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“What We Do Have, We Can Polish”: Towards Quare Placemaking in LGBTQ+
Student Affairs

K. Elyse Ellis

Both Queer studies and Black studies have come a long way in the last decade of higher education scholarship. Even so, there is still a gap in the literature of dual-marginalized students, particularly Black Queer students. Drawing from multiple critical theories, this literature review looks at how secondary marginalization takes place in single-identity campus centers, and how Black Queer students co-create spaces for themselves in response to this violence. How do single-identity centers on campuses harm Quare students? How does centering blackness in Quare communities impact student experiences? What can we learn from Quare social life, and how can student affairs practitioners apply this to our praxis?

*Keywords*: LGBTQ+, intersectionality, quare theory, anti-blackness, community

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“What we do have, We Can Polish”: Towards Quare Placemaking in LGBTQ+ Student Affairs

Both Queer studies and Black studies have come a long way in the last decade, however little work has been done to bring them together. This is to say, many approaches to both Black studies and Queer frameworks are unsuccessful in grasping the nuanced experience of Black Queer students. Where Queer studies often leaves race as a footnote, Black studies can avoid the ways that cultural homophobia and cisgenderism shape the identity development of students. Scholars can wrongly assume that to be Black and Queer is something like a math equation, just adding the two together, instead of understanding Black Queerness as an entity of its own. This additive approach avoids addressing how race, gender, and sexuality are connected and fails to identify how Black Queer students are at risk of both a racist homophobia, and a homophobic racism, as understood by Crenshaw’s (1991) framework for intersectionality.

This gap in the literature of dual-marginalized students further fails to address the secondary marginalization students can face in single-identity serving campus spaces, and thus fails to address how centers can bar students from feeling they belong on their campuses. When we look for literature that is not pathologizing, or from a deficiency lens, the amount of work shrinks even more. Even less is available that takes theory to praxis. This paper aims to begin addressing this gap by highlighting the intersection of Blackness and sexuality by using critical theories including critical race theory, quare theory and the Black placemaking framework.

Purpose

This paper aims to outline the ways both critical race theory and black placemaking theory shape each other, before combining these two with queer theory to present a Quare (Black Queer) placemaking framework for evaluating how Black LGBTQ+ students co-create places, find joy, and build community for themselves on otherwise hostile PWI college campuses. I seek to address how critical race theory informs the Black placemaking framework, before looking at the ways in which single-identity centers fail to serve Black Queer students. In light of a Quare placemaking strategy, I suggest that there is a queered experience that Quare students have when placemaking. Through this lens I examine:

1. How do single-identity centers on campus harm Quare students?
2. How does centering blackness in Quare communities impact student experiences?
3. What can we learn from Quare social life, and how can student affairs practitioners apply this to our praxis?

Positionality

At this point I would like to acknowledge my positionality. I am an identified Black, Queer woman currently working at my institution’s Center for Gender and Sexuality. Of our professional
team of four, I am the only Black person on staff. I am intimately aware of the racial violence that has and continues to take place in the queer community. As an undergraduate, I started a student initiative for queer students of color, directly in response to the racial violence found in my campus queer student groups. These experiences cannot and will not be separated from my work, and my ways of knowing. I am aware that it is often taboo to talk about the ways in which White queers perpetrate racial violence in the queer community and uphold White supremacy. I am also aware of the division it can cause to address homophobia in the Black community. However, I am not, have not, and will never write for the White gaze, nor the heterosexual one. I am, however, writing for future Black LGBTQ+ affairs professionals, and in solidarity with Black Queer student leaders, as I have once been one myself. For this reason, I may use “our” and “we” as I share affinity with my subjects.

Theoretical Framework

This section will introduce a Black placemaking framework for studying how Black student leaders co-create spaces for themselves on predominantly white campuses. I highlight the tension of seeing this work as important to how Black students find belonging with one another, before looking at the ways that this framework is both supported by and in tension with the challenges outlined by critical race theory. I then discuss queer theory, and the Black studies understanding of queare theory, before tying both theories of Black placemaking and queare through to construct a queare placemaking analysis, focused on the ways in which Black Queer students co-create spaces that honor their multiple identities.

Critical Race Theory with the Black Placemaking Framework

Critical race theory (CRT) is a framework that positions racism as woven into the fabric of our society, and thus is endemic (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). At the core of this framework is the assertion that anti-Blackness situates Blackness in direct opposition to humanity. Thus, to be Black, is to be inhuman. It is for this reason Black death and violence against Black people, especially Black Queers, are so normalized. Think about the recent Netflix series Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story, which follows the serial killer, Jeffery Dahmer. Dahmer, who famously targeted BIPOC men, is being romanticized by the media, despite the victims’ families protesting the show be made at all (Mendez, 2022). This is just one way that endemic anti-Blackness is at work, relegating Black death and Black bodies to something to be consumed, rather than protected.

This does not mean that there is no refuge for Black people at all. Black placemaking is a framework used to evaluate how Black people go about creating their own places in response to systemic disenfranchisement (Tichavakunda, 2020). The Black placemaking framework was born from examining Black life in Chicago (Hunter et al., 2016) and later expanded to a higher education setting by Antar Tichavakunda (2020). The five core assumptions of this framework include that Black
people are capable of creating our own places of belonging, that we are politically bound by a linked fate, that we face secondary marginalization in the Black community, and that Black social worlds are worthy of study (Tichavakunda, 2020). This framework challenges the idea that Black places on campus have a priori status, in other words, are places that just happen. By believing Black places just appear, erases the work that Black students put in to maintain Black spaces on campus, often with little institutional support.

It is not lost on me that there is a tension between the claims that anti-Blackness renders Black people inhuman (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015), and Black social life matters and should be studied (Tichavakunda, 2020). I intend to challenge that these two frameworks need each other to be understood fully. There is no grasping Black placemaking without understanding the violent history of anti-Black, exclusionary, policies and principles of higher education. And without evaluating the places we make for ourselves with a critical lens, we risk recreating white supremacist and hegemonic values in our communities, such as homophobia and cisgenderism.

Quare (Queer) Theory

While CRT is a critical framework evaluating race, queer theory challenges assumptions of “normal” and “deviacy” with regard to sexuality and gender (Abes, 2008). However, often times queer scholars do not offer much analysis in regards to race. For this reason, Queer spaces can default to whiteness as the baseline for understanding queerness (Harvey, 2021). This leads to Queer theory conversations both implicitly and explicitly upholding white hegemony in the Queer community, which is the polite way of saying it upholds white supremacy. For that reason, Black Queer scholars often use “Quare” when talking about their experience.

Quare theory, a subsersive framework, popularized by Patrick Johnson (2001), is stylized quare after his grandmother’s southern AAVE pronunciation of the word “queer.” This lens considers how race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect (Means & Jaeger, 2013). Identities do not form within a vacuum, and are not additive. In other words, to be Black and Queer is not somehow a compilation of Black and Queer separately, but actually, its own nuanced experience, shaped by racist homophobia and homophobic racism. For this reason, the quare framework does a better job accounting specifically for the Black queer experience, which is an experience wholly different from a Black experience or a queer experience.

Not only does quare theory honor the experience of Black queers specifically, it targets and challenges Whiteness itself (Duran, 2019). This is to say, by centering Blackness and Black culture’s influence on how quare people navigate identity, quare theory stand directly in opposition of any Whitewashing of queer studies, and the hegemonic structures if consequently produces (Duran 2019).

Quare Placemaking in Higher Education
While literature exists on Black students and queer students separately, it is difficult to find literature that looks at the identities in tandem (Kiesling, 2017). It is even harder to find literature on Black students that goes beyond just analyzing where they fall short, instead of highlighting their contributions to campus life. Black placemaking framework (Tichavakunda, 2020) begins this work, but still does not go into the individual experiences of Quare students.

Due to its centering of Blackness when discussing queerness, quare theory is often cited as a foundational work for many Black Queer scholars (Duran, 2019). For this reason, I will attempt to identify and student Black Queer, or Quare social life on campus, by queering Black placemaking, offering a Quare placemaking framework. From this point forward, Black queer students will be referred to as Quare students, the all-encompassing term to name both identities. In light of a Quare placemaking strategy, I suggest that there is a queered experience that Quare students have when placemaking.

**Literature Review**

This literature review starts with problematizing single-identity campus centers as sites for secondary marginalization to occur for Quare students. First, I examine LGBTQ+ centers, and the on-going history of white supremacy and BIPOC erasure. Then I address the homophobia and transphobia often found in Black Cultural Centers. Finally, I look at the ways that Quare students make places for themselves in the face of being othered in these single-identity centers.

**Problematizing LGBTQ+ Centers**

The literature shows that campus LGBTQ+ centers are important when it comes to queer students belongingness on campus. Indeed, even the mere presence of such a center is counted as all being impactful to LGBTQ+ students’ perceptions of their campus climates (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). However, this impact is not always felt by Quare students, who can be isolated and othered by these campus centers.

LGBTQ+ centers began popping up in response to student protests, such as protests that took place in response to the murder of Matthew Shepard (Duran et al., 2022). At their core, these centers existed as a safe place for LGBTQ+ students, staff and faculty. In addition, these spaces worked to address the homophobia of campus climates that were prevalent, particularly in the 90’s (Duran et al., 2022).

**Anti-Black Erasure & Violence**

Today, many LGBTQ+ centers born from these movements are hostile to communities of color. In what some scholars call “queer liberalism,” white homogeneity is prioritized in queer spaces, causing differences to be erased (Kiesling, 2017). Further troubling is that many White queer people do
not perceive, or severely underestimate the impact of race and racism on the LGBTQ+ community (Harvey, 2021). White supremacy does not socialize White queer people to talk about race, and in fact thrives on the assumption they will not, and should not, as to be white is normal, human. For this reason, many White queer people are comfortable in not talking about race, and seek this comfort in Queer spaces, at the cost of Quare students.

White queers put a lot of emphasis behind “validating,” in a way that feels “polite”, but this ignores the power dynamics that could be at play when race is involved. An example of this is how many white masculine lesbians on Tik Tok claimed to be “studs”, a historically a racialized term reserved for Black and Latinx masculine presenting women (Prager, 2020). Without bringing race into this discussion, we ignore the historic exclusion of BIPOC lesbians from queer communities.

In higher education, LGBTQ+ centers can struggle to accommodate Quare students, and even be campus sites of harm and racialized violence. The tendency to conflate “safety” with comfort (Fox & Ore, 2010) gives space for violence against Black LGBTQ+ students (Bradley, 2020). Instead of inviting in differences, sameness is focused on, at the expense of Black people. And in this hesitance to name differences, queer spaces erase Quare people.

**Racial Differences in Coming Out**

The erasure of Quare people from queer communities is not by accident, but intentionally perpetrated in historical, intellectual, and political contexts (Johnson, 2001), as white queers consistently center themselves. Some even argue that white supremacy is so deep within the queer community, it prevents people of color from identifying with queerness at all (Bradley, 2020). Quare students are less likely to be “out” and participate in so-called normative queer behavior (Duran, 2019), such as labeling themselves at all.

An example of this is so-called “moniker politics” (Spencer & Patterson, 2017) which interrogates the need to lengthen and revise the LGBTQIA+ acronym to include everyone, while doing little at all to discuss the ways race and racism impact queer community development. In this way, centers can talk around difference, without ever getting to the meat of the matter, which is that higher education originally began to uphold white supremacy. And without acknowledging this as the foundation of higher education, campus LGBTQ+ centers resign to become inaccessible to Quare students by holding up white supremacy, too (Spencer & Patterson, 2017). Even when attempting to center justice, queer activists can miss the mark by failing to de-center whiteness in their methods. Some LGBTQ+ centers have began to move away from moniker politics, embracing a queer framework that examines both sexuality and gender together, but even so they do not discuss race (Bradley, 2020). Without addressing how race impacts gender & sexuality, any available resources on queerness or transness are rendered useless to Quare students.
**Black Cultural Centers**

Black Cultural Centers (BCCs) are often seen as refuges for not just Black students, but many under the BIPOC umbrella. BCCs help students to feel like they matter and can be a home away from home for Black students (Sanders, 2016). Beyond just socializing, BCCs can serve as supplementary to otherwise inaccessible campus services. Through BCCs students can gain social capital, leadership roles, academic tutoring, and belonging (Hypolite, 2020).

Due to the nature of predominantly white institutions (PWI’s) to center whiteness by default, Black students can feel especially marginalized by campus programs, classroom dynamics, and in residential life (Williams, 2021). This marginalization can have intense effects on their perceived belongingness (Duran, 2019) and overall self-concept (Williams, 2021). BCCs mitigate these feelings of loneliness by often being a place for students to find connection, community and even family with students who share racial background with them (Hypolite 2020). For this reason, BCCs are critical to Black students’ success (Patton, 2006), as they often have nowhere else to go that is as culturally accepting. Even so, these centers can be a hot bed for homophobic and transphobic violence against Queare students.

**Homophobia & Cisgenderism**

Many BCCs and Black organizations can be hostile to Queare students (Means & Jaeger, 2013). Even though they may center Blackness, BCCs can promote a Black narrative that centers heteronormativity (Bradley, 2020). This can lead to Queare students being marginalized in what should also be their community, as LGBTQ+ issues are not given priority in BCCs. In the same way LGBTQ+ centers can minimize impact of race on Queare students, BCCs can minimize and erase impact of gender & sexuality on racial identity. Once again, we see an additive approach, asking Queare students to identify with one identity over the other, instead of making room for what is an interconnected experience (Fox & Ore, 2010).

Beyond this, Queare students can be putting themselves at serious social and physical risk by disclosing their identities. Fear of stigmatization can cause Queare students to stay in the closet (Garvey et al., 2019). Some students may even attempt to try to code as heterosexual to stay safe, performing gender norms and presentation (Bradley, 2020). Even so, this can lead to added stress for Queare students with QTBIPOC men citing holding onto cultural values of traditional masculinity a stressor (Duran, 2019).

**Centering Queare-ness**

Queare students are not unaware of the tension between their multiple identities, and the resources they lack on their campuses. What BCCs do well is center Blackness and cultural affirming practices, something many LGBTQ+ student centers do not even attempt. However, in focusing too
much on affirming sexual and gender identity, LGBTQ+ centers can erase Quare students’ racial identity. So then, how do Quare students find community?

Many Quare students are not finding a community, but they are building it, often without university support (Tichavakunda, 2020). However, there is a glaring gap in the literature when it comes to studying the places that Quare students make for themselves. This is because the academy is not an unbiased institution, and thus does not value research on the Black students that does not end in a new way to exploit them (Haynes & Cobb, 2022). While queer collegians are often hyper visible, as much of QPOC research is grounded in PWI’s (Duran, 2019), such as the University of Vermont, these researchers are often not Quare scholars, which I believe hinders their ability to access this population. This is not to disconnect the work of many Black scholars, some of who are cited here, but to highlight the difficulty of researching Quare students in general.

Many racial cultures have a strong connection to spirituality (Duran, 2019), which can cause serious tension for Quare students on multiple fronts. Black spiritual communities can be unaccepting and even violent towards the LGBTQ+ community. On the other hand the LGBTQ+ community can be hostile and even dismissive towards those with certain spiritual or religious beliefs. Even so, QTBIPOC students often rely on their spirituality as a positive influence in understanding their identity (Duran, 2019).

**Implications**

Quare students will have a place on campus because they will build it, put simply. But what we should want, as student affairs professionals, is to go beyond demanding students co-create their own spaces, and instead supply them with equitable tools for these students to be successful. This is to say, if we as LGBTQ+ student affairs professionals, desire to cultivate belongingness for Quare students, then we must center race, instead of just talking around it. If there are going to be major developments, we need to target these students explicitly (Duran, 2022).

To affectively address the needs of Quare students, it will mean centering race in LGBTQ+ conversations, calling out white supremacy during events, paying homage to the Quare activists that have paved the way for gay rights. Without addressing anti-Blackness in the LGBTQ+ community, to call our center a “safe space” is white supremacist and dishonest.

As for BCC’s, it is imperative we stop seeing Black students as monolithic, and recognize the white supremacist roots in doing so. Indeed, even the most cultural affirming centers have room to grow in understanding and honoring the gender and sexual identities of Quare students. By not addressing the ways these identities are present in communities of color, we send the message that students must coat-check their quareness at the door in order to be in community.

While there is need for research on Quare students, further research can be done to look deeper into the experiences of Quare women and Quare trans individuals, who are largely missing from the
literature. This study can also be used to examine the impact other campus identity centers, such as campus Interfaith centers, women resource centers, on Quare students.

**Conclusion**

Too often when we talk about Quare students, it is tacked onto a larger conversation about one identity or the other, Blackness or queerness, but never in tandem. This can lead to secondary marginalization in BCCs and/or LGBTQ+ identity centers. By looking at the work of these centers through a critical lens, we can begin to mitigate and undue some of the harm committed by these institutions.

To truly serve Quare students, we need to view the identity as wholly unique, with its own challenges of queerphobia and anti-blackness. The Quare community is unique and robust, with its own culture, needs, and priorities. Once this is understood, we as student affairs professionals can begin giving Quare students equitable tools to support their communities.

When we, as Quare people, talk about our livelihood, it is hard to imagine a future. And how could we, given that of Identified Black LGBTQ+ adults, more than half are under 35 (Choi et al., 2021). But we do age. We do live. We do grow old, as portrayed by artist Jess T. Dugan’s photography of Black trans woman Duchess Milan. Under this piece, lies a digital epigraph, reflecting on a life lived freely. While reflecting on how she defines herself amidst the rejection this world can give, she says:

“Okay? I like me. Okay? And I will tell the whole chorus, honey, “I like me.” I don’t hurt anybody, I don’t do anybody wrong, you know. I’ve dealt with everything I can, as much as I can. So just find that inside yourself and take time with that person. Faults, flaws, wishes, all of it, it doesn’t matter. We’re not going to get it all. None of us gets it all. Okay? But what we do have, we can polish. We can polish it, honey, till it blinds them.” (Dugan, 2020)

It is a nice freedom dream, but I cannot say with any certainty there is a day near that will see a fully integrated queer community, or a total removal of anti-gay rhetoric from Black spaces. I can however lean on the resilience of my people, my ancestors. I come from a long line of people who have not just happened upon good things, but carved places. I can say, “Look at this thing,” take it for what it is worth, and get to polishing.
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