarship. The third section suggests that musicology may ironically be well positioned to intervene on the deracination of “queer” and “trans” in both scholarly and cultural spheres.

The Making of a Radical Killjoy (with Thanks to Sara Ahmed)

When a term opens a new thought paradigm, the effect of opening new theoretical, artistic, and/or material worlds can be an “implied radicality.” For example,

¹ Susan Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Stephen Whittle and Susan Stryker (New York: Routledge, 2006).

terms like “queer” and “transgender” have, importantly, become signal terms in music scholarship. This implied radicality however also makes them very difficult to critique from within.

An affect and effect of radicality permeate much of the conversation around social justice in and outside the academy.² For example, if, at a conference, a scholar is presenting on such a topic as “glitter as a resistant sartorial strategy in queer nightlife,” how does one critique any aspect of that work without becoming what Sara Ahmed has beautifully termed “the feminist killjoy?”³ If this article were being given at AMS, the oceanic white cis heteronormativity of our conference makes the stakes for such a queer interruption even higher and more prone to misinterpretation. The sidelining of queer and trans people of color that is still common in queer theory thus is bolstered, ironically, by the presumed avant-garde nature of the topic. We might call this the fetishization of radicality.

When, as I often do, I choose to engage queer scholars and offer a critique that centers women of color, for example, the response is often defensiveness. There is a strange form of respectability politics that emerges around queer scholarship that it should not be critiqued (at least not out in the open). The idea that critique invalidates work is troubling to me as a queer and trans person of color and as a scholar. We need, now more than ever, to teach our students that critique is the highest form of praise, for it means you are reading/listening closely and engaging the text through the prism of your own thinking. Any radicality that closes down in the face of query would fail Angela Davis’s seminal definition of “radical” as “grasping things at the root,” pun intended.⁴

A second performative effect of radical modifiers, which is something that they *do*, is that they shift the focus of the critique from the argument to the asker. To return to the example of wanting to contribute to an exegesis on glitter as a sartorial nightlife practice, if such a topic is deemed to be outside of critique, the person asking the question becomes the critiqued. Radical modifiers boomerang the focus from what is said to who is saying it and their presumed motivations. Again, Ahmed calls this the making of “the feminist killjoy.”

I would like to suggest that we learn to turn this state of affairs and Ahmed’s pithy term into a litmus test for implied radicals. If someone “becomes wrong” by virtue of challenging gay cis male scholarship, we can be sure that both radicality and privilege are at play. Those of us working on race-ing queer music scholarship would be wise to think about how to remain open under critique. We cannot

2 For a critique of the term “social justice,” see Leigh Patel and Alton Price, “The Origins, Potentials, and Limits of Racial Justice,” special issue, “What Justice Wants,” ed. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, *Journal of Critical Ethnic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2016): 61–81. Also see Frances Lee’s “Excommunicate me from the church of social justice” *Autostraddle* (2017), <https://www.autostraddle.com/kin-aesthetics-excommunicate-me-from-the-church-of-social-justice-386640/>.

3 Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

4 “Radical simply means ‘grasping things at the root’” (lecture by Angela Davis, Moe Lectureship in Women’s Studies, Alumni Hall, Gustavus Adolphus College, April 12, 2006).

allow the fact that many of our critiques come from uninformed interlocutors to dull our ethical and political analytics. We should get better at engaging with and being critiqued by one another; defensiveness and presumed radicality are roadblocks on that path. The boomerang effect quashes emergent critiques that would enrich and extend our scholarship.

There are, of course, high stakes for critiquing marginalized scholarship, especially in a political moment where it is acceptable for prominent white male scholars to insist they are under attack.⁵ Scholars who otherwise do careful critical work suddenly become uncareful thinkers when they dismiss queer scholarship due to one missing or incomplete aspect. This is nothing less than white privilege as reading practice. You can afford to ignore what you can afford to ignore.

The boomerang effect that produces some scholars of color as “angry” and “irrational” by the academic establishment is the same effect that quashes emerging scholarly interventions in work that is implicitly deemed to be radical. In her iconic essay, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” Cathy Cohen questions the implied radicality of “queer” and demonstrates that any queer theory that does not account for racialized and economically marginalized heterosexual women is not queer.⁶ A recalcitrance toward “grasping concepts at their root” as part of the work of radical scholarship only bolsters institutional racism by making those who appear less defensive more attractive to hiring committees.

Labeling work as “too political” is another common way that scholars dismiss the work of queer of color theorists. All work is political, though not all scholars have been trained to be transparent about how their political and ethical beliefs can enrich their work. Being transparent gives a reader the tools to decide what they take and what they leave (for more, see D. Soyini Madison’s *Critical Ethnography*).⁷

Critiquing even the terms we hold most dear is a *method* of race-ing queer music scholarship. It is a practice that increases our ability to put those terms toward the ends that matter to us.

Genealogies of Feminist, Queer, Trans Activism

The narratives we tell about political mo(ve)ments matter. It is important for us to consider the narrative we are telling of this moment, this call for “race-ing queer music scholarship.”

Becky Thompson theorizes the significance of the narrative of the women’s movement, for example. Progressive feminists often state that white feminism emerged first and WOC feminism responded to and emerged from it. However,

⁵ <http://themusicalon.blogspot.com/2017/07/the-intersectionality-of-white-male.html>.

⁶ Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?,” in *Black Queer Studies*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁷ D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*, 2nd ed. (New York: SAGE Publications, 2011).

Thompson demonstrates that WOC feminism existed in tandem with white feminism, and placing white feminism first historically erases early WOC organizing.⁸

We need look no further than the women's movement and the gay rights movement to see that, rather than starting as white, political movements in this country have often *become white* through the exclusion of people of color over time. In one of the earliest essays we have by a trans woman of color (TWOC), Sylvia Rivera tells us that within two years, the Gay Liberation Front had pushed Rivera and other TWOC out of the very movement they had created.⁹ In one of the first works of trans of color critique, Jin Haritaworn and C. Riley Snorton show how the lives and deaths of TWOC are co-opted by white trans people in order to attain needs that are often very different from TWOC's.¹⁰

The fact itself that we narrate feminist, gay, and trans rights as three separate movements tells a story about racism and classism. Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, Lee Brewster, and many others were sidelined and vilified such that those with race and class privilege are at the center of the narratives we tell about gender and sexual activism in the United States.

Queer theory, and what counts as queer theory, is of course also bound up with co-optation and elision. Queer of color (QOC) theory emerged in part, among other places, in a groundbreaking edited volume by queer women of color called *This Bridge Called My Back*.¹¹ However, the subfield of queer of color theory has itself been narrated as beginning when gay men of color hosted a conference and began writing academic scholarship that spoke back to white queer theory.

QOC work began to gain some credibility in the academy, if only very marginally, in the form of publication as a (sub)field during the early 2000s. This is evidenced by edited volumes such as *Black Queer Theory*, monographs by Siobhan Somerville and Roderick Ferguson, and articles on racism in white queer theory such as Hiram Pérez's critique of the University of Michigan conference.¹² Courses entitled Queer of Color Theory began to emerge, often in women's studies programs, and a valorizing of intersectionality, if only by name, began to be par for the course.

As critical as much of the work in *Black Queer Studies* is, telling a story in which queer of color theory emerges in response to white queer theory enacts the very same reduction of QOC theory against which Thompson cautioned. Further,

8 Becky Thompson, "Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 336–60.

9 Sylvia Rivera, "Queens in Exile: The Forgotten Ones," in *GenderQueer: Voices from Beyond the Sexual Binary*, ed. Joan Nestle, Clare Howell, and Riki Wilchins (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 2002), 67–85.

10 C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics," in *Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Aren Aizura and Susan Stryker (New York: Routledge, 2013), 66–76.

11 Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 4th ed. (New York: SUNY Press, 2015).

12 See E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson, "Introduction: Queering Black Studies / 'Quaring' Queer Studies," in Johnson and Henderson, *Black Queer Studies*, 1–20; Siobhan Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Hiram Pérez, conversation with the author, Vassar College, 2016.

it risks relegating work such as *This Bridge* to the past, rather than, as I am suggesting here, as foundational and relevant QOC theory.

Music scholars invested in race-ing queer music scholarship should be cautious of reinventing the wheel. Many ideas from WOC feminist writing and activism have entered into mainstream thinking, and we must engage rather than further marginalize WOC scholarship that has already done much of the work for us. Availing ourselves of a text like *This Bridge Called My Back*, for example, can only enhance intersectional music theorizing.

I find it interesting that between 2000 and 2005, as transgender studies was gaining a foothold in the academy, was the same moment when QOC critique began to be recognized as a legitimate subfield. One reading of this timing is that “trans” became a way for white people to make the conversation about them again. “Trans,” buoyed by its avant-garde affect, had various effects on the academic establishment. Privileged white trans people at elite institutions began insisting on “trans 101” forums, and an element of hysteria permeated the white cis faculty at the elite institutions in which I have been based. People want to get a handle on “trans” and leave race and class and the rest of the “embarrassed etc.” for later, which of course means reading “trans” as white and middle class.

White trans academics contributed to this myopia by maintaining an almost perfect ignorance of QOC and WOC feminist theory. I have written elsewhere about the ignorance that trans feminist scholarship has held for WOC feminisms (even when WOC scholarship discusses two spirit and gender nonconformity). This elision is especially striking given the fact that WOC were specifically naming nonnormative genders in the *early 1980s*. As Chela Sandoval observes:

U.S. women of color have long understood . . . that especially race, but also one’s culture, sex, or class, can deny comfortable or easy access to any legitimized gender category, that the interactions between such social classifications produce other, unnamed gender forms within the social hierarchy. . . . [S]uch expressions imply the existence of at least one other category of gender. . . . This in-between space, this third gender category is also recognized in the early writings of . . . Maxine Hong Kingston, Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Cherríe Moraga.¹³

Despite many of the essays in *Bridge* taking up nonnormative gender and the inclusion of a two-spirit writer within that volume, the transgender studies readers and journal until recently replicated the elision of race by marginalizing trans scholars of color and coding trans as white.

Whiteness has curated the conversation on “trans” in both our scholarship and the classroom. For example, trans etiquette conveyed in the form of Trans 101 classes has taken a front seat in LGBT conversations on many (especially elite) university campuses. The affective structure of the Trans 101 folds neatly into a

¹³ Chela Sandoval, *Methodologies of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 45–46.

white, neoliberal, and middle-class imaginary that privileges English speakers and elides the structures by which certain trans students are perceived as worthy of that comfort. Conversely, trans students sometimes inadvertently replicate colonial tactics of oppression by using fear and shame to change behavior. This inability to listen through our judgment teaches us to respond out of fear and resistance. The etiquette of Trans 101 becomes another way in which white and middle-class respectability politics dominate: etiquette is itself raced, nationally specific, and classed. The question of *who* is made to feel more comfortable in the classroom, or at least made to feel that some effort is being made, regardless of its success, is elided under the prescriptive nature of these conversations. Drawing from the work of b. binaohan, Marlon B. Ross, and Julia Serano, I have theorized that distinctions between the categories of cisgender, transgender, trans feminine, and trans masculine only hold in a normatively white frame.¹⁴ When issues of health care for financially stable trans people with health insurance, and care and etiquette around pronoun and name use supersede those of documentation status, poverty, and police violence, the lives of trans students of color and poor and working-class trans students are white-washed. The whiteness of the conversation on sexual assault on college campuses is another example of how gender and sexual topics are often implicitly or explicitly coded as white. Centering white trans students has weakened our ability to deal theoretically or practically with the real-life ways that race, class, and ability complexly intersect with transgenderism on our campuses, in which the implied radicality of the term has had a hand.

Linking material inequities and theoretical myopia, Hiram Pérez argues that endemic to performativity of whiteness is an ability to adapt and change to whatever will replace it.¹⁵ Supplementing Pérez, I suggest that the implied radicality of “trans” is imbricated with white privilege. For example, because of the perceived newness of “trans” in the early years of trans theorizing, white conference presenters were allowed to discuss transgenderism as if race and class did not exist. Music scholars would do well to reach beyond musicology and read foundational texts in WOC feminism and queer theory when approaching the challenging work of race-ing queer music scholarship.

Intersectional Listening

A practice of intersectional speaking and writing necessitates a practice of intersectional listening. Music scholars may be well positioned to engage critical TOC work because of our valuation of silence and listening as part of our critical work. As an undergraduate at Oberlin Conservatory of Music, I took a music

14 Elías Krell, “Is Transmisogyny Killing Trans Women of Color? Black Trans Feminisms and the Exigencies of White Femininity,” in “The Issue of Blackness,” ed. Treva Ellison, Kai M. Green, Matt Richardson, and C. Riley Snorton, special issue, *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (2017): 226–42; Julia Serano, *Excluded: Making Feminist and Queer Movements More Inclusive* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2013); Marlon Ross, “Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm,” in Johnson and Henderson, *Black Queer Studies*, 161–89; b. binaohan, *Decolonizing Trans/Gender 101* (Biyuti Publishing, 2014).

15 Pérez, conversation.

theory course with Arnie Cox, who introduced me to the importance of silence in music. The example he offered and played for us was from Berlioz's eight-minute-and-twenty-second-long song, "La mort d'Ophélie." We listened to Anne Sofie von Otter's sublime rendering of Ophelia's suicide by drowning and learned the deceptively simple idea that silence structures what we hear. The silence draws our ear in, and we felt it. Rather than allowing us to pity Ophelia from the shore, Berlioz pulls us into the river with her. At 3:55 seconds we lose her for a full thirty seconds before she emerges singing, floating again.

Musicology's valorization of listening and silence offers much to politico-theoretical interventions around race, gender, sexuality, etc. I wish this appreciation for silence extended into our academic offerings, and yet it offers many possibilities for responding to challenges we face in our work. What if we approached the scholarship and conversations we find challenging as we would a piece of music? How much more particularly might we be able to hear power if we allow ourselves to be silent when we do not know how to respond to a critique, if we allow ourselves some time to feel rather than react with defensiveness?

A white middle-class Protestant ethos privileges those who can afford to not be deeply emotionally invested in their work. We need kill the concept of objectivity once and for all. Why is it acceptable to care about political issues that seem to be nonthreatening (such as how music helps children with learning disabilities learn abstract thinking) but not race? The creativity and joy with which musicologists listen to music offers much toward more creative approaches to conversations on race, gender, sexuality, and class.

For example, when our students do work under the rubric of "trans" that is not intersectional, a valorization of temporary silence might allow us to pause long enough to address, rather than ignore, this critical elision. In an industry of intelligence and articulation, it takes integrity to say even to oneself that one does not know. This is especially challenging for professors of color and others of whom students are sometimes implicitly critical of their ability to teach them.

I suggest we reframe the fear that we do not know as a musical silence. Learning how to play with the gaps in our own knowledge would give white middle-class defensiveness a rest. It might allow something constructive to emerge through the white noise, something like, "This would benefit greatly from an analysis of race; I will email you a list of resources," which neither puts us on the spot to immediately offer sources nor lets us off the hook. Even if we do not have those resources at the tip of our tongue, we can start a list of queer and trans of color texts at any time. A valuing of silence both in the moment and in our expertise acknowledges that there is work to be done, not (only) because we are imperfect political subjects but because of long histories of unequal power distribution that have been the cauldron in which much musicological work has been forged.

We should be especially cognizant of writers who have been race-ing queer music scholarship. Angela Davis's *Blues Women*, C. Riley Snorton's work on queer hip-hop, Jack Halberstam on early blues singer Ma Rainey, and the scholarship

of Alisha Lola Jones are models for interdisciplinary intersectional musicological research. Intersectional scholarship is nothing if not necessarily creative: we are thinking outside the matrix from within it, as Patricia Hill Collins would say.¹⁶

In our current political climate, it seems to be both more critical and more difficult than ever to listen. I believe that everyone is responsible for their own work around this, and it is no one's place to judge someone if they cannot listen in a particular moment. Speech can be violent, even sometimes when the speaker does not mean it to be. There is also a culture of knee-jerk judgment within those attuned to ethics and social justice that makes it difficult for us to listen and to remain open to what our work manifests in others. Can we truly expect others to listen if we ourselves are modeling the opposite?

I suggest that musicology is well positioned to host critical and transparently political work around race, class, gender, and so on precisely because of our field's investment in listening creatively, but there is much work to be done. Listening to white noise and to defensiveness of all kinds as forms of music that structure our world might allow us to move through them to actions that address injustices in our communities. Women of color feminist work, such as that cited in this discussion, has been undervalued in the academy and offers us so much toward listening and speaking creatively to power.

Conclusion

In contrast to the ways that white trans theorists mark themselves as distinct from feminism and other queer theory (e.g., Serano, Namaste), many trans of color scholars forge connections between work that queers and trans people of color have made in the past.¹⁷ If trans of color theorizing has remained transparently indebted to queer of color theorizing, it is not because we are more respectful than white trans theorists. It is because we cannot as easily afford to throw away those ideas or the people attached to them.

It seems to me that musicology has that in common with trans of color theorizing: we are a small community. Ironically, the white middle-class sense of respect and decorum that permeates the AMS meeting might offer us a space in which to respectfully hold ourselves and each other accountable and support one another around intersectional music scholarship. If for no other reason than that we know we will see each other soon, that we will be reading and revising each other's work, I hear resonances with an ethic of accountability integral to antiracist queer work.

16 Jack Halberstam, "Queer Voices and Musical Genders," in *Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music*, ed. Freya Jarman-Ivens (New York: Routledge, 2007), 183–96; Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998); Riley Snorton, "On the Question of 'Who's Out in Hip Hop,'" *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society* 16, no. 3–4 (2014): 283–302; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 221–38.

17 See my reading of the distancing move articulated in Serano, *Excluded*; and Finn Enke's introduction to *Transfeminist Perspectives in and beyond Transgender and Gender Studies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 1–15.

Questioning implied radical terms is a methodology of grasping them at their root, not an excuse to ignore them. I hope that this collection of articles will queer the pitch again for musicology. At best, we might open a space for the TWOC who are not yet in the ivory tower but who surely and shortly will be. Let us not only write about trans people of color but also value activists and artists as resources that we can pay to bring to our institution. In this way we can offer a different, queer, and trans of color noise within the knowledge gaps that our curricula reproduce. Listening for sonic and theoretical myopia requires that we believe ourselves entitled to challenge both the implied radical and “normal” term and will help amplify the voices within and behind that silence.

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