

# Black Queers in Everyday Life

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“The rule is that no matter what you do in your artistic expression you are never, ever allowed to upset the alphabet people. You know who I mean. Those people who took twenty percent of the alphabet for themselves.”<sup>1</sup>

When Dave Chappelle used the words quoted above to suggest that queers<sup>2</sup> were all powerful,<sup>3</sup> I pointed out on social media that these were oversimplistic stereotypes that ignored queers of color.<sup>4</sup> I was completely caught off guard by the intersectionality backlash that I experienced from some of my Black cis male friends. “All of you complaining about Chappelle’s comedy special need to remember that you’re Black first,” said a former friend’s Facebook post. We exchanged words. I was told to stop prioritizing my queerness. When I brought up intersectionality, these Black men showed me that they were well acquainted with said principles but to my dismay doubled down on their essentialist arguments. This went against everything we’d all learned,<sup>5</sup> but they seemed to be pointing to some superior Black lived experience.

The past eighteen months have been especially traumatic for a lot of us in the Black community. The move toward right-wing populism within a broader neoliberal system has seen all manner of fissures in the nation’s

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1. STICKS AND STONES (Netflix 2019).

2. Elena Kiesling, *The Missing Colors of The Rainbow: Black Queer Resistance*, 11 EUR. J. AM. STUD. 1, 4 (2020) (“A derogatory term for homosexuals in the beginning, queer has later been reclaimed by HIV/AIDS activist and is currently used as an umbrella term for LGBT, a term for non- heterosexual or gender non-conforming practices, or as a radically non-identitarian, contradicting, and politically challenging term with a keen sense on positionality.”).

3. *See id.*

4. *See id.* (“They even got poor Kevin Hart.”).

5. *See, e.g.,* Mari J. Matsuda, *Looking to the Bottom: Critical Legal Studies and Reparations*, 22 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 323, 325 (1987) (arguing that we should pay “special attention to the needs of the least advantaged.”).

foundation emerge.<sup>6</sup> The persistence and durability of the American caste system continues to amaze and horrify me.<sup>7</sup> This period has also been a time of renewed hope. I have seen the Black community and its pro-equality allies display sustained levels of solidarity and protest I had not seen before in my lifetime.<sup>8</sup> There is an undeniable level of pride in my blackness.

And yet, this has also been a time when I have been worried about some of the retrograde views I have heard from a small minority of my Black friends and associates. And here, I am not talking about the disappointment in my conservative, or white, or white gay friends, etc.—I’ve long accepted that. And I am not alone. Queer scholars of color<sup>9</sup> and their allies have done an excellent job of underscoring the racism in the queer community<sup>10</sup> and highlighting other issues of concern at the intersection of race and sexuality.<sup>11</sup> Despite contributions that were the lifeblood of queer politics, Black queer “uneasiness” with the movement’s centering of whiteness is long-standing.<sup>12</sup> But an analysis of white privilege is a topic beyond the scope of this short essay. Here I am more concerned with what happens outside of academic and activist spaces<sup>13</sup> within the everyday Black community.<sup>14</sup> On a day-to-day basis, are we also promoting a dangerous single oppression model?

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6. See Jenny Jarvie & Brittney Mejia, *Are We Going to Choose White Supremacy?: Voters of Color React to Trump’s Comments*, L.A. TIMES (Oct. 1, 2020, 3:00 AM), <http://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-10-01/trump-debate-voters-white-supremacy-proud-boys>.

7. See generally ISABEL WILKERSON, *CASTE: THE ORIGINS OF OUR DISCONTENT* (Random House 2020).

8. I was born at the end of the 1970s.

9. See, e.g., Cathy J. Cohen, *Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?*, 3 GLQ: J. LESBIAN & GAY STUD. 437, 445 (1997) (“At the very heart of queer politics . . . is a fundamental challenge to the heteronormativity—the privilege, power, and normative status invested in heterosexuality—of the dominant society.”).

10. See, e.g., Cohen, *supra* note 9, at 438 (arguing that queer activism has reinforced “simple dichotomies” and envisioning a space for a “transformational politic[s]” based on intersectionality); Elias Krell, *The New “Queer” and the Old Racism*, 55 WOMEN & MUSIC: J. GENDER & CULTURE 63, 63 (2018) (showing how “terms like ‘queer’ and ‘trans’ produces the very elision of race, class, ability, and other vectors of power . . .” and reproduce hierarchy).

11. See, e.g., THE SAME DIFFERENCE (Women Make Movies 2015); Elena Kiesling, *The Missing Colors of the Rainbow: Black Queer Resistance*, 11 EUR. J. AM. STUD. 1 (2017); Cohen, *supra* note 9, at 448 (“While heterosexual privilege negatively impacts and constrains the lived experience of ‘queers’ of color, so too do racism, classism, and sexism.”).

12. See, e.g., Cohen, *supra* note 9, at 451; CHRISTINA HANHARDT, *SAFE SPACE: GAY NEIGHBORHOOD HISTORY AND THE POLITICS OF VIOLENCE* (2013) (arguing that the increasing focus on safety in queer activism led to the construction of a white queer community that positioned itself against people of color).

13. I do acknowledge that all of these spaces overlap and cannot be separated neatly.

14. I have decided not to precisely define this for the sake of brevity.

I am using my Black queer identity as a starting point to consider the weaknesses I see in everyday conceptions of intersectionality. Do those who have been educated in the principles of intersectionality and who mean well apply them in online and personal conversations? Recent experiences have shown me that there is a disconnect, wherein even those individuals who know better will double-down on reified, essentialist notions of blackness that exclude the concerns of Black women, queer individuals, and other Black intersectional identities. Zero-sum perspectives are valued over coalitional appeals. Black heterosexuality and masculinity are still centered.<sup>15</sup> While I will not be analyzing these issues in depth, further research could point to interventions that we need to make in teaching intersectionality while underscoring challenges that dislodge deeply ingrained notions of white patriarchal hetero- and homo-normativity, even amongst well-meaning individuals.

The principles underlying intersectionality have been practiced by individuals on the ground for well over a century.<sup>16</sup> In the 1970s, some of these principles were articulated by Black female activists, several of whom were queer, as a response to the deficiencies in the white feminist movement.<sup>17</sup> By the 1980s and 1990s, intersectionality was “[i]nstitutional[ly] incorporated in the Academy.”<sup>18</sup> The term itself was coined and elaborated upon by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 and 1991 articles, respectively.<sup>19</sup> Since then, the concept has been expanded upon and used by activists and across disciplines to give voice to the complex,

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15. For example, Kimberlé Crenshaw and the African American Policy Forum founded the social justice initiative #SayHerName, which focuses on drawing attention to Black women’s experiences with police brutality. #SayHerName Campaign, AFR. AM. POL’Y F., <http://www.aapf.org/sayhername> (last visited Mar. 4, 2021).

16. See, e.g., Sojourner Truth, *Ain’t I a Woman?*, Address at the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, in ANTI-SLAVERY BUGLE, June 21, 1851, at 160; see generally PATRICIA HILL COLLINS & SIRMA BILGE, INTERSECTIONALITY (Wiley 2d ed. 2020) (providing a broader history of intersectionality principles).

17. See Combahee River Collective, *A Black Feminist Statement* (1977), in WORDS OF FIRE: AN ANTHOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMINIST THOUGHT 232, 232-40 (Beverly Guy-Sheftall ed. 1995).

18. COLLINS & BILGE, *supra* note 16, at 86.

19. Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*, 1989 U. CHI. LEGAL F. 139 (1989); Kimberlé Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*, 43 STAN. L. REV. 1241 (1991).

relational matrix of disadvantage and oppression.<sup>20</sup> This has led to more of the general public being exposed to these ideas. Classes on intersectionality are now taught at universities, and it is not uncommon to hear individuals appeal to intersectionality principles in their everyday discussions.<sup>21</sup>

And yes, there was something to what Dave Chappelle<sup>22</sup> and my friends were saying: to the extent that the United States is built on a racial caste system, a white gay man has higher status than any Black person.<sup>23</sup> There were other undeniable facts to grapple with. While Black individuals were violently being struck down, white queer citizens were gaining more civil rights (e.g. “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and the legalization of same-sex marriage”).<sup>24</sup> As white gay men began to climb the respectability ladder, queers of color were left behind. Parts of the queer community have contributed to the perception that “queer” equals “white,” by offering a safe, assimilationist version of queerness that increasingly stands in contrast to its more diverse beginnings.<sup>25</sup> A form of “queer liberalism,” which cosigns racism to the past and erases the voices of people of color, became the norm over time.<sup>26</sup>

I could understand a part of what my friends were saying, but there was an erasure of queers of color that they were also participating in that I could not accept given my lived realities. I was being asked to choose, and my friends were also subject to assimilationist pressures. As Frank Rudy Cooper has explored, the “normative masculinity” that Black men are supposed to “emulate” to assimilate into American society is based on

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20. See Serena Mayeri, *Intersectionality and Title VII: A Brief (Pre-)History*, 95 B.U. L. REV. 713 (2015) (discussing Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality in the context of employment discrimination).

21. See Sarah Wood, *Institutions Make Curricular Changes in Response to Black Lives Matter Flashpoint*, DIVERSE ISSUES HIGHER EDUC. (Feb. 19, 2021), <http://diverseeducation.com/article/79624>.

22. See STICKS AND STONES (Netflix 2019).

23. See WILKERSON, *supra* note 7.

24. See Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell Repeal Act of 2010, Pub. L. No. 111-321, 124 Stat. 3515; *Obergefell v. Hodges* 576 U.S. 644 (2015) (holding that states must “recognize” and “license” marriages “between two people of the same sex” under the Fourteenth Amendment).

25. See Kiesling, *supra* note 11, at 8. Even one of the true rainbow moments of queer liberation, Stonewall, has been whitewashed in the popular imagination. See STONEWALL (Centropolis Entertainment 2015) (portraying the events through the eyes of a white protagonist); Solvej Schou, *Roland Emmerich’s ‘Stonewall’ Finds Controversy*, N.Y. TIMES (Sept. 18, 2015), <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/movies/roland-emmerichs-stonewall-finds-controversy.html>.

26. See DAVID L. ENG, *THE FEELING OF KINSHIP: QUEER LIBERALISM AND THE RACIALIZATION OF INTIMACY* (2010); Kiesling, *supra* note 11, at 6.

subordinating those further down on the hierarchy.<sup>27</sup> White females find themselves in a similarly conflicted and tempting position. It is no surprise that my friends found themselves supported by white conservative males in defending Chappelle.<sup>28</sup>

My concerns are not only personal. Resistance to intersectionality has been analyzed by a few scholars.<sup>29</sup> They've found that there can be acceptance and good uptake on social justice and ending inequality by individuals, while they simultaneously resist intersectionality. Even if there is acceptance of some intersecting matrices of oppression, there seems to be some specific resistance to intersections of race and sexuality. In 2016, researchers published a study of secondary preservice teachers who considered themselves to be queer allies.<sup>30</sup> These teachers learned about multiracial education in their teacher preparation programs and were all "dissatisf[ie]d" with the lack of attention placed on issues of gender and sexuality.<sup>31</sup> Yet, despite all of this education, the only queer individual of color in the cohort, Andy, found herself continuously rebuffed when she tried to bring up race and related it to other forms of disadvantage.<sup>32</sup> Andy's peers readily accepted the complex ways in which sexuality intersected with class, but race was a different matter altogether.<sup>33</sup> The study shows Andy trying to make the connections time and again but being "silenced" by her peers.<sup>34</sup>

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27. Frank Rudy Cooper, *Against Bipolar Black Masculinity: Intersectionality, Assimilation, Identity Performance, and Hierarchy*, 39 U.C. DAVIS L. REV. 853, 897 (2006). See also MICHAEL S. KIMMEL, *Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity*, in *THE GENDER OF DESIRE: ESSAYS ON MALE SEXUALITY* 25, 39 (SUNY Press, 2005) ("Manhood is equated with power-over women, over other men.").

28. See, e.g., Gerard Baker, *We Need the Shock of Dave Chappelle's Comedy*, WALL ST. J. (Sept. 6, 2019, 12:28 PM), <http://www.wsj.com/articles/we-need-the-shock-of-dave-chappelles-comedy-11567787318>.

29. See, e.g., ENG, *supra* note 26 (showing how queer liberalism has promoted an idea that racism is a thing of the past and gay is the new Black).

30. See, e.g., Stephanie Anne Shelton & Meghan E. Barnes, "Racism Just Isn't an Issue Anymore": *Preservice Teachers' Resistances to the Intersections of Sexuality and Race*, 55 TEACHING & TEACHER EDUC. 165, 166 (2016).

31. *Id.* at 168.

32. *Id.* at 171.

33. *Id.* at 172.

34. *Id.* In many ways, the interactions played out similarly to my experience with my friends, or what some Black Jewish people experienced when Nick Cannon made anti-Semitic statements implying that Jewish people were all powerful. See, e.g., Neil Vigdor, *ViacomCBS Fires Nick Cannon, Citing Anti-Semitic Podcast Remarks*, N.Y. TIMES (July 15, 2020), <http://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/15/arts/television/nick-cannon-fired.html>. I had several interactions with

This, of course, flies in the face of much progress that has been made both on the academic and activist fronts. Intersectionality has expanded and become increasingly open to new voices and syntheses<sup>35</sup> despite entrenched and determined resistance from some scholars.<sup>36</sup> In activist communities, the struggle against police brutality has served as a place of convergence between anti-racism and queer liberation efforts. Discrimination and harassment by law enforcement in the LGBTQ+ community has also been a continuing problem.<sup>37</sup> The Black Trans community has been especially impacted by violence.<sup>38</sup> These realities have always been a part of the Black Lives Matter movement. Two of the three founders identify as queer, and the movement has always been based on the plight of all Black people, including those with intersectional identities.<sup>39</sup>

The activists seem to be clear on Black queer lives mattering,<sup>40</sup> but I continue to worry about what happens outside of these spaces. There is a disconnect between the activist streets and some of the individual

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educated Black friends who wrote off Jewish people as a separate group altogether, while ignoring the experiences of the Black Jewish community who were pained by the comments.

35. See, e.g., Sumi Cho, *Post-Intersectionality: The Curious Reception of Intersectionality in Legal Scholarship*, 10 DU BOIS REV.: SOC. SCI. RES. ON RACE 385 (2013) (providing a brief account of the emergence of intersectionality in the legal academy and analyzing the race-sexuality critique of intersectionality); Peter Kwan, *Jeffrey Dahmer and the Cosynthesis of Categories*, 48 HASTINGS L.J. 1257 (1997) (introducing “Cosynthesis” as a concept that better represents the dynamic interactions between identity categories); Ann C. McGinley & Frank Rudy Cooper, *Identities Cubed: Perspectives on Multidimensional Masculinities Theory*, 13 NEV. L.J. 326 (2013) (arguing for an expansion of intersectionality that is more attuned to the influences of cultural context and hegemonic norms that define “what it means to be manly”).

36. See Vivian M. May, “Speaking into the Void”? *Intersectionality Critiques and Epistemic Backlash*, 29 HYPATIA 94 (2014) (analyzing critiques of intersectionality as further were power dynamics play out and epistemic distortion occurs); Matthew Dean Hindman, *Rethinking Intersectionality: Towards and Understanding of Discursive Marginalization*, 33 NEW POL. SCI. 189 (2011) (critiquing intersectionality and arguing for a move beyond it and towards another notion of discursive marginalization).

37. Christy Mallory et al., *Discrimination and HARASSMENT by Law Enforcement Officers in the LGBT Community*, WILLIAMS INST. (2015) (providing data from a wide range of sources “demonstrating that LGBT individuals and communities face profiling, discrimination and harassment at the hands of law enforcement officers . . . [and] is greatest for LGBT people of color, transgender persons and youth.”).

38. See, e.g., Doug Meyer, *An Intersectional Analysis of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) People’s Evaluations of Anti-Queer Violence*, 26 GENDER AND SOC’Y 849, 849 (2012) (showing “that Black and [Latinx] respondents perceived anti-queer violence as implying that they had negatively represented their racial communities . . .”).

39. *About Black Lives Matter*, BLACK LIVES MATTER, <http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/> (last visited Mar. 5, 2021).

40. See *id.* (“We affirm the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, undocumented folks, folks with records, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. Our network centers those who have been marginalized within Black liberation movements.”).

responses I encounter, and usually this adds up to much more attention being placed on the lives of cis, straight Black men.<sup>41</sup>

What about those teaching and/or raising children,<sup>42</sup> or other contexts that we are less aware of? Teacher education programs have been identified as central in making interventions that promote inclusion, equity, and diversity. Yet, research has shown these programs often “send[] teachers into the field largely unprepared” to have diversity discussions and provide safe environments.<sup>43</sup> For example, research found that preservice special education teachers tended “to compartmentalize their own intersecting identities” and reproduce a “unitary approach to diversity.”<sup>44</sup>

To what extent are we pushing our students and ourselves to interrogate their own privileges? More work needs to be done to figure this out, since stakes are so high. A lot of the potential interventions and solutions depend on what the reasons are for the resistance to intersectionality principles. A place to start is to explore some possible explanations for the phenomenon: (1) gaps in our teaching of intersectionality (e.g., not providing enough or the most illustrative examples); (2) a mismatch between the theory and some perceived reality that at times you do have to choose between identities (3) some resistance to theory in general because of its association with intellectuals and academia; (4) an almost inevitable reproduction of hierarchy that should be expected; and/or (5) real fears about the loosening of the Black coalition and its implications. I hope we move forward on this because microaggressions within minority communities are that much more painful and traumatic for the individual to recover from.

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41. There is also a larger, more worryingly disingenuous right-wing war against critical race theory that is beyond the scope of this essay. *See, e.g.*, Adam Harris, *The GOP's 'Critical Race Theory' Obsession*, ATLANTIC (May 7, 2021), <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/05/gops-critical-race-theory-fixation-explained/618828/>.

42. These two roles have converged again during the pandemic. *See* Jessica Grose, *The Primal Scream: America's Mothers Are in Crisis*, N.Y. TIMES (Feb. 4, 2021), <http://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/04/parenting/working-moms-mental-health-coronavirus.html>.

43. *See, e.g.*, Bethy Leonardi & Sara Staley, *Gender and Sexual Diversity in Teacher Education*, OXFORD RSCH. ENCYC. EDUC. 1-20 (2019).

44. Mildred Boveda & Brittany A. Aronson, *Special Education Preservice Teachers, Intersectional Diversity, and the Privileging of Emerging Professional Identities*, 40 REMEDIAL & SPECIAL EDUC. 248, 257 (2019).