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On the Uses of Black Feminism: Notes on Black Feminism as Sexuality Study

Shoniqua Roach

This essay reflects on the theoretical and pedagogical utility of centering a Black feminist approach in the queer/sexuality studies classroom, an antiracist praxis the author conceptualizes as Black feminism as sexuality study.

Keywords: antiracism / Black feminism / Black feminism as sexuality study / pedagogy / queer studies / sexuality studies / the erotic

In the Black feminist imagination, erotic work has always been an explicitly antiracist practice (specifically, an anti-anti-Black practice). It is a radical praxis of politicizing the personal, of doing self-work to align where and how we feel, where and how and who we love, where and how and whom we fuck, with an antiracist politic. As Audre Lorde ([1978] 1984, 59) told us, the erotic is a profoundly creative resource and power that is circumscribed by and proscribed within “a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society.” To claim the erotic, then, one must actively work against racism. The two are inextricably linked. Yet, while this insight careens around the Black feminist imagination—indeed, I can drop a list of names, books, and chapter titles as long and far-reaching as the litany of Black woman archetypes that structure Hortense Spillers’s “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (1987)—it is one that, in my own experiences studying and teaching within and across four US-based Research 1 institutions, continues to evade the construction of queer and sexuality studies syllabi that have as their stated aims (1) mapping the polymorphous field of sexuality/queer studies and (2) defining and advocating erotic autonomy. And while Black feminism is frequently understood as, and often framed within, queer and sexuality studies course syllabi, as a foundational precursor to (Black) queer studies and queer of color critique, this essay (and my queer/sexuality studies course) is concerned

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with how Black feminism is a rich site, in its own right, from which to push students to reckon with the racialized contingencies not only of sexuality studies as a field but also and, perhaps most crucially, of their own erotic subjectivities.

This essay is called “Uses of Black Feminism” so as to call in “Uses of the Erotic” as an essay metonymic of Black feminist commitments to theorizing and enacting embodied freedoms, which is to say erotic freedoms, as an antiracist praxis. From Black feminism’s theorization of the pornotropic objectification of Black feminine flesh for white pleasure and capital (Spillers 1987; Hartman 1997) to its assessment of sexual and reproductive violence as anti-Black tools of social control (Davis 1983; Roberts 1997; Collins 1990); from its elucidation of the mutability of racial, gender, and sexual categories (Jennifer Morgan 2004; Davis 1983; Spillers 1984) to its insistence on the political utility of “the lesbian” and “the erotic” (Clarke 2016; Lorde [1978] 1984); from its exposure of the heterosexualization of state power (Cohen 1997; Alexander 1994; Silvera 1992) to its exploration of the world-making potential of Black pleasure (Stallings 2007, 2015; Nash 2014; Musser 2014, 2018; Cruz 2016); Black feminism urgently unsettles and recalibrates conventional assumptions about what sex, gender, and sexuality *are* and have the potential to *be*. In this way, it functions as a foremost site of *sexuality study*—by which I mean a crucial site of knowledge production and (counter)planning that exposes and theorizes the very basis upon which the categories of Blackness, race, sex, gender, and sexuality rest (Harney and Moten 2013). Here, I invoke Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s mobilization of the term “study” to capture the insurgent force of knowledge production and pedagogical practice within and beyond the academy, practices that refuses the anti-Black institutional “call to order” that hinges on conducting white supremacist capitalist imperialist heteropatriarchal business as usual vis-à-vis assigned readings, course assignments, and evaluation and teaching methods (2013, 8). Extending this notion of *study*, and in contradistinction to institutionally legitimated sexuality studies projects (e.g., queer and sexuality studies), my pedagogy centers Black feminism as a crucial site of *sexuality study*.

Black feminist sexuality study as it manifests in the classroom necessarily centers students’ racialized embodied experiences and begins with *what we know*: our feelings. The class itself asks students to draw from their own embodied experiences—including not only what they know and/or believe to be true about themselves but also what they have been taught to trust or not (their erotic knowledge!)—in order to build a Black feminist sexuality study that explicitly does antiracist work. Structured by canonical Black feminist texts that often fall by the wayside or beyond the purview of queer/sexuality studies, my queer studies courses are organized around four central questions: (1) What is (my) sexuality and how do I/we come to know it? And, relatedly, how do we come to know “queer” as a category? (2) Is there a history of sexuality? Are there histories of sexuality? How do we come to know various histories of sexualities as “queer”? (3) Who benefits from dominant narratives of queer

history? (4) What are the stakes of telling histories of sex, gender, and sexuality otherwise? These questions guide students through the assigned readings, in-class activities, and course assignments, as well as along their own personal and theoretical trajectories, which begin and end with questions of the *erotic*, that is, of students' embodied—which is to say, necessarily racialized—experiences as the basis for knowledge.

Question 1: What Is My Sexuality? How Have I Come to Know it?

Students start with “Uses of the Erotic” in order to think about their deepest desires, and how and why they came to “suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued,” which, Lorde (1978, 53) argues, society either denies altogether (in white masculine subjects, for example) or manages and expropriates for white supremacist patriarchal capitalist ends. Students are asked to consider how their subject positions—externally and internally defined—have mediated their access to what Lorde calls “the erotic.” We read “Uses of the Erotic” in conversation with Adrienne Rich, who writes of the structural ways that “compulsory heterosexuality” plays out and reproduces itself (Rich 1983). Students thus begin to see the ways that they, too, have been taught—by the forms of erotic denial and compulsory heterosexuality that Lorde and Rich respectively elucidate—to (dis)trust their deepest forms of erotic knowledge. They are then encouraged to ask these questions of their own personal life experiences, which are grounded in their natal and chosen communities, as well as racialized geographic homeplaces. Students do so by drawing explicitly on Silvera (1992) and Johnson (2001), readings that quite literally ground the authors' understandings of racialized sexual knowledge on their grandmother's respective porches in the American South and in the Afro-Caribbean. Johnson's and Silvera's positioning of Black porches as sites of intellectual production evince how *Black feminism as sexuality* study urges us to source knowledge from our racialized cum spatialized embodied experiences. Taking all of these texts together, students map how their feelings reflect their erotic knowledge, and how that erotic knowledge has been mediated by their specific racialized, gendered, spatial, and sociopolitical contexts (contexts that helped them to make sense of their feelings-as-erotic-knowledge). This informs the first class assignment, which asks students to write a journal entry interrogating their own sexual subjectivities, not simply in terms of defining themselves as “asexual,” “queer,” “straight,” “gay,” “lesbian,” and so on, but in relationship to larger questions of racialized, gendered, and sexual norms, state exclusion, and power, all of which construct, mediate, and supersede various sexual categories.

Through the structure of the syllabus, that is, the reading list and ensuant reflection questions, students forge ahead into the realm of Black feminist sexuality study, asking questions not only about who they are, but also how they came to understand themselves as racialized erotic subjects in the first place. In the

second unit, I ask students to meditate on how racialized historical narratives inform their understandings of their own erotic subjectivities.

Question 2: How Are Histories of Sexuality Told?

For example, in this unit, I construct in-class activities that stage conversations between canonical queer/sexuality studies texts that purport to tell (and purport to trouble) the history of sexuality (as if a single history could be told!)—for example, Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* and David M. Halperin’s “Is There a History of Sexuality?”—and Black feminist texts that frequently fall outside of the scope of what is considered queer studies proper. Disrupting both white queer studies approaches that posit Foucault/Butler/Sedgwick as the genesis of queer studies and queer of color critique genealogies that use Audre Lorde as a metonym for Black lesbian feminism and/or *This Bridge Called My Back* as the critical-yet-no-longer-temporally relevant foundation(s), or jumping-off point(s) for a new sexuality studies project altogether: queer of color critique. I ask students to return to the feminist sex wars and to closely read two articles from Carol Vance’s now canonical 1984 feminist anthology *Pleasure and Danger*: Hortense Spillers’ “Interstices” and Gayle Rubin’s “Thinking Sex.” I ask students to reflect on both essays’ concerns about the contemporaneous dearth of theorizing on sex and sexuality, and to consider how each essay roots (and problematizes) the foundations of Western thinking on sexuality in the nineteenth-century United States. To make sense of why each author takes the nineteenth century as a starting point from which to understand modern gender and sexual categories, students are asked to consult Google, text community members, and mine the texts themselves to map a timeline of events that took place in the nineteenth century. Black Feminism as Sexuality Study displaces the academy as the primary source of knowledge production and locates students’ as well as other bodies as ripe sites for the production of knowledge and alternative historical narratives. Students crowdsource their responses and, more often than not, use Spillers as a frame through which to grapple with two world-and-paradigm-shifting nineteenth-century phenomena: the legal end of transatlantic slavery (and beginning of slavery’s afterlife, as Saidiya Hartman would have it) and the discursive and material sedimentation of “the black woman” as the principle passage point defining the inner and outer limits of gender and sexual categories (a process that was set afoot much earlier than the nineteenth century, as Black feminist historians such as Jennifer Morgan have made clear). Reading Spillers, they come to understand anti-Blackness and anti-Black womanness as crucial to the formation of racialized gender and sexual categories in the present. They bring these insights to bear on Gayle Rubin’s call for a radical and singular theory of sex, which Rubin suggests in the first paragraph of “Thinking Sex” should be untethered from issues of race. Spillers’s work helps students to make sense of the racial implications of Rubin’s

contention that the nineteenth century shapes contemporary sexual categories as well as Rubin's failure to acknowledge (the afterlife of) slavery and the subsequent state-sanctioned rape and lynching of Black communities as relevant to modern notions of sexual perversion. I also encourage students to reflect on both essays' spatial metaphors, imploring them to think through the relationship between Spillers's notion of "the black woman" as that which defines the inner/outer limits of gender and sexuality, and Rubin's construction of the infamous charmed circle, defined by an unnamed inner and outer limit (*perhaps a Black female subject?*). Finally, through a bibliometric exercise on Google Scholar, I encourage students to question why Spillers's insights on the relationship between (anti)Blackness and sexuality have not enjoyed the queer studies prominence that Rubin's essay has, which fuels our second assignment asking students to look more closely at the "queer" historical narratives that they have been taught, and to question the racialized implications of how particular figures, essays, events, and the like come to queer prominence.

Question 3: Why Do We Ask the Questions We Ask?

This question structures a course assignment that takes up Sharon P. Holland's call to think critically about dominant narratives in critical race theory, feminist studies, and queer theories, and the conditions under which we understand history, theory, and other stories. Students journal on the question *Why do I want to study queer theory?* They think about the different educational environments they have (or have not) had access to, and how different classrooms, instructors, and life experiences have taught them about gender and sexuality as areas of academic inquiry. Following Holland's lead, they think specifically about the forms of racialized power that have influenced their (formal and informal) educational experiences as they persist in the "everyday." The assignment asks and prompts, What kinds of everyday experiences, whether in or out of the classroom, have influenced your personal desire to study gender and sexuality? How can you use Holland's analyses and findings to inform your own work in this course (and others)? In your analysis, include at least two direct quotes from the text, as well as at least one basic theme from this week's course lectures.

Students read the entirety of Holland (2012) in my queer studies courses, as it emphasizes Black feminist sexuality study for my students by mapping how queer (studies) projects continuously disavow and detrimentally lose the Black (queer) feminine subject, thereby limiting the "radical potential of queer studies" (Cohen 1997; Hammonds 1994).² In this way, it textually grounds my refusal of the queer studies' performative (dare I say, obligatory) nod to Black (queer) feminist work, instead dwelling in the unnerving discursive and material spaces in which Black feminism unapologetically disagrees with the premise of queer studies (Holland 2012 57), while cultivating discursive space for "honest bodies that like to also fuck" (Joan Morgan 2015 40). In conversation with other Black

feminist texts, it urges queer studies to consider “the Black (w)hole,” the Black queer feminine as a “global sign” (Hammonds 1994, 126), while holding a real brief for the embodied experiences of “play aunties and dyke bitches” (Shange 2019). Using this text as a guide for the third assignment, students in my queer studies classrooms actively grapple with the inextricable links between erotic desire and anti-Blackness (Holland 2012; Hammonds 1994), Black fungibility and modern gender and sexual subject formation, Black death and (white) pleasure (Randolph 2017).

Question 4: How Can I (Re)tell My Story?

In the final unit, students return to the first question—(1) What is (my) sexuality and how do I/we come to know it?—to challenge themselves to retell the story of discovering their sexuality and/or erotic subjectivity, from the perspective of the histories of (anti)Blackness that Christina Sharpe (2009) and Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman (2012) relay. Through a final assignment, they look back on the story of their sex/uality that they told in the first week, and reflect on what is missing, specifically thinking about how their experiences have unfolded in relationship to anti-Blackness. They rethink the underside of their histories/stories of gender and sexuality and reconsider their experiences and identity categories in relationship to the histories of slavery and anti-Blackness that Sharpe and Abdur-Rahman emphasize in their texts.

By the end of my course, students will have used Black feminism to build a personal history of sex/uality study and met the following four course objectives: (1) understand and describe how the category of sexuality is produced and shaped in relationship to Blackness, race, political economy, gender, and geopolitical location; (2) use close reading to analyze articles, books, material conditions, and lived experiences; (3) trace and evaluate how sexuality studies scholars have used varied intellectual genealogies and analytical lenses to understand sexuality, as it is experienced at the intersections of Blackness, race, class, gender, and geopolitical location; (4) produce four writing assignments that clearly and concisely engage their personal experiences and political commitments in relationship to the course’s four central questions.

In conversation with other Black feminists who “look back on alternative genealogies of black feminism,” my queer studies courses interrupt the (re)production of anti-Black histories, legacies, and practices within and beyond women’s, gender, and sexuality studies spaces (Stallings 2015, 60). They call for a fundamental reorientation in sexuality studies and forge a Black feminist *sexuality study* approach that reckons with the (in)stability and (f)utility of the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality, which are themselves socially constructed and mediated by anti-Blackness. In so doing, my goal is not to center Black feminist works as feminist or queer studies “classics,” or to recuperate Black feminism as *the* vanguard (and potentially static) sexuality studies canon, especially given

the neoliberal university's predilection for reinforcing Black feminist fungibility under the guise of inclusion and valorization (duCille 1994; Christian 1994; Hong 2008; Holland 2012; Bliss 2016; King 2015; Cooper 2015). Instead, my Black feminist *sexuality study* approach necessitates personal and theoretical (re)considerations of dominant assumptions about Black feminism's utility for sex/gender/sexuality studies and mines Black feminism's surplus energy for theorizing possibilities for students' sexual and erotic, which is to say racialized embodied, freedoms at the limits of disciplinary boundaries, everyday life, and institutional practice.

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Notes

1. This disavowal is, in part, what functions to shape Black feminist cultures of "justification" and "defensiveness" that potentially circumscribe (dominant understandings of) the capacity of what Black feminist theory might offer to historical and contemporary theorizations of sex, gender, and sexuality (Cooper 2015; Nash 2019). Black feminist justification and defensiveness animate the tenacious specter of the Black, female, queer within queer studies; indeed, even as the Black, female, colored, and queer "share a simultaneity that opens them to violence, reduction, and forgetting," Black (queer) feminists continue to chart the ways in which sex, gender, and sexuality are constructed and embodied in relation to notions of race and racial difference (Holland 2012, 66; cf. Randolph 2017).

2. See Holland (2012), Edwards (2015), and Cooper (2015) for generative discussions of how Black and queer of color theorists inadvertently proscribe the capacity of Black feminism by positioning it as "foundational," which renders it static rather than dynamic, capacious, and useful.

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